

# Dixon Jones' Quadrant Three

**Charles Saumarez Smith applauds the well-crafted mixed-use development of a historic hotel site at Piccadilly Circus by Dixon Jones and Donald Insall Associates. Photos: Paul Riddle.**



New faience cladding, echoing the finish of the original building, features in three colours around the building.

In walking across Golden Square to pick up a lunchtime sandwich at Fernandez & Wells on Beak Street, I have been aware of a certain amount of building going on in the great monolithic block which lies immediately to the south of Brewer Street and behind the curving, neo-baroque swagger of Sir Reginald Blomfield's Regent Street. This is the block which was formerly occupied by the Regent Palace Hotel, whose massive scale and absence of any obvious street frontage made for an area that was rather dead, a no man's land just to the north of Piccadilly Circus where, according to Ian Nairn, 'behind the bland facades on the north side, a dozen alleys slip away into Soho and sin'.



Aerial CGI and location plan

Then, sometime earlier this year, a facade appeared in the block facing onto Brewer Street, made of intense deep-blue polished faience. I recognised the hallmarks of the work of Jeremy Dixon and Edward Jones, who have made a characteristically intelligent adaptation of the old Regent Palace Hotel, which breaks up the unfriendly bulk of the former hotel, whilst, at the same time, adding a quality of well-judged, sleek modernism to the view west out of Piccadilly Circus along Glasshouse Street. In particular, I spotted that the horizontal, roof-top loggia on free-standing columns was similar to the roof they used to help secure planning permission at the National Portrait Gallery (where I was then director) for the Ondaatje Wing.

Dixon Jones is a master in the art of city-making, much less well recognised than it deserves to be, owing to the fact that its work does not draw ostentatious attention to itself and, ever since Jeremy Dixon was hired in the early 1980s to work on the Royal Opera House, has often involved interventions to, or adaptations of, major historic buildings, including, in the 1990s, the National Portrait Gallery and, a decade ago, the creation of a new street level entrance to the National Gallery (where I was again their client). Both of the partners have shown a much deeper interest in the history of architecture than their more purely modernist contemporaries, as is evident, for example, in Edward Jones' collaboration with Christopher Woodward in the multiple editions of their Guide to the Architecture of London, and in the extraordinarily important housing development designed by Jeremy and Fenella Dixon in the late 1970s in St Mark's Road, Maida Vale, with its neo-Victorian references and return to traditional street frontages. Both partners are also deeply interested in issues of urbanism, as is evident in the way that the Royal Opera House presents different fronts to the street, something many architects regard as a solecism, but which effectively diminishes the overall scale of the building and makes it sit more comfortably and unobtrusively in its surroundings. It is also apparent in their planned use of Georgian typologies for the Chelsea Barracks site.



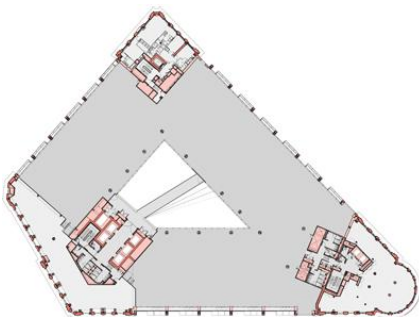
Atrium up-view



A new arcade, lined by a light and glass artwork by Venice-based Swiss artist Daniela Schönbächler, cuts through the east corner of the building.

Their new building for the Crown Estate is also evidence of their sensitivity to issues of townscape and variations in the texture of buildings: how to prevent the sometimes gross effect of big, new office blocks on streets which are essentially seventeenth-century in origin. Visitors to the building will almost certainly not realise how radical it is. The architects have hollowed out the Edwardian baroque facades, leaving the grand corners of the original building, which were constructed of Burmantoft Marmo and have been beautifully restored by Donald Insall Associates, including their heavy, baroque, spiral volutes and lead lions on the skyline.

