



## Contemporary transformation 1930s campus gets new lease of life

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London community



The new learning centre at Waltham Forest College is designed to attract students, staff and visitors to the heart of the main building

# Contemporary transformation

**Waltham Forest College is a landmark education building in northeast London that has been given a radical new lease of life thanks to a major refurbishment by Richard Hopkinson in collaboration with Platform 5 Architects. Peter Allen, a Partner at Platform 5, details the amazing contemporary transformation of this 1930s campus building.**

**W**altham Forest College had originally hoped to fund a major building programme under the Learning and Skills Council's Building Colleges for the Future funding stream. When this funding source was cut however, the college was forced to look elsewhere to fund its ambitions. Richard Hopkinson assisted the college in the subsequent review of its estate and this led to the college adopting a phased approach to its redevelopment, adopting a policy of refurbishment rather than wholesale renewal. The result of this first phase is an extraordinary transformation of the heart of the campus that is proving to be extremely popular with the college and its users.

Richard is an experienced architect, design director and project manager, with over 20 years' experience of working with public buildings, schools, colleges and universities, particularly in refurbishment and renewal projects. Platform 5 is an emerging London practice with an award-winning portfolio of smaller projects. For us, this project represents a breakthrough as our first major education project and our largest project to date. Our collaboration began when Richard was appointed in 2010 by Waltham Forest College to masterplan development for the revitalisation of the estate. Richard chose to renew his association with us at Platform 5, and together we put together a successful

bid for the college, with Waltham Forest becoming one of only two successful applicants in South East England.

The £3m project sought to open up the existing 1930s building to create a new series of formal and informal education and meeting areas. The previously austere entrance and run-down main spaces have been transformed, creating a welcoming, inclusive and contemporary environment for students, staff and other building users.

Before the refurbishment, visitors to the imposing main entrance were met by a shabby and cluttered reception area and a high, blank wall. Behind this lay a neglected and underused

main hall, with a series of cramped and similarly tired teaching spaces above. Circulation throughout the building was poor and transparency was limited.

Building users at Waltham Forest College are now welcomed by a bright and airy reception area on arrival at the entrance. The design removed the rear wall in the lobby, giving clear views through to the former main hall which now houses a large new learning centre. The visual effect from the lobby is a series of layers: looking beyond the main staircase through full-height glazing into the new learning centre with glimpses of new interventions inside the main space. As you move up the revitalised main staircase, transparency has been incorporated on all levels to reflect the open inclusive nature the college wishes to project.

The new learning centre is designed to attract students, staff and visitors to the heart of the main building. At its entrance is a cafe, providing a much-needed meeting and refreshment area, and deliberately blurring the boundaries between formal and informal uses. Beyond a glazed wall, the former hall then opens out into a large double-height, brightly lit and colourful space containing a library and a series of informal learning areas. Learning is now visibly at the core of the college campus.

The most striking feature of this area is a new intervention, a suspended glazed box, offset from the main orientation of the learning centre. Accessed by a slender oak-lined staircase or from a



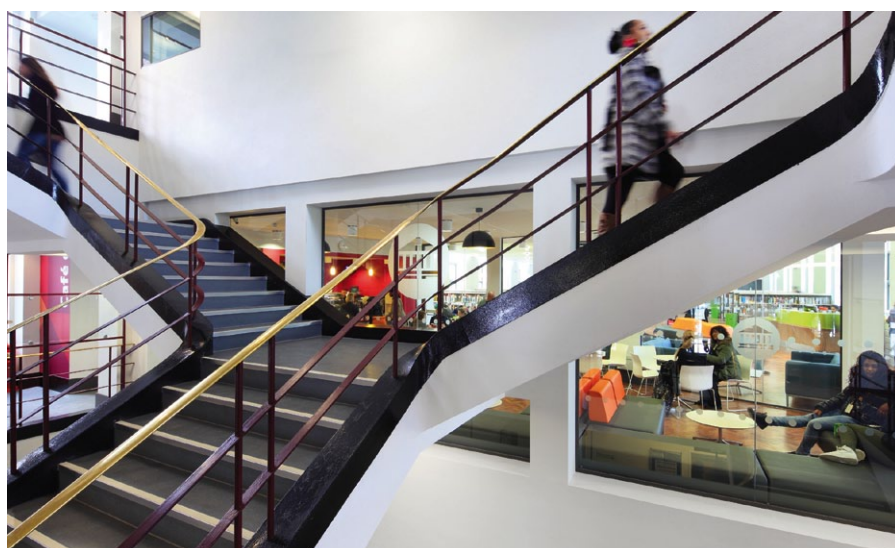
Further visual effects are gained by the insertion of a wide and deep lightwell piercing the two storeys above the learning centre and bringing additional natural light into the core of the building

