

BUILDING ■ Plus ça change

Jean Nouvel's One New Change breathes life back into a vital part of the City of London, says Ian Ritchie. Photos: Paul Riddle.

The Client, the Competition and the Prince Buildings originate with clients who identify an opportunity, a need and an ambition. Architects should recognise the qualities of the client they are about to work for.

Land Securities acquired the site of One New Change in 1994. Its occupant, a 1960 Portland stone and red brick building, had been strongly criticised for being conceptually out-of-date, harking back to pre-war styles of stripped classicism and neo-Georgian and an indictment of the City of London and commercial developers' inability to accept the new. Sounds familiar.

The nearby Paternoster Square went that way, too. Why not One New Change? Well, Prince Charles did write to Land Securities in 2005 to ask it to replace Jean Nouvel with one of his non-modernist favourites. The serial interventionist was concerned to retain St Paul's 'inspirational' presence on the London skyline. Land Securities had selected Nouvel's design concept of a 'stealth bomber' in its invited competition (against Viñoly, Moneo and HOK). Nouvel unveiled an Airfix model of a stealth bomber as part of his presentation to the City of London Corporation's Planning & Transportation Committee. Was it a witty reference to the conservationists' defensive architectural radar that appealed, as much as its angular shape? Land Securities, a committed client bolstered by support from other quarters, politely rejected the Prince's approaches.

'What you regulate is what you get' seems to be the principle for Nouvel's formal concept. The building appears as a singular silica block, shaped and carved by the constraints of the St Paul's Heights and viewing corridors, first established in the 1940s, along with the site boundaries, daylight





Here the silica form easily contains the plant and monster cleaning systems. Looking at the designs for the aborted joint Foster/Nouvel proposal for nearby Walbrook Square, dubbed Darth Vader's Helmet, I see the same generic modelling of form. In New York, Frank Gehry took a similar approach with the IAC headquarters, analogous to a shimmering white yacht (the client's request), which is fritted internally allowing the glass to reflect a lot of the sky. Nouvel, working with Sidell Gibson Architects, has delivered a glass building that absorbs more light than it reflects.

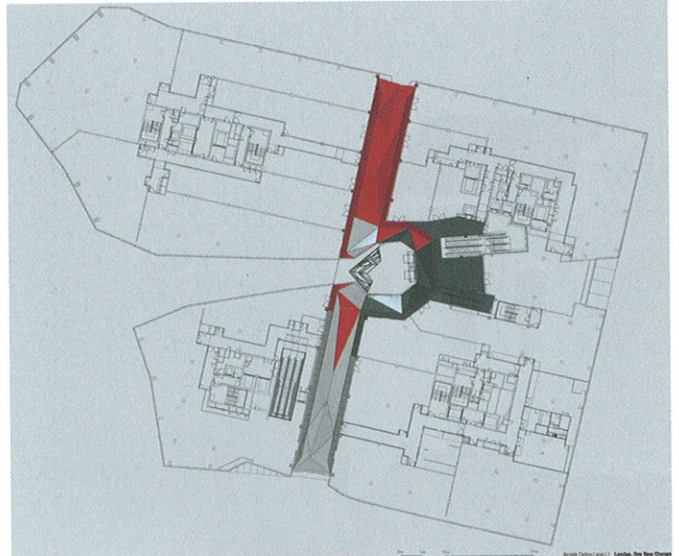
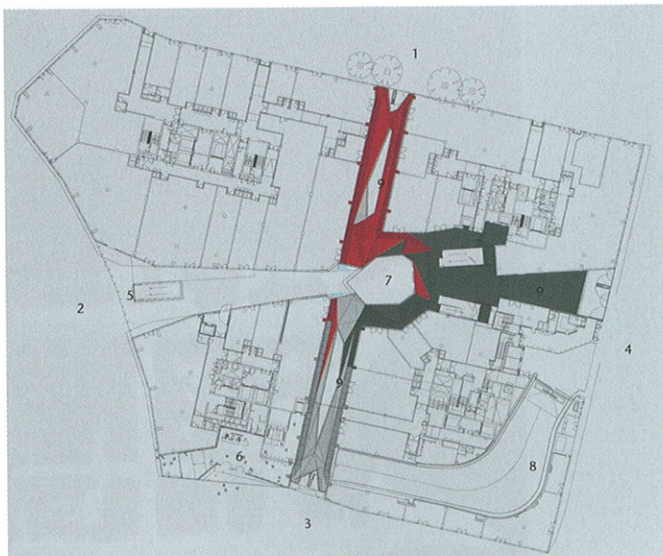
Like many architects, Nouvel is besotted with the idea that you can do almost anything with this most ubiquitous material. Not only is it waterproof and almost eternal (except for fallible joints), but it is the perfect substrate for illusions, graphics and messages. Here the low-iron glass is coloured and made less reflective by day with its translucent white external frit. The silica surface becomes the graphic architect's territory, transformed by many colours layered on a foundation of just four – red, light grey, dark grey and beige – each chosen to 'reflect and respect' the Portland stone, concrete and red brick of the neighbouring buildings. A pinker version of Armani's trademark 'greige' of the early 1990s, Nouvel's 'prown' is surprising, challenging and somewhat alien. Where the greys work well and the red marks the double-height chasm through the block from Cheapside, more or less where Fryday's Street (fishday) used to be, the 'prown' is unfamiliar. Was it really derived from the colour of the stones of St Paul's before it was cleaned? This new colour extends along the most visible facets of New Change and Watling Street and because it has little building reference or familiarity it exaggerates the alien forms. The retailers' graphic designers have been obliged to keep their

