

STAYING POWER

David Heath discovers how Camden Town Hall's 1970s concrete extension found new life as a stylish hotel



Campaigning for the creative adaptive reuse of modern buildings has become an increasing part of the Society's casework, and to this end we have sometimes supported substantial changes of use and re-planning. As we report elsewhere in this issue, there's increasing support for the argument that re-use is energy efficient, and that modern buildings deserve as much respect and understanding as those from earlier periods. Even where the change of use is dramatic, the retention of a building's fabric helps to retain its back-story, as well as the essence of its design. So it is with the Standard Hotel, formerly the Annexe to Camden Town Hall.

The 20th century history of this site (immediately south of St Pancras Station) is

worthy of study. The main Town Hall was built in 1934-37 by A J Thomas for St Pancras Metropolitan Borough Council. Described by Nikolaus Pevsner in 1952 as 'completely unremarkable neo-Palladian', it was listed Grade II in 1996. When St Pancras, Holborn, and Hampstead Councils were combined as the London Borough of Camden in 1965, it was St Pancras town hall that became the Town Hall of the new borough. It was found to be too small almost immediately, and in 1968 Camden acquired the Granada cinema next door as the site for an extension. This former music hall (built in 1900 as the 1300-seat Euston Palace of Varieties) had been converted to a single-screen cinema by 1935.

Various schemes for the extension were designed in-house by the London Borough of Camden Architects' Department. The one built from 1974-77 had eight storeys, of which six were office space, with a library on the ground floor and a staff restaurant and recreation space at the top. The reinforced concrete framed structure had waffle slab floors and load-bearing storey-height precast panels with curved corners. 'Solar heat retardant smoked brown windows' and air-conditioning were installed. There was also a visually unsatisfactory bridge link to the Town Hall next door, and a similarly lumpy service enclosure on the roof.

On its opening in 1977, *Building Design* described the result as 'self-effacing civic pride

and order' but it acknowledged that it was 'unlikely to make the next edition of *Guide to modern buildings in London*', despite the high reputation of the Department at this time, primarily for its social housing (much of which is now listed).

It seems that the building was never much loved as offices (though the library had its supporters) and some critics were much harsher than *Building Design*. Pevsner, in the 1998 revised edition of *London North*, writes of the 'coarse extension by Camden Architects Department'. Not that controversy over architectural change in the area was anything new: the artist Paul Nash lived nearby from 1914 to 1936, and seems to have moved out because

his view of the St Pancras Hotel was lost when the original Town Hall was built. And the actor Kenneth Williams - who grew up in nearby Cromer House - complained on TV in 1975 as the Annexe was being built: 'You'd think they were going to build places for the homeless with the kind of housing problem they've got in this area. Well, they're not. This is to be an extension to the Town Hall... so instead of places for the homeless there'll be bureaucrats discussing the plight of the homeless.'

In the early 2000s Camden decided to move most of its staff from the 'old' Town Hall and to close and sell off the Annexe, which faced reported repair bills of £15 million. In 2014 many staff and the library moved to 5 Pancras Square

Right: the 1970s extension was originally linked to the original 1930s town hall



Previous pages: the hotel's library lounge on the ground floor is designed to pay homage to its original use as a library



