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The Office Building Architecture of the Early 20th Century in London

The London office building 1900–30 and a case study of an urban ensemble: Kingsway

Introduction

This paper has two parts; each illustrates the sharp *differences* between individual buildings and urban development in London and Hamburg during the period 1900 to 1930.

The first part is an introduction to three broad themes that inform the construction of the London office building in the period, followed by a chronological survey of about twenty significant office buildings of the period. The majority were built for particular commercial clients – banks, insurance and trading companies – otherwise speculatively. Buildings for the state are referred to in passing. The survey is illustrated by recent photographs, supplemented where possible by plans and other material from contemporary journals and magazines.

The second part is, as a contrast with the commercial district associated with the Chilehaus and Sprinkenhof etc, a case study of an early twentieth-century urban ensemble constituted almost entirely of office buildings: Kingsway, one of the series of ‘improvements’ – new streets – begun at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These were intended to relieve traffic congestion, improve the commercial building stock and to remove areas of slums, dispersing their inhabitants or rehousing the ‘deserving poor’ in new philanthropically-inspired developments.

1 Three themes and a survey

1.1 Plans and forms of organisation, types

While the twenty selected buildings are extraordinarily diverse, some common themes can be discerned. These include the development of types and methods of organising spaces for the activities of large, complex commercial, hierarchical entities. Techniques for these had first emerged in England in the early- and mid-19th century in the plans of, for example, museums, law courts, town halls, ministries and hospitals, particularly in the work of John Soane (1753–1837), in his Bank of England and Law Courts, and later of Alfred Waterhouse (1830–1905). These new plans were without exception developed within the framework of the street, always extending to the boundaries of their sites, the ‘building lines’. Their ranges were about 9m thick and daylit either from the perimeter or from the ‘light wells’ that penetrated the block.



Fig. 1: Capitol, Rome, Michelangelo Buonarroti and Giacomo della Porta, 1539–92

Fig. 2: Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne, Rome, Baldassare Peruzzi, 1532–36





Fig. 3: Palazzo Chigi-Odescalchi, Rome, Carlo Maderna, G.L. Bernini and others, 1622–29, 1644–66



Fig. 4: Rashtrapati Bhavan (former Viceroy's House), New Delhi, India, Edwin Lutyens, 1912–31

1.2 Building technology

The Ritz Hotel of 1906, designed by Mewès and Davis, was the first London's building in which a steel frame clad in redundant conventional masonry was used. A year later year same architects' offices for the *Morning Post* newspaper were completed (Fig. 6), also built with a steel frame. While since the Industrial Revolution England had much experience of industrial and warehouse buildings constructed with cast-iron frames, the use of the fireproofed steel frame almost certainly followed the example of the rebuilding of Chicago after the fire of 1871. The layouts of these frames tended use the square bays of the warehouse, and until buildings such as Broadway House (Fig. 15) and were rarely based on particular planning ideas about use or sub-division. This form of construction became *de rigueur* in commercial buildings until 1945 when shortages of steel provoked the substitution of the reinforced concrete frame.

While the white stone from Portland in Dorset had first been introduced in London's monumental architecture by Inigo Jones in Whitehall Banqueting House of 1623–27, until the end of the nineteenth century its use remained limited mainly to the cladding of churches and large houses. By the beginning of the twentieth century it had become widely used as a general covering for the street fronts of commercial buildings, as most of the examples here show, while humbler materials such as light-reflecting white glazed brick were used for lining their light wells. Windows to the street were usually made of drawn bronze or hardwood while the first steel frames first appeared in light wells.

1.3 Style: imperial dreams

By 1900 the gothic revival had finally expired, first challenged in the 1860s in official circles by a form of Italianate classicism, and in domestic architecture by the various practitioners of the Arts and Crafts, including Waterhouse's near contemporary Richard Norman Shaw (1831–1912).

Edward VII, successor to Queen Victoria, was crowned in 1901 and the period of his reign until his death in 1910, now known as the 'Edwardian', was characterised by both what in retrospect was seen as the apogee of British imperialism, and those political and cultural forces which were eventually to lead to its demise. In matters of both urban form and architecture, the search for an appropriate "imperial" style in town planning inevitably suggested the use of axes and vistas. The buildings that formed these were to be dressed in an amalgam of various but exclusively classical forms originating in Italy and France and transmuted through the École des Beaux Arts (Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

It was, though, from 1911 when New Delhi, the new capital of India was founded, that these megalomaniac dreams were most fully realised, chiefly and most astutely by Edwin Lutyens (1869–1944) – the dream described by Nikolaus Pevsner as the '*folie de grandeur imperiale*' (Fig. 4).

1.4 Survey

The following examples have been chosen largely for their architectural significance: they show the variety of approaches to the design of office buildings in London in the period 1900 to about 1930.

