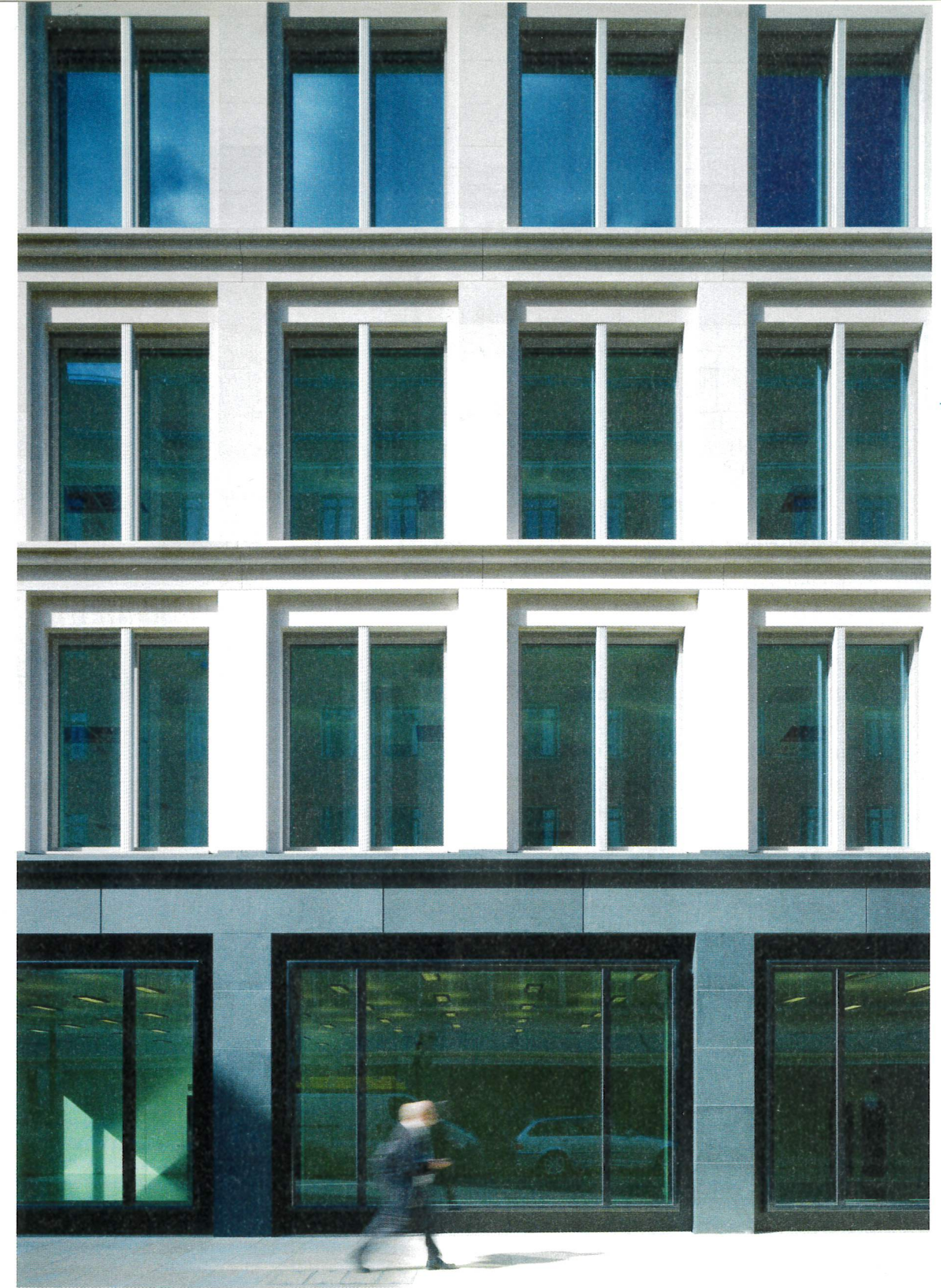


ARCHITECTURE TODAY • 200



July/August 2009

10 on 20: Olgiati, Rogers, Frampton, Chipperfield, Alsop, Leveté, Eisenman, Thorsen, Zaera Polo, Caruso
Daniel Rosbottom on Eric Parry's five London office buildings
Re-Learning – Denise Scott Brown returns to Las Vegas
Ian Ritchie on Liverpool One • Sean Griffiths on Ash Sakula
Bernard Tschumi in Athens • Steven Holl in Denmark



BUILDING ■
As 23 Savile Row joins
a growing suite of
London office projects,
Daniel Rosbottom looks
at the thinking behind
Eric Parry Architects' *tailor-made facades*.
Photographs: Tim Soar.