guidelines and rights of light issues. It is only one third of the height of the cathedral. I can imagine Nouvel being inspired by playing with these regulations.

Where Nouvel leans walls out he withdraws them at ground level to avoid overstepping the site boundary. Why does he lean them outwards? He is continuing the formal composition inspired by the regulations and expanding the views up Watling Street. All of this leads to a clear architectural expression at roof level which is the purest and most prominent of the building's facets.

Above View along Watling Street with entrance canopy to the offices foyer. Sidell Gibson Architects was appointed to advise on technical, planning, regulations and standards.

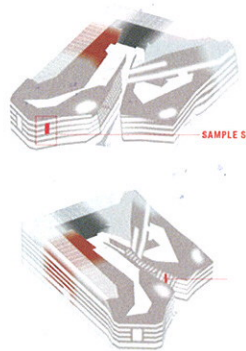
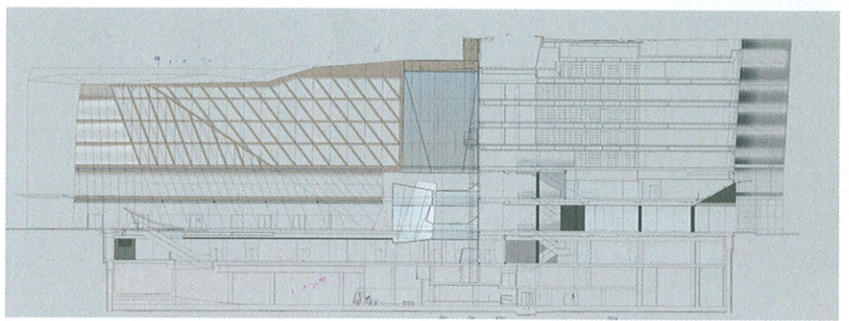
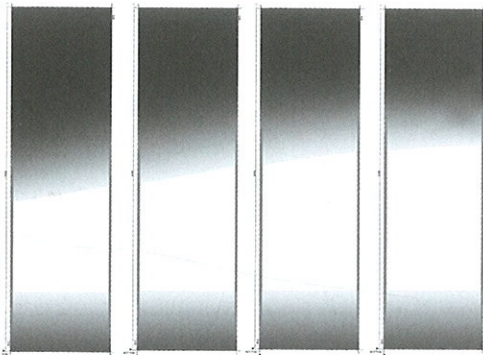
Below Ground and first-floor plans; retail also occupies one below-ground level, while above are three floors of offices and the rooftop restaurants: 1 Cheapside, 2 New Change, 3 Watling Street, 4 Bread Street, 5 escalator to basement shopping level, 6 office entrance, 7 open lightwell, 8 service ramp to basement, 9 arcade – reflected ceiling plan is shown.



shop signs within the skin – a good move since the upper level shop fronts can only be stage sets without shoppers.