The 1934-37 town hall by A J Thomas



The extension was built on the site of a 1900 music hall



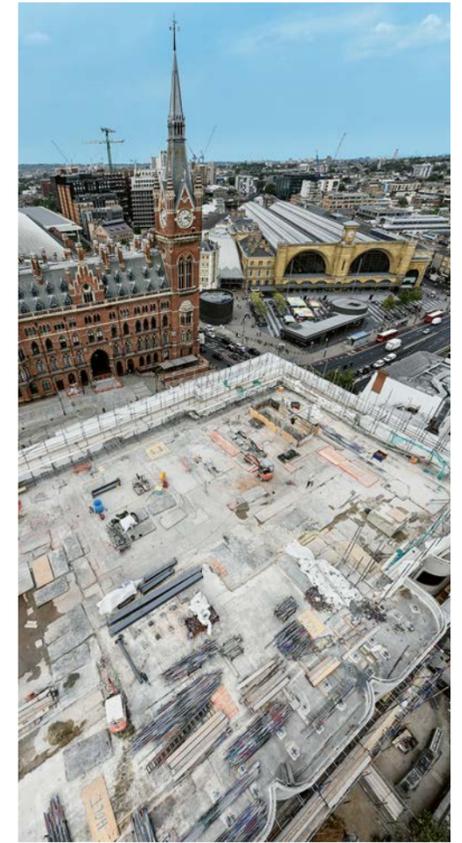
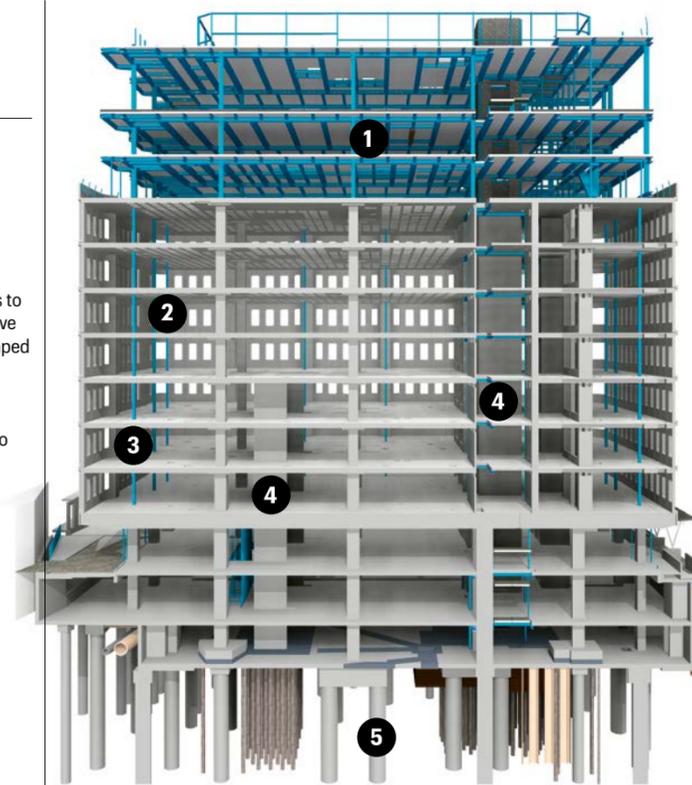
'St Pancras, 1927' by Paul Nash, oil on canvas

BRIDGMAN IMAGES; ARCHER/UMPHRIES (2); HISTORIC ENGLAND; CINEMA TREASURES; HEYNE; TILLET STEEL STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS

'IT LOOKS LIKE A SMOKED GLASS 1970s HI-FI CABINET'

Structure Cross section of the building

1. New steel frame to extension
2. Western stair core removed reducing building stability
3. New steel columns threaded through existing waffle slabs to carry extension above
4. New core and C-shaped structure added to improve stability
5. New piles under existing basement to new core elements



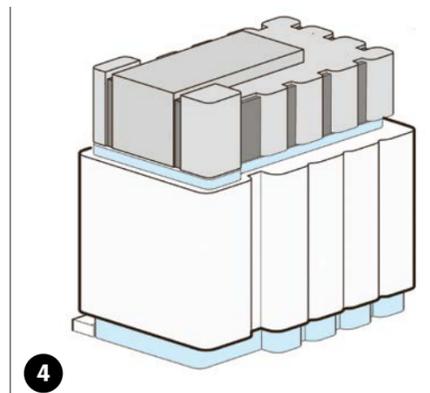
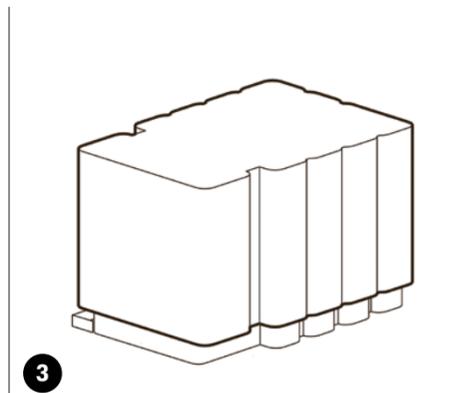
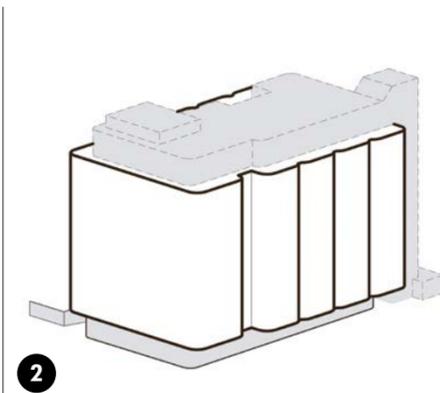
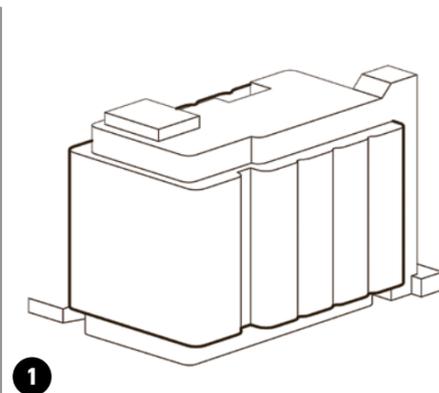
Top: the roof-top during construction