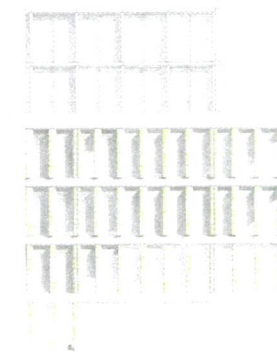
Eric Parry's spacious meeting room is screened from the rest of his bright Clerkenwell studio by a wall of books. Perusing them, the breadth of his interests quickly becomes apparent, encompassing among other things history and archaeology, a panoply of artists and an intriguing, eclectic range of architectural references. This is to be expected from a distinguished teacher. What is perhaps more surprising is that our discussion, which took place beneath a Richard Serra etching, across a large table filled with models and drawings, did not concern one of his various public commissions. Instead it related to a programme that, for an

architect of his persuasion, might seem less enticing – the speculative office block.

Such prejudices appear justified when one remembers the earliest building for which Eric Parry Architects became known – a pair of studios for painter the Tom Phillips and the sculptor Antony Gormley. But in fact the practice was simultaneously working on another defining project, an office pavilion at Stockley Park near Heathrow. Strands of work have extended from each of these beginnings. However they should not be understood as parallel trajectories, with lucrative commerce economically underpinning cultural prestige – the usual cross-subsidy.

