



Historic England

# The Late 20th-Century Commercial Office

Introductions to Heritage Assets



# Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which lack such a summary. This can either be where the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood. Many of these are what might be thought of as 'new heritage', that is they date from after the Second World War.

In the later 20th century ever-larger, and sometimes architecturally ambitious, commercial office buildings proliferated in many cities. The deregulation and globalisation of the UK's financial services sector in the 1980s led to a dramatically increased demand for a new types of work space while the 'Big Bang' in October 1986 led to changes in the financing of developments, an influx of foreign investment banks and a speculative property boom. These developments had the greatest impact on the City of London, but also contributed to the growth of secondary financial centres such as Canary Wharf, Leeds and Manchester. After recession in the early 1990s the commercial property market rallied, and competition between regional financial centres and further deregulation contributed to the return of the tall building to the urban skyline.

This guidance note has been written by Geraint Franklin and edited by Paul Stamper.

It is one is of several guidance documents that can be accessed at  
[HistoricEngland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/listing-selection/ihas-buildings/](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/listing-selection/ihas-buildings/)

First published by English Heritage September 2013.

This edition published by Historic England June 2016.  
All images © Historic England unless otherwise stated.

[HistoricEngland.org.uk/advice/](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/advice/)

---

## Front cover

Bracken House, the former Financial Times headquarters (Sir Albert Richardson, 1955-9) was the first wholly post-war building to be listed, in August 1987 at Grade II\*. It was remodelled in 1988-91 by (Sir) Michael Hopkins to form the Obayashi headquarters. In a bold intervention, Hopkins replaced Richardson's

central printing works with a High-Tech design of metal and glass, combining sensitivity to the existing fabric with a distinctive, contemporary language of its own. The List entry was amended in 2013 to recognise the special interest of both phases.

# Contents

**Introduction.....1**

**1     Historical Background .....3**

**2     Architecture of the  
Commercial Office .....5**

2.1    Introduction .....5  
2.2    Roles and responsibilities.....5  
2.3    Patterns of development.....6  
2.4    Architectural design.....7  
2.5    Interiors .....11  
2.6    The public realm .....13

**3     Associations .....15**

3.1    Change and the future.....15

**4     Further Reading.....17**

**5     Acknowledgements .....18**

# Introduction

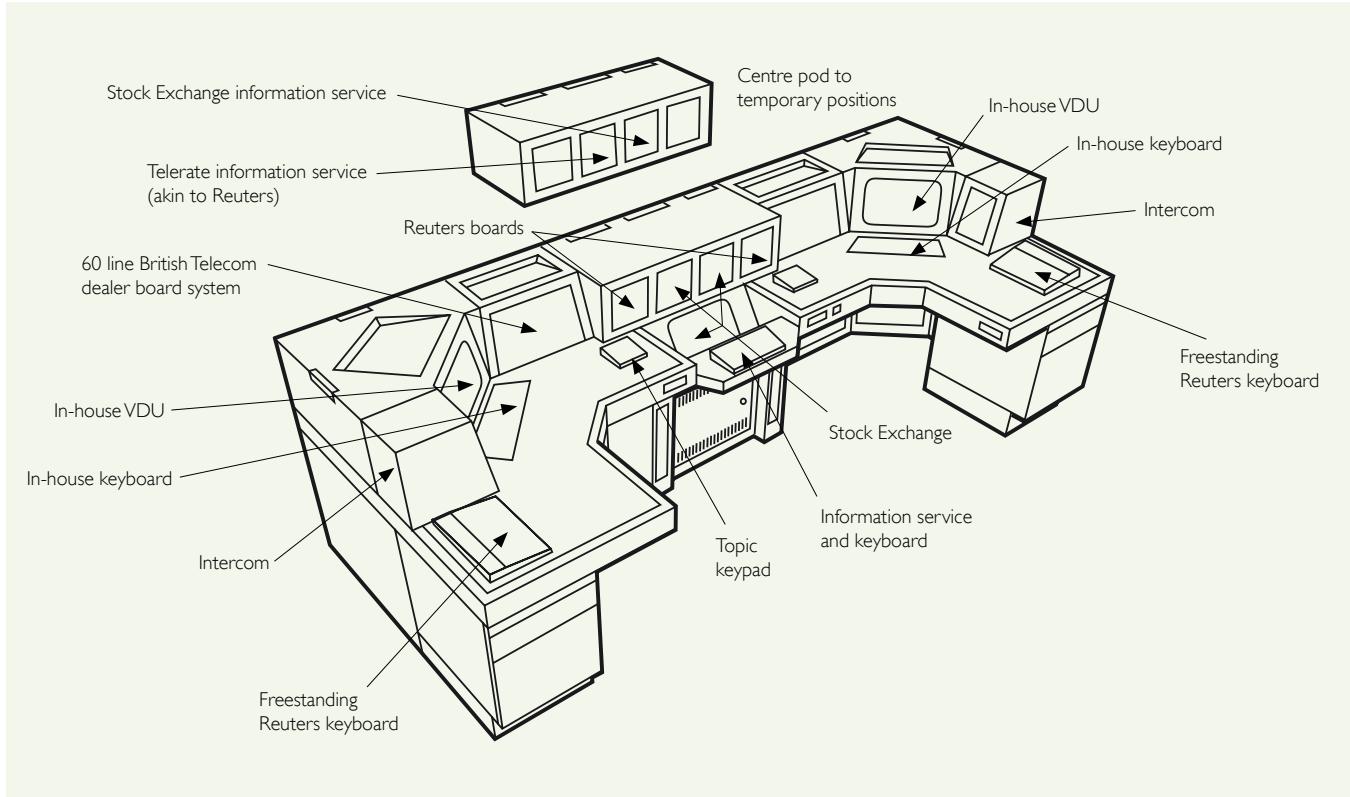
The term ‘commercial office’ encompasses the business and administrative premises of commercial, professional and institutional organisations. Whilst many building types incorporate administrative functions, the development of the office has been driven by commerce and the banking, financial services, insurance and law sectors in particular. The pace of change and innovation in office buildings in the late 20th century accounts for the chronological focus of this document. Exchanges, guildhalls and livery halls all have their own distinctive histories and characteristics, and so are not considered here.

