

The skeleton safari

Is this the weirdest courtyard cafe in Britain? **Jonathan Glancey** has a delightful cuppa surrounded by the skulls and bones of dead animals

I am sitting in a sun-filled courtyard, sipping coffee in a raised plywood pod, and looking down at the skeleton of a two-year-old African elephant. From this vantage point, dotted with neatly placed holes, I can make out two marks in the creature's skull, showing how it met its brutal end two centuries ago: a spear through the head.

Elsewhere, in tall glass cases, there is the skeleton of a polar bear, arranged in a sitting position as if waiting to be brought a coffee, as well as the skulls of a hippopotamus, a gazelle and an alligator, looking out at us just as we look at them. Below, scaling a branch, is the skeleton of a three-toed sloth. It's a bit like being on some strange fossil safari - though I am, of course, a long way from the plains of Africa.

This delightful spot is one of the most inspiring new squares in Britain: a spacious courtyard at the heart of the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) in London. This unexpected space has the feel of one of those compact yet incident-packed piazzas you might stumble across in a historic Italian town; and yet, with its modern design, edged by brick walls and steel-framed windows, this is clearly a very contemporary cafe and square - although there's a lot more to this place than the tinkling of teacups and the guzzling of cake.

Rising up through three storeys, the newly adapted courtyard acts as a thoroughfare, linking classrooms, library, lecture hall and laboratories - not to mention the RVC's collection of animal skeletons and other sliced, pickled and bottled specimens. As well as housing the fashionable cafe, this is



also a place for study - either at the ground-floor tables, or, more thrillingly, up in the pod, which connects to the main library.

"We'd have liked a bigger elephant skeleton," says Rupert Cook, director of Architecture PLB, the Winchester and London-based practice behind the £1.5m development. As we speak, there are students sitting at tables and sprawling on the pod's floor. "It may look casual," adds Cook, "but they're working. You don't get to be a vet by drinking coffee and text-messaging all day.

"This is a particularly relaxed space, though - students can even come here to have a quick sleep between exams. What we've tried to do is provide layers of space for learning, from the formal to the informal. As you climb the stair from the cafe to the pod, there's a mezzanine used increasingly for

tutorials. The college calls the courtyard its Social Learning Project. And that's exactly what it is: a place to learn in the company of fellow students and teaching staff, as opposed to being stuck in front of a laptop in a student bedsit, studying head down in the library, or taking notes in lectures."

Founded in 1791, the RVC is a busy institution about 10 minutes' walk from St Pancras station; if it was open to the public, this courtyard would rapidly be overrun, so public access is currently restricted (this may change); requests should be made by letter to the college. The spot, which would be ravishing in the soft daylight even without its skeletal exhibits, certainly deserves a wider audience: no wonder Cook and his firm have been retained for the £60m redevelopment of the RVC's two campuses, this one in London, the other out in the Hertfordshire countryside.

However you choose to enter or exit the main RVC building, you end up passing through Cook's courtyard. The architect leads me up to the corridors that wrap around the top of the space, high above all those brightly coloured tables. The view comes as quite a surprise: an indoor-outdoor space, with so much coming and going, and yet such a relaxed atmosphere.

Those planning or redesigning our town and city squares would do well to come here and see how a space that was once all but dead - save for the odd student sneaking out for a cigarette - can come so intelligently alive without recourse to annoying gimmickry, dull water features or characterless chain stores. Here, beneath a transparent polymer roof, the finishes are simple,



the materials are made to last, and there is an abiding sense of purpose - courtesy of those silent skeletons.

In recent years, it has become de rigeur for big museums and galleries to turn courtyards and lightwells into new rooms or circulation spaces, where the public can tramp about, eat, gawp and take photographs; the Great Court at the British Museum is a good example. The RVC courtyard is a reminder of how it's possible to fashion truly delightful public spaces without spending a fortune or making a song and dance about them.

Is that a three-toed sloth? ... the Royal Veterinary College's new courtyard; facing page, skeletons from its collection