

Interview

Will Hunter, founder of the London School of Architecture

By Laura Mark



EMMA GIBNEY

Above Students from the first cohort entering the London School of Architecture (l-r): Aleks Stojakovic, Charlotte Chambers, Frazer Haviz, Nathaniel Amisah, Alexander Frehse, Timothy Ng, Maeve Dolan, James Mackenzie, Stuart Goldsworthy-Trapp, Jank Idle and Raphael Arthur
Left Will Hunter

Ahead of the first student cohort matriculating in October, Will Hunter, founder of the London School of Architecture, shares his vision for the new institution.

Why did you decide to set up a new architecture course?

I was worried about the effect on the profession of the £9,000 tuition fee rise. I wanted to combine new financial and teaching models, bringing practice and education closer to enrich both.

How did you develop your approach?

Before I launched the Alternative Routes for Architecture think-tank in *The Architectural Review*, I spoke with many different people – Isabel Allen, Simon Allford, Niall McLaughlin and James Soane to name a few. A core group decided, instead of just exploring models abstractly, to do it for real. Deborah Saunt suggested the name the London School of Architecture. We couldn't believe our luck that nobody had registered it already.

What have you come up with?

Our two-year diploma programme opens this October. In the first year, students work three days a week in a practice, for which they are paid a minimum of £12,000. This covers the tuition fees for both years, which are set at £6,000 – so effectively it is 'cost neutral' to study with us. In the second year the students are full-time, working on self-directed projects. We set up as a charity with a board of trustees led by Crispin Kelly and Elsie Owusu. Our academic partner is the Cass at London Met, which will validate the programme, and we have a group of 50 London-based practice partners.

What's the biggest obstacle remaining?

Living costs for students. Access to state funding currently takes a minimum of two years, so we have a taskforce raising money to offer more of our own bursaries now. The aim

'I wanted to combine new financial and teaching models, bringing practice and education closer to enrich both'

is to be 'needs blind' within three years.

What projects will your students be working on?

We're intensely interested in London. Each cohort is focused on a different borough for its two years on the programme. We kick off with Soho, which will be where the thesis projects will be sited in second year.

In the year's main project, practices and students form a 'design think-tank' to collaborate on a piece of design/research, which will make speculative propositions about the spatial consequences of how the world is changing.

Who have you recruited to teach at the school?

Deborah Saunt is director of first year, Clive Sall is director of second year, with James Soane, Peter Buchanan, Tom Holbrook, Alan Powers and Lewis Kinneir teaching different subjects. As a non-teaching judicial body we have an academic court made up of three exceptional international professors: Nigel Coates, Farshid Moussavi and Leon van Schaik.

How many students are you taking on?

We were aiming for 25, but we had about 140 applications, so we have ended up recruiting 35. We will always be small, however – every cohort is capped at 40.

Have you received ARB accreditation?

We've been in discussions with them for a couple of years, and they've been really helpful. We're currently seeking ARB accreditation and will be making a final submission shortly.

Where will the school be based? Will the students have access to studio spaces and model-making facilities?

In the first year, they have a base at their host practices five days a week. The majority of the lectures, crits and seminars are at the Design Museum, a partner organisation providing space. In 2016 we will rent a studio for second years to work in and they will have access to BlackhorseWorkshop in Walthamstow.

How has this model been received by the profession?

Really enthusiastically. The range of practices involved is amazing, from those awarded the RIBA Gold Medal to those shortlisted for the Turner Prize, plus a few Stirling Prize winners. AHMM, Grimshaw, Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners and Orms have been particularly

supportive, not only in helping to develop ideas, but also in supporting the school financially.

Beyond the profession we have a wide coalition of backers. Our founding patrons include Nadja Swarovski and Terry Leahy, and Davina Mallinckrodt, Niall Hobhouse, Martin Halusa and Peter Mason are just some of our founding benefactors.

Would a model like this work outside of London? Can it only work in the capital due to its concentration of firms?

It could work in New York (where we're considering a satellite school), but I think we'd struggle in York!

At £6,000 your tuition fees are a third less than other institutions. How have you kept this cost down?

By using the city as campus and keeping the organisation lean.

Do you plan to start a Part 1 in the future?

Before Part 1, we'd look at Part 3, hopefully to come online for our first graduates in 2017.

Is it more difficult to shake up Part 1?

For us, as a new institution, definitely. How do you reach those just leaving school? Most are still told that they need A-Levels in physics and mathematics, so the careers advice to enter architecture seems fairly immutable.

Are working in practice and lower fees needed to ensure the profession doesn't become only for the privileged?

It's certainly our answer to the problem, but I am sure there are others. I know the RIBA is campaigning for change, and I'm sure all schools of architecture have their own response.

Will we see more courses like this emerging in the future?

There are some already – Central St Martins, Cambridge, Sheffield, Oxford Brookes and Bath all have practice-related courses. I'd love it if we saw lots of different types emerging.

GO ONLINE TO FIND OUT WHY STUDENT EMILY FRIBBANCE DECIDED TO STUDY AT THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

Search 'Fribbance' at TheAJ.co.uk