

→ The corrugated oak and glass facade discourages graffiti

Alley catalyst

Not only has the ribbed oak Japanese-style facade of Paul McAnearney Architects' office helped to improve its inner London path, but it masks a bespoke workspace that boasts a raft of ingenious light and storage solutions

Words by Catherine Slessor

Images by Paul McAnearney Architects





← Glass floor panels in the ground-floor studio allow light to permeate

↓ Steel desks inspired by light boxes echo the original iron columns

Snaking from Charing Cross Road to Denmark Street in the heart of London's West End, Flitcroft Street is a back alley straight out of central casting. Named after the Georgian architect Henry Flitcroft who designed the nearby church of St Giles-in-the-Fields, its narrow trajectory is lined with an assortment of old buildings, many now appropriated for use as offices or studios. The team at Paul McAnearney Architects (PMA) have been Flitcroft Street habitués for some time now, occupying an office of their own design in a remodelled Victorian warehouse. A crisply corrugated street frontage of oak and glass signals the presence something new and civically elevating. "We designed a ribbed facade to tactfully discourage

graffiti," says PMA founder and principal Paul McAnearney. "And the glass cultivates a sense of overlooking, which has helped to reduce anti-social behaviour and crime."

Both Flitcroft Street and nearby St Giles churchyard do inevitably experience a bit of rough trade, but it hardly matches the levels of the late 19th century. Back then, the area was known as the Rookery, a notoriously fetid and unruly slum district, rife with poverty and overcrowding. "They are a noisy and riotous lot, fond of street brawls," wrote Walter Thornbury in 1878, "equally fat, ragged and saucy, and the courts abound in pedlars, fish-women, newscriers and corn-cutters."

Today, the neighbourhood is in a state of flux, partly razed to make way for a new Crossrail station, with historic locales such as Denmark Street, the original Tin Pan Alley, being slowly gutted and gentrified. ☺



Designer: **Paul McAnearney Architects**
 Client: **Paul McAnearney Architects**
 Location: **London**
 Duration: **Mar 2011-ongoing**
 Floorspace: **238sq m**
 Cost: **£100,000**

← A glass box set into a table funnels light down to the basement

↙ The basement laboratory is used for modelling and research



of projects, from exquisitely crafted one-off dwellings to efficient modular housing.

To make the basement operational, it was imperative to increase the ceiling height and bring in natural light. PMA employed a special fibre-concrete floor that could be cast as a very thin 70mm slab, so avoiding underpinning costs. Light penetration is maximised through pavement lights and structural glass floor panels. A skylight set into the ground floor ceiling to the rear of the studio funnels light into the basement laboratory through a glass box ingeniously incorporated into a meeting room table.

Most of the office furniture is custom designed as working prototypes for use in the practice's projects. Desks are elegant and clean lined, with square-section steel legs and illuminated tops of translucent glass, inspired by the idea of a light box, once an essential tool of design offices. Rather than freestanding storage, full-height units are precisely tailored to line the walls, freeing up space in both perceptual and practical terms. McAneary spent time in Japan and used to work for John Pawson, so has developed an affinity for rigour and simplicity, yet this is also inflected by a feeling for the inherently sensuous qualities of materials and how they evolve through use and wear.

Creative recycling consistently underscores the design approach. Offcuts of reconstituted stone were transformed into bathroom and kitchen work surfaces and the 3.2m high panels of glass for the street facade were salvaged from another PMA project. Translucent at street level to maintain privacy but clear at higher level to admit light, the glass is anchored in a vertical armature of slim oak members. McAneary personally sourced the

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oak from a felled tree, driving the lumber back to the office where it was cut and shaped to form the facade's ribbed structure. Though an essentially simple concept, its impact on Flitcroft Street has been palpable, with a noticeable decrease in anti-social behaviour.

“Instead of turning our back on our surroundings we've helped to uplift them,” says McAneary. It demonstrates how such thoughtful architecture can have a genuinely transformative effect across the board, from the micro level of practice organisation and development, to the macro level of the urban realm. Today, those 19th-century commentators who wrote so despairingly of Flitcroft Street and its environs would have a hard time recognising the place. ■



↑ Illuminated stairs are both practical and atmospheric

↓ The oak used for the facade was cut and shaped in the office



Yet, within this upwardly mobile landscape, Flitcroft Street retains a sense of raffish history. “When we moved here it was a bit rough,” says McAnearny. “But that was part of its appeal. And for the kind of practice we are, working mostly in central London, it’s a great location.”

Catalysed by recession economics, the project required a level of radical thinking that went beyond the drawing board to encompass business organisation, procurement, economy and, in particular, its relationship to the public realm. Dislodged from its original studio in Soho by a rent hike, but still wanting to stay in the area, PMA alighted on the warehouse in Flitcroft Street. In exchange for a comprehensive transformation of the original dilapidated premises, the practice negotiated a substantial rent-free period with its new landlord. Traditional procurement proved infeasible, so PMA set up a design-and-build company

to execute the work, which meant it had complete control over the outcome.

The remodelled two-storey office is a highly effective and expressive use of space. The formerly compartmentalised ground floor is opened up to accommodate the main drawing studio in a single fluid volume, with the original cast iron columns exposed. A shallow trench cut in the floor neatly solves the problem of servicing, while strip fittings recessed in long cuts in the ceiling provide diffused lighting without glare.

The basement contains an exhibition and event space as well as a laboratory, where the practice builds models, tests mockups and researches materials. “Our laboratory gives us the capacity to really explore how things are made and put together,” says McAnearny. “It informs everything we do.” The results of this investigative approach to fabrication and detailing and are applied across a spectrum ☺