The double-cavity triple-layer of glazing consists of a double-glazed unit and a glass outer skin, which combine to provide a thermal-regulation-compliant principal skin using separate soft coatings for both solar control and low-e. Although the client and architect are delighted, to my mind some of the detailing lacks the finesse that emerges in designing a mullion to accommodate the variable geometry and multi-directional junctions that such architectural form develops. Glazing systems often seem to miss an element between the glass unit and the mullion that could resolve design integrity, combining mullion, surface pattern, fold and facet geometry. William Shakespeare, who supped at the Mermaid Tavern on the corner of Fryday Street and Bread Street, could well have surmised, 'Forsooth, what manner of glass is this that wears its surface in parenthesis?' I'm also tempted to twist Cedric Price's aphorism, 'glass is the answer, what was the question?'

Below The facade glazing changes from almost opaque and matt to transparent. Dot patterns transform from an oval into a parallelogram, while the frit coverage changes from 90 to 10 per cent. The frit involved 289 patterns for most of the 6,500 pieces of glass, and 21 different colours and minimum repetition.



Space and Place in the City

After the Luftwaffe had cleared the ground around, planners wanted a square to face the apse of St Paul's, but the City permitted the classical curve of New Change Buildings. Now Nouvel has replaced it with an edgy building structured around four narrow passages. The solution is inventive and contextual – the view up Watling Street reveals Nouvel's measured nod to the rooflines of the cathedral and cathedral school and, looking down Cheapside, Nouvel manages to highlight the beauty of the spire of St Mary-Le-Bow.

There is a lot of space in this place – 20,400 square metres of retail space on three levels and 30,700 square metres of office space on five floors above. The shops, open seven days a week, offer vitality to the City and a convenient enclave for consumers in a hurry, Monday to Friday. For tourists it offers sheltered respite all of the time. Commercially, a new shopping centre located between Tate Modern, the Millennium Bridge, St Paul's, the Barbican and Bank has to be a winner.

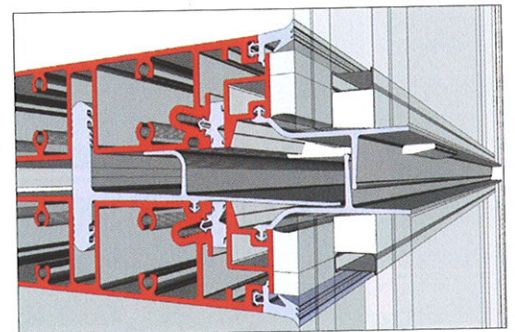
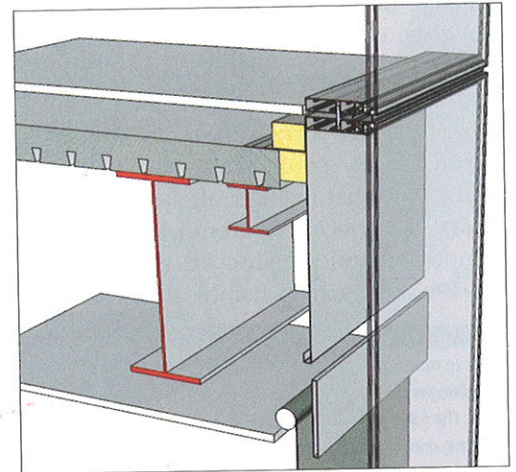
So, what sort of place is it? Where the Cathedral Gardens on the south-east side of St Paul's offer quiet outdoor space, One New Change provides compact noise. Its raison d'être is to make money – the ethos of the City – yet Nouvel has cleverly





exploited the St Paul's Heights regulations to carve a public roof terrace with hitherto unseen views of the cathedral. A mosaic disc – one of several from the old building that had to be preserved on the site – is set down on the obligatory 'sustainable sedum roof' alongside a 'vitrine' of recovered 1960s sculptures.