Sources of plans and other information available in the literature are indicated.

Abbreviations

AR: *Architectural Review* magazine

Butler: A S G BUTLER, *The Architecture of Sir Edwin Lutyens*, volume 3: Town and public buildings, London 1950

Fig. 5

Offices, shops and flats 1903

R Norman Shaw with Ernest Newton

St. James's Street SW1

Corner site, in Shaw's late Baroque style, five storeys around a single light well, loadbearing masonry (?), Portland stone cladding.

Plans and elevations in: vol. 21 AR 1907, pp. 46–9



Fig. 6

Newspaper offices 1906–7

Mewès and Davis

Aldwych WC2

Triangular corner site, seven storeys (top mansard later addition); early use of steel frame.



Fig. 7

Kodak House 1911

Sir John Burnet Tait

65 Kingsway WC2

End of block, six storeys (top floor later addition). Steel frame, 'warehouse' construction. Portland stone clad piers with bronze-clad spandrels and window frames between.



Fig. 9/ Fig. 10

Britannic House 1924–27, 1987–89

Edwin Lutyens; Peter Inskip and Peter Jenkins

Moorgate and Finsbury Circus EC2

Originally built as headquarters of an oil company. End of block. Three differentiated façades, the most elaborate that to Finsbury circus. Originally two light-wells, separated by major rooms, one now covered by atrium roof. Steel frame, Portland stone cladding. Plans in: AR vol. 57 1925, p. 192 ff.



Fig. 11/ Fig. 12

Adelaide House 1924–25

John Burnet, Tait and Partners

King William Street EC4

End of block. Eleven storeys, corners and ends of façades emphasized, closely-spaced piers between, 'Egyptian cornice', 'warehouse' type steel frame, Portland stone cladding.

Plans in: AR vol. 57 1925, p. 68–73



Fig. 13

ex **Midland Bank Head Office** 1924–39

Lutyens; executive architects Gotch and Saunders

Poultry and Princes Street EC3

Site spans between two streets each having different, sophisticated astylar elevations, the more intricate to Poultry. Two main light wells. Suite for board and chairman's office on top floor, board room crowned with flat dome. Steel frame, Portland stone cladding. Empty in 2011, with plans for conversion into a hotel.

Plans, elevations and details in: Hussey, vol. 3, plates XXIX–XXX etc



Fig. 14

Bush House 1925–35

Helmle and Corbett

American architects for an American client. Large development on Aldwych island site.

Steel frame, Portland stone cladding. Central north-south range with U-shaped offices to west and east. Main entrance on axis of Kingsway marked with magnificent screened exedra.

Plans and contemporary photos in: AR vol 55 1924, p. 132 ff.



Fig. 15

Broadway House 1927–9

Charles Holden

55 Broadway SW1

Built as new headquarters of London transport. Modern plan: irregular cruciform wings radiating from core, all standing on single-story podium above Underground station.

Wings organised as rooms on either side of a corridor. No light-wells: all rooms have un-restricted views. Steel frame, Portland stone cladding.

Plans in: AR vol. 66 1929, pp. 225–6



Fig. 16

Unilever House 1930–31

J Lomax Simpson with John Burnet, Tait and Lorne

New Bridge Street and Embankment EC4

Island site, curved façade facing bridge with magnificent 3-storey high giant colonnade.

Originally planned round two light wells, one of these now an atrium. Steel frame,

Portland stone cladding.



2 A case study, a new office district: Kingsway and Aldwych, started 1898

In London, and until the formation of the Board of Metropolitan Works in 1855, there was no central agency to promote public works of infrastructure (including improving the poor drainage responsible for the two cholera outbreaks of 1854), or to address the unsatisfactory housing conditions of the poor. Having addressed the first with the major works to the new Thames Embankment, the Board continued with the establishment of several new streets designed to demolish areas of poverty and establish new traffic routes.

The elected London County Council (LCC) replaced the Board in 1889, the same year that the campaigner Charles Booth published his polemical 'Descriptive Map of London Poverty'. With wider powers than the Board, the LCC undertook schemes of social housing (previously provided by charitable trusts), and in 1898 published its plan identify-

ing the area roughly midway between the West End and the City as an opportunity to provide a useful north-south traffic link and to eradicate slums to the east of Covent Garden. The council bought up sufficient land to provide for a new road, 'Kingsway' 100 feet (30 metres) wide, and lined with irregular plots on which developers were invited to build offices. Kingsway was to be a modern road, of ample width for pedestrians and traffic below which ran two new sewers and a tram tunnel; two ample vaults were provided for piped services. Large basements below the pavements extended from the building plots.

While the road was aligned on the Baroque church of St Mary to the south, a connection to Waterloo Bridge was provided by a new quarter-crescent to the west, reflected to the east. The resulting crescent was called 'Aldwych'.

