

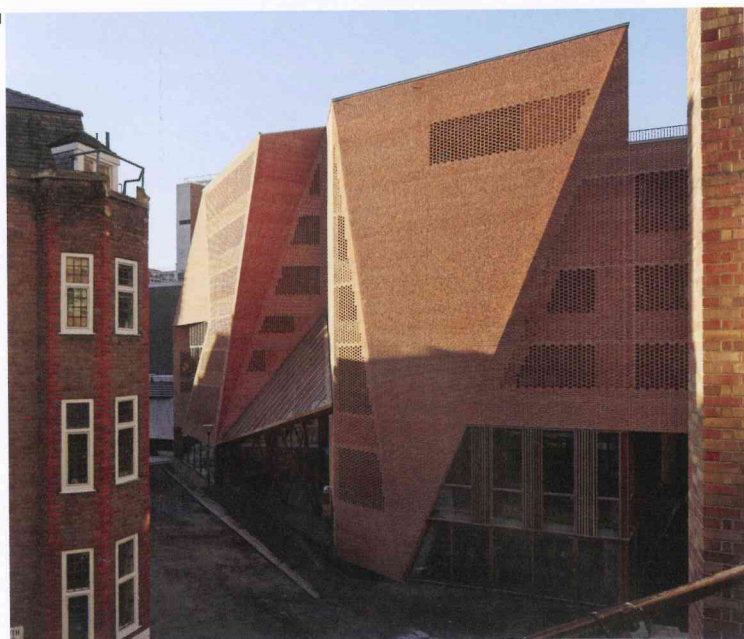
3

THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW
1405 | MARCH 2014 | £9.90 | €19 | US\$28

