

Looking down the length of the boulevard, large sliding doors allow lectures to spill out from crit spaces.



# ROOMS FOR IMPROVEMENT

ARU has kicked off the remodelling of London Metropolitan University's Cass Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design with a bold revamp of the building's fourth floor. **Ellis Woodman** reports

Pictures by Jonathan Lovekin



**ARU's proposal for the exterior of Central House on Whitechapel High Street.**

I have to confess that, in writing about London Metropolitan University's new architecture studios, I can't promise much in the way of objectivity. I took my diploma at the school in the mid-nineties and have taught there since. Wandering around the new spaces one afternoon late last year, I stumbled on crits being conducted by my former tutor, Peter St John — back teaching on the diploma course after more than a decade's hiatus. Listening to his wryly unsparring assessment of one young innocent's work represented a giddy moment of recollection.

In 1996, I was among the first intake of students to study at Spring House, the school's former premises designed very successfully by Brady Mallalieu for a site on Holloway Road. However, by 2008 the school had outgrown this building, requiring the diploma studios' relocation to a former office block a couple of hundred metres down the street. Recalling one of Mike Nelson's more oppressively shabby art installations, this was hardly an ideal teaching environment but was always understood as a stop-gap measure. The larger problem on the horizon was that the lease on Spring House was due to expire in 2013, requiring the development of a strategy for the entire school's rehousing.

In addressing that challenge, the then-head of the faculty, Robert Mull, recognised a unique opportunity to provide it not just with new premises but also with a significantly refocused identity. One effect of the 2002 merger of the universities of North London and London Guildhall to form London Metropolitan University had been to bring Mull's department under the same administrative umbrella as the Sir John Cass Faculty of Art, Media and Design — a now 22-year-old institution offering graduate courses in fine art, jewellery, furniture and textiles. The possibility of the schools' merger had been floated intermittently over the past decade but the decision to take the plunge was only finalised two years ago.

"Before then," Mull explains, "the timing hadn't felt right; but in the last few years the school of Architecture and Spatial Design began to take on a much greater focus around live projects and 1:1

making. I think people began to realise that real synergies might be possible."

With Mull appointed as Dean, the Sir John Cass Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design was officially established in August. It is operating out of Central House on the eastern fringe of the City of London that the art school formerly occupied alone: a brick and concrete structure built in the early sixties as a factory and warehouse for fabric production. While far from lovely, this property does have the merit of being exceptionally robust — Mull speculates that it could take a three-storey roof extension — and enjoys a location directly opposite the Whitechapel Art Gallery.

The new studios are the first phase of a comprehensive internal remodelling that is being designed by the Architecture Research Unit, the office that

## ARU's central preoccupation has always been the nature of urbanity

has operated out of London Met since the mid-eighties under the direction of professors Florian Beigel and Philip Christou. Its work completed to date provides new accommodation for the diploma studios across the entirety of the fourth floor. A second phase, due to be undertaken next year, will transform further floors for use by undergraduate architects, designers and fine artists as well as establishing a gallery and café at street level.

Since as far back as its Half Moon Theatre of 1985 — much abused but still standing just down the Mile End Road from the Cass — ARU has framed its work in terms of a poetic investigation into the nature of urbanity. Its projects are invariably compositions of disaggregated forms, in which the spaces caught between carry a charged reading much like the streets and squares of a city. In schemes like its 2009 proposal for the island city of Saemangeum in South Korea, the practice has brought this



The frontage of one of the closed studios.



sensibility to bear on projects of a genuinely urban scale, but much the same spatial operations can be found at play in its designs for individual buildings, interiors and even pieces of furniture. In its project for the Cass, the concern shines through vividly.

The building, as originally conceived, was a model of pragmatism: a stack of identical floorplates, each defined rigidly by a centrally located lightwell with WCs distributed to either side and a primary stair and lift core that stands midway along the rear elevation. ARU's interventions have been directed towards transforming these conditions into a much more permeable and differentiated environment. Once the whole project has been delivered, the building should read as a single expansive terrain made up of floors that share an architectural grammar but are each configured uniquely.

