



RIBA LIBRARY & PHOTOGRAPHS COLLECTION

THE OFFICE AS A WORK OF ART

Large projects on inner-city sites afford opportunities for both artistic creativity and civic responsibility, says *Patrick Lynch*



LUKE McDONALD

Previous page
Adolf Loos' entry
for The Chicago
Tribune Building
Competition, 1923
Left Adler &
Sullivan's Guaranty
Building in Buffalo,
New York, 1896
Below Rafael
Moneo's town
hall extension,
Murcia, Spain

'The metaphor with which I have been concerned with is more extended – a double one – ... a body is like a building and the building in turn is like the world.'

JOSEPH RYKWERT

At first sight, office design seems to have been left alone by architectural theorists and by the better sort of modern architect. Yet, throughout the 20th century all sorts of architects worked on office buildings: Alvar Aalto's offices contribute a great deal towards the gracious and low-key quality of central Helsinki; and Louis Kahn, Peter Celsing and even Sigurd Lewerentz all designed offices. Louis Sullivan's famous 1896 essay 'The tall office building artistically considered' is an early attempt to create a theory that could reconcile technical and ornamental design and, of course, there is Adolf Loos' polemical entry for The Chicago Tribune Building Competition 1923 (a Doric column made into a skyscraper).

Mies van der Rohe's urbane temples of finance established a standard for mid-town office buildings – mostly as a matter of proportion, with towers set back from boulevards behind grand plazas. Mies also introduced and half-resolved the problem of what to do with the forecourts – satirised brilliantly by the American artist and architect James Wines as the problem of 'the turd in the plaza'. More recently, in *S,M,L,XL*, Rem Koolhaas sought to define size in terms of scale and vice versa. However, scale is not exactly a matter of dimension, and architecture is often the art of making small things appear massive (Donato Bramante's Tempietto in Rome); and sometimes also of making large buildings appear as an elegant part of a street scene (John Soane's Bank of England).

The enormous AEG Turbine Factory of 1909 by Peter Behrens is a factory straining towards urbanity. Colin Rowe claims that its extremely theatrical front facade was influenced by Mannerist architecture.² In contrast, Walter Gropius' highly influential Bauhaus Building at Dessau pushed the decorum of a university or art school

closer towards a factory. Arguably, an unexpected consequence of the Bauhaus is the conventional type of glass office building that we are used to seeing all over the world still today – which is actually a semi-rural or suburban type. Joseph Rykwert refers to these urban – if not quite urbane – white-collar factories, somewhat cattily as 'Emirates Style', which he defines as 'tall buildings surrounded by traffic engineering'.³

In contrast, if you look around post-war Milan and pre-war London, it is clear that architects like Gio Ponti and Richard Norman Shaw sought to treat offices as just another example of the art of architecture – which might be defined simultaneously as the art of urbanism. Despite the recent predominance of the factory-office model, as well as providing opportunities for technical and stylistic innovation, early office buildings offered possibilities for architectural investigation into urban relationships. Since modern cities are largely made up of places to work, shop and live, and not everybody wants to drive to work at a business park, the problem of creating modern office buildings that are integrated into the fabric of our cities is clearly not going to go away any time soon.

Adler & Sullivan's models were Florentine of course. It is not surprising that we find the first offices appearing in the cities where banking and quasi-industrial agriculture were first organised around what might be called early-modern methods of production (the Medicis originally made pills – hence medicine). The nascent



WIKICOMMONS

democratic city-state of Florence demanded not only an administrative class to serve it, but also accommodation for bureaucracy. Giorgio Vasari's Uffizi is famously the first large urban office, and recent criticism emphasises the opportunity that its vast scale offered for architectural experimentation and its urban contingency.⁴ Unlike Gropius' Bauhaus, the Uffizi was, and is, part of a series of urbane spatial experiences that connect together parts of the city into a coherent and legible whole.

This is evident both in the loggias and colonnaded spaces at street level, and in the hierarchy of urban motifs. The tower of the neighbouring town hall, Palazzo Vecchio, soars above the wings of the Uffizi and the nearby mercantile palazzi (the otherwise vast urban blocks of Palazzo Strozzi, etc) establishing a democratic and secular counterpoint to the Duomo on the skyline of Florence. In Murcia, Spain, José Rafael Moneo Vallés acknowledges the tension between temporal and divine power in his extension to the town hall, where bureaucrats and clerics are placed in an eternal face-off.

