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
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 old, 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.) Odd, easy to miss and weird. I can't think of higher praise.

The Saw Swee Hock building is packed into an oblong corner of the crossed lanes squeezed between Lincoln's Inn Fields and the traffic terraces 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'Donnell were specially taken with a glass fronted A4 noticeboard, right on the street, displaying LSE exam results: those lanes form a kind of improved campus, in what 'feels like an old town'.

This was a Christmas stocking of a brief: a glorious mix of entirely different-shaped, differently-scaled activities, all potentially interfering with each other, including cafés, eateries, advice and accommodation services, gym, prayer room, church, media centre, music venue and pub. The presence had to have full acoustic separation, and be run when the rest of the building was closed; there are largely 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'Donnell notes — something between a club and a lived-in warehouse, with a 'robust, knockabout quality'.

O'Donnell immediately diverged from the rights-to-light competition norm (one side flat, two sides sloped). They pulled their proposal away from the neighbours 'to give it its own definition and form.' They made a permeable model of the rights-to-light diagram, and used it as a 'jelly mould', testing their musings 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 intended 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 obsessed about how to achieve it,' says O'Donnell. That casted brick was turned and stretched from solid to perforated screen (with opening windows behind), from thin screen to thick gable; from Hugh Ferrers right-of-light to moasic cell; from thermal chimney to vast, perforated, hanging screen — and without over seeming fancy, so that the whole Chinese puzzle of activities could be seen as a coherent and graceful whole. A single dress, made of substance that gets older 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
Unfound in a barely opened building to find every scrap of space in living, concordant, comfortable, use, but this one feels like it's been going for decades.

From that intimated 'collective space' on you're in a continuous, open circulation space, winding and folding up through the building, past cafes and bath rooms, doubling back past the gym, walking (naturally, it seems) into sharply perspectival street views, past pocket handkerchief scraps of courtyard, or grossly balconies as you climb the vertiginous, rough London skylines. The building sought, and got, a BREACH 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 Lloyds of all. And then, those almost-straightforward, LSR lifts (which give through the irregular floorplates, helping you orientate) also form a casual, giant student notebook, already well in use, rising straight through the building, died in vast hoard vitreous enamel.

The building's not-to-gross clearly stagger the commercial men, but as LSIF 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 stump 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 80 years.

Part of that idea comes from how it's been made. 'Handmade' can suggest a sort of glib-slip preciseness. But there's an astonishingly low, almost Marxkoff-y feeling in the hit-and-miss bricks, which you see in the view as you arrive. And when you're inside looking out, I swear the weakest 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.
These bricks were handmade in the Forest of Dean, by men turning clay out of wooden moulds, one by one; taking 90 seconds per brick. There are no cast bricks in this building at all (BIBRAM 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 raw 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 terrazo 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 med in the Lyric Belfry (All June 2011), and like them they are red oxide painted (that imaginary warehouse again) stopping just short of from from. Some cables go straight on the wall, with (oxide red) trimming 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 gives the building the 'cafe' 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 steeply-high Vierendeel truss at one level, but you're never bothered by structural rateries in the relaxed open plan. There's a metre-plus glass 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 pace for a club.

Most astonishing of all are the exquisite, poured-concrete spiral staircases with their visible, rough, spiral stairways built into the frame's carpenters, Tuomey says, their beautiful, part-cast, curved sides and their polished tops. These are the very highest beauty 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 DB's procurement, partly by detailing every seam and brick layout in advance, partly by having their contractors into other complexity. 'I'm not saying it's easy' ... says O'Donnell - but it means that everything is approved and exactly engineered. Westminster's

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 Harber said 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 sense of continuous occupation and there's much more to it than meets the eye. Old, easy to walk past, weird, beautiful around, unusual, intriguing, comfortably human, thoughtfully loved, pleasantly used. What more does architecture have to do?