One move that is set to be common to every floor is the relocation of the WCs away from the central lightwell — a procedure that liberates the plan from the racetrack-like arrangement found on the floors that ARU has yet to transform. By contrast, the plan it has established for the diploma studios is structured as a series of parallel strips, each of a distinct character, that extend north to south across the longer of the floorplate's dimensions.

On exiting the stair core, we find ourselves midway down the strip that enjoys the most privileged reading: a passage, loaded with rooms to either side, that ARU terms "the boulevard". As that name suggests, it has been conceived in significantly more generous terms than a mere corridor. Four metres wide at its narrowest point, it expands at either end, taking on the quality of a place in its own right rather than just a route.

The urban association is enforced by the treatment of the elevations to either side. These are constructed in birch-faced plywood — the material being used as a sheer lining on the walls' internal face and as an exposed structure of 16mm-wide fins on the other. The views down the boulevard are therefore characterised by an insistent rhythm of vertical lines of a precision and delicacy that contrasts with the pre-existing brick and concrete fabric.

The studio rooms addressing the boulevard's east side have been provided with highly figurative frontages, giving them something of the character of a row of small houses. Composed of a door, an adjacent window and a diminutive high-level panel that Beigel suggests should be seen not as a vent but rather as "a door for the wind", this repeated assembly presents a strikingly peculiar set of proportional relationships. The windows are at an ideal height for passing five-year-olds and are of a width that takes no lead from the module of the fins; the vent cannot be opened easily without climbing onto a chair; even the kickplate declines to make its customary journey from one side of the door to the other. It is a composition in which

every part guards a sense of its own identity rather than allowing itself to be subsumed into a systematic expression.

To the west are meeting and crit rooms, the largest of which can be opened up to the boulevard by wide sliding doors, enabling the audience for lectures to spill out — an arrangement that recalls the ground floor of the Smithsons' architecture faculty building at the University of Bath. The plan in this central strip is highly perforate, each room being framed to either side by a short passage, providing multiple points of connection between the boulevard and the strip that extends along the building's western facade.

This too comprises studio spaces, but of a contrastingly open arrangement. Free-standing ply-faced walls divide it into territories of varying size — a system that has a pointedly loose relationship to both the rhythm of the building's structure and the

**FOURTH FLOOR PLAN**



To the west of the building, open studios have been configured between plywood partitions.



**Left:** The open studios are articulated by a specially designed strip-light fitting.

**Right:** Additional stairs have been introduced, allowing improved permeability between departments.



distribution of a series of large, mat-like rectangles that have been painted on the floor. Again, the sense is of a composition in which the constituent parts are held in bristling tension.

The other key aspect of the plan is its introduction of two new staircases — one located in the boulevard, which leads down to the third floor; the other in the open studios, which leads to the fifth. In the next phase, further connections are set to be introduced, creating an alternative meandering route up the building that it is hoped will enable a more fluid relationship between departments.

A more unified identity is also set to be cultivated by the decision to invite students from different departments to contribute directly to the construction of the second phase works. ARU's language of plywood fins has been conceived as a blank canvas that can accommodate artworks, textiles

## The sense is of a composition whose constituent parts are held in bristling tension

or pieces of built-in furniture. It is also anticipated that small standalone structures — termed "Jeromes" in honour of Antonello da Messina's painting of St Jerome's study — will house facilities like printing and photocopying. The first of these are being created by ARU but subsequent iterations will be designed and built by students.

The Cass is not unique in the range of disciplines that it offers, but speaking to Mull, it is clear that he hopes to engender a greater level of interaction between departments than can be claimed by the likes of the Royal College of Art. It is evidently

going to take some years before we can assess the success of that experiment but ARU's work has created a highly engaging site of encounter which puts this new institution on a fantastically strong footing.

### PROJECT TEAM

**Client**  
London Metropolitan University  
**Concept / client-side architect**  
Architecture Research Unit  
**Executive architect**  
Architecture PLB  
**Quantity surveyor and client's agent** Lambert Hart  
**Structural engineers**  
Hurst Peirce & Malcolm,  
EDA Construction Consultants  
**Services engineer**  
Chapman Bathurst Partnership  
**Construction** ITC Concepts  
**Subcontractors**  
PURE Joinery (partition joinery),  
Brystewood Joinery (door manufacturers),  
Moyné London (M & E contractor)