

40 Chancery Lane



“It is architecture itself that
must be the real decoration.”

Eileen Gray

40 Chancery Lane WC2

Chancery Lane, the heart of London's legal profession, evokes a deep sense of the past that is epitomised by the historic frontages of Lincoln's Inn, The Law Society and the Maughan library. This sliver of history runs from the Strand to High Holborn with numerous inviting narrow side streets.

The consequence of its listed façades and compact nature is that new development opportunities are rare. When they do arise there are many sensitive aspects to be respected and addressed.

Derwent London's involvement began in 1999 when we acquired two very different ownerships. 40 Chancery Lane was a 54,800 sq ft tired office building on the corner with Cursitor Street. Our tenure was a 29-year unexpired headlease. The second property, which was also in need of improvement, was in a terrace of 19th century buildings. This relatively small 7,000 sq ft freehold building, at the rear of 40 Chancery Lane, was an important feature in Took's Court, a small piece of Dickensian streetscape.

Architects Bennetts Associates explored our options. Initial studies showed synergies by combining both buildings, but a more radical option evolved: to incorporate 44 Chancery Lane, a 9,700 sq ft adjacent building. Combined, they enabled the creation of a substantial office building, worthy of its prominent

corner location yet respecting the architecture and scale of its neighbours. The floor plates, positioned around a central core, would provide modern flexible offices, and there was also the opportunity to create a new courtyard.

Luckily our freeholders, the Colville Estate, also owned 44 Chancery Lane. Having owned properties in the vicinity for over 400 years, they were equally enthusiastic to work together to create a special building. The City Corporation were supportive and planning for the 102,000 sq ft project was obtained in 2008. The subsequent re-gear of our interests onto a new 128-year headlease, enabled the development and created long-term value for both ourselves and our freeholder.

Now complete, the building sits well in its historic location. The use of travertine cladding raises its aspect, the new courtyard offers a tranquil retreat, the ground floor retail adds street life and the fusing of the new building with the retained Took's Court façade at the rear creates some interesting spaces.

We were pleased to attract an early pre-let. The Publicis Groupe now occupies the property and we wish them every success in their new home.

Nigel George
Director





The Chancery Lane elevation,
with the gate to the courtyard hinged
back against the wall

Previous page: Looking north
on Chancery Lane



The window reveals to the elevation
show the depth and textural quality of
the travertine cladding

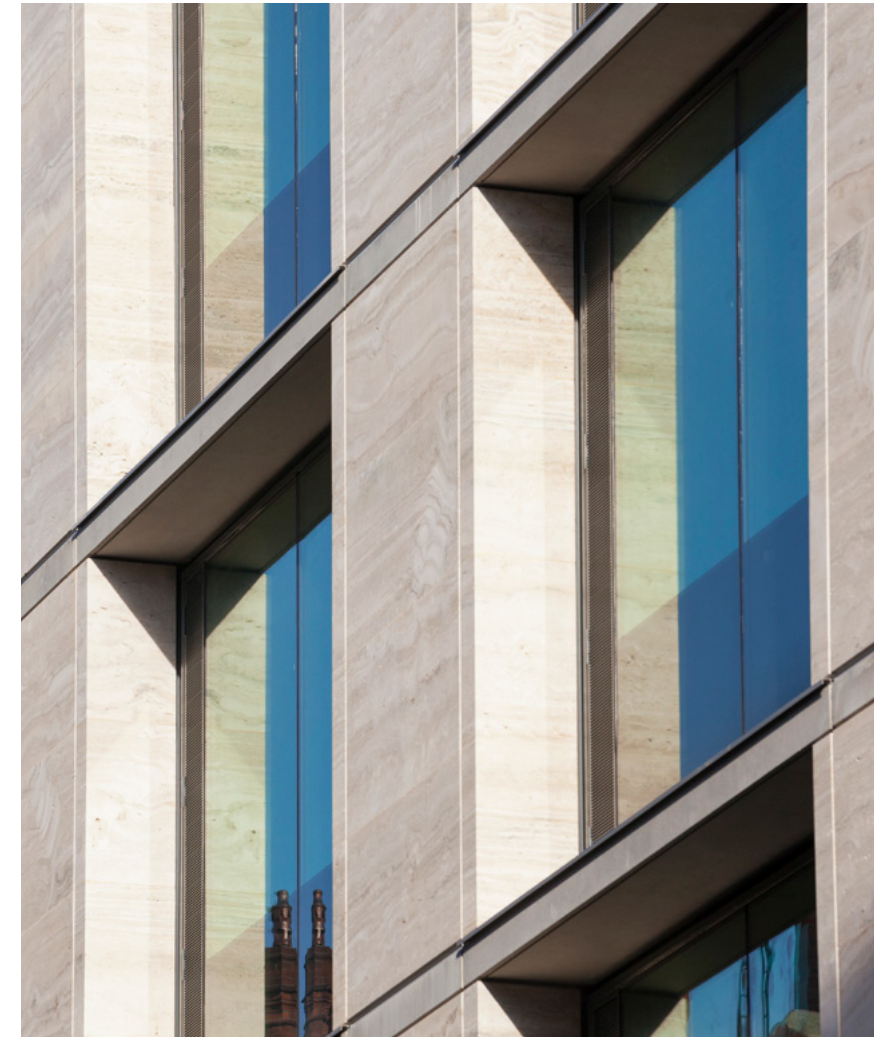
Previous page: The travertine-clad
columns are at six-metre intervals on
Chancery Lane





