Sean Scully

WILLIAM ORPEN’S WAR PAINTINGS
MICHAEL CRAIG-MARTIN AT CHATSWORTH
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O’DONNELL + TUOMEY ARCHITECTS’ SAW SWEE HOCK STUDENT CENTRE IN LONDON
BY KESTER RATTENBURY

I t ought to seem peculiar that some of London’s most recent new buildings are by O’Donnell + Tuomey. One of many peculiar things in fact: that you could almost walk past something as dramatic as their Saw Swee Hock building without noticing it, or that it can feel both strange, familiar and old—even before the works are fully finished. But if you know O’Donnell + Tuomey, it’s not so strange, because whenever they build, their projects are almost revelatory of the places they’re in. So their London projects take you into, gritty, old, brick-built London with its tangible life, rough-tough shabbiness and its unexpected, occasional generation of freedom. That’s not a given. Almost everything else that’s going up in London seems obliged to suit the commercial stream—very shiny, very generic, very standard. It’s often hard in the UK to tell if you’re in a school or a rather grim business park. But O’Donnell + Tuomey’s buildings are really public, human and particular. They make you take real pleasure in the place you’re in, in the people you’re sharing it with, and the way that those places are made.

The new Saw Swee Hock Student Centre for the London School of Economics (LSE) is their second, and a really great building. It’s in a tiny mesh of lanes squashed between the irregular grandeur of Lincoln’s Inn Fields and the traffic torrent of Holborn, amongst a jumble of buildings of all ages, including the old building, which a carny Victorian owner rebranded as The Old Curiosity Shop. LSE uses these streets as its campus (exam results are posted on the street) and O’Donnell + Tuomey wound this street life upwards through London’s ragged, dramatic skyline.

So that strange, obeyingly dramatic, futuristic brick building presents a Christmas stocking of life: a fantastic adjacency of should-be-incongruous activities—music venue, pub, prayer room, church, gym, cafes, careers service—inside an apparently coherent one-piece brick dress. Those brick planes shift to accommodate this against