Angles with poise

O’Donnell + Tuomey’s Student Centre for the LSE zig zags out of the ground – a dramatic, angular statement layered with intense detail

Words Hugh Pearman

Opposite The building’s folded facade expands into perforated openings, with glazing set behind, plus areas of ‘blind’ textured brickwork. All in handmade brick.

Left The faceted plates of the building’s facade collide at the focus of the entrance canopy.
This is such a pleasure, and a bit of a guilty one at that. If Soho’s Photographer’s Gallery was its understated, low-budget introduction to London in 2012, then O’Donnell + Tuomey’s new Student Centre at the London School of Economics is the exact opposite: a £24m statement of what might be called Total Architecture. Here we have a building that celebrates complexity and recalls something of the awkward-squad character of their former boss Jim Stirling in his ‘Red Buildings’ phase – though with far greater response to context and – one hopes – lower maintenance.

It’s not as if there was no other way of doing this building. Easier options were available. Having opted for the folded-plate approach in the facades, letting the sightline and rights of light constraints determine the physical envelope, lesser architects would have been daunted by trying to achieve the form in brick. There was, surely, nothing in the brief that called for the most obsessive level of brick detailing I have ever seen on a modern building, requiring prodigious numbers of one-off ‘specials’, some very special indeed. It is even more remarkable that this was all done on a design-and-build basis. If that facade was simplified, I can’t imagine what it must have looked like before. Not that it’s perfect – you can easily spot blemishes and inconsistencies – but in the realm of the handmade some roughness is acceptable. Differential weathering will add a further patina.

Seeing the building during the winter’s heavy rains demonstrated how some parts of the facade are drenched while others remain largely dry: this will inevitably affect its appearance as time goes by, which is not necessarily a bad thing and may even be intentional.

The site is tucked away in the warren of little old streets just south of the grand open space of Lincoln’s Inn Fields, east of the broad Edwardian boulevard of Kingsway. So this is in a Dickensian fragment of old London. Assertive though the new building is when you concentrate on it, you could easily walk close by and not really notice it at all. It’s all about the glimpsed, often angled views you get from those narrow surrounding streets. The building does, however, generate a sense of tension. Partly this is to do with brick doing things

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\text{Opposite: The luxury of austerity: the main stair is terrazzo and concrete, with painted steel and warm timber.}
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\text{Below left: Hardwearing materials in the interior include enamelled metal cladding to lift shafts.}
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\text{Below centre: It’s all very hugger-mugger with surrounding buildings, seen here from student union offices.}
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\begin{array}{|c|c|c|}
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\text{IN NUMBERS} & \text{£24m} & \text{£4000} \\
\text{total contract cost} & \text{GIFA cost per m²} & \text{area} \\
\text{6000m²} & \text{19.24} & \text{kgCO₂/m³ calculation} \\
\text{BREEAM Higher Education – Outstanding} & \text{GDLA standard form of contract} & \text{Design & Build} \\
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\end{array}
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The building’s complete facade is tied to a composite concrete and steel structure. Steel transfer beams allow a large, clear-span basement events space.
Buildings
London School of Economics

This is obviously designed to be a hard-wearing palette of low-maintenance materials suitable for student life – but it’s as gamy as the inside of a butcher’s shop.

If the resolution of the facade details could be seen as the architect setting a fiendish problem and then solving it, and the interiors at least partly an exercise in flowing the outside into the inside, then another aspect of the building’s complexity certainly comes from the brief. They asked for ‘the best student centre in the world’, along with exemplary low-energy credentials. It’s designed to achieve a BREEAM Outstanding rating.

But an awful lot of different functions had to be squeezed onto this very tight site. It is a relatively shallow building, especially at its southern end. It has to step back from its neighbours behind, just as it pinches itself inwards at the front to provide spill-out space. Although it rises to six levels above ground and one deep level beneath, this feels just enough room – you’re right into the hive the moment you enter, too many buildings, the visible architecture is skin-deep and once over the threshold, anodyne standard fit-out takes over. Not here: if anything, the architecture intensifies as you move further inwards and upwards.

This, then, is a slice of vertical student city, London distillation. The twists and turns echo the densely-packed streets outside. It is richly considered and finished. A binary building, perhaps, alternating between raw and coquettish, rough and smooth, luxury and austerity, it mysteriously combines apparent razor-sharp precision with the generous tolerances demanded by craft and design.

The architects’ own words, the external form and sitting of the building is ‘a spatial bowtie that intertwines views of the facade from narrow neighbouring streets to gaze down on the seething activity at night. The ground slab – this will also be a great place from which to sit down and contemplate the bustling pastry shop below.’

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