Commerce has traditionally played a major role in shaping our towns and cities, whether through the formation of a ‘central business district’ or the clustering of trades or professions into streets or quarters. Urban redevelopment continued in the post-war period, but new preferences and patterns of distribution emerged too. In the 1960s increasing car ownership made the ‘out of town’ office feasible, a trend accelerated by government policy. Some firms chose to relocate to new towns or the outlying districts of major cities such as London (Croydon, Ilford), Bristol (Bedminster), Newcastle (Killingworth and Cramlington) and Birmingham (Edgbaston). The growth of the motorway network stimulated commercial development such as the ‘M4 corridor’ of high-technology firms which ran from London to South Wales, joining up Slough, Reading, Newbury, Swindon and Bristol. Proximity to airports was a key factor in the location of the business parks which developed from the 1980s.

Because most commercial offices are designed to be let to tenants, relatively standardised formats and layouts have prevailed. The basic elements are spaces for desk work, divided into cellular offices or more open configurations. Semi-public

spaces, such as entrance lobbies, foyers, atria, lifts, boardrooms and restaurants may be singled out for architectural treatment. The ground floor may be given over to a spacious reception area or divided into retail units to be separately let. Threaded through the modern office building are what the American architect Louis Kahn termed ‘servant spaces’: vertical cores for lifts, stairs and toilets, and horizontal servicing zones in which the occupant can install cabling and ducts. The development of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has demanded increasingly flexible installations and a substantial proportion of the construction budget is now allotted to building services.

Face-to-face contact has remained important in banks and institutional headquarters and so they retain a greater amount of semi-public space. Banks maintained their traditional preference for branches on corner sites, sometimes rebuilding their earlier premises, although the introduction of credit cards (1966), automatic telling machines (1968), and latterly telephone and internet banking have made large and prestigious banking halls increasingly rare.



**Figure 1**

A typical trading desk in a financial dealing room after the 'Big Bang' of 1986. Such an arrangement required a sophisticated and flexible servicing strategy.

Beyond accounts of individual buildings, the recent development of commercial offices has received relatively little attention. Of particular value are histories that relate architectural characteristics to their economic and regulatory contexts, this helping to explain characteristic or innovative design features. Historic England's listing selection guide to [Commerce and](#)

[Exchange Buildings](#) summarises the broader development of commercial buildings from the medieval period to the post-war era. The guide sets out criteria for considering commercial buildings for designation, which this Introduction augments with specific considerations relating to post-war offices.

# 1 Historical Background

The office is a relatively new building type. From the early 19th century, purpose-built offices were required in increasing numbers with the expansion of free trade, financial investment and industrialisation. The move of insurance and banking firms from leased accommodation to bespoke offices resulted in new models. The architect Edward l'Anson recalled in 1864 how 'merchants dwelt in the City over their counting houses and next to their warehouses'. These functions were gradually dispersed into discrete and specialised building types. The process was accelerated by the practice of letting out upper chambers or floors, and by the mid 19th century whole offices were built to let.

Speculative commercial developments came to dominate the urban property markets of the great merchant cities but above all London, the UK's pre-eminent financial centre since the early 18th century. The commercial property market tends to follow economic cycles, with periodic shortages and surpluses of space. Patterns of supply and demand of office buildings are themselves linked to external factors such as land values, infrastructure, regulation, technological and commercial developments and user needs.

The post-war economy was characterised by growing service and information sectors and high-technology industries, such as computing, telecommunications, biotechnology and the manufacture of scientific instruments. These, together with an expanding public sector, countered a dwindling manufacturing base. The new breed of 'knowledge worker' was better

educated, relatively autonomous and office-based: three-quarters of all jobs created in London in the 1950s were office jobs in traditional industries. Government policy at national and regional level was no less crucial. Wider planning and policy trends which influenced post-war commercial development included city reconstruction plans, comprehensive redevelopment, land-use zoning and decentralisation. In the 1990s regeneration, mixed use and sustainability became key agendas.

In the straitened economy of the immediate post-war years, government controls limited office building to the reconstruction of bomb-damaged premises and public-sector offices. Commercial building was kerbed by the imposition of building licences and a tax on 'betterment' or land speculation by developers introduced in the 1947 Town and County Planning Act. The Act laid down a framework for future commercial development,

stipulating that all proposals had to secure planning permission from the local planning authority. The Act granted authorities the power to use compulsory purchase orders to acquire land for resale to private developers on long leases. This allowed large sites to be assembled more rapidly. On occasion, local planning authorities did not anticipate the extent to which developers and their architects would manipulate the complex set of urban planning regulations to maximise built area.

The lifting of building licences in 1954, the loosening of government controls on development and an increase in bank lending paved the way for a commercial building boom. From the 1960s much speculative building was driven by financial institutions seeking to amass mixed portfolios of commercial property. The suspension of controls on bank mergers and acquisitions left to a ‘big four’ (Lloyds, NatWest, Barclays and Midland), which consolidated their position with a spate of commissions for new headquarters such as the NatWest Tower in the City of London (front cover). The property market slumped in November 1973, precipitated by soaring inflation rates and a global oil crisis. But the hiatus in building enabled a complacent sector to take stock. It was at this point that the owner-occupied market, hitherto catered for by a handful of ‘commercial’ architectural practices, was reinvigorated by a younger generation of innovative and collaborative designers who had established their reputations in other sectors.