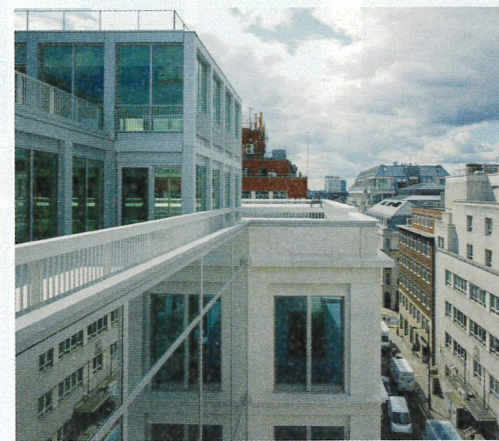
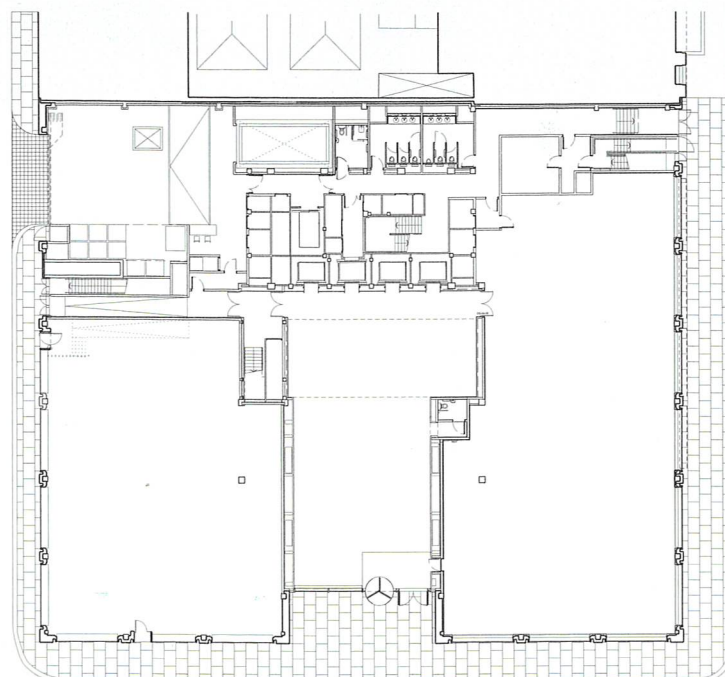
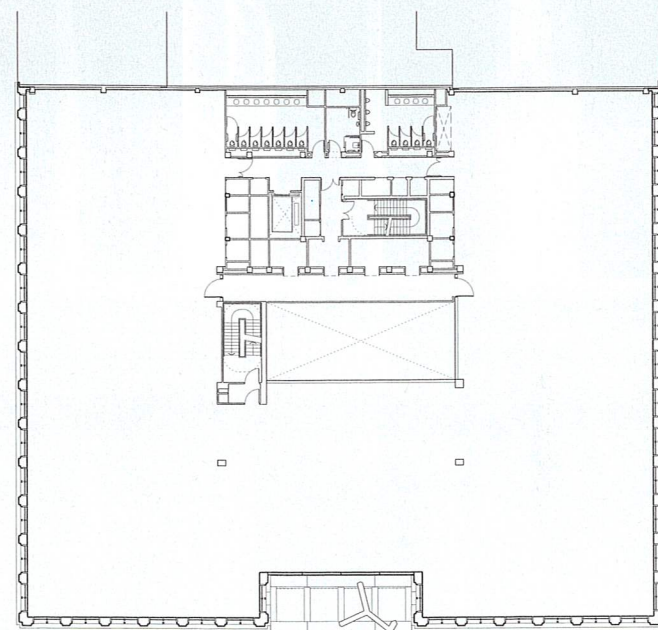
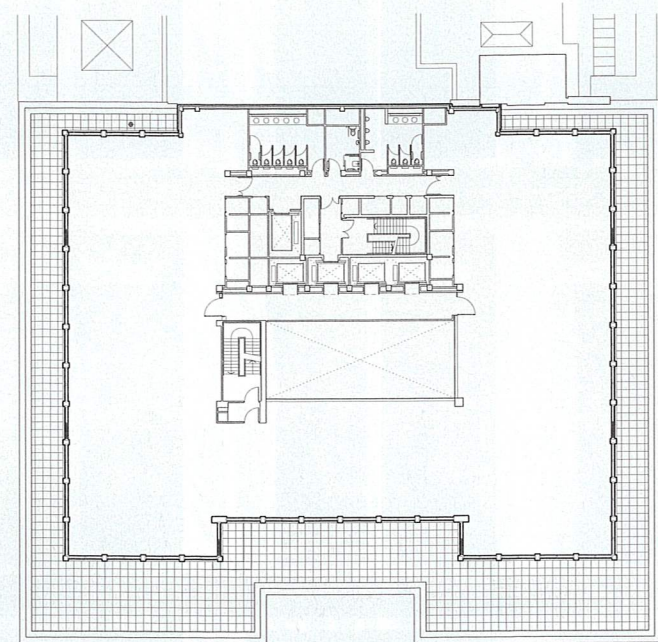
Instead they have intertwined to achieve a refreshing level of equivalence, together becoming the DNA of a practice that has, with a singular degree of success, confronted the breadth of the heterogeneous urban condition that is London and which understands the need to consider both the figure and the ground of the city with equal concentration.

Twenty years on, this holistic view is eloquently demonstrated in Parry's latest work, a substantial office and retail building at 23 Savile Row, in London's Mayfair. Here art, craft and commerce are drawn into quietly dramatic dialogue. The building also marks the conclusion of a more tightly defined period



in EPA's oeuvre, completing a suite of projects born out of a seismic shift in the influence of corporate power and wealth within London during the last decade. The physical consequences of that transformation rippled across the urban fabric from its epicentre in the City before shuddering dramatically to a halt in the face of the economic downturn. The blossoming cranes have quickly withered but the effect on London's grain and scale will be lasting and Parry's contribution is a rather exceptional high point in what might generally be considered an unfortunate legacy.

The primary reasons for the quality and consistency of his work are encapsulated in



Parry's remark that his first London office commission, Finsbury Square, arrived not because of a perceived expertise in the programmatic constraints of commercial office development, but rather in recognition of an attitude to the city. As with its predecessors, the Mayfair building is innately concerned with the particularities of its urban situation. Critically however, this relationship is not a subservient or passive one, nor is it the result of a predetermined attitude, indiscriminately applied. Instead each of the buildings seeks to become an active agent in reinforcing or transforming innate, but often latent, qualities found within its context.