Facing St Paul's the block is sliced, as if by a butcher's knife, to open up and mark its centre. Over the road is the area formerly known as The Shambles – the meat market – which finds its echo in Jamie Oliver's restaurant, announced with meat carcasses in Watling Street. Although it is discreetly located in the slice, the diagonal fenestration jars,

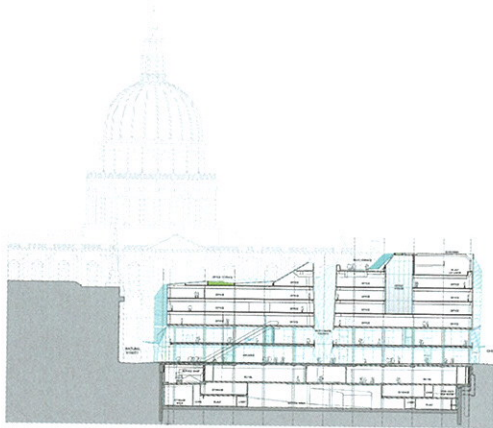


Above left/left Cross axis mall from Watling Street.

Above Cladding panel and mullion perspective details.

as it does on other look-at-me towers in the city. The diagonal line belongs to an industrial and structural aesthetic – something Nouvel acquired in his youth that is now embedded in his neural network. He just can't hold it back as it also slides out across the ceiling of the retail streets.

With one's back to the cathedral the choice is between the 'mining entrance' leading to the escalator down into the underground retail, past an end-of-the pier distorted reflected image of St Paul's, or to stride ahead into the chasm towards the exposed lifts. Both entrances first squeeze you before opening up in an explosion of colour and lights as walkways collide with multiple reflections of shopfronts inverted by polished coloured surfaces. This is the



Section South-north through the cross mall and central well.
Right/below Reflective and polished ceiling and wall surfaces together with interpenetrating walkways enhance the apparent dimensions and bustle of the retail levels.



world of glamour and gratification, of body wrap and lettuce wrap. Nouvel loves black and red, and dark interiors, but this is urban entertainment rather than opera house, and the new-born buzz is palpable. The tight, carved upper level concourses are catwalks in disguise – they go nowhere but that doesn't matter – City workers can window-strut. This is indoor-outdoor space, set on the Central Line between the hermetically-sealed malls of Westfield at White City and its twin (coming soon) at Stratford.

Nouvel has created intense but intimate twenty-first century galleries, albeit without the sky, that allude to the narrow streets wonderfully captured in Roger McGough's poem *The City of London Tour*:



*Along Leadladen Street/ Into Snarlup Lane/
 Through Crosspatch/ Into Coronary Circus
 Past Foulmouth Gardens/ Into Fetid Lane/
 Along Profligate/ To the Tube at Charnel House
 Up Dirtneedle Street/ Into Destitute Square/
 Down Pacemaker Passage/ (Nearly There)
 A quick one in the 'Half Lung' / (Leave your
 gasmask at the door)/ Which concludes, ladies
 and gents, / The City of London Tour*

Wisely, office workers above aren't made to encounter all this. Rather they enter by a more traditional outdoor landscaped pocket in Watling Street and then glide up two floors to a generous 'common room' and reception overlooking the butcher's slice.

The office spaces are quite deep in some areas, particularly towards the 'butcher's slice'. They are air-conditioned and have a relatively poor daylight factor which will require the lights to be on all the time. A desk with a view of St Paul's may promise much, but behind raking reflecting windows it may not turn out to be the most inspiring environment in which to work.