In the 1980s, the deregulation and globalisation of the UK’s financial services sector led to a dramatic increase in market activity and a wave of demand for a certain type of work space. ‘Never before, not even in Chicago in the 1880s, has the office building been so central to society nor loaded with such significance’, wrote the architect Francis Duffy in 1981. The decision of the Conservative government to eliminate trade controls and deregulate the London Stock Exchange in October 1986 (the ‘Big Bang’) led to changes in the financing of developments, an influx of foreign investment banks and a speculative property boom. Computerised dealing rooms replaced traditional face-to-face trading (Fig 1). The UK’s geographical position meant that it could trade with the Pacific market in the morning and North America in the afternoon. These developments had the greatest impact on the City of London, but also contributed to the growth of secondary financial centres such as Canary Wharf, Leeds and Manchester.

The 1990-3 recession left many cities oversupplied with office space and planning regulations were relaxed by some local authorities. The commercial property market rallied from the mid 1990s, and competition between regional financial centres and deregulation contributed to the return of the tall building to the urban skyline.

# 2 Architecture of the Commercial Office

*The office building that gives up the most for light and air is the best investment [...] The parts everyone entering sees must make the lasting impression [...] Carefully consider and provide for changes in location of corridor doors, partitions, light, plumbing and telephones.*

Office design principles by the Chicago developer Owen Aldis, 1894

## 2.1 Introduction

A continual tension exists between the idea of the office as property investment and the office as workplace. It is often observed that in continental Europe homes tend to be rented and offices owned, whereas the opposite is true in the UK. Nevertheless, owner-occupied offices, although accounting for less than a quarter of the UK office stock, have generally led the way in architectural and managerial innovation. In planning speculative offices, which are less closely tailored to specific needs, a combination of anticipation and flexibility has been crucial. The new disciplines of space planning and facilities management helped to bridge the gap between the designer and the user of the speculative office. New types of speculative developments such as serviced office spaces, business parks and conference centres, emerged in the late 20th century.

## 2.2 Roles and responsibilities

The 20th century saw an increasing division of labour in the construction of large and complex buildings, in which the elements of a building were increasingly parcelled up and contracted out to specialist contractors. Thus structural engineers designed the frame; the heating and ventilation systems were installed by service engineers; interior designers or space planners fitted out the interior, and so on. This brought greater efficiency and speed in construction, whilst compelling the architectural profession to redefine its role in co-ordinating and adding value to the development process. Multi-disciplinary practices such as Arup Associates and Building Design Partnership could develop the architecture, engineering and services as a seamless, integrated process. The client is a key figure in any development, and much significant innovation in office design was facilitated through the enlightened patronage of certain developers or company directors.

Francis Duffy has described office buildings and their components in terms of ‘shell, services, scenery and sets’, each element having a different lifespan and design team. Organisational innovations were achieved by the application of project management techniques to the development process. In ‘fast track’ construction, project timescales were reduced by overlapping activities – such as design and construction – which had previously been executed in sequence. Longer established was the ‘design and build’ option (sometimes termed ‘package deal’) in which the building contractor co-ordinated all stages of development, employing in-house or external architects. Some projects were erected in phases to allow continuous trading and to offset capital expenditure. Advances in building technology included climbing formwork (shuttering which is successively raised with each use), tower

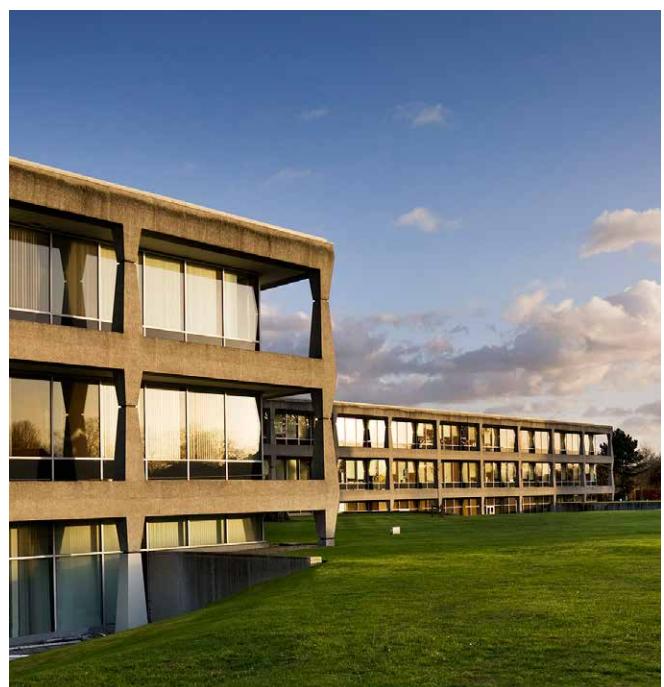
cranes (introduced to the UK in 1950) and pre-fabricated cladding and structural components.

### 2.3 Patterns of development

Urban office developments fall into two broad categories. Traditional infill developments comprised the rebuilding of existing plots, generally observing street and cornice lines. ‘Comprehensive’ developments became possible with changes in the planning system and in the financing of major construction projects. Here a larger site (perhaps an entire block) was assembled from multiple plots, resulting in greater floor areas and wider architectural possibilities (Fig 2). Changes in commercial practice accelerated an existing tendency for commercial development to spread beyond the traditional ‘central business district’. ‘City



**Figure 2**  
The Halifax Building, Trinity Road, Halifax; Building Design Partnership (partner in charge Bill Pearson), designed from 1968, opened in 1974. An open-plan office floor is raised above this West Yorkshire mill town on four enormous legs. This exceptionally bold design was listed at Grade II in January 2013.