Inside, Dixon Jones has created a big internal atrium, which is brightly daylit, as well as floor upon floor of offices, each one the size of a football pitch and connected across the atrium by transverse connecting bridges, banked up at an angle towards the top of the building in a way which is deliberately sculptural. On the top floor, there is a roof with blue transverse ribs modelled on St Pancras station and views out southwards across the pandemonium of London towards the distant North Downs. On the ground floor, there is an enormous area for deliveries which also services the adjacent Café Royal, currently being redeveloped as a hotel by David Chipperfield. There are smaller, more private offices in the detached prow of the building facing onto Piccadilly Circus.



Typical office floor plan



## Ground floor plan

The Regent Palace Hotel was designed by WJ Ancell and Henry Tanner Jr and opened in May 1915, at the height of the first world war. With over 1000 rooms, it had the opulence and scale of a transatlantic liner, with a marble entrance vestibule, a Winter Garden which was decorated with palms and rattan chairs, and a large Rotunda Court for the service of afternoon tea. It was run by Joe Lyons as a more democratic version of the Ritz, 'to make the luxuries usually available to the very rich open to the less well-off' and to give women and children a retreat from shopping. After the second world war it fell on hard times, and by the 1960s it had acquired a dubious reputation for the services offered on request of a second pillow.

In 2004, the Crown Estate decided to redevelop the building to realise its full economic potential and as part of its long-term strategy to upgrade Regent Street. To begin with, it was proposed to demolish the entire block and replace it with a new building designed by Allies & Morrison. But the planners in Westminster City Council did not like what was proposed, nor did the Twentieth Century Society and SAVE, which was particularly worried by the potential loss of the historic interiors. Dixon Jones was selected as architect by the Crown Estate, precisely because of its expertise in the adaptation of historic buildings.



The main office entrance hall is set within a retained facade at the junction of Air Street and Glasshouse Street. The lobby gives access to the seven office floors which are arranged around a top-lit atrium that reaches from the first floor upwards. Bridges span the atrium at each level to give letting flexibility.

What it proposed was a mixed office development, with perimeter shops to break up the facades and bring life to the streets, and a passageway cut diagonally through the building, which is illuminated by a backlit wall sculpture and allows an element of public access. It kept as much as possible of the historic building at the corners to retain its character and added new facades in each of the three main street frontages, using three colours of faience tiles, specially made by Shaws of Darwen. Dixon Jones' commitment to the use of fine quality materials, its appreciation of the craftsmanship involved, and willingness to use art deco references are all evident in the entrance onto Air Street in the south-west corner, where the floor is made of French and Portuguese limestone laid out in a diamond pattern, and the pillars use the same opulent, Noir St Laurent marble as the grand staircase in the National Gallery, with bronze strips and incised lettering over the doors.

I never visited the Atlantic Bar and Grill in the basement when it was a fashionable late-night dive run by Oliver Peyton. It has now been acquired by Jeremy King and Chris Corbin as the latest in their string of well-managed restaurants and the original Edwardian interior has been polished up and re-gilded by Donald Insall Associates. It belongs to a sequence of astonishing interiors in the basement of the building, including the Titanic, which has been moved from the ground floor downstairs, complete with its pistachio green ceiling. The incredibly mannered 'Chez Cup Bar' under the entrance rotunda, which was created in 1934 out of the former billiard room, has been recreated from the original architectural drawings. The hallway of tobacco-coloured travertine is retained, but most impressive of all is Dick's Bar, an astonishing survival with its broad, horizontal stripes of stained birch veneers and jazz age columns.



The Titanic restaurant

The art deco interiors were created by the stage designer Oliver Percy Bernard, who had been technical director of the British Pavilion at the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, so was one of the key figures in the creation of the art deco style and who later became artistic director to Joe Lyons. They are probably the best and most authentic series of 1930s interiors in this country, described by Building magazine in May 1935 as 'just a trifle dissipated and naughty, but not sufficiently so to be vulgar'.

