

Collaborative Doctoral Award: English Office Buildings c.1900 - 1939

Research area: Architectural History/Under-represented Heritage

Supports: NHPP 4A1 – Historic Towns and Suburbs

University Partner

University of Cambridge

Project Summary

Scoping work carried out by English Heritage (NHPP Activity Team 4A1) established that there has been little research work done on English office buildings of the first half of the twentieth century. Offices have been under threat of conversion to other functions as a result of the economic downturn over the last 6 years and this important and under-estimated building type has not enjoyed the attention of the last few decades which has begun to fall on the Victorian fabric of English town and city centres. Research in early twentieth century urban architecture has tended to focus on signature buildings of the Modern Movement (for example Owen Williams' Daily Mail offices on Fleet Street or, in the commercial sector, the Peter Jones Department Store) or, conversely, on what might be called the traditional alternatives (the bank buildings of Edwin Lutyens, for example, in London and Manchester). Whilst not disregarding these two extremes, this research will seek to throw light on the much more common types of office architecture that lie between them representing, of course, the majority of buildings put up in town and city centres during the period.

From a purely architectural perspective we expect to learn much about three aspects of these buildings in particular: how their elevations were handled in relation to the character of the street; how their interiors were planned for specific functions and adapted for changed or flexible usage; and how they integrated rapidly developing building technologies. The very ephemeral nature of office buildings provides at one and the same time the *raison d'être* for undertaking this study now and the necessity of the academic research being combined with the practical advantages offered by English Heritage. English Heritage needs to be able to understand these buildings better in order to protect those of historical significance, whether through designation or improved planning advice. The results of a study of the building type would also assist local authority decision-making, and perhaps contribute to the enrichment of local lists. The findings could also impact on issues surrounding reuse and refurbishment.

While the essential parameters (building type, date range, and the requirement that the research focuses on London or another large city) have been laid down to meet English Heritage interests, there is considerable scope for a student to formulate their own approach and methodology.

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