**Figure 3**  
The administrative headquarters and research laboratories for Heinz UK, Hayes Park, Uxbridge; Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, 1962-5. The design, Andrew Saint has written, is ‘bland in manner so as to signal discipline, dignity and wealth’. Listed at Grade II\* in 1995.

'fringe' locations and satellite developments around transport hubs attracted commercial development. American-style 'air rights' developments were built on decks raised over rail tracks and termini. In London, the regeneration of the docklands through an Urban Development Corporation, established in 1981, resulted in the secondary financial district of Canary Wharf.

Increasing mobility (car ownership doubled between 1957 and 1962) made peripheral and rural office locations viable for owner-occupiers. Development costs were lower and some firms provided on-site amenities such as staff restaurants and sport facilities for their employees. From 1963 the government introduced a raft of measures intended to disperse office development throughout the south-east. Most notorious was the 'Brown ban' on London offices introduced in November 1964 by the Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, George Brown. London offices of over 2,500 square feet required an 'Office Development Permit' (ODP), and a Location of Offices Bureau was set up to assist the relocation of businesses from the Capital. From July 1966 onwards the ODP regime was extended to the whole of the south east and much of the Midlands. The policy was relaxed with a change of government in 1970 and formally abolished in 1979.

The typical green-field headquarters was a low-slung courtyard building amid landscaped grounds, the forerunner being Eero Saarinen's General Motors Technical Centre in Michigan, in the United States, of 1950-6. In the UK, too, the phenomenon was popularised by American-owned multinationals: Birds Eye's headquarters in Walton on Thames, Surrey (Sir John Burnet, Tait & Partners, 1960-1; listed Grade II); Heinz at Hayes Park, Uxbridge, of 1962-5 by the American firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM; Grade II\*; Fig 3) and the Wills Imperial Tobacco headquarters in Bristol of 1970-75 by SOM in collaboration with Yorke, Rosenberg and Mardall (YRM) of London (Grade II). Former country estates offered mature landscaping and the possibility of converting and extending historic buildings for office use. For the Olivetti International Education Centre in Haslemere, Surrey (1971-2; Grade II\*), Edward

Cullinan re-ordered a Victorian country house for which James Stirling designed a bold extension.

In the 1980s the business park brought the advantages of the green-field office to a broader range of firms and sectors. Developing from the existing models of industrial parks, trading estates and science parks, the business park is characterised a peripheral location, easy access to transport hubs, recreational facilities and landscaped surroundings. A lead architect usually drew up the master plan, although variety was achieved by commissioning several architects to design the individual buildings. Key examples are Aztec West, Bristol (masterplanned by Farrell, Grimshaw & Partners around 1980); Stockley Park, Hillingdon, (Arup Associates, 1985) and Chiswick Park, Hounslow (Terry Farrell & Partners, 1990-1). The development corporations of some new and expanded towns, such as Hemel Hempstead, Basingstoke (Fig 6) and Milton Keynes, saw office development as a critical component of their employment base and enticed firms with tax incentives, a pool of skilled workers, business parks and, in some cases, ready-built premises.

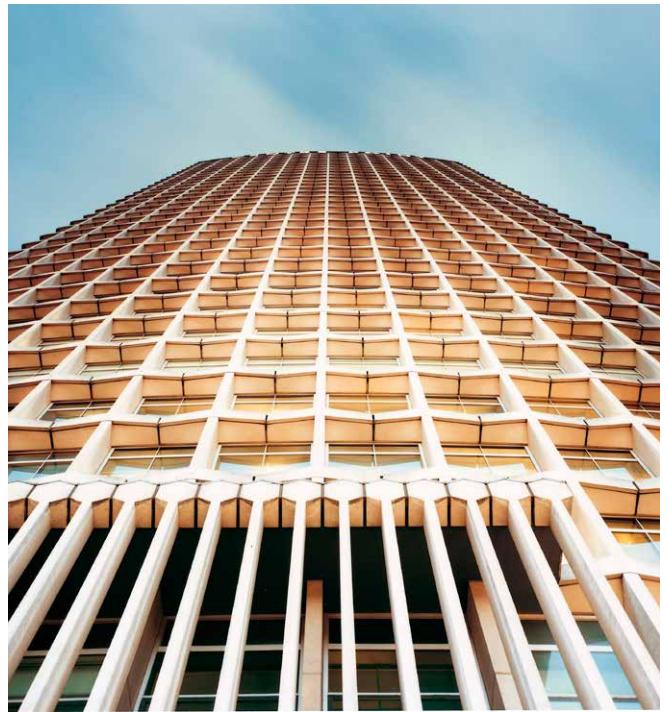
## 2.4 Architectural design

In the immediate post-war period, offices conveyed an image of stability and confidence through a relatively conservative architectural idiom. Design features such as Portland stone cladding, vertical window proportions, and vestigial classical details signalled continuity with pre-war practice. Where budgets permitted, natural materials, bespoke interiors or integrated works of art conferred a touch of opulence. The outstanding example of this trend towards enrichment is the Time and Life Building, Westminster, of 1951-3 (Grade II\*) designed by Michael Rosenauer with interiors under the direction of Sir Hugh Casson and a sculpted screen by Henry Moore.

