



The Architecture of Regent Street





Introduction

We all encounter architecture. It shapes our lives, makes us feel safe or uncomfortable. It is the home where we live, the office where we work or the street where we shop.

Architecture Week is the national public celebration of architecture and the theme for this year's Architecture Week is 'the public realm'. It is in this vein that The Crown Estate is pleased to publish this Architectural Guide to Regent Street. All the property in Regent Street from Oxford Circus to Piccadilly Circus is part of The Crown Estate.

The use of the public realm has changed significantly over the years with many more buses, lorries and vans fighting for limited space in Regent Street and also in the back streets which are used as service streets for the shops and restaurants on the street.

The Crown Estate is committed not only to remodelling the street in a sensitive way in order to provide offices, shops and housing behind the wonderful façades of Regent Street, but also to working with others, so as to transform the public realm ensuring Regent Street once again has a world class environment. As you walk along Regent Street look around you and see what improvements you think should be made to the public realm.

Starting at either end of the street, simply follow the map and read about the history of the buildings, look at the old photos and compare how they look today with how they used to look. Notice the detail on each building, and look above the shops signs to appreciate the scale of the street and the beauty of the architecture. Your concentration will come in useful when you reach the end of the guide and are asked a question about the architecture you have seen in order to be in with a chance of winning Regent Street shopping vouchers in our special competition.

Nash's development

A stream once ran where one of London's most graceful streets stands today. Located in the heart of Central London, Regent Street is now a continuous stream of traffic and pedestrians while offering some of the best shopping in the West End.

Regent Street was planned from 1811. John Nash was the architect who designed the street in the second decade of the 19th century as a compliment to the Prince Regent, later to become King George IV.

He had a vision of a wide, imperious boulevard with sweeping curves. It was designed to connect the large royal estate, then known as Marylebone Park, in the rural area north of Portland Place, with central London.



The optimum use of pockets of Crown Estate land meant that the New Street (as Regent Street was initially known) contained a number of twists; where Portland Place joins Langham Place, and where the street enters Piccadilly Circus. Ironically it is these acts of expediency which has created the great set pieces of Regent Street: the closed vista of All Souls Church looking north and the curve of the Quadrant leading into Piccadilly Circus.

The street was completed in 1825 and being the first ever planned street, it was a masterpiece of town planning; up until this point, London had grown organically so never before had any part of London been redeveloped with such thoroughness. Nash saw New Street as a clear dividing line between Soho, which was considered rather less than respectable, and the fashionable squares and streets of Mayfair.

Twentieth century redevelopment

By the end of the nineteenth century at a time when the first leases were expiring many of the retailers in Regent Street were considering rebuilding their premises to provide larger shop units.

The first redevelopment was of Regent House, just south of Oxford Circus. However, the stylistic tone for the rebuilding was set by Sir Reginald Blomfield's Quadrant, this followed the construction of the Piccadilly Hotel, designed by Richard Norman Shaw, which opened in 1908. The hotel helped to draw attention to the redevelopment of Regent Street and in particular the requirements of the retail trader.

Regent Street's reconstruction was driven by the need to increase the size of the shops, to meet the Edwardian aspiration for department stores but completion of the work was delayed by the Great War and it wasn't until 1927 that this was celebrated, with King George V and Queen Mary driving in state along its length.

Architectural context

Regent Street is an outstanding example of Beaux Arts 'façadism', an architectural set piece designed to impress as it unfurls before the visitor. It is a medley of related styles and decoration, with each building having been designed individually but within rigorous guidelines. Each block was required to be designed with a continuing unifying façade to the street, regardless of the number of sub-divisions behind this main elevation, and they had to be finished in Portland stone with a uniform cornice level.

All the buildings in Regent Street are listed as being at least Grade II status and together they form the Regent Street Conservation Area. These designations serve to protect Regent Street's architectural and historical importance.



Regent Street is unique. It was built when London had the largest population of any city in the world. It was a symbol of elegant living at a time when style and grace were 'de rigueur'. It is the nature of this built environment that gives the street a particular ambience not evident in any other shopping street in the world.

The Future

While some may claim travesty against the destruction of the Nash period buildings in the early part of the twentieth century, others argue that this actually saved Regent Street. What must be understood is that by the end of the 19th century the original buildings were deeply unpopular. This was due to several factors; firstly, Nash's buildings were not of the highest quality, utilising stucco render and composition, to imitate stonework; secondly, many of the buildings had already been extensively extended and were structurally suspect; thirdly, they were too small and old fashioned for the type of retail uses which were becoming popular as bespoke shopping died out. The redevelopment of the street resulted in buildings with Portland stone facings and steel framed structures. These buildings have adapted well to change and continue to do so, providing the basis for The Crown Estate's £500 million redevelopment currently underway today. This programme of works seeks to conserve and preserve what is best in Regent Street while providing significant improvements to the public realm; updating and modernising the buildings to provide superb quality retail, office and residential accommodation; and looking forward to the next hundred years of history.