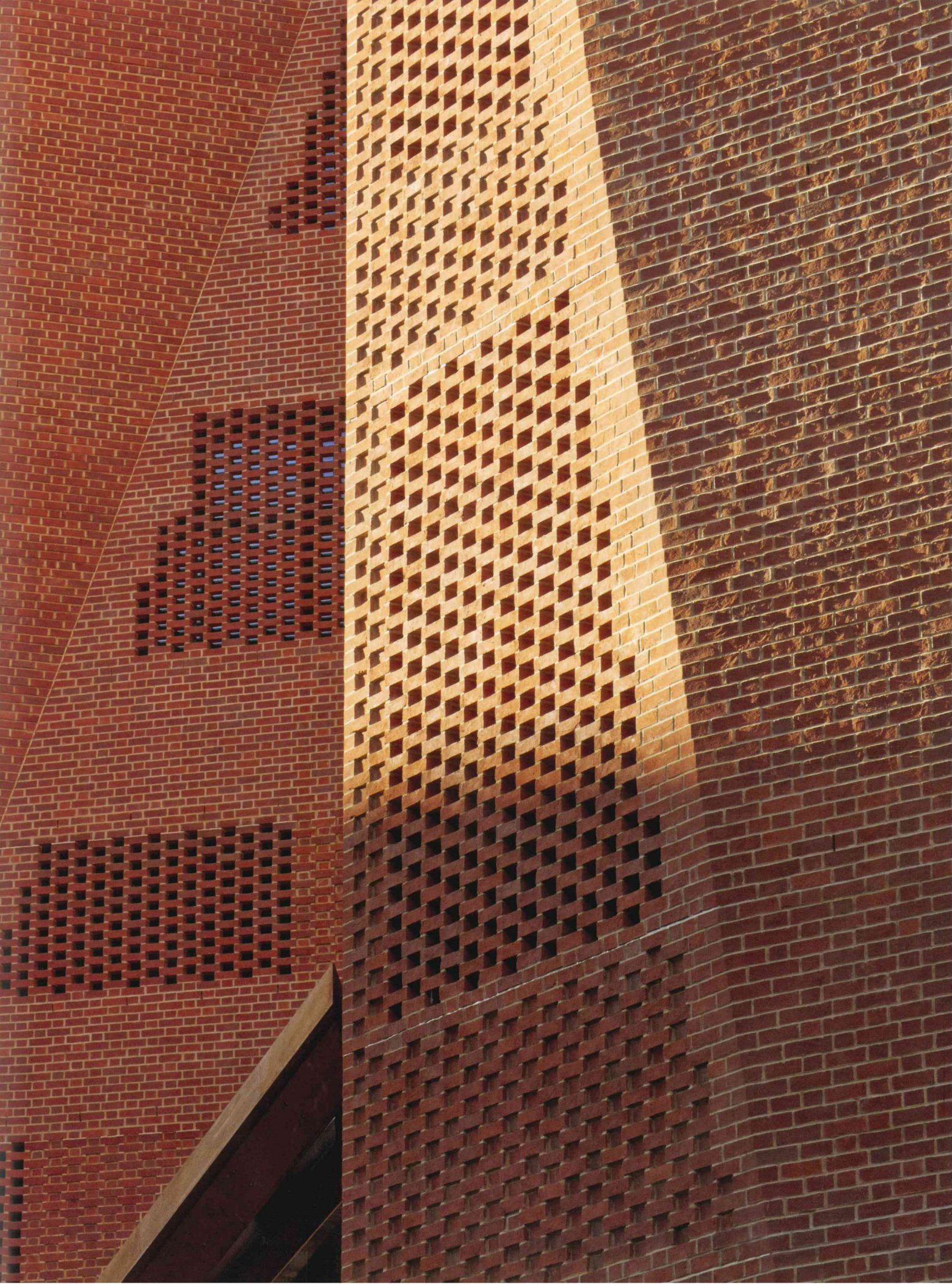


PATTERN LANGUAGE

Handmade bricks form a richly patterned screen that unites a complexity of functions in a new student centre for the London School of Economics



**Saw Swee Hock
Students' Centre,
LSE, London, UK,
O'Donnell +
Tuomey**



CRITICISM

KESTER RATTENBURY

The most peculiar thing about O'Donnell + Tuomey's new student building for the London School of Economics is that it feels, somehow, old. It sounds daft, looking at the dramatic photos of this brand new, exquisitely made building – as does the fact that I almost walked past it. (Many people do, according to Sheila O'Donnell; it's only when someone asks that they notice this 'weird-looking' thing.) Old, easy to miss and weird. I can't think of higher praise.

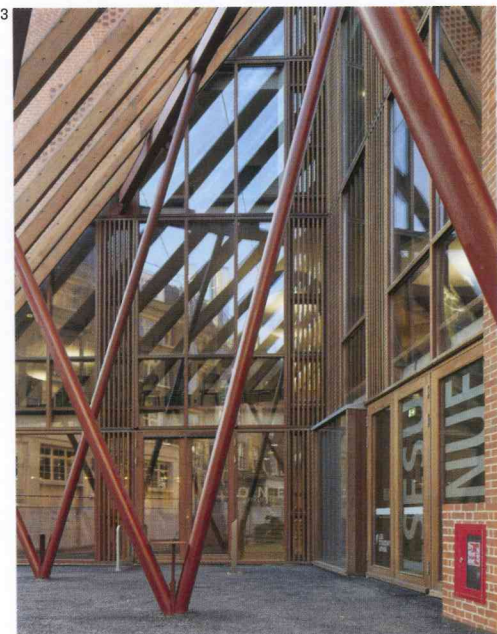
The Saw Swee Hock building is packed into an obtuse corner of the crooked lanes squashed between Lincoln's Inn Fields and the traffic torrent of Kingsway. As O'Donnell says, 'you can't really see it as an object' – despite its almost Futurist brick presence. It's a triangular site with a complex web of rights of light for the muddle of neighbouring buildings. O'DT were specially taken with a glass-fronted A4 noticeboard, right on the street, displaying LSE exam results: these lanes form a kind of improvised campus, in what 'feels like an old town'.

This was a Christmas stocking of a brief: a glorious mix of entirely different-shaped, different-sized activities, all potentially interfering with each other, including cafés, careers, advice and accommodation services, gym, prayer room, church, media centre, music venue and pub. The pub/venue had to have full acoustic separation, and be run when the rest of the building was closed; there are hugely differing demands for light and privacy (it's heavily overlooked), and almost everyone wanted to be on the ground floor. It's a surprisingly unprecedented type, too, O'DT decided – something between a club and a lived-in warehouse, with a 'robust, knockabout quality'.

O'DT immediately diverged from the rights-to-light competition norm (one side flat, two sides stepped). They pulled their proposal away from the neighbours 'to give it its own definition and form'. They made a perspex model of the rights-to-light diagram, and used it as a 'jelly mould', testing their massing models inside it; tilting, twisting or cutting the irregular volumes and specific activities for daylight, natural ventilation, scraps of open space, air and privacy. They indented the front to form a gathering space from the street. It was just that that stopped me walking past.