In January 1954, David Eccles, the Minister of Works, called on the financial sector to commission 'new materials, methods and designs to produce buildings of real character'. The



**Figure 4**  
New Zealand House, Haymarket, London; Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall and Partners, designed in 1955-8 and built 1959-63. This elegant tower and podium design, a product of the post-war commercial boom, was listed at Grade II in 1995.



**Figure 5**  
Centre Point, London designed 1959-62 by George Marsh of Richard Seifert & Partners, and built in 1962-6. Listed at Grade II in 1995.

commercial building boom resulted in larger and more adventurous buildings by younger architects grounded in the International Style and generally following precedents established in New York or Chicago. Modern architecture translated well to the needs of commercial offices. The use of structural frames permitted highly-glazed curtain walls and office floors could be raised over ground-floor shops on columns termed ‘pilotis’, expressing the different functions of a building.

In London, the introduction of ‘plot ratios’ in 1947 (the ratio of a building’s total floor area to the area of its plot), together with daylighting regulations, encouraged a break with the street line and uniform cornice height, most dramatically demonstrated in the modernist re-planning of London Wall in the City of London. Gordon Bunshaft’s Lever House in New York (1950-2) provided the influential model of the ‘slab and podium’, a block, usually set against the street line, over a ground-level podium. A British example is New Zealand House, London, of 1959-

63 by Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall and Partners (Grade II; Fig 4).

The period 1956-73 was distinguished above all by the office tower, described by Cass Gilbert, the American architect of the Woolworth building, as ‘a machine that makes the land pay’. A sophisticated example is the Millbank Tower, Westminster (Ronald Ward & Partners, 1960-3; Grade II), whose canted profile reflects the sparkle of the Thames. City planning policy sometimes encouraged the grouping of tall office buildings in clusters that framed the financial district. In the 1970s the office tower became less financially viable and fell out of favour as employers sought larger and more flexible work spaces. In the 1980s the ‘groundscraper’, a building with a large footprint, ground-hugging form and deep, flexible interiors, became a popular format for the commercial office. Tall buildings returned to prominence from the mid 1990s, heralded by No. 1 Canada Square, Canary Wharf, London of 1988-91 by the American firm of César Pelli & Associates.



**Figure 6**

Gateway House. When the paper merchants Wiggins Teape relocated from the City of London to a business park in the expanded town of Basingstoke, they commissioned a new headquarter building from Arup Associates, built in 1974-6. The focal point of Gateway House is

a spectacular series of terraces, landscaped by noted garden designer James Russell, which cascade down two sides of a sheltered courtyard. The building was listed at Grade II in 2015 and the landscaping was designated at Grade II on the Register of Parks and Gardens.

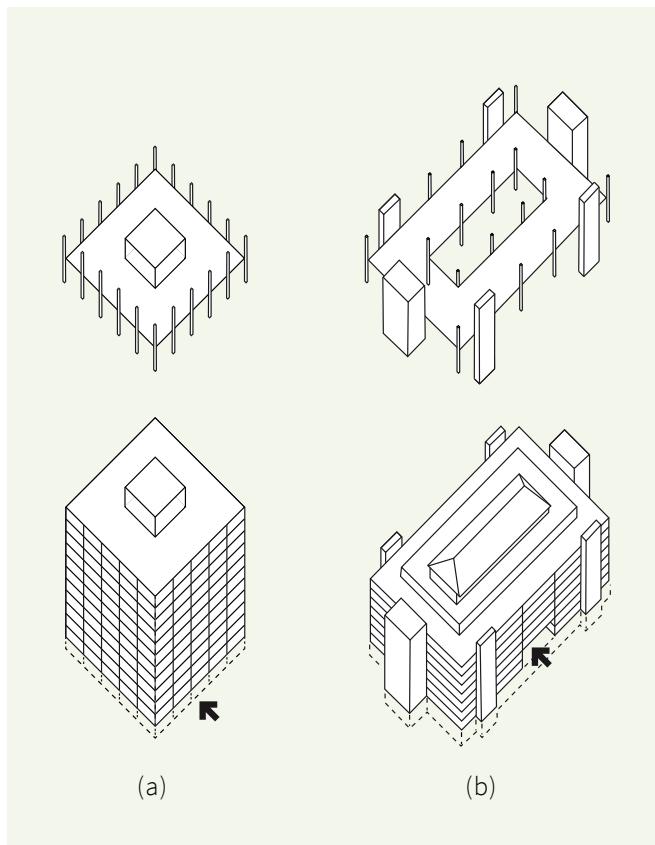
Most offices are based on a structural frame of steel or reinforced concrete from which is hung a prefabricated curtain wall, an early example being Castrol House of 1958-61 by Gollins, Melvin, Ward and Partners. A wide variety of cladding material were employed, including plate glass, steel, aluminium, brick and reinforced concrete. Technological developments spawned new materials such as bronze-anodised aluminium cladding, Cor-Ten steel (an alloy with a rust-like surface), mirror glass and glass fibre-reinforced plastic (GRP). In the 1960s the ‘glass box’ aesthetic gave way to heavier concrete forms, a preference which was sustained by the 1973 Oil Crisis and the consequent need to reduce energy consumption. Pre-cast concrete panels, assembled by crane, were often textured or modelled to enliven large surfaces (as with Centre Point, London of 1962-6 by George Marsh of Richard Seifert & Partners;

Grade II; Fig 5). Smaller offices were sometimes clad in bands of brickwork with strip windows after northern European models. From the 1970s onwards flat, sleek and reflective surfaces became popular, including all-glass facades or thin slices of polished marble or granite.

