
Above The main stair and lightwell occupy axial positions on plan. Right/below The principal elevations align with faculty buildings and Water Lane to reinforce the campus edge.

While debates about the future of the print word rumble on, universities aspiring to climb the rankings tables still recognise the importance of a good library building. Students, ever-more discerning since the recent hike in tuition fees, do too, and for undergraduates in particular there is still an appeal for what poet Philip Larkin described (at the University of Hull, where he was librarian) as a ‘lifted study-storehouse’, a space in which to feel inspired and also emotionally secure. Hopkins’ library at the University of East London’s Stratford campus embraces Larkin’s elevated notion of the library, while also adhering to Louis Kahn’s tenets of good library design: an understanding of the collective, a veneration of the window and the quality of light – ‘a man with a book goes to the light, a library begins that way’, he suggested.

A short walk east from Stratford Station, the UEL campus has its origins in the grade-II* listed University House, formerly the West Ham Technical Institute. Much of the library accommodation was previously housed in this handsome red brick and Portland stone building, which opened in 1900. Richard Murphy Architects’ masterplan for the westward expansion of the campus identified a site for the new library so as to form a strong edge and signal the university’s presence to the street. The split with UEL’s Docklands campus library resulted in a required capacity at Stratford for 150,000 items for the faculties of law, social sciences, sport and biosciences, psychology and education. Spread over three floors, open-access shelving and IT stations are set in the depth of the plan with the readers located at the edges, toward the light.
Referencing University House, the elegantly ordered brick elevations contain an interior that is calibrated to deliver a calmness conducive to study; quite a contrast to the distinctive sweep of Hopkins' nearby 'cauldron of noise' that was the Olympics velodrome. A formal five-bay elevation faces the new campus courtyard, drawn out from the main body of the library footprint that has been eased out to occupy the limits of the site. The rear elevation is freer, following the gentle curve of Water Lane. A meeting with Newham's Design Review Panel prompted a loosening of the plan and the allocation of more direct activity and animation on the street. In response, the entrance was moved off-centre and a wider pavement defined on Water Lane to
give more breathing space to the street line, permitting glimpses into the life of the university and vice versa.

On entering, the internal arrangement is immediately revealed, with permeability from east to west and ancillary spaces to the north and south. High occupancy and flow are accommodated by a racetrack plan with windows and secondary staircases terminating internal routes, which adds further legibility to the layout. Generous space is given to the busy activities around the entrance area, with book check-out, help desk, search engines, a small archive, and a separate snack area. The staff offices overlook the street but are also on show internally through glazed screens which convey openness and approachability. Seminar spaces and quiet study areas similarly define the edges of the upper floors, and a large casual seating area has been carved out of the section to provide a double-height space, above the entrance.

Two primary elements are embedded at the centre of the plan, a helical stair and the void of a rectangular lightwell. Readers gather around the upper floors of the open lightwell that reaches up from an enclosed contemplative bamboo garden at ground level. The motif recalls Louis Kahn’s Yale University Art Gallery and provides points of focus within the regular ordering structural grid. Since movement within libraries can cause acoustic and visual...
distraction, the hermetic stair contains the noise while serving as a totem for the overall composed and quiet atmosphere.

The beautifully detailed and proportioned windows are the most striking aspect of the design. A curtain-wall window section is pushed out flush with the brickwork, giving tautness to the external skin and unexpected depth internally. Internally the aperture is wrapped in oak to lend warmth of tone and softness to the quality of light. The generous window width translates to bays of paired, five-person study desks, a scale well suited to the high density of readers. The freestanding bookshelves have a utilitarian quality, subservient to the quality of the study spaces that incorporate carefully considered task lighting.

UEL is clearly thinking long-term; to attain BREEAM excellent is particularly laudable on a site where openings were restricted by external noise levels. Working with a repetitive window module helped sharpen the focus of the construction sequencing. The projecting bays were bracketed back to the concrete frame, insulated, sealed, and then blanked off during the brickwork phase before the window installation. A displacement ventilation system employs the 500mm-deep floor zone for supply air, with extract through attenuated plenums via the lightwell. A 425-square-metre photovoltaic array spans the zone of mechanical plant. Despite being carefully coordinated, this forms a rather heavy lid to the deep-plan container. Perhaps the same model on a quieter suburban campus might engender more modelling in section to provide more or wider lightwells to act as lungs to the library.