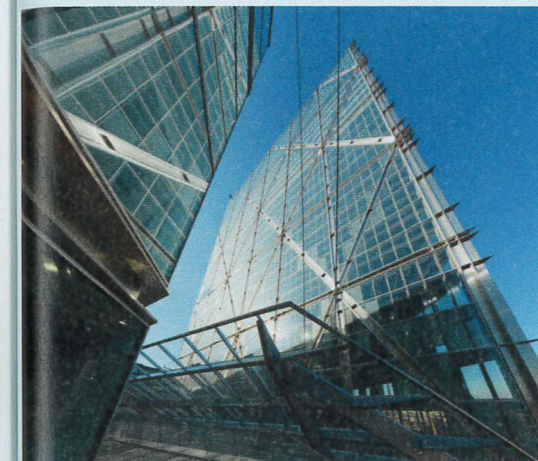
At Savile Row, EPA has confronted the issue of a prominent site and a scale of development that is considerably larger than its immediate neighbours. The project replaces Fortress House, latterly the home of English Heritage. This was built in 1950, itself the result of a fortuitous combination of bomb damage and demolition which had opened

Above Two upper storeys and interior overlooking the atrium.
Plans Ground, first to fourth and fifth floors (basement and sixth floor not shown). The principal street frontage is 50m with a return facade of 42m facing onto New Burlington Street.



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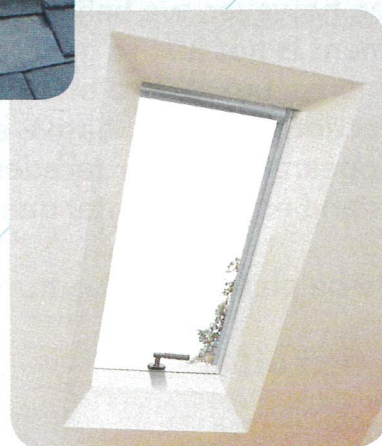
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up the northern end of Savile Row to Conduit Street. While it was a building with definite qualities, its didactic plan and limited floor-to-floor heights made it difficult to re-appropriate and its introverted demeanour, concentrated around an axial entrance court, left it unresponsive to the wider context of the surrounding streets.

Parry's initial moves were akin to those of Alison and Peter Smithson within the similarly sensitive context of the Economist Plaza in St James – breaking down the site into an ensemble of pieces and creating an element of public space. However, the plan was



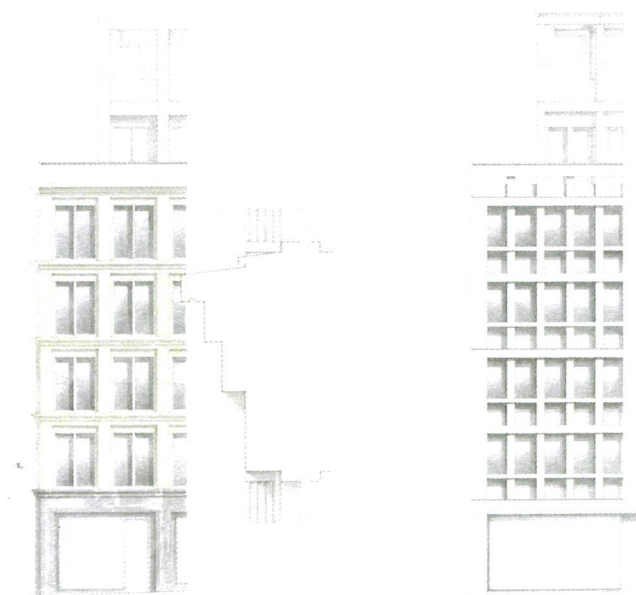
subsequently 'hardened up' and the result is a building that at an urban scale straightforwardly reinforces the line of the pavement and the grid of the street, both predominant characteristics of the historic Burlington Estate, of which Savile Row is a part. The new building retains an axial relationship to the Row, with two wings of accommodation stepping forward to the street line, separated by a slightly set-back, canopied entrance. The foyer leads through to an atrium, with a densely planned core to the rear of the site. Street presence is reinforced by a ground floor retail unit on the prominent corner that opens to Conduit Street. Behind it, along the minor edge of New Burlington Place, are secondary and service access points.