And they decided on that singular brick wrapper. 'A single form to hold together such a complex brief,' says John Tuomey. London was once a brick city, but brick is a stranger material in these days of steel and concrete structure: a heavy rainscreen with a residual human connection, surprising flexibility and the capacity to unify a lot of small and irregular things into a single entity. 'Once we'd started, we became obsessive about how to achieve it,' says O'Donnell. That canted brick was turned and stretched from solid to perforated screen (with opening windows behind), from thin screen to thick gable; from Hugh Ferriss rights-of-light to monastic cell; from thermal chimney to vast, perforated, hanging screen – and without ever seeming fancy, so that the whole Chinese puzzle of activities could be seen as a coherent and graceful whole. A single dress, made of a substance that gets odder the more you think about it. Brick, says O'Donnell, is 'simple within its complexity'.

While almost everything else that's going up these days – arts centres and libraries included – seems to be dragged along in the commercial slipstream, this building is quietly but entirely different. It feels both public, domestic, working and owned. It's almost

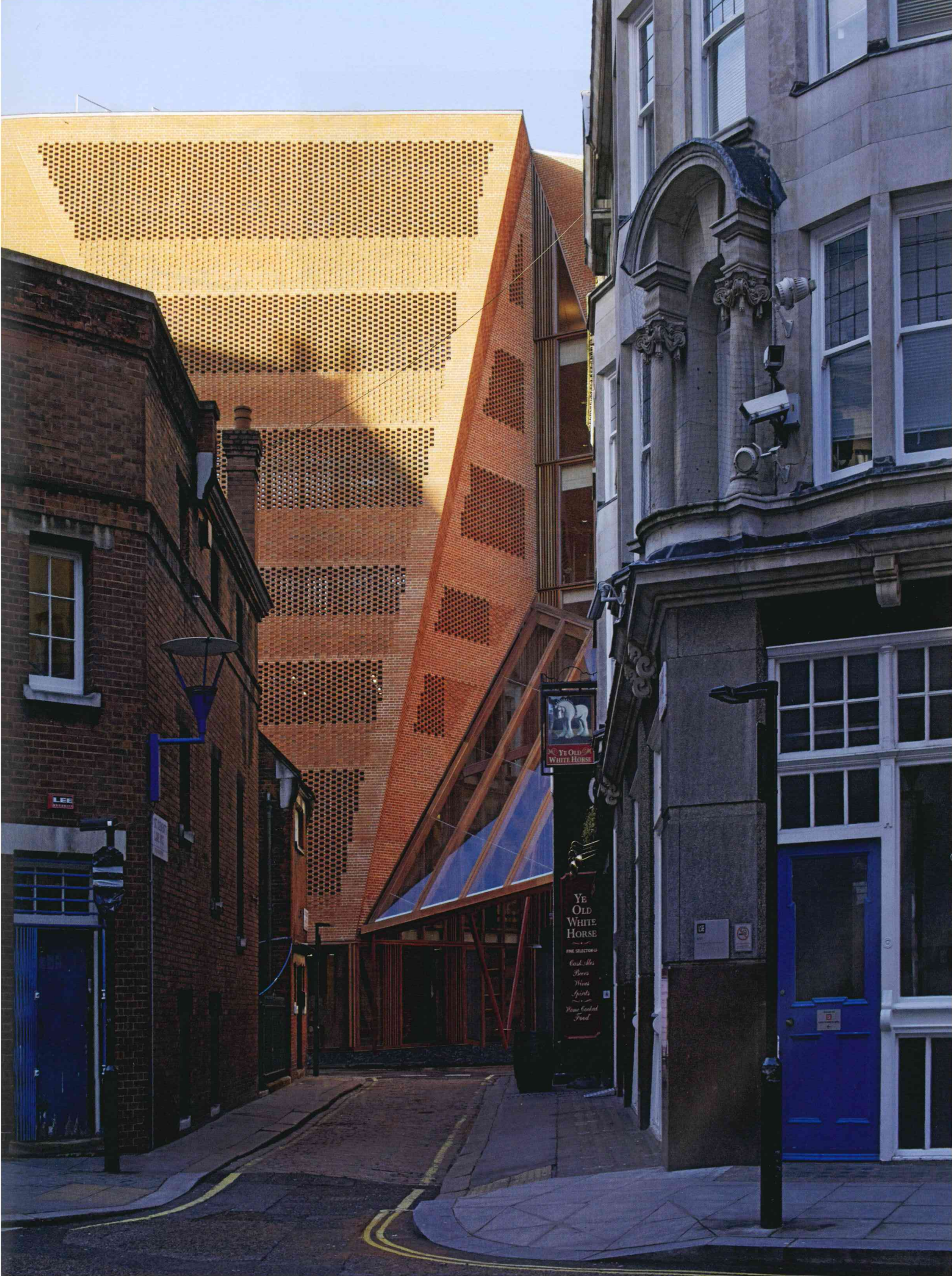


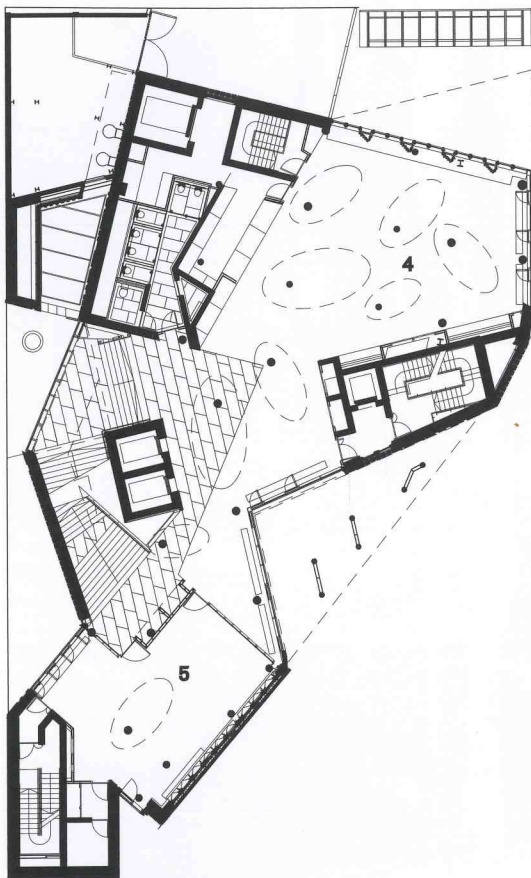
1. (Previous page, left) the new students' centre appears as a series of perforated, prismatic brick planes that mimic the London townscape

2. (Previous page, right) bricks are handmade, giving the building a richly variegated texture
3. Sheltered by a glass canopy, the indented entrance forms a natural gathering space
4. Behind the unifying embrace of the brick screen lurks a Chinese puzzle of activities

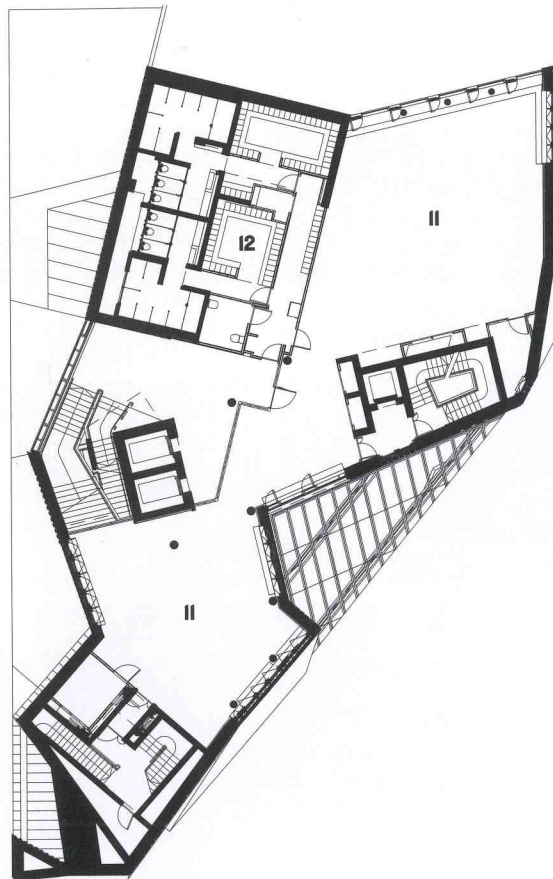
Saw Swee Hock Students' Centre, LSE, London, UK, O'Donnell + Tuomey