The problem of scale (or 'The large office building considered urbanistically') has two aspects, and these make the design of office buildings the resolution of some fundamental architectural tasks: firstly scale as a silhouette and urban hierarchy; secondly, scale of street; and thirdly, scale of facade as body. The first aspect might be called the typological or typical decorum of a building; the second is the character of its spatial situations; the third is the quality of its armature. All aspects of scale affect the rhythm of the facades and the morphology of the urban block, as well as the physiognomy of the spaces within and around a large office building.

In the cases of The Zig Zag Building (see page 46) and Kings Gate, colonnades at various scales indicate and define the entrances to the various different types of accommodation housed within the broader scope of the project – offices, housing, restaurants, shops, bars, etc. Situated between a cathedral and a town hall on Victoria Street in London, our project seeks to mediate between these two in terms of size and scale, as silhouette and urban hierarchy. It seeks to establish a credible and pleasurable urban spatial order connecting together the grain of this part of Westminster for the first time with the scale of street. It also includes a new park above the District and Circle Line Tube lines, Kings Gate

The Uffizi is famously the first large urban office building in history

FOOTNOTES

1. Joseph Rykwert, *The Dancing Column: On Order in Architecture*, MIT, 1999
2. Colin Rowe, *As I Was Saying*, volume 1, MIT Press, 1995
3. Joseph Rykwert, *The Judicious Eye*, University of Chicago Press, 2008
4. 'Vasari "reversed" the traditional design procedure, conceiving the office building as a direct articulation of its constituent surrounding conditions, rather than a volumetric imposition of an autonomous architectural object.' Francesco Marullo, 'The Office and the Loggia: Giorgio Vasari's Architecture for Bureaucracy' in *The City as Project*, ed. Pier Vittorio Aureli, Ruby Press, 2013.
5. David Leatherbarrow, *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2008

Gardens. The third aspect of scale – scale of facade as body – expresses the tension between the needs of occupants and what might be best called decorum; those matters that planners refer to as 'visual amenity' and which can mean any and everything from privacy to beauty. The relationships between the inside and outside of the building are articulated as thresholds in carefully calibrated, shaded, openable, yet mostly transparent facades that nonetheless appear solid from afar. Layers of shading not only add scale to the elevations, but also vary across the different orientations, offering occupants the possibility of the enjoyment of fresh air and natural light alongside the virtuous preservation of natural resources. Terraces will be planted with trees and flowers; emphasising further the presence of the natural world within the working lives of the inhabitants and helping to create the possibility of healthy or happy building syndrome. Concern for the wellbeing of inhabitants is balanced by the care taken in the design of the landscape by Vogt and BDP, and is reflected in the art works of Rut Blees Luxemburg and Timorous Beasties, that are integral both to the architecture and to the quality of Victoria Street as a whole.

The project is currently being built for Land Securities by Lend Lease and practical completion is expected in spring 2015. We are fortunate to have a client that has the ambition to act as a patron of architecture, and who has the foresight to have commissioned across its estate a diverse range of buildings from a number of younger and more established London practices. Since Westminster Council now demands an equivalent provision of residential accommodation to match any increase in office space, this offers the possibility of the transformation of a central business district into a high street; and Land Securities' ambition is nothing less than to create an economically and socially sustainable area.

'The large office building considered urbanistically' is neither a personal statement nor a general theory. Rather, it is offered as a way to think creatively about the ethical and artistic opportunities presented by large projects on inner-city sites, something that David Leatherbarrow memorably describes as 'architecture oriented otherwise'. In the book of this title, he declares that: 'Perhaps the greatest challenge for designers is to work through the non-expressivity required for this sort of dialogue; the communication I have in mind arises instead out of a tacit form of presence. Articulation in architecture presupposes reticent receptivity, the silence that architects such as Loos, Le Corbusier, Kahn, Peter Zumthor and Ando have recommended in their writings and cultivated in their projects.'⁵ A large office building in London by Peter Zumthor or Peter Märkli is something that I'd very much like to see. ■

Patrick Lynch, director, Patrick Lynch Architects