

# fringe thinking

*Mix* is in Edinburgh, but unlike many others, we're not here for the Festival. We've come to visit the recently opened Evolution House building at the Edinburgh College of Art, which is just much a part of the Edinburgh cultural landscape as the Festival itself. Freddie Steele reports.

One of the most common complaints we hear at *Mix* is that the magazine is too London focused. Well maybe, but we're not as bad as some others we could mention and we'd argue the point anyway. As natives of the North West we at least know that, contrary to what some Londoners may think, there is life north of Dunstable (if not actually in it).

Other parts of the UK can find what they perceive as the parochial outlook of the South East rankles with them. So much so that they sometimes feel the need to make the point in a pretty blunt way. In Glasgow, for example, the developers of the £40m Aurora Development have tellingly given their website the pointed moniker [www.andnotinlondon.com](http://www.andnotinlondon.com). Get the message?

Whatever you may think, any comparisons between London and anywhere else can be tenuous at best. Scotland and England may have much in common following three centuries of union but there will always be





»»» things that set them apart. For a start, the treaty that brought them together in 1707 went out of its way to preserve Scottish social structures, notably the church, law and educational system. Scotland also has an entirely different economic structure and a culture that is entirely its own. They do things a bit differently up here.

We like people who do things differently, which is how *Mix* finds itself in Edinburgh to visit the Edinburgh College of Art (ECA), which has a well-deserved reputation as one of the most successful and forward thinking independent art colleges in the UK. It's been around for a while, dating back in one form or another to 1760. In 1858, the college became an affiliate of the nationwide Science and Art Department under something called the South Kensington system. Now located in the heart of Edinburgh, within clear view of

the Castle, it also enjoys an international reputation as a factory of ideas, helping the latest generation of international creative thinkers – designers, architects, artists among them – to realise their potential. You may recognise the names of its alumni including Sir Nicholas Grimshaw, Sir Basil Spence and Rab and Denise Bennetts.

With this sort of pedigree, it was entirely fitting that, when it came to the development of one of its key buildings, the College should turn to an alumnus to create an environment that reflected not only the best contemporary architectural thinking, but also the values of creativity and progressiveness that earned the college its reputation in the first place. The brief given to ECA alumnus and internationally renowned architect and designer Shashi Caan was to create that building at the recently acquired Evolution House development as part of the College's programme of expansion. Working closely with Axis Interiors and Herman Miller, Shashi was able to deliver something that not only reflected the best traditions of the College but also pointed a way ahead.

Purchased in 2006, Evolution House was already an award winning building, noted for its green design credentials. Its location next door to part of the ECA's existing building stock was important but so too was the potential for its development to provide 45,000 sq ft of Class A corporate office facilities for the College and other tenants.

'It's an intensely contemporary approach for this sort of organisation,' says John McGee of Axis Interiors. 'This idea that you»»»



►►► have a home but also take in lodgers to give you an extra income stream. That sort of thinking can make a huge difference to what you can achieve. It also means that you have to take a different approach to the specification of the interior. You have to design in flexibility but maintain focus on the identity of the organisation.'

The six floors of Evolution House provide a very strong linear core with clearly divided floor plates. Although an advantage in many ways, this provided some specific challenges for the designers. Although the intention was to maintain some elements of corporate design, the interior also had to also reflect the College's ideals of creativity and provide a world-class learning facility, and be flexible enough to anticipate future changes in technology. Challenging enough in their own right, the design had to meet these potentially conflicting objectives in an holistic way, resolving the potential clash in a satisfying whole.

The resolution of the design starts at the front entrance, not merely a brightly lit lobby but also the public face of the college, where a digital multimedia installation allows students to experiment with graphics and film, but also gives them a chance to showcase their work and the best the ECA has to offer by immersing students and viewers alike in the ECA's culture and identity.

The interior architecture of the building is equally indicative of the College's culture. Shashi Caan applied the multi-layered principles of design that she developed as a student at ECA and which are the basis for



her international reputation. Steel and glass elements are combined to convey ideas of transparency and openness but are juxtaposed with soft and textured finishes and colours to accentuate elements of the interior. The use of light is carefully thought out to provide the perfect balance of natural and artificial light. Materials have been chosen for their longevity but also to provide maximum flexibility in that they are used to help the college anticipate future changes.

'It was important that we maintained this sense of balance,' explains Shashi. 'It is typical of many types of modern buildings that their design has to resolve seeming paradoxes in the brief. Central to this is the need to resolve complex demands in a simple whole, balancing tradition and contemporary demands, the need for openness and privacy, to meet current needs and anticipate those yet to come.'

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the College Library. At the heart of the building, the Library provides an innovative environment for learning, teaching and research with a collection of some 85,000 books, film archives, maps and slides. All aspects of the College's teaching and research are covered, with an emphasis on contemporary issues and practice. As well as such traditional forms of media, Evolution House is also wireless networked throughout and laptops may be borrowed for use anywhere within the Learning Zone, allowing access to a wide range of online and networked information sources. The range of media and types of information is reflected in the specification of a wide variety of spaces for people to work in.

The result is a design that looks unlike any college you may have ever seen before. The lightness of the design, the feeling of transparency, the domesticity of many of the areas and the use of breakout and meeting spaces all point to contemporary ideas of corporate design rather than stuffy old academia. 'Well that's just as it should be,' says John McGee. 'It may be an old institution but it wouldn't be right for it to get stuck in the old ways. That wouldn't be the Edinburgh way. It was always a guiding principle that we were to work with Shashi to create something that would point a new direction for the college whilst maintaining its core values.'

'We feel we've delivered that in spades!'

## essential ingredients

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| Client:             | • Edinburgh College of Art   |
| Architect:          | • Shashi Caan  |
| Master Vendor:      | • Axis Interiors<br><a href="http://www.axis.gb.com">www.axis.gb.com</a>                                       |
| Systems Furniture:  | • Herman Miller<br><a href="http://www.hmeurope.com">www.hmeurope.com</a>                                      |
| Seating:            | • Herman Miller<br><a href="http://www.hmeurope.com">www.hmeurope.com</a>                                      |
| Occasional Seating: | • Design within Reach<br><a href="http://www.dwr.com">www.dwr.com</a>  |
| Storage:            | • Herman Miller<br><a href="http://www.hmeurope.com">www.hmeurope.com</a>                                      |
| Executive Spaces:   | • Eames by Vitra<br><a href="http://www.vitra.com">www.vitra.com</a>   |
| Lighting:           | • Cotterell Lighting<br><a href="http://www.cotterell-lightcentres.co.uk">www.cotterell-lightcentres.co.uk</a> |