HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY

O'Donnell + Tuomey's progressive building for the Central European University in Budapest has sadly fallen victim to regressive politics, writes Jay Merrick.
The Central European University (CEU) in Budapest is dedicated to socially and morally responsible intellectual inquiry, open society, and open borders, and the first phase of its architectural reconceptualization was completed by O'Donnell + Tuomey in collaboration with local executive architect Tamas Papp. Within 18 months, Hungary's president Viktor Orbán— who believes in what he has described as an "illiberal society," in which cultural groups such as Jews and the LGBTQ+ community are effectively marginalized—had demanded its closure.

The singularly inflected limestone façade of the new northern segment of the CEU is in Nador, a quiet street in the most historic part of the city dominated by impressive 16th- and 17th-century Neo-classical buildings. The façade's vertical creases is at the centre line of Vygysk’s Ferenc tisz, which is directly opposite and runs down to the east bank of the Danube.

That axis continues internally through the centre of the double- and triple-height volumes of the public ground floor area. Just inside the entrance, the centre-line passes a stone plaque fixed to the wall, inscribed with a message from the CEU's Hungarian-American billionaire sponsor, George Soros: "Reality has the power to surprise thinking, and thinking has the power to create reality. But we must remember the unintended consequences— the outcome always differs from expectations." O'Donnell + Tuomey won the international competition to masterplan the 29,000m² CEU campus for 1,500 postgraduate students across more than half of a city block. The CRT is the biggest and most international of a small number of private universities; the majority of Hungary’s university developments are state funded. The three-phase scheme was designed to transform and interconnect five adjoining buildings, and construct two new ones. The first phase produced a new building at Nador 18, and major interventions in the existing and adjoining Nador 18 building.

Early conversations about the design frequently focused on architectural expression. The client wanted a "signature building," but the practice resisted this idea, at one point asking the then resident, John Shaittuck: "Whose signature? Your signature?" The pair were away teaching in Florence at the time, discussing the "idea of representation or identity" in three-way phone conversations. The project was arrived at through negotiation in a way that could be debated.

The reactions of each of the university’s departments to the evolving design was occasionally rather well. For example, the School of Music section was very interested in the treatment of boundaries in the buildings; the legal studies academics preferred to wait until the design was more fully developed so that they could have something distinct to cross-examine. By 2014, both O'Donnell and Tuomey or their project architects Mark Freeman and Miklós Hideg made it to approximate 50 focus-group meetings to discuss the design in relation to the needs of academic departments, and students.

Nador 15 incorporates a functional academic stack composed of a 400-seat lecture theatre rising from the basement to the first floor, a Harvard seminar room and, above it, a five-storey library and atrium. There are cafés on the ground and first floors, offices, breakout spaces, various well-concealed back-of-house facilities, and a stack of classrooms at the east end of the plan.

Nador 13 remains, in essence, a typical Budapest courtyard building, with a gallery of lighting rooms, offices and break-out spaces around the seven-storey central volume. There are three dramatic interventions: a glass roof slides on at a steep angle through the courtyard void, coming to rest on a raking steel structure at second-storey level; a robustly ribbed oak-red-steel staircase—which features in many of O'Donnell + Tuomey's cultural buildings—passes through the glass and flies through space to join the north and south sides of the courtyard; and there is a brilliantly artful intervention in the south-east corner of Nador 13, where another red-steel staircase rises like an asymmetrical unfolded Möbius strip that signifies in an Expressionist Cubist of Dr Caligari manner past the old brick and limestone walls.

The immediate context influenced the design of Nador 15's facade—the "excellence of expression, the three-dimensional, amazingly muscular 19th-century buildings," explains Tuomey. We introduced this idea of sacrilege:

(Opening spread) the Nador 15 elevation captured by a camera, and by the paintbrush of O'Donnell (Opposite, clockwise from top left) the dramatic five-storey library and atrium features a hooded brick, recalling the CEU's Sándor Eőri House Centre, glassy, curved, sharply through the courtyard void; this is linked to the limestone facade by O'Donnell + Tuomey's signature enfolded red steel staircase, both natural and artificial light permeates the classrooms and library spaces. (Right) the neighboring 19th-century buildings, with the limestone and glass façade abstractions of the street's historic elevations, influenced the design of the CEU (O'Donnell) lighting in the library and various benefits from the generous register overhead glazing.
The building’s energy is embedded in the facade’s angles, juts, gapped stonework and setbacks.