A small number of sensitive, well-detailed infill schemes demonstrated that modern architecture need not be incompatible with the existing urban townscape. Examples include 190-2 Sloane Street, Knightsbridge (Brett & Pollen, 1963-4; Grade II), Pall Mall Court, King Street, Manchester (Brett & Pollen, 1969; Grade II) and the adjoining 55 King Street (Casson, Conder & Partners, 1966-9). Sensitivity to urban context and the regional vernacular, expressed through massing, scale or materials, became especially important in the Conservation Areas designated



**Figure 7**  
The Lloyds Building in the City of London; Richard Rogers Partnership, 1981-6. A seminal high-tech building, listed at Grade I in 2011.



**Figure 8**  
(a) A typical post-war office tower, with multiple floors around a load-bearing core which incorporates lifts and vertical services. (b) A typical ‘groundscraper’, with deep floor plates, perimeter service cores and a central atrium. Compare with Fig. 8a.

under the Civic Amenities Act 1967. Historic town centres were defended by a vocal preservationist lobby, blocking some commercial schemes and engendering a ‘contextual’ approach to design. Some architects opted to rebuild behind retained facades whilst others creatively adapted historic buildings, such as Bracken House (front cover image) or Arup Associates’ additions of about 1971-5 to the 18th-century Truman Brewery in east London (listed Grade II\*).

The 1970s saw confidence in Modernism falter, and the emergence of a more pluralistic approach. Post-Modernist classicism became a popular style for commercial offices in the 1980s. Robert Venturi’s thesis of the ‘decorated shed’ – in which exteriors were treated as stage sets, independent of structure or interiors – came to symbolise a disjunction between the treatment

of interiors and exteriors in the development process. Bold, idiosyncratic facades were loaded up with over-scaled, polychromatic ornament and allusions to architectural history or symbolism. Typical Post-Modernist devices include a tripartite division into base, middle and top; recessed bows and turrets, arched windows with keystones and big, Egyptianate cornices.

It is characteristic of the multiplicity of late 20th-century architecture that the High Tech idiom continued to develop alongside historicist and Post-Modernist idioms. High Tech buildings are characterised by exposed structure, integrated (and sometimes expressed) services, a smooth, shiny skin and a free-flowing interior composed of zones rather than rooms. Sheer glass facades became possible with glass gasket technology (borrowed from the automotive industry) and point-fixed



**Figure 9**

The second floor of the Willis Corroon building, Ipswich; Foster Associates, designed 1970-1 and built 1973-5. Listed at Grade I in 1991.

glazing systems. Although early ‘serviced sheds’ accommodated manufacturing, ICT and logistics concerns, the High Tech image of a universal and flexible interior and a machine aesthetic was soon applied to urban commercial buildings, the seminal examples being the Willis Corroon building, Ipswich (Foster Associates, 1973-5; Grade I) and the Lloyds Building in the City of London (Richard Rogers Partnership, 1981-6; Grade I; Fig 7).

## 2.5 Interiors

Developments in building services, ICT and changes in working practice all demanded fresh thinking in the layout, construction and servicing of offices. Commercial workflows, and hence interior layouts, were greatly rationalised by the application of management techniques. The 20th-century workplace was an early adopter of technological innovations, including electric lifts,

structural frames, air conditioning, fluorescent lighting, the ‘open plan’, suspended ceilings and raised floors (Fig 9). One by one they transformed the office interior out of all recognition.

Office interiors have to be highly serviced, free of obstructions and capable of reconfiguration. By 1964, work spaces were often planned around a central service core containing lift and stairs (Fig 8a). Improvements in air-conditioning and artificial lighting permitted deeper plans, with services hidden above a suspended ceiling. The introduction of personal computers in the 1980s led to raised ‘access floors’ for flexible configurations of cable runs, with floor-to-floor heights of up to four metres. From the 1970s, floor plates became broader and service cores were shifted to the perimeter, freeing up internal space and solving at a single stroke the congestion of floors of tall buildings by banks of lifts (Fig 8b). Late 20th-century offices revived



**Figure 10**

The central, galleried atrium of the Lloyds building rises through the height of the building, culminating in the steel and glass barrel-vaulted roof which

recalls the Victorian engineering tradition.

© Steve Cadman

the idea of the atrium, a full-height, roof-lit, enclosed court which brought daylight and sometimes natural ventilation into deep plans and allowed views out (Fig 10). An atrium might be externally expressed and integrated into a grand entrance sequence, after the model of the Ford Foundation building in New York (Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo Associates, 1963-7).

The layout of work spaces often says much about the balance between corporate and user priorities. North American management practice and planning techniques were adopted in the UK from the 1960s. Most layouts combined a large open-planned area with cellular offices around the perimeter or core; corner offices were reserved for those at the top of the organisational hierarchy. Open-plan work spaces were flexibly divided by furniture and partitions, either in a rectilinear arrangement or following the organic *Bürolandschaft* or 'office landscape' method

developed in 1959 by the German Quickborner team. The most sophisticated English open plan was designed by a US firm: the Boots D90 Building, Nottingham (SOM with YRM, 1967-9; Grade II\*; Fig 11).

In recent decades some owner-occupiers have looked to continental Europe for layouts characterised by a greater focus on user needs, workplace participation and a more egalitarian and 'user friendly' culture (an early model being Herman Hertzberger's administration building for the Centraal Beheer Insurance Company in Apeldoorn, Holland of 1970-72. The 'combi office' developed by the Swedish practice Tengbom stressed greater privacy and environmental control by giving most workers their own cellular space at the perimeter plus the use of central group rooms. In the late 1980s a return to shallow 'finger plans' gave employees views out, natural lighting and ventilation and more enclosure.



