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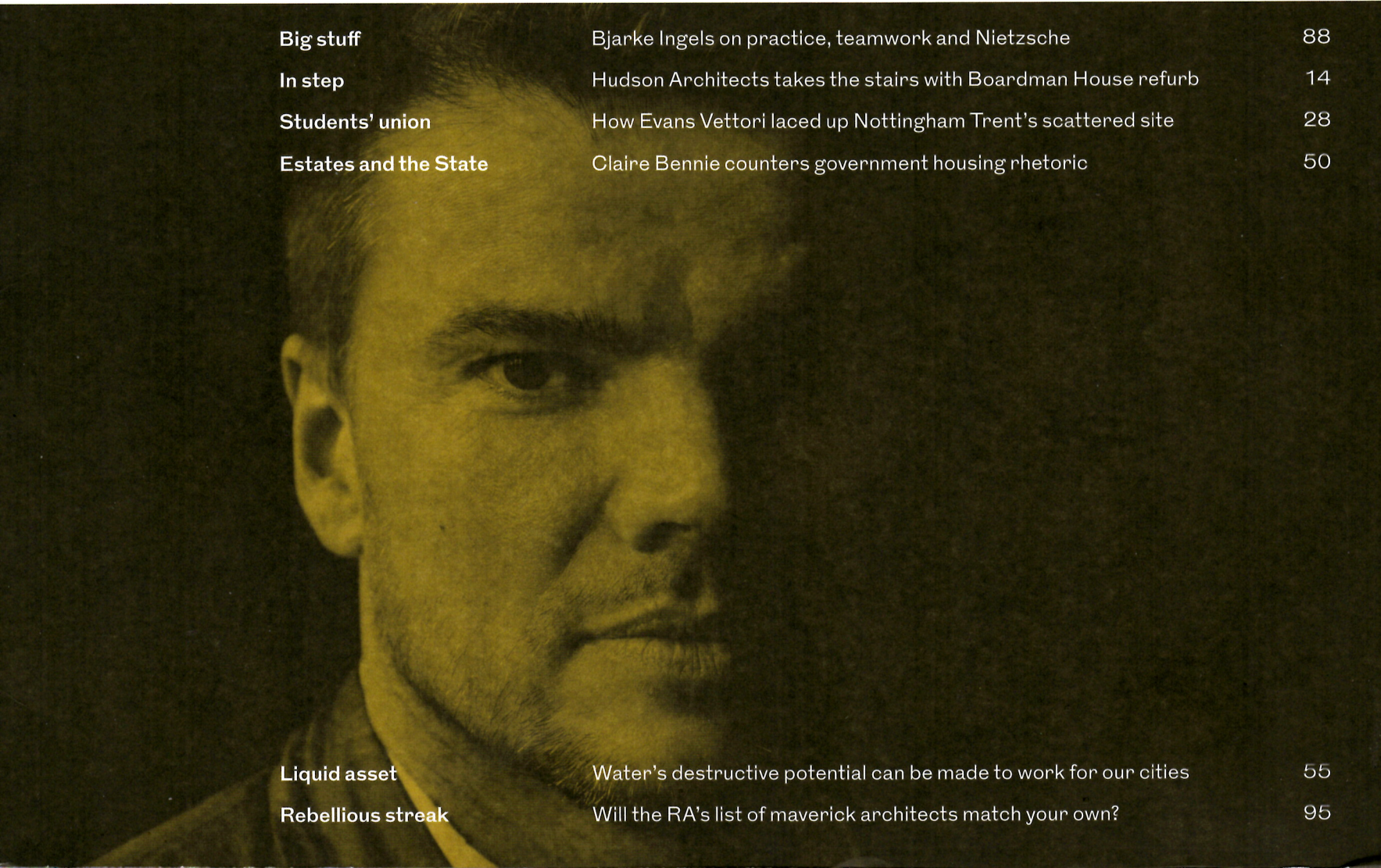
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March 2016



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Care, flair and hanging stairs

If architecture students at Norwich University of the Arts need a lesson in design, all they have to do is look around them at Hudson Architects' refurbished Boardman House

Words: Eleanor Young Photographs: Joakim Boren

A solid civic Sunday school building may not be the obvious place to teach the architects of tomorrow. But then for many years Norwich has not been the obvious place to study the subject. It's only since 2012 that this flint-ful cathedral city has had an architecture school. Norwich University of the Arts was fully fledged as a university in the same year and operates out of 12 buildings all within a few streets of each other. There are 89 students in the architecture school and Boardman House was bought for them.

It is named after its original architect Edward Boardman, who borrowed an Italianate style that was already considered a little passé when it was designed. The handsome yellow brick face has, however, weathered

well, belying the twisted muddle of offices and access that Hudson Architects found inside. Rather like its mother church next door, the central space is a double height hall with a wide gallery encircling it at first floor level and housing regular alcoves.

In these days of open plan teaching and creative mingling, a little bit of fixing up and some work on the access might have done the trick for the architecture school and its downstairs neighbour of media studies. And at £2,374/m² with no frills, Hudson Architects has infused this potentially sober building with characterful quirks, partly by historical accident, partly by the design of two set pieces.