Site clearance began immediately the plan was published, and the new road opened in 1905. The scheme provoked much discussion and criticism in the professional press, most of it detailed. (For example, the mandatory splayed block corners intended to help traffic movement were censured for breaking the street-line.) An unofficial competition for the design of the Aldwych block produced mediocre results: most entries proposed uniform buildings with regular cornice-lines and dressed and with feeble classical motifs, all vaguely French.

Development began rapidly at the south end with buildings on the two crescents. In the period up to 1914 it continued northwards on Kingsway, after which supplies of material became increasingly restricted. Suggestions for uniform development of form, for example a continuous cornice line 80 feet (24 metres) above the ground were not realised, but building lines were strictly observed, and every building is clad in the traditional material of London for non-domestic properties: Portland stone, introduced to London by Inigo Jones for the facings of his Banqueting House, 1619 and used ever since for institutional and many commercial buildings.

*Fig. 8: ex County Hall 1911–22 and 1931–33, Ralph Knott, Westminster Bridge SE1
Built as headquarters of London County Council, now hotel. Island site with frontage to Thames; six storeys plus two in huge roof, planned round multiple light-wells. Steel frame, Portland stone cladding*



The architectural quality of many of the mainly seven- to nine-storey office buildings with shops on the ground floor is tentative and undistinguished, the work of Trehearne and Preston. A few buildings, however, show some ambition. Lutyens' Dorland House of 1906, for the head office of a gardening magazine, completed two years after the larger *Country Life* offices of two years earlier (Fig. 8). Its facade is layered: fortified Sanmicheli on the ground; eighteenth-century palace above, topped by an Arts and Crafts classical synthesis (Fig. 17). Contemporaries criticised the design for failing to provide large enough windows at street level, and this was indeed a perennial concern since the classical language yielded few suggestions.

The single building which has entered respectable histories, and of which Nikolaus Pevsner approved is the 'proto-modern' Kodak House of 1910, designed by the Scot John Burnet. Its bland warehouse structure is clad to the street with an assured composition of base, middle and top which at pavement level on either side of the central entrance suavely incorporates very wide windows for the display of camera equipment. This is separated by an intermediate floor from the four storeys of office accommodation where near-featureless pilasters separate full-height bronze panels and widow frames. The whole is capped with an Egyptoid cornice.

In the 1920s the southern termination of Kingsway was provided by an American developer, Irving T. Bush, proprietor of a large distribution (logistics) company for whose proposed 'trade center' his American architects brought to London their grand American classical style with their magnificent exedra (but without the planned ambitious tower) (Fig. 7).

The best example of the type that underlies most of the commercial buildings of the period 1900–1910 is perhaps that of Australia House on the triangular site on the east side of Aldwych, started in 1913 and completed in 1918 (Fig. 18). Its plan can be regarded as a solid carved out by three light wells, or as a perimeter block with an additional central range. The crucial point to note is that the light wells are strictly utilitarian, their workaday architecture a sharp contrast with the stone 'imperial' pomp presented to the street. Moreover, they do not extend to the ground but stop at first floor level to allow light to penetrate into the continuous, publicly-accessible ground floor. At Australia House, this ground floor is of some magnificence, and a vaulted and marble-lined, Doric-ordered route extends right through the building from east to west.

This pattern of internal light-wells, adapted to suit particular site conditions, provided the pattern for the offices of most of the period from 1900 to 1930. While by no means confined to London, it is sufficient to distinguish the type from, say, that of the Hanseatic open courts, 'die hanseatischen Höfe', of Hamburg's Chilehaus, and accentuate the particularity of the latter's type.



Fig. 17: *Dorland House, Kingsway, London WC2, Edwin Lutyens, 1906*

Fig. 18: *Australia House, Aldwych, London WC2, A M and A G R Mackenzie, 1913–18*



Abstract

Bürohausarchitektur des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts in London

Diese chronologische Untersuchung von bemerkenswerten Bürogebäuden in London, die zwischen 1900 und 1930 entstanden, betrachtet sowohl Gebäudeart, -form und -funktionen als auch deren architektonischen Stil. Haben diese Gebäude einen Beitrag zum Ensemble oder gar zur Stadtlandschaft geleistet? Es wird eine Studie zum letzten ehrgeizigen „imperialen“ städteplanerischen Ensemble Londons vorgestellt, nämlich dem städtischen Sanierungskonzept für die neuen Straßen „Aldwych and Kingsway“, wozu Gebäude und Infrastrukturmaßnahmen gehören. Die Arbeiten begannen im Jahre 1906, jedoch entstanden große Teile erst später und die Nachkriegsbauten – fast ausschließlich Geschäftshäuser – sind zeitgenössisch. Sie heben sich sehr deutlich vom Hamburger Kontorhausviertel ab und sind einzigartig.

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