**Figure 11**

D90 Building, Boots, Nottingham; Bill Hartwell and Bruce Graham of Skidmore Owings and Merrill with

Brian Henderson of Yorke, Rosenberg and Mardall, designed 1965, built 1967-9. Listed at Grade II\* in 1996.

The SAS building in Stockholm by Niels Torp of 1988 combined cellular offices with public 'streets' containing cafes and relaxation areas to promote interaction and creativity. With changes in working practice the evolution of the office interior has continued. Patterns of occupancy are becoming more mobile and flexible, with wi-fi and mobile devices encouraging 'hot desking' and home working.

The speculative development process has led to a disjunction between a relatively highly-specified exterior and a standardised and flexible interior. Because office interiors are periodically refitted, distinctive architect-designed work spaces are rare. The separation between inside and out was most strongly expressed with the adoption of the north-American 'shell and core' concept, where the developer provides a flexible framework which the tenant's contractors fit out to their own specification. The 'shell' provided remarkably

flexible: in some cases atria were infilled, whilst in others sections of the floor plates were removed. The most successful office buildings establish visual connections between inside and outside, drawing design features to the attention of the passer-by.

## 2.6 The public realm

The later 20th century saw the emergence of a public debate about the contribution of architecture and planning to the urban environment. Mixed-use development, pedestrianisation and the rehabilitation of historic buildings became widely accepted elements of planning strategies. In some redevelopment schemes, the spaces around offices were carefully configured and enhanced with hard landscaping, planting, water features, street furniture and sculpture. In 1961 the City of New York granted

planning concessions to developers in return for the provision of certain types of public space, establishing a model which was soon emulated in the UK. Crucially, the developer owned the space and controlled public access to it, hence the appellation ‘privately-owned public space’ (POPS).

An early British instance of these ideas was the raised plaza of the Economist group by Alison and Peter Smithson of 1962-4 (Grade II\*), which reflected the architects’ interest in the alleys and courtyards of London (Fig 12). The prestigious plaza of Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram building in New York became the model for the Commercial Union Assurance scheme in London (Gollins, Melvin, Ward & Partners, 1963-9). The huge Broadgate development of the 1980s gave London two new squares: Broadgate Square, with its open-air circular ice rink (Fig 13), and the linked and contrasting Finsbury Avenue Square. Skidmore Owings and Merrill’s 1980s masterplan for Canary Wharf included over 10 hectares of squares, parks, boulevards and waterside promenades, with formal landscaping designed by the Philadelphia-based landscape architects Hanna/Olin with Sir Roy Strong as consultant. Broadgate and Canary Wharf are notable for continuing the post-war practice of integrating works of art and sculpture into large urban developments. Urban design and public space remain a crucial aspect of recent commercial developments such as Birmingham’s Brindleyplace, begun in 1995.



**Figure 12**

The Economist group; Alison and Peter Smithson, 1962-4. Listed at Grade II\* in 1988. The small, raised plaza links the office tower of the Economist magazine, a residential block and a bank, with car parking beneath.  
© Gareth Gardner

# 3 Associations

The early development of the commercial office was closely bound up with the related activities of manufacture, storage and trade. With the development of industry, markets, and professions for the provision of goods and services, offices became increasingly specialised and self-contained, while retaining links and overlaps with retail and industry. Offices, especially in peripheral locations, were commonly co-located with factories, warehouses and latterly distribution centres. Newspaper buildings traditionally combined offices for journalists and managers with floors for type setting and printing. In the post-war era these functions were clearly expressed in linked blocks of contrasting shape and character. Buildings for 'clean' and technologically-advanced industries, such as data processing, telecommunication and scientific research centres, incorporated office spaces within a highly-served, deep-plan box (Fig 14).

In urban centres, offices and chambers were located above ground-floor shops, each enjoying separate access from the street. These became unpopular and hard to let in the post-war period, and declined in the 1960s. Obvious functional parallels exist between commercial offices and civic and governmental offices, and public bodies sometimes occupied speculative offices on long-term leases. The increasing prominence of the service and creative sectors has helped to weaken the planning distinction between offices and industrial uses and bring about mixed-use developments, such as live/work accommodation.

## 3.1 Change and the future

As commercial buildings are themselves commodities to be sold and leased, the building stock is subject to regular cycles of renewal and redevelopment. Commercial pressures are the driving force behind the most novel and iconic architecture of our towns and cities, and

offices can make a remarkable and enduring contributions to the distinctiveness and character of urban centres. The relationship between old and new, whether one of continuity or juxtaposition, is key to a vibrant townscape. The most distinctive examples of post-war offices combine high-quality urban design with commercial appeal; they are valued by their owners and occupiers.

Office buildings are amongst the most vulnerable building types and rates of survival for some of the categories discussed above can be very low. What has endured is all the more significant as a result. The appearance and character of post-war offices can be detrimentally affected by unsympathetic window replacement, re-cladding and the alteration of ground-floor entrances and reception areas, which may contain elaborate fittings or integrated works of art. High-quality banking halls, rare in the post-war era, are particularly vulnerable to modernisation and reuse, often as a retail conversion. The adaptation

of commercial buildings to housing and other uses may also involve significant changes to layout and appearance.

The protection of the best of the past and the need for change are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, a key characteristic of the late 20th-century office is an in-built flexibility which facilitates new functions and technologies. An office building can therefore be listed for its flexibility, something with which the listed building consent system was not designed

to deal. Large buildings and complexes have scope for heritage partnership agreements which clearly define a range of works that can be undertaken without individual applications for listed building consent. Such a streamlining of the consent application process has been successfully pioneered with post-war commercial buildings such as the Willis Corroon Building in Ipswich and the Lloyds building in London.