The elevations are refined and simple, with the corner details revealing the thickness of the travertine slabs

Image overleaf: The travertine-clad columns are at three-metre intervals on Cursitor Street to reflect its smaller scale









40 Chancery Lane
A building firmly rooted in
its historic context

Sitting astride the City of London and Camden boundary, the Chancery Lane area is one of those fascinating city ‘quarters’ with a unique character, almost as if it has been transplanted from the collegiate environment of Oxford or Cambridge. The Inns of Court, Lincoln’s Inn Fields and the Chancery itself represent centuries of development around bucolic gardens and courtyards with mature trees, lawns and almost no traffic. The architecture varies between the grand and the domestic, but always in masonry with a strong verticality.

At 40 Chancery Lane our instinct was to uphold these engrained urban patterns and to explore how a relatively large commercial property could interpret the imprint of history without compromising its function.

Our first thought was to create a new courtyard, glimpsed through a tall, gated passageway off the main street. In doing so, we struck an empathetic chord with the spatial sequences of the area and provided a semi-public amenity for the property that provided daylight for the workspace in a way that was markedly different to a more conventional atrium solution. Eventually, this strategy had a delightful side-effect, as it enabled the tenants to create a second ‘front door’ in the courtyard to supplement the primary entrance on Chancery Lane.



Section through the courtyard

With office space on three sides of the courtyard, the fourth side comprises a series of timber-slatted planes and benches along the boundary with neighbouring buildings. The asymmetrical composition of screens and a group of silver birch trees that catch the summer sunlight draw the eye to the rear of the courtyard.

The slender trunks of the birches were the inspiration for an expansive work of public art by the artist Susanna Heron, who has created a series of tall, incised panels on the flank wall to the passageway between Chancery Lane and the courtyard. The work’s multi-layered parallax of overlapping stems provides a gentle challenge to the precision of new construction.



Site plan

If the courtyard provides spatial resonance with the area, the façades add to its rich materiality without being disruptive.

The post-war years in many parts of the City saw traditional load-bearing masonry give way to the structural framed buildings of modernism, resulting in a radically different architectural language to their predecessors. Many of these largely unpopular buildings have now themselves been superseded, but the dilemma for modern architects remains: how to express faithfully the techniques of modern construction and the needs of current occupiers without damaging the surviving texture and grain of streets like those around Chancery Lane. There was no doubt that a substantial building such as 40 Chancery Lane would have broad floorplates and a framed structure, but how this was represented outwardly became little short of an architectural obsession.

Looking around the area it seemed to us that the larger and more impressive buildings were those in Portland stone with deep vertical reveals and, for the most part, classical proportions. However, whereas there are some impressive modern Portland stone buildings in London such as the Economist Building by the Smithsons, it often looks bland without the patina of old age.

Simon Silver of Derwent London, whose reputation as an enthusiast for modern architecture is unrivalled in the property world, was keen to explore travertine as an alternative limestone with a similar light colour. Travertine has powerful links to some of the great 20th century buildings such as Louis Kahn’s Kimbell Art Museum in Texas and the ground plane of Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram Building in New York. Although rarely used in London because of its uniformity, travertine’s pedigree was impeccable and, when we came across a particular type known as “Bianco Oniciato”, it seemed to offer the tone of Portland but with a very pronounced grey vein that was far more interesting. With the help of the Italian stone specialists Campolonghi, a visit to the quarry outside Rome confirmed that this was a uniquely interesting material and a group of enormous travertine blocks were immediately reserved for the project.