mezzanine gallery, this 'learning pod' houses two seminar rooms overlooking the library which can be opened into a larger teaching space. The mezzanine level contains a well-equipped IT suite, separated from the learning centre below by a balcony. Both the pod and the mezzanine level are hung from the ceiling of the main space – this adds drama to the expression of this area.

The former stage area is now configured as a black box performing arts studio which can open to the floor of the learning centre via a demountable feature wall for performances, fashion shows award ceremonies and other activities. We have therefore retained the former use of the previous hall space within a much more flexible, attractive and welcoming space.

Further visual effects are gained by the insertion of a wide and deep new lightwell piercing the two storeys above the learning centre and bringing additional natural light into the core of the building. At upper levels the resulting voids are glazed from floor to ceiling, giving views into the learning centre from the top of the college. The upper level is laid out as a set of seminar rooms or conference suite visibly linked to the areas below. This conference suite leads to a vibrantly coloured refectory, which is a flexible open plan space that can be used for other teaching and social events by linking with the adjacent spaces.

The transformation of the old main staircase and reception area has led



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## Education



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to a huge improvement of circulation, which has been further enhanced by the provision of additional emergency escape routes to the upper floors. Highly functional in appearance, these two stairs offer a pleasing contrast with the Deco-inspired main college staircase, which has been improved by removal of later fire protection-related accretions. The new works are clad with simple insulated panels, appearing from outside as translucent boxes gently resting upon the original 1930s structure.

The team introduced graphic designers Nalla to the college to support

the changes with new branding. The refreshed branding is carefully integrated into the design and the team's interior design skills including the selection of furniture, result in colourful dynamic interiors, and uplifting environment.

The college vice-principal, Peter Glasgow has told us: "The College now has a physical visible heart that reflects the great teaching experience we offer to the community of Walthamstow. The whole arrangement encourages meeting, dialogue and good behaviour. What is best, is that it is fun for the students and staff alike."

We're delighted that our work at Waltham Forest College has been highly acclaimed by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) as offering exceptional value for money. This has led to further work with Richard: a subsequent bid by the team for SFA funding for a £4.8m second phase at the college has recently been approved. We're excited that our successful collaboration with Richard is allowing us to demonstrate what can be done with limited funds to raise aspirations in difficult times.

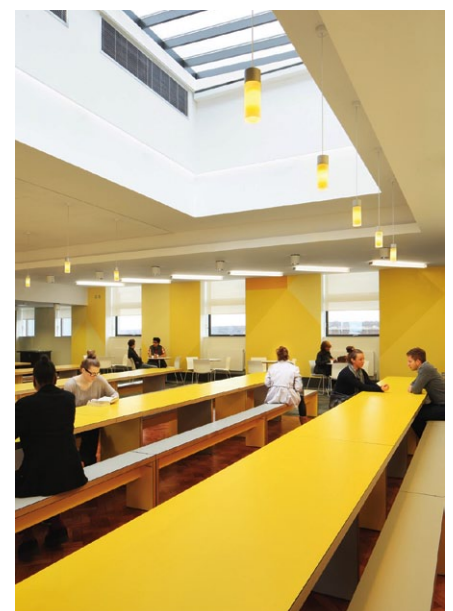
We feel very fortunate to be involved in such an exciting project, and proud to have provided Waltham Forest College with an exceptional new heart that will bring real educational change. Our team has demonstrated the ability to deliver complex refurbishment,

putting limited funds to maximum effect and delivering real change to learners in this important sector. As our partnership continues, we hope to bring our skills to bear on an increasing number of education and public building projects, as we believe we really do have something special to offer.

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The cafe provides a much-needed meeting and refreshment area, and deliberately blurs the boundaries between formal and informal uses



The vibrantly coloured refectory is a flexible open plan space that can be used for other teaching and social events by linking with the adjacent spaces