

University of Greenwich

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Architects:

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Late last year the University of Greenwich opened its new 16,000m² Academic and Library building in Stockwell Street, Greenwich. It holds the only school of architecture on a UNESCO World Heritage site and is located just a stone's throw from the National Maritime Museum, St Alphege's Church and the monumental Old Royal Naval College complex by Christopher Wren and Nicholas Hawksmoor. Consequently, the contextual and conservation issues in its design were complex.

The resulting diplomatic design uses a strategic system of architectural details with which to negotiate such a constrained brief and a budget of £76 million. Maintained as a single volume of stepped, parallel but connected masses over four storeys, the building accommodates the Department of Architecture & Landscape, as well as the university library, gallery, two lecture theatres, seminar rooms, studios, offices and fourteen landscaped roof gardens. Though distinctly twenty-first century in its use of BIM and in some of its materials, its precedents include the modernist architecture faculty buildings at Harvard by J. L. Sert and at Yale by Paul Rudolph.

Aside from other architectural consequences, the townscape dimensions of the limestone-clad Stockwell Street facade match the proportions of adjacent Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian buildings. This is a much deeper, more detailed and articulated facade punctuated with bands of sequenced setbacks. This narrow banding in plan generates a series of parallel strips throughout the site. Separating "serviced" and "servicing" spaces in this manner means large open-plan studios, offices and seminar rooms are visible to each other through their circulation, encouraging innovation and sharing through the ad hoc, chance and random mix of staff, students and ideas. Both the library and the academic wing have a grand, black-steel staircase that provides a long, circuitous route through the heart of both sections of the building. Like the grand staircases of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this central architectural element helps to generate the social exchange and meme transmission that are so key to organisational and educational innovation in teaching, learning and research.

The academic building contains two lecture theatres and a TV studio in the basement, as well as galleries, shops, cafes and workshops on the more active, public focussed ground floor. This more porous segmentation of programme becomes more student-focused in the first-floor, openplan design studios, computer labs and

the heart of the School of Architecture & Landscape: the so-called “crit-pit”. The crit pit (made famous by its predecessors at Harvard and Yale) is where students present and perform their work. As a two- storey, column-free space viewable from the second-floor galleries, it is the theatrical and functional centre of the school and is where students’ projects will reach a pedagogic intensity and climax during the academic year. There are also secondfloor seminar rooms used for a variety of - historical, theoretical and speculative multimedia practices and modes of team-based learning. The largely open-floor academic offices on the third floor enhance staff research and facilitate group work, as well as a more participative and inclusive form of collegiality.