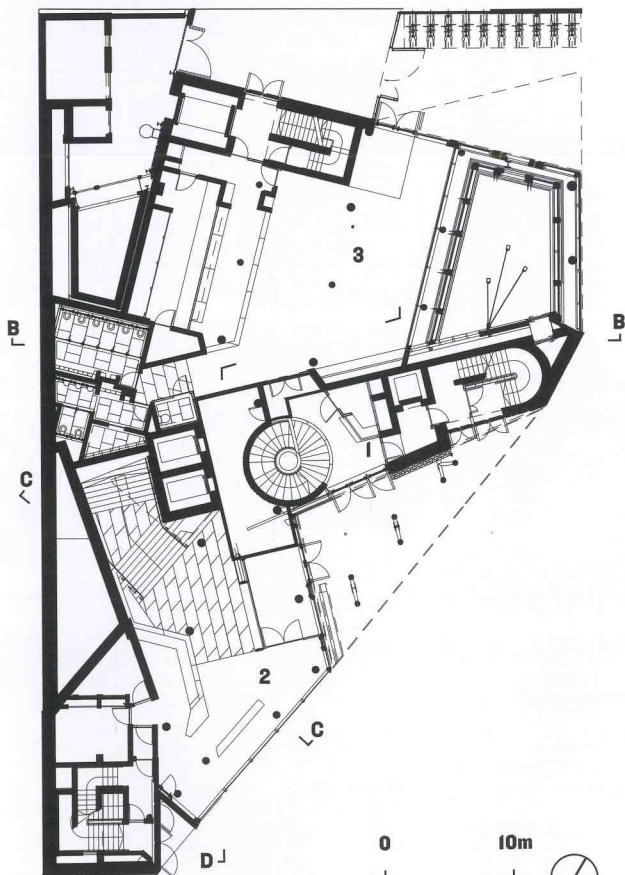




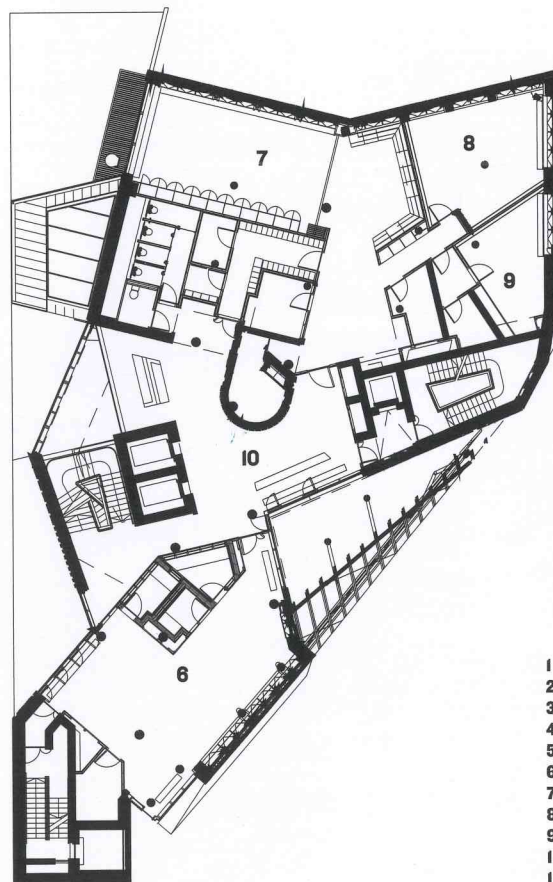
first floor plan



fourth floor plan

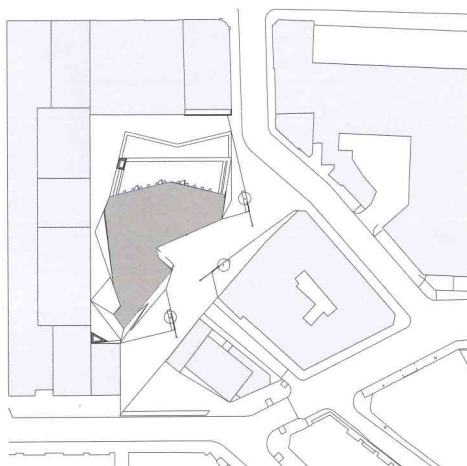


ground floor plan



second floor plan

- 1 entrance
- 2 foyer/reception
- 3 pub
- 4 café
- 5 activity centre
- 6 media centre
- 7 multi faith prayer
- 8 male prayer room
- 9 female prayer room
- 10 inter faith space
- 11 gym
- 12 changing area



site plan

unheard of in a barely opened building to find every scrap of space in loving, concerted, comfortable, use, but this one feels like it's been going for decades.