What Dixon Jones' latest building demonstrates is the need for sensitivity to the character of the street in areas like Soho and Covent Garden, and the benefits of mixed development, whereby the monolithic character of office blocks can be softened by the incorporation of shops and restaurants. It is perfectly possible, as the architects have demonstrated, to create a big building with the floorplates which are needed to accommodate large-scale, open-plan offices and computer cabling, while still allowing for a degree of variety on the street. It is a lesson which needs to be learned before big buildings begin to foul up the streetscapes on the eastern fringes of the City.



Atlantic Bar & Grill

*Charles Saumarez Smith is secretary and chief executive of the Royal Academy and former director of the National Portrait Gallery and National Gallery. An art historian by training, his doctoral thesis on The Building of Castle Howard was published in 1990.*

## Dixon Jones

Jeremy Dixon and Edward Jones established their practice in 1989, since when they have completed major projects in London for the Royal Opera House, the National Portrait Gallery and the National Gallery. Current work includes the Chelsea Barracks masterplan and the redevelopment of Exhibition Road.

## Project team

Architect: Dixon Jones; design team: Jeremy Dixon, Anthony Charnley, Michael Trigg, Graeme Frost, Patrick O'Sullivan, Sarah Rubinstein, Chris Milan, Nicholas Pawlik, Toshiya Kogawa, Richard Cohen, Andrew Brown, Alireza Irvani, Dan McIntosh, David Miles, Anna Prajs, Shabnam Noor, Angela Silva-Jones, Elena Tsolakis, Jeff Essen, Charles Broughton, David Gatrill-Smith, Paul Smith, Peter Weimer, Celina Ribeiro, Anna McNeil, Emily MacDonald; conservation architect: Donald Insall Assocs; visualisation: Miller Hare; models: Millennium Models; specification writing: Haddon Few Montuschi; facade consultant: Arup Facade Engineering; service yard consultant: Arup Logistics; facade access: Reef Assocs; access: David Bonnett Assocs; lighting design: Barry Wilde; residential design: Johnson Naylor; structural engineer: Waterman Structures; environmental consultant: Waterman Environmental; m&e: Aecom; fire: Exova Warrington Fire; planning consultant: CBRichard Ellis;

approved inspector: Butler & Young Group; vertical transport: Dunbar & Boardman; qs: Cyril Sweett (Crown Estates), Davis Langdon & Everest (Stanhope); CDM: PFB; art consultant: Modus Operandi; retained faience consultant: Adriel; security: QCIC Group; ecologist: Ecology Consultancy; surveys: CSL Surveys; artists: Spencer Finch, Daniela Schönbachler; client: Crown Estate, Stanhope; development manager: Stanhope; construction manager: Sir Robert McAlpine.

### **Selected suppliers and subcontractors**

New facades: Felix (curtain walling), Decomo (precast concrete), Shaws of Darwen (faience); gridshell roof: Josef Gartner; roofing, plant screens, enclosures: Prater Roofing; cleaning access: Facade Hoists; facsimile mansards: NDM Design; faience restoration: Paye Stonework & Restoration; brick/blockwork: Lyons & Annoot; drywall, ceilings: MPG Group; metal ceilings: SAS International; wc fit-out: Swift Horsman; architectural metalwork: Handrail Design; internal doors: Powershield, Door Technik; access floors: Kingspan; lifts: Otis, Evans Turner (interiors); secondary stairs, metalwork: PAD Contracts, Robinson Metalwork; new stonework: Grants of Shoreditch; bronze shopfronts: Edmonds; Wilder Walk: Dane Group (architectural), Tuchschnid Constructa (art installation); residential fit-out: Ellmer Construction; service yard gates: CoBaCo; flooring: Rees Flooring; signage: Rivermeade Signs; timber windows (facsimile), restaurant restoration: Ruddy Joinery; fire curtains, shutters: Coopers Fire; security: First City Care; decoration: GSE; fibrous plaster (SI areas): Simplicity; blinds: Levolux.

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