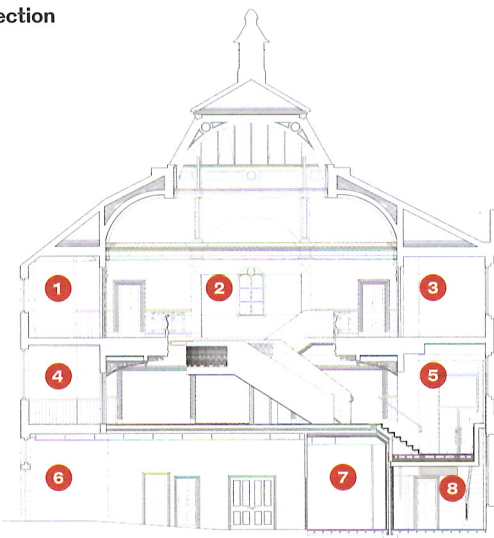
The first well handled accident, as you



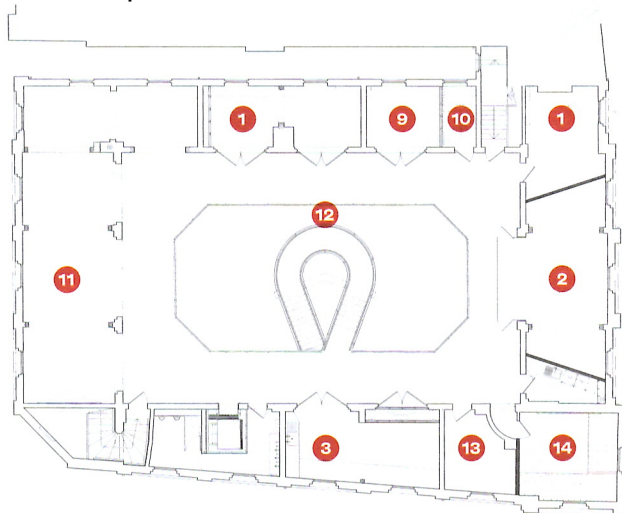
Far left A way in to architecture.
Left The Italianate corner of Boardman House.
Opposite Scrolls and tendrils of the old balcony and new staircase.



Section



Second floor plan



Key

- 1 Print room
- 2 Seminar room
- 3 Model making room
- 4 Server room
- 5 Main entrance lobby
- 6 Corridor
- 7 Control room
- 8 Lobby
- 9 Office
- 10 Disabled refuge
- 11 Design studio
- 12 School room
- 13 Portfolio storage
- 14 Group tutorial room

enter, is a surprise: a hanging stair, half a cantilevered staircase, truncated in an earlier refurb above head height. And, on the other side, the dado rail embedded in the wall that would have followed the staircase down into the entrance. At the end of the slim double height atrium a new little staircase runs up to a wall of mirrors, turning a slot alongside the lift shaft into something more than leftover space and giving the original window alongside a place to light. All this is done amid a toned down building where red doors

complement the university's light grey walls and timber panelling, modestly highlighted in a gentle shade of pewter. The only other strip of colour is the full height blue of new timber panels. Elsewhere there is a leftover door to nowhere, remnants of impossible windows and fragments of tiles. These might be pieces of 'significant fabric' or not, but either way it's done with a lightness of touch.

But the essence of space is in the vaulted school room of Boardman House. Entering from the narrow atrium, the openness of



Left From above but going nowhere, the original cantilevered staircase, sliced in two by a previous refurbishment.

IN NUMBERS

1,474m²
gross internal area

£3.5 million
project value

£2,374
cost per m²

the space comes as surprise. But this is even more true of the beautiful new curving, decorated, staircase, its water cut steel decoration echoing the elegant tendrils around the building's original balustrades. It is bold both visually and in the way it takes hold of the room, pulling the open volume into a swirl of stairs and apparently eating up the space. But what it does of course is act as a dividing device to create different spaces. The focussed areas for screens and display under the stairs, computers to one side, an open plan lecture or crit space to the other. As you ascend you appreciate, as will generations of architecture students, the care and attention that has been lavished on the staircase as the oak on the treads is oh so carefully set out to follow the stairs up and around to the top of the architecture school.

Up on the first floor is the invisible studio, depending which angle you are looking from. A glazed wall of switchable glass keeps the school room gallery visually intact, while pushing out into it, first translucent then opaque, reflecting the spaces around it. In the telling it might sound an expensive diversion but it is simple enough, bar the glass technology, and adds a level of sophistication that should set students thinking about what materials might do for them.

Anthony Hudson was one of those who encouraged Norwich vice-chancellor Professor Last to add a school of architecture to this arts school. Hudson Architects' reworking of the building under the energetic and diligent stewardship of project architect Jenny Harvey looks set to be one of the most important ingredients in making this intimate little school a success. ●



Above Dividing the space with a swirl.
Left Now you see it, now you don't, as the glass switches the room and its reflections are more or less readable.

Credits
Architect Hudson Architects
Client Norwich University of the Arts
Main contractor Balfour Beatty
Structural engineer Rossi Long Consulting
M&E Mott MacDonald
Quantity surveyor Aecom

Suppliers
Solid timber floor Nordik Oak Junckers
Microcement floor PSR concrete overlay PUUR Floor
Roof lantern Vitral A98 ESB Services
Switchable glass IG Smart Glass Prodisplay
Glazed entrance doors Schueco ADS 65 Alan Hone Associates