From that indented 'collecting space' on you're in a continuous, open circulation space, winding and folding up through the building, past cafés and faith rooms, doubling back past the gym, walking (casually, it seems) into sharply perspectival street views, past pocket handkerchief scraps of courtyard, or generous balconies as you climb the vertiginous, rough London skyline. The building sought, and got, a BREEAM Outstanding rating, and its energy efficiencies are integral. You'd certainly take the stairs if you could: it's like a rougher, slower, more laid-back ride on the Lloyd's lift. And then, those almost-straightforward LSE lifts (which pin through the irregular floorplates, helping you orientate) also form a casual, giant student noticeboard, already well in use, rising straight through the building, clad in vari-hued vitreous enamel.



The building's net-to-gross clearly staggers the commercial men, but as LSE's director of design and development Julian Robinson tells them, circulation is absolutely central to the success of the project. This whole building works as a better version of the campus on the lanes. It's as though its architecture diverges into a better London: a more normally generous, but also more London-y city than the one we've been building over the past 20 years.

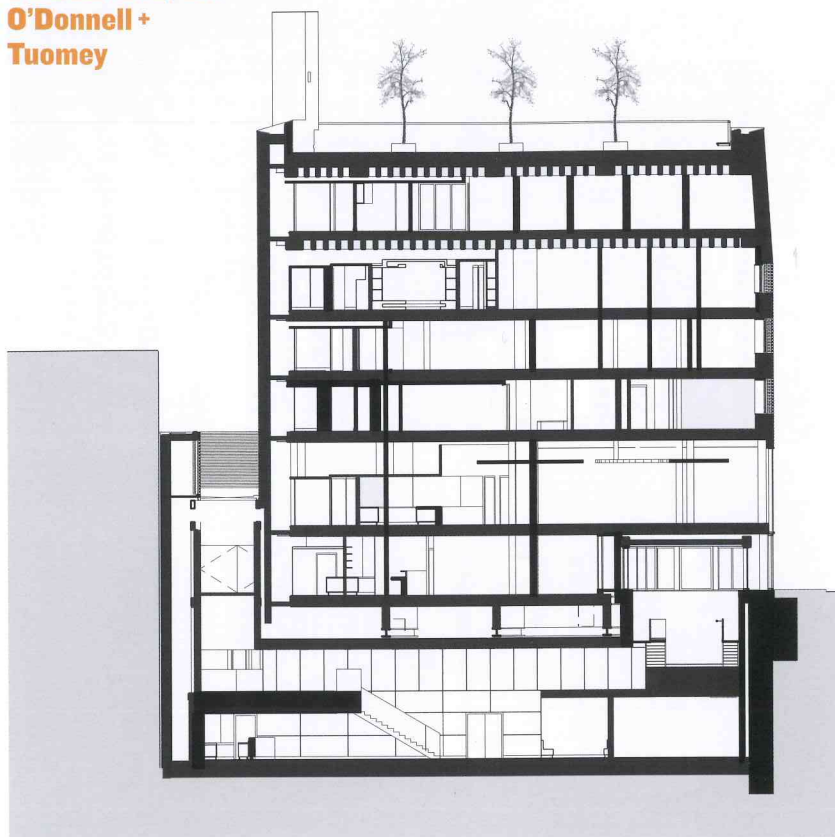
Part of that idea comes from how it's been made. 'Handmade' can suggest a sort of gift-shop preciousness. But there's an astonishingly uneven, almost Marrakech-y feeling in the hit-and-miss bricks, which you see in up-view as you arrive. And when you're inside looking out, I swear the wonkiest bricks are the ones they've set exactly at eye height. This building is, inter alia, a brilliantly curated construction process that loves subliminally reminding you how people make buildings.

5. Floors overlook the circulation core, emphasising a sense of fluidity and sociability. Light percolates through the brick veil into the gym