---

**Figure 13**

The amphitheatre-like Arena within Broadgate Square in the City of London. This open-air amenity space, designed by Group Two of Arup Associates (partner

in charge Peter Foggo), represented part of the initial phases of the major Broadgate development, and was opened by the Prince of Wales in December 1987.

# 4 Further Reading

The history of the commercial office in the UK has yet to be written, although the emergence of the building type from banks, insurance offices, exchanges and warehouses is traced in Nikolaus Pevsner's *A History of Building Types* (1976). The post-war development of office buildings in rural and urban surroundings is traced in chapters eight and nine of Elaine Harwood's *Hope and Brutalism* (2015). Francis Duffy has charted the relationships between organisational structure and the planning and programming of office buildings in several publications; see especially 'Office Buildings and Organisational Change', pages 254-80 of Anthony King (ed), *Buildings and Society: Essays on the Social Development of the Built Environment* (1980); *The Changing Workplace* (1992, with Patrick Hannay); and *The New Office* (1997).

The key sources for banks are Edwin Green, *Banking: An Illustrated History* (1989); John Booker *Temples of Mammon: The Architecture of Banking* (1990); and Susie Barson and others, *Banking on change: a Current Account of Britain's Historic Banks* (1992). For North American influence on commercial architecture see Elaine Harwood, 'Prestige Pancakes: the Influence of American Planning in British Industry since the War', in *Twentieth Century Architecture* no. 1 (1994), 84-6; and 'Centres of Commerce', pages 185-250 in Murray Fraser & Joe Kerr *Architecture and the 'Special Relationship': The American Influence on Post-War British Architecture* (2007). Some individual offices are documented in the architectural journals and the *Pevsner Architectural Guides* series published by Yale University Press.



**Figure 14**

IBM Greenford, Ealing, built in 1977-80 to designs by Norman Foster and Partners and listed at Grade II in 2013 is an early work of the British Hi-Tech movement for a prestigious multinational client itself noted for

its industrial design. Multiple processes, including warehousing, logistics and technical and administrative support are disposed in a series of serviced 'zones'.  
© Ken Kirkwood

# 5 Acknowledgements

Cover: © Historic England, James O. Davies  
(DP158980).

Figure 1: © Historic England, Vincent Griffin, after an illustration reproduced in *Building*, 16 May 1986, p.46

Figure 2: © Historic England, Peter Williams

Figure 3: © Historic England, James O. Davies;  
(DP157953)

Figure 4: © Historic England, James O. Davies,  
(DP137646)

Figure 5: © Historic England, Boris Baggs

Figure 6: © Historic England, James O. Davies

Figure 7: © Historic England, James O. Davies (002993)

Figures 8a and b: © Historic England, Vincent Griffin

Figure 9: © Historic England, Pat Payne (BB91/04625)

Figure 10: © Steve Cadman, reproduced with permission

Figure 11: © Historic England, James O. Davies,  
(DP158011)

Figure 12: © Gareth Gardner ([www.garethgardner.com](http://www.garethgardner.com)),  
reproduced with permission

Figure 13: © Historic England, Derek Kendall (DP130996)

Figure 14: © Ken Kirkwood

This page is left blank intentionally

## Contact Historic England

### East Midlands

2nd Floor, Windsor House  
Cliftonville  
Northampton NN1 5BE  
Tel: 01604 735460  
Email: [eastmidlands@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:eastmidlands@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

### East of England

Brooklands  
24 Brooklands Avenue  
Cambridge CB2 8BU  
Tel: 01223 582749  
Email: [eastofengland@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:eastofengland@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

### Fort Cumberland

Fort Cumberland Road  
Eastney  
Portsmouth PO4 9LD  
Tel: 023 9285 6704  
Email: [fort.cumberland@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:fort.cumberland@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

### London

1 Waterhouse Square  
138-142 Holborn  
London EC1N 2ST  
Tel: 020 7973 3700  
Email: [london@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:london@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

### North East

Bessie Surtees House  
41-44 Sandhill  
Newcastle Upon Tyne  
NE1 3JF  
Tel: 0191 269 1255  
Email: [northeast@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:northeast@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

### North West

3rd Floor, Canada House  
3 Chepstow Street  
Manchester M1 5FW  
Tel: 0161 242 1416  
Email: [northwest@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:northwest@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

### South East

Eastgate Court  
195-205 High Street  
Guildford GU1 3EH  
Tel: 01483 252020  
Email: [southeast@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:southeast@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

### South West

29 Queen Square  
Bristol BS1 4ND  
Tel: 0117 975 1308  
Email: [southwest@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:southwest@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

### Swindon

The Engine House  
Fire Fly Avenue  
Swindon SN2 2EH  
Tel: 01793 445050  
Email: [swindon@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:swindon@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

### West Midlands

The Axis  
10 Holliday Street  
Birmingham B1 1TG  
Tel: 0121 625 6870  
Email: [westmidlands@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:westmidlands@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

### Yorkshire

37 Tanner Row  
York YO1 6WP  
Tel: 01904 601948  
Email: [yorkshire@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:yorkshire@HistoricEngland.org.uk)



# Historic England

We are the public body that looks after England's historic environment. We champion historic places, helping people understand, value and care for them.

Please contact  
[guidance@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:guidance@HistoricEngland.org.uk)  
with any questions about this document.

[HistoricEngland.org.uk](http://HistoricEngland.org.uk)

If you would like this document in a different format, please contact our customer services department on:

Tel: 0370 333 0607  
Fax: 01793 414926  
Textphone: 0800 015 0174  
Email: [customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

Please consider the environment before printing this document