Above: the new exterior facade

Topping off Roof extension

Sketches by ORMS show their proposals viewed from the NE:

1. The original building with rooftop plant room and west extension
2. The parts to be removed are shown dotted
3. The basic retained structure
4. The roof extension, set back from main elevations and aligned with the opened-up ground floor at street level





(by Bennetts Associates), part of the King's Cross railway lands development, and described at the time as 'a fantastic new public services hub for Camden, as well as being one of the greenest public buildings in the UK'.

The 'old' Town Hall is itself currently being refurbished at a reported cost of £40 million, and will continue to house the council chamber. The Annexe was put up for sale, and was expected to be demolished and replaced by a new, larger building. In 2009, a local councillor wrote that 'the council's prospectus to the property developers actively encouraged bidders to go for a high building. Residents in King's Cross have been told that a building as high as 26 storeys will replace [it].'

As it turned out, the building was purchased by Crosstree Real Estate Partners, who wanted to retain the building and convert it into a hotel. Ian Chalk, then of ORMS, the architects for the scheme, was quoted in the *Camden New Journal* in 2014: 'We think it is undervalued. We believe it can be great. The problem is it is dirty, and the glazing - which is smoked glass - is awful. It looks like a smoked glass 1970s hi-fi cabinet. We will give it a clean and re-glaze the windows with clear glass. We believe it is an undervalued 20th-century block. It is a sensitive area, with a primary school next door and a Grade I-listed building opposite. We feel it is better to convert than knock down.' He went on to say that, while the bulk of the building would remain

essentially the same, the top and bottom would be changed: 'The big issue with the building at the moment is the roof and ground floor.' It is not often that modern architects are seen to value the work of their immediate predecessors, and thereby change popular opinion.

At this stage C20 Society had not been involved. The Annexe was - and remains - unlisted, so we were not directly consulted about the planning application. Instead, the architects approached us for support after local objections to some parts of the scheme, though significantly not to the proposed use or the retention of the building.

In April 2015, Henrietta Billings, then our Senior Conservation Adviser, wrote that