Looking from Conduit Street, the building has a significant presence, with the 'vitrine' of the new shop introducing the refined world of bespoke tailoring that lies beyond. In its response to the surroundings, the building seeks to improve on the rather ponderous relationships that the similarly-scaled Fortress House had imposed. Seen obliquely, the two wings accentuate a rhythm that already echoes along the length of Savile Row.



Above The retail space cleverly uses a rise of 1.5 metres along the Savile Row frontage to attain the generous floor-to-ceiling heights required for high end shopping. At street level, a black Indian granite is used to form a strong ground, in contrast to the lighter Portland stonework above.

Below Facade studies by Eric Parry.

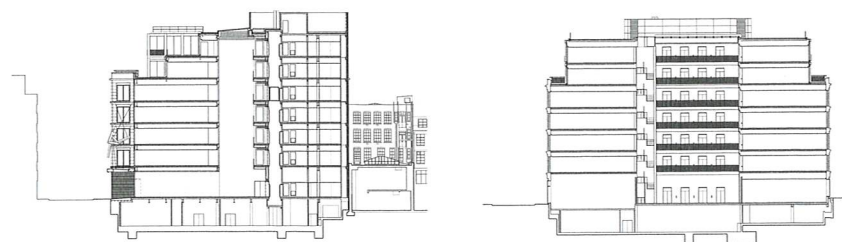


Sectionally, a tri-partite strategy offers empathy with the scale of adjacent properties and the street as a whole, with the base and four storeys above establishing an eaves height. Set back from this, two further storeys, originally intended as residential but now converted to office use, form a visually lighter roof-top pavilion.



Commentators on his City buildings have noted the quality of light and optimised efficiency of Parry's office interiors, and this project extends that track record. But what particularly defines EPA's attitude to the office building as type is the role that the facade plays. Although Savile Row is as different from its predecessors as they are from each other, one can see a genealogical thread running through them. At its root, this familial quality stems from an innate belief in the 'idea' of the facade, both as an integral component in the ordering and optimisation of those interiors, but simultaneously as a separate, mediating element between the life of the building and the public world beyond.

The theoretician Colin Rowe regretfully concluded that 'face was never a preoccu-



tion for modern architecture.' In giving his buildings a very definite physiognomy, Parry clearly places the work of his practice apart from the didactic urban machinery of high-tech. For while a fascination with the conditions of modernism is embedded in his work, the buildings collectively reject the orthodoxy that the free plan inevitably destroys the primacy of the facade as the representative

Above Atrium and largely column-free interior space. The reception and atrium design was carried out by another designer.

Sections The free-spanning floor plates are 1.5m deep (12m on the upper two floors).

Below Eric Parry Architects' London office buildings. Left to right: Finsbury Square, 2002 (see AT136; ph: Hélène Binet), 60 Threadneedle Street, 2009 (AT195), Aldermanbury Square, 2008 (AT188).



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moment of a building. Thus they bring the pre-modern, the modern and the post-modern into a satisfying continuity. Within these buildings, the ubiquitous multiplier of the 1.5 metre grid is respected, but it is not allowed to dissolve the exterior into the numbing

Above The frame is extremely stiff, allowing the corners to become particularly delicate, formed around a fragile 200x200mm RHS. This move necessitated the single column in the floor plate of each wing, but it more than justifies that small compromise, suggests Rosbottom.



repetition of a curtain wall. Nor is the problem of the face ignored through the application of veils or screens leading to a kind of de-scaled objectification. Instead, such pragmatic concerns become merely another system of order within a complex matrix of thinking that takes in issues of proportion, scale and tectonic, solid and void, window and wall.

Previous projects have demonstrated this through a layering of components that are allowed to slip past each other, interlacing tectonic clarity with experiential shifts in scale and depth, light and shadow. This is most immediately evident at Finsbury Square where the extraordinary screen of loadbearing,



self-supporting masonry plays against tauter rhythms of bright stainless steel framing behind, with light bouncing in the space between. Close inspection reveals similar intricacies in the gridded, stainless steel facades of Aldermanbury Square or in the midnight blue frames of Threadneedle Street – although in that case it is shadow and structure that are almost interchangeable.

