Urban campus reform, Budapest

O’Donnell + Tuomey set out to transform several buildings in the heart of the historic city into a coherent whole.

Founded in 1991, the Central European University is a child of the Velvet Revolution, having responded to the need for new academic institutions in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Supported by many of the regions leading intellectuals, CEU’s ambition was to assist the democratic transition of post-communist nations by introducing study programmes in public policy modelled after Western counterparts, as well as social and environmental sciences.

The university quickly became a source of highly trained individuals for the regions universities, NGOs, and governments. Originally located in Prague, CEU moved to Budapest in the early ’90s. The choice was a challenge right from the beginning, as its faculties were distributed in several historical buildings. While the new library and faculty tower (1994) by László Iványi created a strong connection between the separate buildings, situating university functions in former residential buildings had its inconveniences. Moreover, CEU’s accreditation began attracting an increasing number of students from Western Europe and elsewhere.

In 2016, CEU launched its campus redevelopment programme. Following an international competition, Irish firm O’Donnell + Tuomey, together with Hungarian partners MT-Appestudio, was selected to turn the campus into a sustainable, respectful, and practical entity. Besides bringing all the faculties together in one 35,000 m² campus comprising six contiguous buildings, plans also include a new library, an extended auditorium, and a cafe. After adapting the proposals to the requests of the Budapest Heritage Authority, construction began in May 2016. The design, while preserving the architectural character of the city block, promises to translate CEU’s mission into a spatial arrangement: permeable, accessible for citizens, and giving the university greater vibrancy and a stronger presence in the city. The new buildings were designed to work in harmony with the environment. Topped by a clearly pitched green roof, the area now provides natural light and air for the buildings.

Tell us about the design process. We begin every project by a deliberate process of immersion, reading around the subject, analysing our brief, listening to our client and people who can help us learn something new about the situation. By gradual steps of observation and analysis, careful investigation, we prepare ourselves for the precarious, sometimes sudden and always necessary jumps in logic that turn the way to an actual architectural design. Multiple early consultations and meetings with the CEU community (students, faculty, staff) augmented our understanding of the brief and gave us insights into the workings of CEU and the interconnections within and between departments. We explored the city of Budapest, observing the historic architectural pattern of courtyard development, facades, and buildings of stone.

What is the building’s central concept, and how are the ideas materialized? The existing campus consisted of five adjoining buildings, each with an entrance from the street, with minimal interconnectedness between them. We identified opportunities to intervene in the urban block, to make what is now a disconnected and disparate set of buildings into an open campus. We employed a process of selective subtraction and addition to transform the campus into a metaphorical crossroads. By carefully considered ‘surgical’ strategies, we link all existing and new facilities through a logical sequence of connected courtyards.

What experience and references did you draw upon for this project? What lessons have you learned from the LSE building, for example (see A10-57)? One parallel with all our work, including LSE, is our approach to sustainability and environmental design, forming an integral part of the design process. Rather than being an exercise in ‘licking boxes’, we see environmental performance as a key measure of the success of the design of new additions and the rehabilitation of existing spaces in CEU. We understand the role of integrated approaches to environment, architecture, structure, and services, not only in creating a comfortable environment for staff and students, but also in conserving natural resources. The design team follows an environmental design methodology that prioritizes demand reduction strategies over active supply strategies. This is an approach which defines how we validate architectural and technical design decisions, and ensures that we develop robust and reliable solutions for achieving a low-energy, low-carbon campus.

How were the materials selected? The palette of materials has been selected for their endurance and natural material qualities that give character to the overall appearance. Stone, timber, concrete, and steel form the fabric of the interior public spaces, with bespoke furniture used throughout the building. The new facades will be constructed with local limestone, designed to emphasize the geometric quality of the building and continue the traditional solidity and permanence of the Budapest stone architecture.