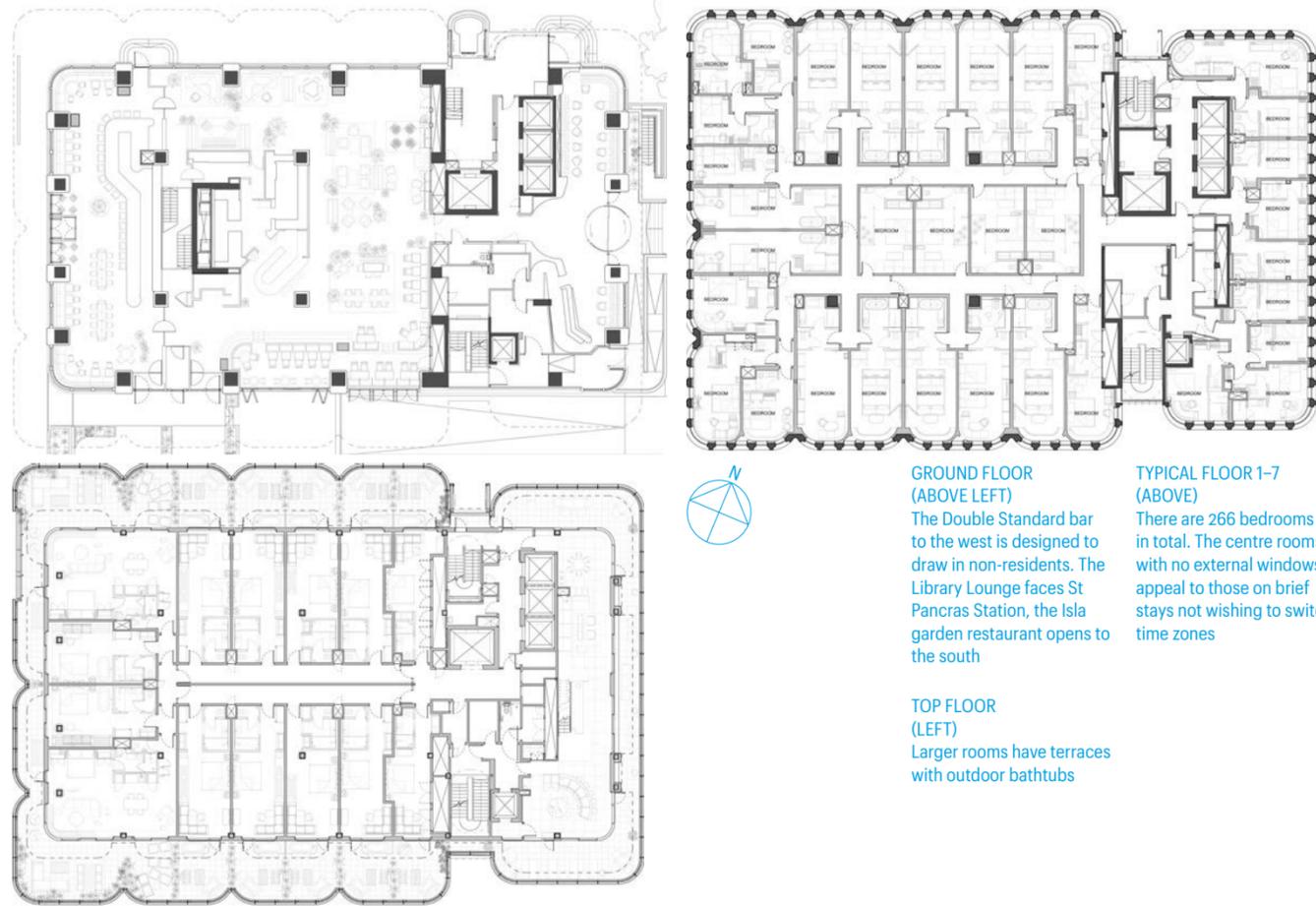
'Although unlisted, the Camden Town Hall Annexe... is a significant and attractive post-war building. The crisp pre-fabricated concrete panel construction is an excellent example of its strong sculptural form... The scheme currently submitted for planning permission is a sympathetic response to the key qualities of the building and a good example of high quality design respecting a landmark 1970s building.'

The scheme received planning consent and work has now been completed, with ORMS as lead consultant, while the interior is the work of Archer Humphryes and Shawn Hausman Design. The whole clearly works well, and there is no denying the quality of what has been achieved. The external precast panels and the

internal waffle slab floors are all still there, visible and structurally functional. The steel supports for the new roof extension have been threaded through the waffle slab with minimal impact on the new plan. The roof extension itself, the 'crown', could perhaps have been smaller, but it is certainly coherently designed in relation to the rest of the building. It's worth noting that the roovescape of the Euston Palace of Varieties would surely have been just as prominent in the street scene.

Not surprisingly, the luxurious interiors are quite unlike the previous municipal offices, but there are still subtle references to the building's former use. Seated on one of the leather sofas in the ground floor lounge, you can read the Dewey Decimal System labels on the spines of the old library books lining the walls. However, the macramé curtains in the top-floor restaurant may be one facet of 1970s style that popular taste has not yet caught up with, and it is hard to find architectural precedents for balconies with external bathtubs.

'The retention, change of use and substantial refurbishment of 1970s buildings is (or was six years ago) new territory for a lot of architects and developers,' says Ian Chalk. With no tried and tested principles to rely on, 'it was helpful to work with the Society as a sounding board on the principles for this new territory and discuss the approach to how one may reuse and adapt these structures in an appropriate manner.'



GROUND FLOOR (ABOVE LEFT)

The Double Standard bar to the west is designed to draw in non-residents. The Library Lounge faces St Pancras Station, the Isla garden restaurant opens to the south

TOP FLOOR (LEFT)

Larger rooms have terraces with outdoor bathtubs

TYPICAL FLOOR 1-7 (ABOVE)

There are 266 bedrooms in total. The centre rooms with no external windows appeal to those on brief stays not wishing to switch time zones

Previous pages: a new bright red lift (left) on the north façade goes directly to a 10th-floor restaurant. Right: new roof extension clad in PVD-coated stainless steel, above the cleaned concrete panels of the original structure



Opposite: large bedroom with built-in bar at the NE corner

Above: a view of the Double Standard bar on the ground floor

Right: a suite on the ninth floor of the hotel