The development of the Savile Row facade began in a similar way, as a process of 'weaving' stone. However, this was quickly put to one side in the face of a sensitive planning conversation. Instead the project developed as a more traditional dialogue of Portland stone string-courses and pilasters, spaced at three metre centres within a six metre structural grid.

Parry has made a number of eloquent and expressive stone facades, notably at Pembroke College, Cambridge. Prior to this one, though, each worked with the idea of carving back from a planar surface. Perhaps it was the deep, sensuously curving, Mendelsohn-like projections of Threadneedle Street that emboldened him to express the horizontal strings in this case. Whatever the

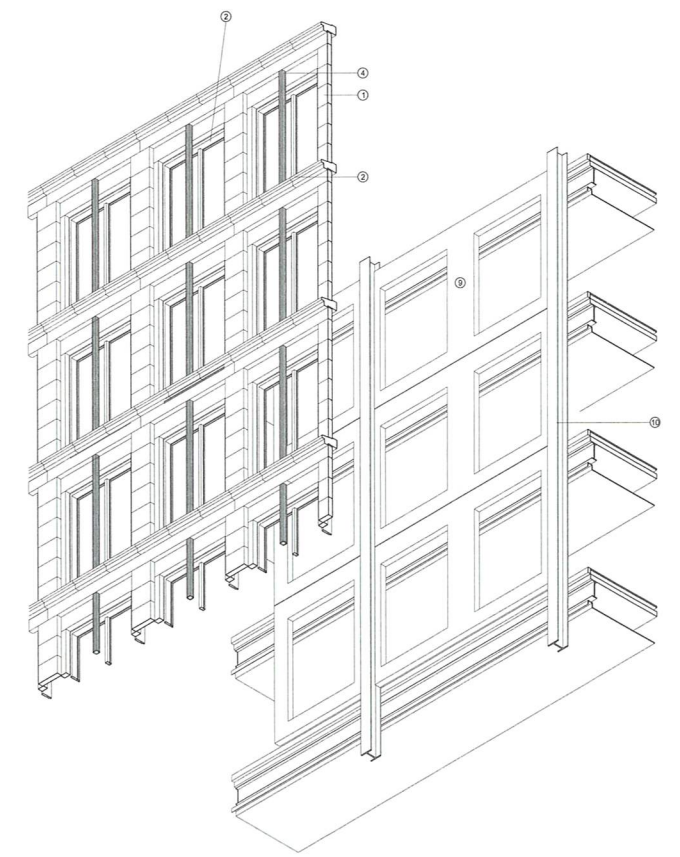
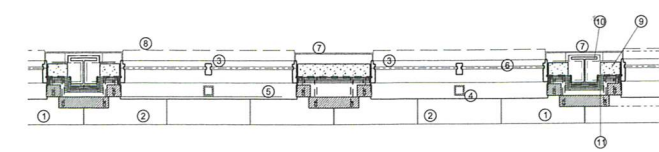
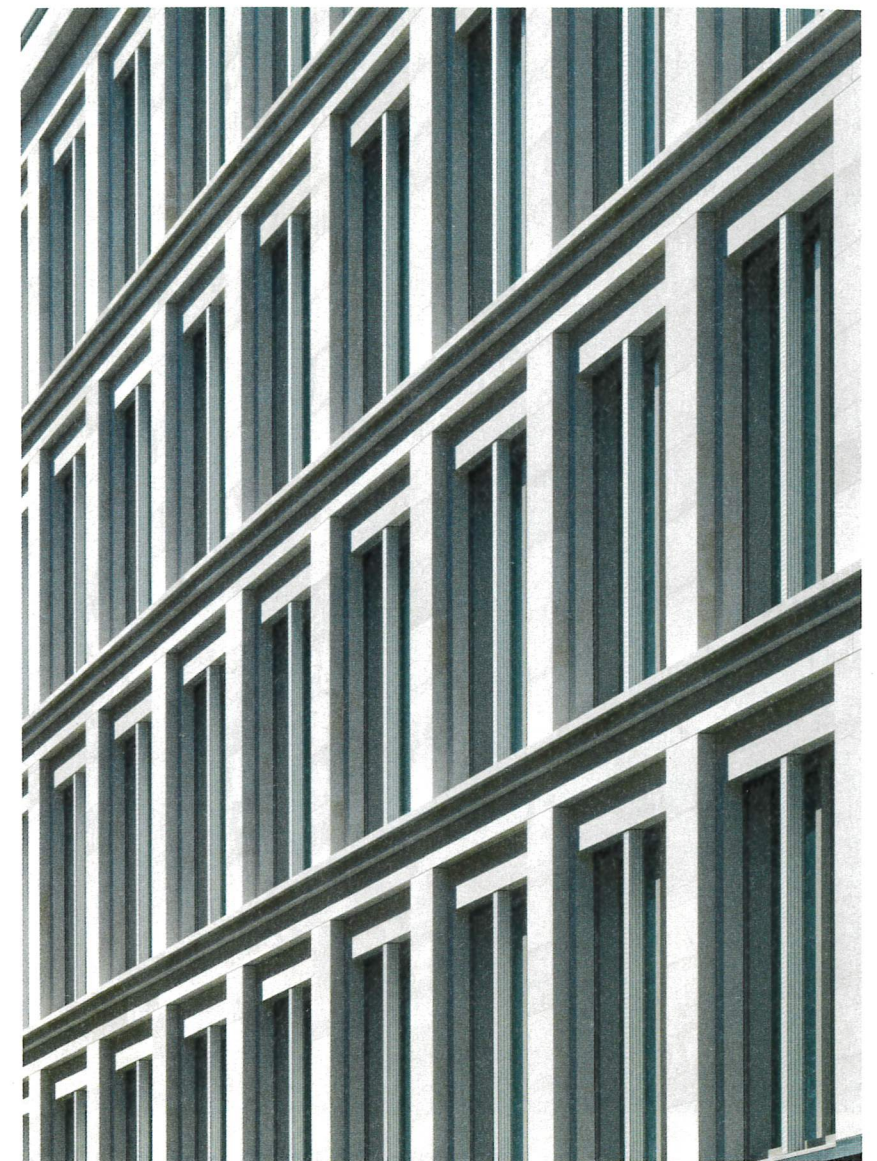
cause, the result is a strongly classical resolution but one which embodies an implicit modernity, recalling the Chicago School or the work of 'Greek' Thomson in Glasgow. Such resemblances are in part to do with the democracy of repeating floor-to-floor heights but are largely a result of the slenderness of each element of the composition.