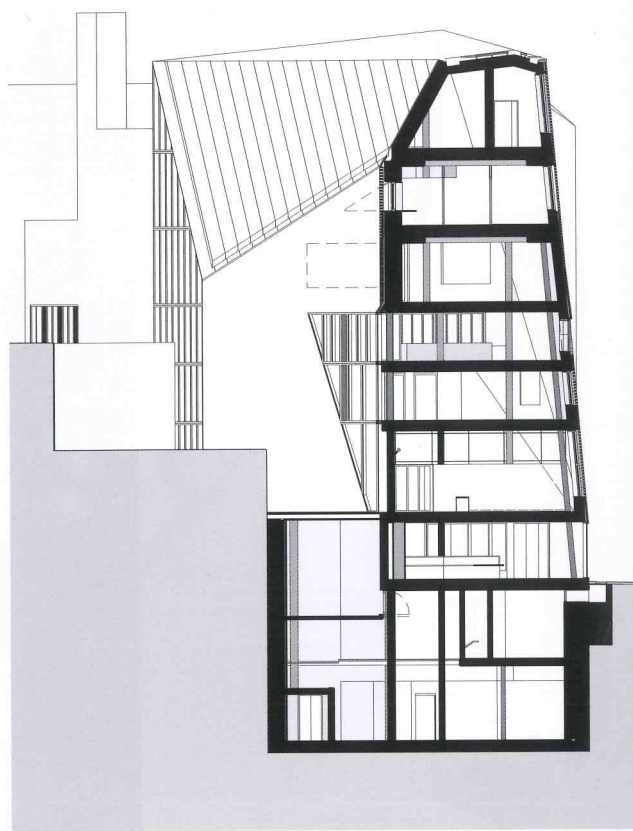
Saw Swee Hock Students' Centre, LSE, London, UK, O'Donnell + Tuomey

'This building is, inter alia, a brilliantly curated construction process that loves subliminally reminding you how people make buildings'

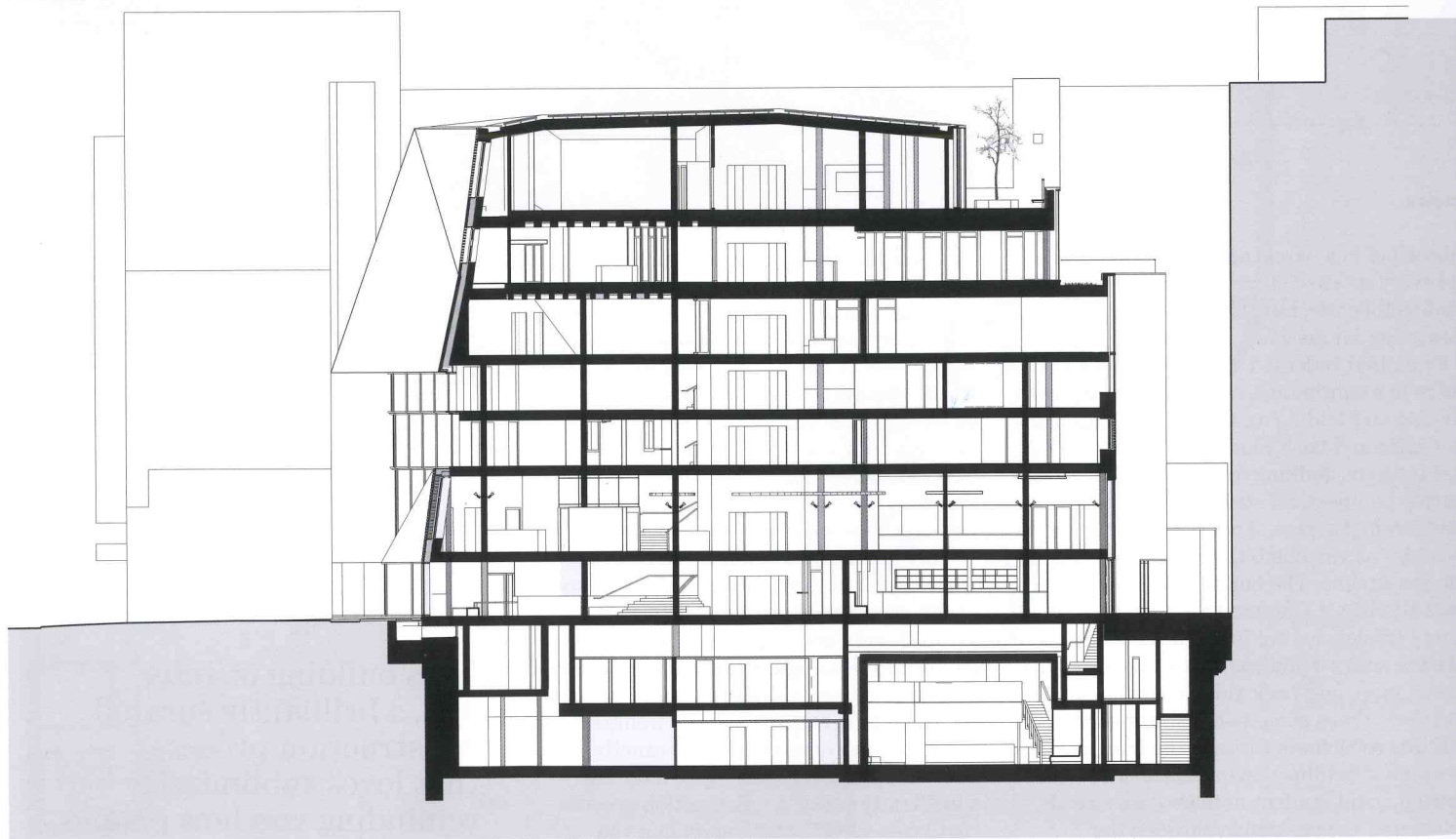
**Saw Swee Hock
Students' Centre,
LSE, London, UK,
O'Donnell +
Tuomey**