By infusing the programme with seminar and departmental activities, and with the inherent flexibility of the concrete frame and the loose-fit plan, UEL's Stratford Library feels robust enough to accommodate the inevitable changes that the future will bring. By projecting a positive image with a calm and confident architectural language there is a sense that the legacy for this part of Stratford is on track.

Above/ below. Full-height glazing to the atrium and cellular offices contributes to the open character of the ground-floor study space. Concrete ceilings are exposed where possible to enhance thermal mass. The main staircase is housed in a cylindrical timber-clad enclosure to isolate movement noise from the study areas.

Cross section. Cross section through entrance area showing double-height seating bay overlooking the entrance.

Stephen Smith is a partner at Wright & Wright, whose projects include libraries at Magdalen College, Oxford, the Royal College of Art in London, and Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. He is also a design fellow at Cambridge University.
Hopkins writes. The library contains more than 150,000 items of stock, plus learning spaces that include individual reader study spaces, group study, training rooms, silent study rooms, open-access computers and a 24-hour cafe area. It is accessible from the main campus entrance, off The Green and adjacent to the Conference & Computer Centre. The ground-floor hub contains a security desk and self-service facilities such as a book sorter and self-issuing machines. Staff accommodation runs along the Water Lane facade at ground level. A helical stair and small atrium garden are centrally positioned. Student spaces occupy the perimeter of the upper two floors, with views over the internal courtyard and Water Lane back towards Stratford town centre.

External walls are constructed from a single skin of stretcher-band handmade Charwood Hampshire red bricks, chosen to complement the surrounding buildings, including Richard Murphy’s Cass School of Education and Conference & Computer Centre (1999), and the Edwardian University House. Toggle-glazed windows are set flush within the brick wall and supported on galvanized steel frames fixed to the in-situ concrete structure. Bespoke polyester powder-coated aluminium trims surround the windows, accommodating differential movement. Fresh silicone-painted glazing is used for the large window overlooking the entrance and above the atrium. A hemispherical stainless-steel-framed rooflight sits above the helical stair. The structure is a concrete frame with exposed fair-faced solids, columns and stair wall. The stairs are acid-etched precast concrete with stainless steel/PPC aluminium balustrading. Suspended metal acoustic ceiling panels minimize reverberation. American white oak is used throughout for joinery with a clear matt lacquer finish. Timber window reveals contain integrated manual roller blinds for glare control. Below the windows, powder-coated mild steel perforated metal panels conceal fin-tube heaters. Natural and mixed-mode ventilation options were considered but ruled out in favour of a mechanical displacement system with heat recovery.

Acoustically attenuated transfer grilles provide an air path from cellular spaces.

Above/below Workspaces overlook the atrium; Water Lane elevation. The site, previously occupied by a single-storey brick building and two porticos, was identified in Richard Murphy’s masterplan so as to create a second campus courtyard.

Project team
Architect: Hopkins; design team: Mike Taylor, Chris Bonnier, Steve Jones (above), Georgina More, Rory Crawford, Andrew Henriques, Jonathan Watts, Ahmed Rana, Mark Mazier; contractor: Volker Fenger; structural and civil engineers: Expedition Engineering; services and fire engineer: BREEAM
assessor: AECOM; acoustics: Adrian James Acoustics; facade consultant: Billings Design Associates; planning consultant: CoM Consulting; access: Ann Sawyer; project manager, employer’s agent: Jones Lang LaSalle; cost consultant: Turner & Townsend; landscape: Grant Associates; rights of light: party-wall surveyors: OWA; architects: Sweett and Partners; University of East London, Building

Selected suppliers and subcontractors
Facade and rooflight glazing: Vitre Systems; in-situ concrete: Wheats & Grant; precast concrete stair and canopy: Charwood Concrete Products; architectural metalwork: Hi-Tec; Walling & Fabrications; joinery: Kawneer/Boards; toilet cubicles: Total Laminate Systems; roof: Noble House; lights: Intech Agila; doors: AEFL; suspended acoustic paneling: SAS International; landscape: ESL Landscape; Charwood Hampshire; bricks: Michael; carpet: Desso; tiles: Pott; shelves: Caradon; benches: IFS; internal doors: Decoform; roller blinds: Silent Gliss; insulation: Kingspan; roof waterproofing: Redmac; plant screens: Pal; metal doors: Primac; internal glazed screens: Planet Partitions; signage: Merson Signs; external benches: Pendeford; cycle shelters: Fitch.