Parry is rigorous but he is not a moralist and he is happy to announce that this lightness is the result of the stone being only partially self-supporting – tied back at intervals to the precast panels holding the window assemblies and hence to the steel frame. A slipping of layers within the facade is still just discernable within the 550mm wall depth. This is artfully registered through the slight shift in the grain of the larger pieces of stone used within the revealed openings and is made literal by the shadows of movement joints at the back of each pilaster.

These subtleties express something of the inevitable discontinuity of contemporary construction. The architect has worked hard to emulate traditional structures, however, using three metre unbroken Portland stone lintels and 3mm joints between each stone. Collectively these complementary expressions provide a satisfying tectonic clarity.

More ambiguously, a free-standing, ribbed aluminum extrusion stands centrally within

Facade details 1 Portland stone, 2 Portland stone cill, 3 powder coated aluminium frame, 4 natural anodised aluminium centre pier, 5 pressed metal powder coated cill, 6 double glazing, 7 plaster-board, 8 boxover, 9 greyback, 10 steel, 11 insulation.





Above The fifth of Eric Parry Architects' London office buildings under construction on New Bond Street. The mixed-use development makes use of both new and existing buildings within an urban block bounded by New Bond Street, Maddox Street and St George Street. A different facade order has been developed for each, including glass blocks and ceramic cladding.

Top right 'Here', by Joel Shapiro. **Below** Facade study models exploring the idea of 'weaving' stone (ph: Andrew Putler). **Below right** Casting Joel Shapiro's 'Here', which takes its texture from sawn timber (ph: Mark Craemer).



