

Saw Swee Hock student centre – review

The LSE's new student centre by O'Donnell and Tuomey is a quietly impressive 'red brick Eiger' built to real old-school standards of design and construction

[See images of the LSE's new student centre](#)



Rowan Moore

The Observer, Sunday 16 February 2014



The 'inscrutable' scale of the LSE's new student centre 'goes from grand to intimate and back'. Photograph: Dennis Gilbert

The Irish architect John Tuomey, who is fond of a metaphor or two, says that the new student centre at the London School of Economics is "an LP". He is telling how the life of its interior revolves around a central spindle of lift and stair, but he could equally be describing its pre-digital spirit. Computers have played their part in its design, and in setting out its many bricks, but so have pencils, drawing boards and manual skill. This is vinyl architecture, physical and resonant, complete with scratches and crackles.

The LSE is living proof that it is possible to be world famous without conspicuous architecture. It occupies a tangle of streets in the armpit formed by Kingsway and Aldwych, which themselves consist of neoclassical set pieces, axial and geometrical. Where they make grand proclamations without having much to proclaim, the LSE is the opposite. With alumni including John F Kennedy and Mick Jagger, and very many distinguished others, it has a lot to shout about but chooses not to.

There are no quadrangles or gothic towers, but a variegated array of building types that includes pubs and a church hall, in multiple materials and styles – ceramic, concrete, render, curtain wall, granite, Portland stone and brick in several colours. At first the area just looks like some small streets laid out on a medieval pattern, until small signs, such as noticeboards and the long queue for free food given out by Hare Krishna volunteers, tell you that this is student territory. The best-known building in the area is nothing to do with academe, but the wonky cottage believed to be the inspiration for Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

The academic buildings are what you might expect economists to commission – sensible-looking. But nowadays even they have to recognise that there is economic value not only in numbers but in the quality of the physical environment and of daily experiences, and in image. They are in a global competition with Ivy League universities, in which the best students have to be wooed by impressive facilities. So the LSE commissioned the Saw Swee Hock student centre, at a construction cost of £24m, named after an alumnus who donated £2.5m.

On seven storeys above ground and two high storeys below, it contains a nightclub, gym, bar, cafe, multi-faith prayer rooms, broadcasting station, dance studio, careers advice and student union offices, all thrust into a polygonal site between the little streets and the high backs of Kingsway buildings. It is designed by John Tuomey, his partner, Sheila O'Donnell, and the office they run in Dublin, which has made a habit of almost winning the Stirling prize, with projects such as the Lyric theatre in Belfast.



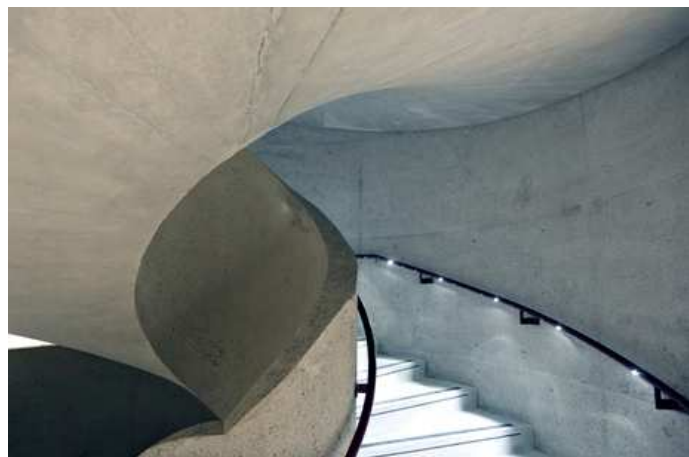
The student centre includes a broadcasting studio, gym, prayer rooms and a nightclub Photograph: Dennis Gilbert

Given its profile-raising brief, the student centre could have been yet another disheartening iteration of the hateful I-word, but while this red brick Eiger, its shape sculpted to avoid infringing its neighbours' rights of light, might be a bit of an icon, the first aim is not to seek attention. It is, says Tuomey, to "suck the street into the building and draw the building into the street". The broad, generous, intriguing stair is conceived as a vertical continuation of the horizontal web outside, seeking a flow between the centre's multiple uses that is uninterrupted by lobbies or corridors. Which it successfully achieves, its large and small spaces readily inhabited by students, much as they do the existing streets. A newly paved and pedestrianised zone just outside its front door, not yet complete, will aid the connections.

Its materials are robust, which is what you want for student spaces, and of the kind that remember their mineral or organic origins, and of the heat and work that made them – handmade brick, vitreous enamel, oak, terrazzo, concrete that is sometimes extraordinarily rough. As in the streets, they are of multiple kinds. The polygon is multidimensional, vertical as well as horizontal, frequently returning you to views of the outside and unexpected intimacies with surrounding buildings, their roof-mounted plant or their glass-walled interiors.

It threatens to get all too much, so the exterior is mostly in a single unifying material, brick, off which all this difference can play. It gives an inscrutable scale, going from grand to intimate and back, in which it's hard to read exactly where the storeys are. The brick itself has multiple aspects, at times making a perforated screen through which light can filter, at others being massive, papery or sharply cut. It is as if the architects had been playing a game of stone, scissors, paper in which the winning answer was all three, at once.

At which point Tuomey's metaphors press for attention. His favourites suggest the structure is animate – a spiral stair in hyper-rugged concrete is "a baby elephant", the building itself a "beast". "We wanted to make it wriggle free from its surroundings," says Tuomey, and also so that, with an indentation in its main elevation, it "yields to your approach". It's a body, a being, but also geological, something mountainous, with chasms and caverns. It is not meant to be seen in isolation or from a distance, but in oblique views, emerging from the foothills of the surrounding fabric.



The concrete spiral

staircase is likened by its architect, John Tuomey, to a 'baby elephant'. Photograph: Nigel Stead/LSE Images

All of which would be so much talk if it wasn't that the building demanded genuine skill in both design and construction, of a kind that modern ways of building make ever more difficult to achieve. Tuomey is in awe of the bricklayers who made its leaning, faceted, ever-changing walls, employing both lasers and bits of string to align them correctly, and the boat-builders who made the timber form for the open concrete spiral of the "baby elephant" stair. He expresses a view not often heard about the British construction business, that "there is such a strong tradition of making".

There are exceptions to this pleasing craftsmanship, which are highly visible joints in the external brickwork that are there to handle expansion and contraction in changing temperatures. Tuomey is convinced that they weren't needed, but he was overruled by the builders – or, to be more precise, the builders' insurers, who hold the real power in such matters. The joints all but destroy the exterior's impression of coherence and solidity. "I wear them like scars on my back," he says. They are, to return to the vinyl theme, as upsetting as deep scratches on a favourite record.

There are times when the student centre feels overwrought, with its many materials, details and facets. But at least it is wrought, at a time when most buildings are just assembled. It can feel a little gloomy inside, at least on a dull day, behind its veils of perforated brick, but it's also good to experience a building that gives you shadow, as well as bright, unrelenting light. Mostly it is a triumph of proper architecture, which strives to make something out of the relationship of spaces and materials to the lives they contain.



[Get the Guardian's Art Weekly email](#)

For your art world low-down, the latest news, reviews and comment delivered straight to your inbox.

[Sign up for the Art Weekly email](#)

More from the Guardian

[What's this?](#)