The travertine quarry at Tivoli, outside Rome

We then devised a way of bonding panels of large travertine slabs on to the actual structure for the building, with the support of flat concrete walls at the perimeter instead of conventional square columns. On Chancery Lane these structural elements occur at 6 metre intervals whereas on the smaller-scale Cursitor Street, they double in intensity to 3 metres. The windows are deeply recessed, such that the travertine’s finest qualities are visible in typically oblique views, the thin facing slabs and thicker side slabs being perfectly matched so the veining is continuous. To achieve this, each façade was separately dry-laid on an Italian factory floor to allow final stone selection prior to shipping.

Internally, the concrete structure behind the travertine is left exposed, as are the concrete walls to the main glazed lift lobby. Like the travertine panels, the construction quality of exposed concrete is exceptional.

The changing pace of the façades, the verticality of the window recesses and the carefully calibrated proportions of each elevation are our way of saying that modernism is compatible with both the visual richness of a historic neighbourhood and the functional needs of a modern commercial building.

The office space itself is, therefore, rigorously functional, comprising rectangular floorplates linked by two stair/ lift cores so that it can be subdivided easily into different tenancies. The spacing of the structural columns synchronises with likely space-planning layouts and the arrangement of air-supply from the floor supplemented by opening windows means that it achieves high levels of environmental sustainability. All of the workspace is well-lit, visually uncluttered and highly adaptable.

To the rear of the property in Took’s Court a fragment of the 19th century has been preserved, directly opposite a house once occupied by Dickens. As with the new construction every attempt has been made to give this element its own ‘integrity’, with reconstruction works aligning with the original levels and with the old building separated from the new office space by a slender top-lit atrium. The counterpoint of old and new is as relevant internally as it is to the façades and their neighbours. Inside and outside are intended to be seamless.



The retained buildings in Took’s Court

The day-to-day experience of architecture is often overlaid with the pragmatism and compromises that can result from budget restraints, tight timetables, the practicalities of construction and the sheer effort that is required by numerous individuals over a long period of time. It is rare to come across a client, especially a commercial one, who could be described as a perfectionist but there is no other term for Derwent in their pursuit of something truly exceptional. The level of detailed resolution in all areas of the project, from external cladding to internal concrete, doors, toilets, stairs, glazed lifts and signage shows what a design team can do when supported and challenged by a client who has the enthusiasm and commitment to see it through. Designing with Derwent is enjoyable and challenging as we both refuse to accept that good design is more costly; it is, quite simply, more rewarding.

Seeing a new building fully occupied and buzzing with life for the first time is a thrilling experience for any architect but, in the case of 40 Chancery Lane, it is especially significant as it is no less than 16 years since we sketched out the initial feasibility study on behalf of Derwent Valley, as they were then. Although land assembly dictated an unusually long timetable, there is a reassuring consistency between those original ideas and the final outcome, due in large measure to the involvement of the same key people from the beginning to the end of the process, in particular Simon Silver of course but also my colleague, project architect Alison Darvill. Moreover the design matured with the passage of time.

I like to think the completed building has a freshness and rigour entirely in tune with our ambition to create something timeless that adds to its historic context and avoids the pitfalls of architectural fashion.

Rab Bennetts
Director, Bennetts Associates



The main façade within its Chancery Lane context







The double-height entrance lobby
embraces the passageway to the
courtyard off Chancery Lane

Previous page: A detail of Susanna
Heron's artwork, incised into the wall
of the passageway



The glazed lifts and exposed concrete walls at each level create light and transparent connections between the floorplates

Previous page: The building's second major entrance is directly off the courtyard





To the rear of the property, a dramatic atrium expressing the contrasting textures between the new and old elements







Team

Freeholder
Colville Estate

Client
Derwent London

Architect
Bennetts Associates

Structural Engineer
AKTII

MEPH
Arup

Cost Consultant
AECOM

Project Manager
Buro 4

Façade Engineer
FMDC

Specialist Lighting Designer
Pritchard Themis

Planning Consultant
Hillebron Consulting

Main Contractor
Morgan Sindall

CDM
Jackson Coles

Party Wall / Rights of Light
Deloitte / Point 2

Landscape Design
J & L Gibbons

Cladding
Felix + Sterling

Stone Supplier
Campolonghi

Artisans

Building Identity & Signage
Cartlidge Levene

Photography
Hufton + Crow

Stone Art Wall
Susanna Heron

Visual Concrete Walls
Dunne

View of the courtyard looking
back towards the Chancery
Lane passageway

Previous page: Views over the
rooftops from level 5

“The beauty of what you create
comes if you honour the material
for what it really is.”

Louis Kahn







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