An addition worthy of honours

The LSE's profile-raising 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

Saw Swee Hock student centre
London School of Economics, London WC2

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 evolves around a central spine of lift and stair, but he could equally be describing its pre-digital spirit. Computers have played their part in its design, and in selecting out its many beliefs, but no have panels, drawing boards and manual skill. This is vinyl architecture, physical and resonant, complete with scratches and cracks.

The LSE is living proof that it is possible to be world famous without conspicuous architecture. It occupies a single timeline of streets and facades is a characteristic example. It is a red brick Eiger, in its vertical spirit, in its continuous red brick and bricked in various colours. At first the two buildings are just like some small streets laid out on a medieval pattern, until small signs, such as noticeboards, and the long queue for a free coffee given out by Zeno Khadija volunteers, tell you that this is student territory. The best-known building in the area is nothing to do with academia, but the modesty community is to be the inspiration for Dickens's The Old Curiosity Shop.

The saw swee hock student centre, above, includes a broadcasting studio, gym, prayer rooms and a nightshift. Right: the concrete spiral staircase inside the glass building, designed by John Tuomey, to "make the building into the street". Below: the "invincible scale" of the building makes from grand to intimate and back. (Nigel Sheard/Dennis Gilbert)

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