



Central European University

Phase 1 of O'Donnell + Tuomey's rationalisation of a loosely connected campus has just completed in Budapest. A simple palette of materials helps turn their old courtyards into new spaces for gathering

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Left and far left The main atrium of the new Nador 15 building creates a sizeable public reception area.

Above The courtyard of Nador 13, once a hotel, is the backdrop to the circulatory interventions.

Above right Ragstone walls and Sutto limestone arches in Nador 15 create distinct spatial experiences.

Below The creased, folded main west elevation of Nador 15.

It's existed for less than 30 years, but the Central European University (CEU), a private academic institution in Budapest, seems to be carving its place in the awareness of both city and state. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán wants to bring higher education under centralised control, so CEU's foreign funding and relative autonomy doesn't sit well with his right-wing government, which has enacted laws that could see it closed. But when your sponsor is billionaire Hungarian-American financier George Soros, there's a sense the university is not going down without a fight.

This will please O'Donnell + Tuomey, appointed in 2011 to propose ways of developing CEU's campus of seven adjacent buildings on Nador Utca in downtown Budapest. Phase 1 of the three-phase project has just completed, creating a library and 'learning commons' over a multi-purpose auditorium, a public face for the university and a celebration of its proximity to the Danube. The new building starts to form connections with the adjoining ones, and, by the time it is due to complete in 2021, there will be network of new academic and circulation spaces behind its 19th century skin.

The strategy throws up associations with the firm's work at the London School of Economics, where its Saw Swee Hock Student Centre had to respond to a group of academic buildings playing second fiddle to the public streets and alleys between them. But project architect Mark Grehan says the influences were more contextual than that. The practice was struck by the way Budapest's urban form was defined as much by

the courtyards behind its classical facades as by the facades themselves. Creation of internalised, connected courtyards as the circulation strategy was born out of this city condition.

Buildings are being stripped back to core materials and refurbished; with all that materiality on show, the firm wanted a common palette to keep the complex intelligible. So the oxidised look of new steel staircases in courtyards is echoed all around in the balustrades. Polished concrete floors unify the ground floor plane despite the stone arches, brick piers and white rendered walls rising out of it. The budget wasn't huge: painted plywood and softwood dictate internal finishes, but the library is impressive nonetheless. Hardwood is reserved for surfaces touched by human hand – desks and worktops.

The courtyards, internalised with huge triangular sections of glazed cladding that pop out at roof garden level like a party hat, are part of the sustainability strategy, using stack effect to draw fresh air in and exhaust air at high level. 'For a city whose climate can range from -20C in winter to 40C in the summer, the campus only goes into air-conditioned "lock-down" during the most extreme times of year,' says Grehan. 'For 70% of the time it's anticipated natural ventilation will work in the public areas.' That's quite a claim for a university that, ironically, faces west. But that would account for its thick-set local Sutto limestone facade; by turns perforate, folded or fin-deep, with a huge window looking out full-square to the Danube. It embodies the new activism of its students; standing their ground, in for the long haul. ●