This fits with The Crown Estate's vision for Regent Street as a unique destination and a world class environment that delivers quality, heritage, style and success for businesses and people alike.





British Columbia House

British Columbia House or 1 Regent Street is now the site of the Britain and London Visitor Centre.

Built in the 1820s it would have been one of the first buildings on the street when it was designed by John Nash. At this time it was the Hotel Capitol, forming an integral part of the street.

In 1915, during the redevelopment of Regent Street, the Hotel was altered substantially by Sir Reginald Blomfield. A lease was granted on behalf of the government of British Columbia and the building became known as British Columbia House. A sculpture representing the British Empire and the connections to the Canadian province was placed above the entrance where it still remains today.

British Columbia House played an important part in the Second World War as the building was used as a base by the British Columbia Women's Institute and also as a service club for Canadian troops.

The Quadrant

The famous curve of Regent Street is known as The Quadrant. It is the most distinctive part of the street and lends it an air of old fashioned elegance. The original building featured a wide colonnade, as you can see from the etching from 1827. This colonnade was removed in 1848, as its condition had become dangerous. This actually resulted in the street being opened up which created a much more pleasant environment for the visitor.

The Quadrant is quite rightly regarded as one of the most visually striking areas of our capital.



Both East and West sides of The Quadrant employ the same neo-classical architecture as the rest of Regent Street. Whether you are standing at the bottom of the street and looking up round the curve or doing the opposite you will very clearly see Nash's genius for creating vistas, as there is always something to catch the eye.





229 – 247 Regent Street

When Nash's street was first built this was the site of Hanover Chapel. It was designed by C R Cockrell in 1823. The building was demolished in 1896 to make way for Regent House which was completed in 1898.

The dome on the roof of this building is one of its most distinctive characteristics.

The original building's dome was said to have been influenced by Sir Christopher Wren's St Paul's Cathedral. Although completely redesigned when it was rebuilt the dome reflects the earlier building.

The building has recently been rebuilt behind its original 1898 façade, as an integral part of Regent Street, and now houses the European flagship store of computer giant Apple, one of the many famous shops on the street. The store opened in November 2004.

Liberty

The Liberty store was opened by Arthur Lasenby Liberty in 1874 with a £2000 loan from his prospective father-in-law. Arthur Liberty took on the lease of half a shop at 218a Regent Street which opened in 1875. Within eighteen months Liberty had repaid the loan and acquired the second half of 218 Regent Street.

In 1885, 142-4 Regent Street was acquired and Liberty moved and it was then that it became the most fashionable place to shop in London.

The more famous of the two buildings is Tudor House. It was first built so that trading could continue while renovations on the Regent Street frontage were completed. In 1924 the Tudor building was built from the timbers of two ships: HMS Impregnable and HMS Hindustan. The frontage at Great Marlborough Street is the same length as the Hindustan.

Both shops were designed by Edwin T. Hall and his son Edwin S. Hall. They designed the Tudor building at the height of the 1920s fashion for Tudor revival.







All Souls Church

All Souls Church is unique as the last surviving church built by John Nash. It was completed in 1823 and opened the following year. The church is built of Bath stone. The winged heads of the cherubs on the external Corinthian columns are based on a design by Michelangelo.

Nash's design, with its peculiar combination of Gothic

spires and classical rotunda, was not at first universally admired. In March 1824 an MP criticised Nash for designing "this deplorable and horrible object." Happily attitudes have long since changed and the church is now considered to be one of the finest in London.

In 1940, during the Second World War, a landmine explosion caused extensive roof damage which meant that the church was unusable until repair work was carried out in 1951.

BBC Broadcasting House

Just beyond All Souls Church, and at the very Northern end of Regent Street, is the BBC's famous Broadcasting House. It was built in 1932 as the first ever purpose-built broadcast centre in the UK. The building is a jewel of Art Deco design, and was in fact styled after the original skyscrapers of New York. The architect, Colonel Val Myer, named his original design 'the Top Hat design' and it was frequently compared, from its first appearance, to a 1930s ocean liner for its clean cut lines and sharp design.

The building links empathetically to the rest of Regent Street through its complementary use of Portland stone, and is adorned with important artistic commissions - most notably the statues of Ariel and Prospero by the leading 20th century sculptor and typeface designer, Eric Gill, which are above the front entrance of the building.



The building is currently closed for a two-phase programme of major refurbishment. The first phase completes at the end of 2005, when network Radio moves back into the original building. In 2009/10 a brand new extension will be completed, housing BBC News and World Service.



To find out more visit:

www.regentstreetonline.co.uk/crownhistory

www.thecrownestate.co.uk

www.architectureweek.org.uk



COMPETITION

To be in with a chance of winning £250 worth of Regent Street shopping vouchers, please tell us on which of the six buildings featured in this guide can you find this lion mosaic pictured above.

To enter please visit:
www.regentstreetonline.com

The closing date for entries is 31 July 2005.

Good luck!