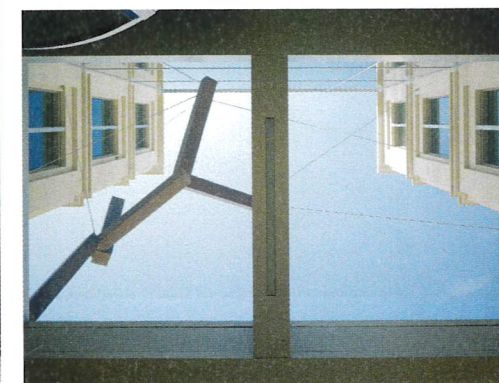
each window bay. At first glance this appears to act as a prop to the long stone lintels. In fact its purpose is entirely visual, masking any intermediate partitions that might be erected inside and heightening the modulation of light and shadow. Such creative ambiguities and playful tensions exist within each of Parry's projects and these are what allow the apparently laconic forms and relationships to oscillate within one's consciousness, moving beyond mere well-tempered background.

The final element of the composition draws the building as a whole into such a

dialogue. In direct response to the sense of restraint exhibited throughout, the shallow space above the entrance canopy has become a kind of votive niche at an urban scale – a space for a sculpture. 'Here' is a work by American artist Joel Shapiro. Specially commissioned, it was developed in dialogue with the architects and the building. The dynamic composition of five linear, raw bronze pieces is apparently weightless and yet obviously massive; both figurative and abstract. Suspended from the stone on either side, it creates a dialogue with the facades that feels

both free-spirited and absolutely precise, a leading dancer to the building's corps de ballet. This does not feel like a 'percent for art' appendage but rather an intrinsic and essential element in the composition. Indeed, the minimalist, Dan Graham-like qualities of the reflective glazing that fills the recess behind it would feel a distinctly curious conceit without its presence. Seen as a whole, the warm, tonal colour of the bronze heightens the monochromatic qualities of the stone. Close to, the rhythmic marks of the sawmill, captured within the sand-cast surface, echo the larger urban rhythms of the facade. The loss of a public space at ground level, speculated on within the early schemes, is more than compensated for in this very different form of public event. It is a gift to the city whose arrival, as Parry suggests, might once have prompted a three-day festival of celebration.

If the Savile Row building concludes his sequence of latter-day palazzi, dedicated to



the art of commerce and embellished, like their forebears, by the finest artists, then Parry's final office development, for the moment at least, promises a rather different urban expression – one that might be succinctly characterised as *poché*. Very close by, on New Bond Street, a mixed use development of office, shopping and housing expertly weaves its way through back courts and through both new and existing buildings. If Savile Row is a big man in an impeccably tailored, bespoke suit, then the striking infill piece emerging on New Bond



Street is an agile youth in a hand-stitched snakeskin jacket. That project underscores the point touched on at the outset: while there may be architects in London who have built more, and more noticeably, there are few whose work is more encompassing. From the renewal of St Martin-in-the-Fields to 23 Savile Row, Parry has approached the complexity of the city and the diversity of its building stock with perception, precision and personality.

Daniel Rosbottom is co-director of DRDH Architects and head of the School of Architecture and Landscape at Kingston University.

Project team
Architect: Eric Parry Architects; design team: Eric Parry, Roz Barr, Robert Kennett, Ben Hassell, Martin Reynolds, Brendan Durkin, Guy Parkinson, Douglas Carson, Eva Ravensbourg, Ze'ev Feegis, Lisa Ngan, Felipe Errazuriz, Georgina Aldworth; structural engineer, m&e engineer: Arup; facade engineer: Arup Facade Engineer; cost consultant: AYH Arcadis, Mott Green Wall; fire engineer: Arup Fire; access consultant: REEF; interior design (reception, atrium and wcs): MoreySmith; project manager: Stanhope; main contractor: Mace; client: D2 Private.

Selected suppliers and subcontractors
Portland stone and granite: Grants of Shoreditch; curtain walling: Mero-Schmidlin; greybacks: Decomo; steelwork: Severfield Reeve Structures; roofing: Praters; lifts: Otis; architectural metalwork (handrails): CMF.