The limestone and glass facade are abstentions of the street’s historic elevations and O’Donnell speaks of the facade sitting quietly with its neighbours without either embarrassing them or kowtowing to them. Tomney, however, has a slightly different interpretation: “It should be disruptive but remain in conversation with the other buildings. It sort of becomes itself by developing its own energy.”

This energy is embedded in the facade’s angles, juts, gapped stonework and setbacks. At the top, two rows of differently scaled stone millstones even have a hint of medieval battlements about them, expressed in beautifully cut and laid thin stone, with some joint inaccuracy to them. As a whole, the elevation proffes the aspects of the plan and sectional geometry of the central reception area and cafe.

The support of the city’s monuments authority was crucial in convincing the CBI that this degree of creatively critical design was acceptable.

It is inconceivable that there weren’t already familiar DNA-like strands of form, space and connections hovering in the architects’ minds from an early stage. For example, the way the library is held up above the reception volume – "nesting" as Tomney puts it – recalls the sequence of the volume of the Lyric Theatre in Belfast (2011).

The spaces, connections and geometry can be traced back to the practice’s solid model of the Ans Qudkhana Irish language cultural centre in Derry, shown at the 2006 Venice Biennale, a year before that building’s completion. The play of Níodh’s solids, voids and metalwork also recalls formal and more-detailed aspects of the designs of the Lyric Theatre and the 2014 New York Student Centre at the London School of Economics.

One thing both authors agree on; Tomney reveals, “is the point of resistance – with, against, for, working in relation. When’s the well, the rift, the stream? We’re looking for something to work against.” And O’Donnell adds, tantalisingly: “We knew what the inside would feel like.”

And does the architecture feel? According to Katalin Mihó, a CBI redevelopment officer, students are particularly happy with the new social spaces, which were not requested in the original design brief. Library director, Blaise (Burn) Lomas, speaks of “that very different atmosphere” to the old school’s library. O’Donnell says that “there’s a lot of new” about the buildings: “It’s a challenging and dramatic building that our community must make the most of.

These human and academic outcomes flow from Buckley’s historic morphologies of courtyards and passageways, which have been reconfigured to play out the transparencies and connections produced by knowledge. From the floor ground, students or visitors can look up and into the glass, superbly furnished library floors, from where Níodh win and the Danube can be viewed from breakout spaces or desks. The library’s entrance sequence is novel; there are no doors, but a cleverly arranged four-turn ascent allows stacks to be accessed, keeping the 100,000-book upper register silent.

In Níodh it especially, the solids and voids have a dynamically nuanced look and feel, in the same way that in some axialonic drawings solids and voids seem spatially interchangeable.

The practice’s profound interest in previous artifices of sculpted and interwoven geometries, coupled with the quite different language used to describe them, produce an interesting tension in which the great physical clarity and lift of the architecture seems almost like fragments in an Escheresque riddle.

“We wanted a sense of building,” says Tomney. “We needed a school that could work its way through the whole urban block, like sea waves working space around these sea caverns. We want the parts to add up to a moment whole, so that if you hit it with a hammer it would all resonate with the same ring.”

Geometry and mass meet pre-history.

I found an etymological speculation that gives John Tomney’s early poetry an unexpected resonance with Pest, the part of the city on the eastern side of the Danube. Adrian Room, a specialist in the origin of place names, says that Pest is rooted in the Slavic word for a limekiln, or a cave where fires burn. And this allows us to imagine the facade of Níodh as a timeless clifftop, behind which lies a heart of illuminating ideas.

The university was recently again academically accredited for another five years by the Hungarian authorities, but Scyce’s words now have a deadly irony. "How disappointing to think that the failure of the project is transcended," says Sheila O’Donnell. "It’s very depressing that the political system overwhelmed the idea, the dream. The building has become a symbol of what’s happening."

In 2011, on our first visit, you could feel the atmosphere changing, becoming more crossed-minded. It is to be hoped that the CBI’s architectural asymmetries will prove to be more than your runs cast onto Hungary’s shifting political sands.