section BB



section CC



section DD



Those bricks were handmade in the Forest of Dean, by men turning clay out of wooden moulds, one by one; taking 30 seconds per brick. There are no cut bricks in this building at all (BREEAM again, and part of the Saw Swee Hock's perfectly-solved-Japanese-puzzle quality). So the hundred-plus specials (and more 'special-specials') meant 'just' making some extra moulds. Plus presumably, a phenomenal amount of drawing in the office and care by the brickies; the sort of human engagement O'DT buildings seem made of.

The fact that the quality is phenomenally high doesn't mean it's all fancy. The terrazzo flooring and bathrooms are beautiful, but have a robust, re-used quality. The steel columns sometimes have uplighters and acoustic baffles, a bit like those O'DT used in the Lyric Belfast (AR June 2011); and like them they are red-oxide painted (that imaginary warehouse again) stopping just short of frou-frou. Some cables go straight on the wall, with (oxide red) trunking over them. Big parts of the floor are untreated oak, soft-looking and designed to get dirty. The windows (their favourite Irish firm made it into the contract) are beautiful, with a direct, early industrial feel. Some spaces are divided from the circulation by grilles, and I love it that they make their own, very basic plywood kitchens.

A vast amount of work goes into this casual feeling. Maybe it's that that gives the building the 'old' sense of being well used: so many people are clearly imagining the life of the building and adjusting the design to suit. The materials are hard, but lots of work goes into making it acoustically comfortable. The structure is complex, with a lot of transfer loads and a storey-high Vierendeel truss at one level, but you're never bothered by structural rhetoric in the relaxed open plan. There's a metre-plus glazed acoustic gap where the basement music venue 'area' opens

to the street – a very London-house section with its dug out basement area, and the natural place for a club.

Most astonishing of all are the exquisite, poured-concrete spiral staircases with their visible, rough, spiral daywork joints (shuttering painstakingly constructed by ships' carpenters, Tuomey says), their beautiful, part eroded, curved sides and their polished tops. These are the very highest architecture – and the very most vernacular – pieces in the whole building. Useful, beautiful works of art.

O'DT manage to coax this astonishing construction out of the D&B procurement, partly by detailing every scrap and brick layout in advance, partly by luring their contractors into utter complicity. 'I'm not saying it's easy...' says O'Donnell – but it means that everything is approved and can't be value engineered out. Westminster's rigorous planning demands also helped; and Robinson says John Walker, Westminster's Director of Development, told him it was his favourite new building in Westminster. Rogers Stirk Harbour are about to start LSE's next building, and Ivan Harbour told Robinson this would be a tough act to follow.

This is the most astonishingly well and truly occupied new building I've ever seen. 'A democratic, unusual architecture of useful beauty,' O'DT call it. It's not even quite finished (the landscaping is still on site with a Mark Wallinger artwork under embargo) but every single space was enthusiastically used. The gym membership has gone through the roof and I couldn't get into the prayer rooms. It has a feeling of continuous occupation and there is much more to it than meets the eye. Old, easy to walk past, weird, beautifully made, unusual, intriguing, comfortably human, tangibly loved, pleasurable used. What more does architecture have to do?

6. (Previous page) the lift shaft is sheathed in coloured vitreous enamel panels which will act as a giant student pinboard
7. The building's concrete spiral staircases have a strong sculptural quality
8. Exercise studio on the topmost floor

Saw Swee Hock Students' Centre, LSE, London, UK, O'Donnell + Tuomey

Architect
 O'Donnell + Tuomey
Architects
Photographs
 Dennis Gilbert/VIEW



