

Designer digs

The traditional, grotty perception of student housing is undergoing a transformation, with the latest developments heralding a new trend in design-led accommodation with a focus on the social side, says **Laura Snoad**



1 Artist's view of the Scape development opening in London's Mile End in 2012

2 Broadcasting Place, Leeds by Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios for property developer Downing

3 A kitchen-cum-lounge and a single room at the Nido Spitalfields development in London, by architect TP Bennett

4 A common room at Unite's Newington Court, London by architect Stock Woolstencroft

To many, student accommodation brings to mind concrete blocks, warrens of bleak off-white corridors and basic rooms whose major design features include a trophy wall of empties and the odd traffic cone.

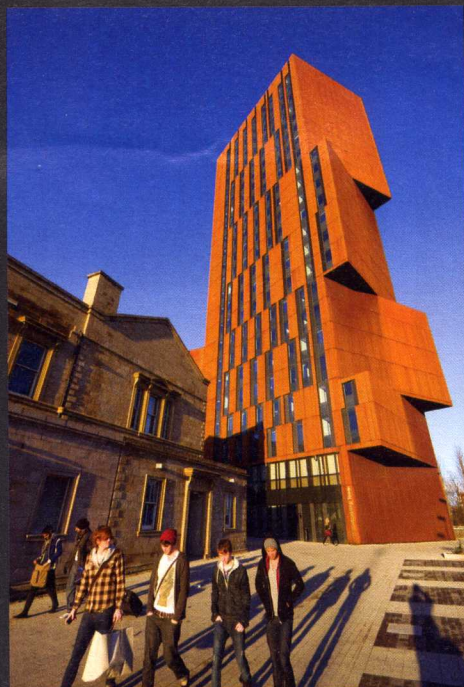
But a new breed of design-led student housing is looking to reinvent this perception. Scape, a 550-room development with interiors by Ab Rogers Design, is due to open in London's Mile End in 2012, while the 35-storey Nido Spitalfields by architect TP Bennett – the tallest student accommodation in the world – opened in January and jostles with the Gherkin for a spot on London's skyline.

Similarly, the upcoming 27ha King's Cross Central mixed-use development will feature student housing from accommodation provider Urbanest, which is being designed by Glenn Howells Architects to match the modern, ambitious look of the new development, both inside and out.

And this looks like just the beginning of a major new trend. With tuition fees set to almost treble, universities will be seeking to offer differentiation and value for money. Jagdeep Bhogal, design and planning director at the UK's largest student accommodation provider Unite, says, 'Students will become consumers, and scrutinise exactly what they are getting for their money.'

Students now want a whole flat in their room, rather than just a bed, wardrobe and desk. This is leading designers to seek inspiration from couchettes, submarines and spacecraft, according to Ab Rogers, who says, 'Design in 2011 is not just about aesthetics, it's about facilitation and the performance of the space.'

Scape's sleek, minimal flats, created for one person, will include multipurpose modular



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furniture – so that damaged parts can easily be replaced – customisable bedroom doors, interactive notice boards and noise-reducing carpets. 'We will be concentrating on the light and acoustics of spaces, as well as the overall aesthetics,' Rogers adds. Communal break-out spaces will maximise social interaction.

Students may well want more from their rooms, but it is the communal spaces that are really changing. Shared kitchens are becoming larger, especially with the trend for flats with more bedrooms, says TP Bennett director Nenad Manasijevic. For Nido Spitalfields, TP Bennett made the kitchen the centre of each flat and also its entrance, meaning inhabitants and visitors enter a social hub rather than a long, unfriendly corridor.

According to Glenn Howells Architects director Davinder Bansal, this focus on kitchens is due to a move towards a family-oriented experience. The feel of its King's Cross Central project is of a modern, yet welcoming, 'urban village' featuring dining areas that resemble living rooms rather than canteens. Its double-height main entrance has been designed to harness light, space and energy from the communal areas above, as has Nido Spitalfields' triple-height entrance, leading inhabitants to feel as though they are entering a busy, sociable space.

In a further attempt to 'ground' students through familiarity, Unite often encourages designers to reflect the local scene and architecture in the feel of communal spaces. Young, hip architect Bellis Cooley was recently appointed to develop plans for a new site in London's Camden that aims to capture the vibrancy of the area, whereas in locations such as Woburn Place in Tavistock Square,

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Bloomsbury, the feel is more corporate and business-like, says Bhogal.

Just as communal spaces are growing, so is their scope. Scape will feature restaurants, delicatessens and a cinema, to act as the 'youthful social scene' in the area, says Scape partner Tom Ward. Urbanest at King's Cross Central will include a public, ground-level courtyard space with seating, planting, public art, and retail units accessible to students and non-students.

The Brown Review's recent encouragement of universities to work more closely with private organisations may see student housing expand even further, leading to lecture halls being introduced on the ground floors of buildings, says Bhogal, which may help to boost attendance. The plans for Scape also include 2300m² of teaching facilities.

Bhogal adds, 'We're seeing more and more universities relinquishing their own stock of student housing. As funding tightens and universities focus on their core offer of providing student accommodation, we are going to see a lot more partnerships.'

As the sector grows in sophistication and seeks ever-more advanced and detailed design, interiors specialists are likely to benefit from a higher demand for their services.