The City's chief planner, Peter Rees, has said of One New Change, 'This isn't a shopping mall. This is the City's high street reborn'. He is right because, as well as the three levels of inner galleries, three street

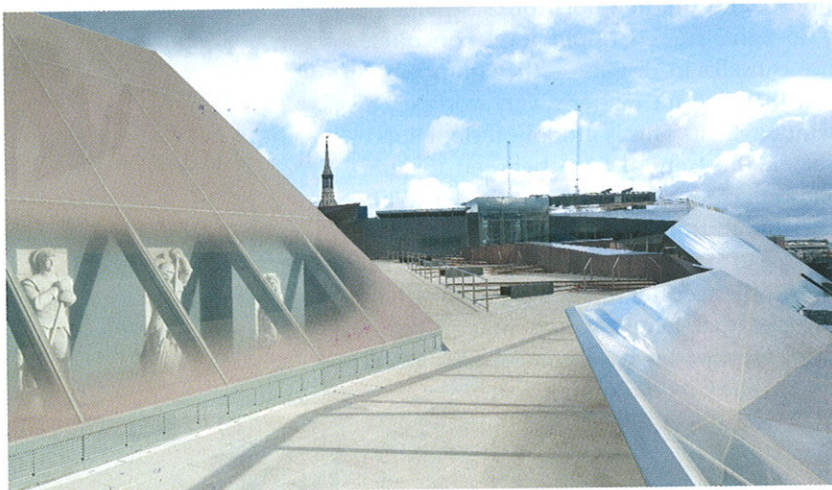


edges are alive, with Bread Street their servant. It is smart and classless. What the Royal Exchange did for the bonused, One New Change will do nicely for the salaried. Directed at a mixed community of cafe gossipers, office workers, shoppers and tourists, this project serves the contemporary city centre of the carless youth and elderly, while the family passes through as tourists.

Old Change, New Change, City Change

London was an outpost of the Roman empire and we preserve this heritage below ground. London was the centre of the British Empire and we're reminded everywhere above ground. Many would like architects to design in a manner that is reminiscent of one or the other.

However the ongoing success of the City, after the stock exchanges, will be through a world-class electronic infrastructure. London needs the City to remain a major player in an age of global connexity. Space has changed. It is a continuum, and Nouvel's design reflects this. It may remind me of Gehry's IAC building or of the unbuilt Walbrook



Square as a style of the early twenty-first century, but it's not the only architecture.

The pursuit of an instantly recognisable image that stands out through its geometric form is a sign of our 'thin' times, and planners and clients indulge. The emergence of such architecture is akin to the creation of celebrities. But Nouvel's One New Change hasn't arisen simply from a desire to occupy the spotlight, nor is it, as some might conclude, architectural stunt-making for its own sake. Rather, it is a clever play at exploiting the urban rules. Its form and colour may not please many, but time will mellow the newness and it will be seen to have been unexpected, successful and intelligent – the stealth bomber's high aerodynamic efficiency and large payload translated as exploited heavenly air rights and maxed-out development.

In fifty years we will look back, perhaps snarl at the 'prown' colour facing the cathedral, but note that it enhances the magnificent but imperfect Portland stone of St Paul's, and also reflect upon an age when regulations changed the shape of glass buildings... and didn't some planners, clients and their architects have fun?

Above The central public lift shaft terminates on the accessible roofscape.

Left Reflected views of St Paul's are brought into the heart of the scheme.

Ian Ritchie is director of Ian Ritchie Architects and the Royal Academy Professor of Architecture. He designed the masterplan and original scheme for the Chelsfield development that was later sold and developed as Westfield White City.

Project team

Concept architect: Ateliers Jean Nouvel; AJN team: Jean Nouvel, Hala Warde, Stacy Eisenberg, Philippe Monteil; delivery architect: Sidell Gibson Architect; Sidell Gibson team: Sanya Tomic, Andrew Snalune, David Hampton, Lorenzo Poli, David Adams, Noam Rosenkovich, Shahram Ameryoun, May Jingqi Qin, Armin Rose, Grazyna Reichel, Veronica Um, Magdalena Rychlik, Robin Hewitt, Richard Barry, Liz Ng, Marija Todorovic; structural engineer: Arup; services engineer: Hoare Lea; cost consultant: Davis Langdon; lighting consultant: Speirs & Major; access consultant: Reef Associates; construction manager: Bovis Lend Lease; client: Land Securities.

Selected suppliers and subcontractors
Piling and ground access: Energy Cementation Foundations, Skanska; concrete: Byrne Bros; steelwork: Rowen Structures; cladding: Josef Gartner; arcade shopfronts: Astec Projects; arcade balustrade and glass floor: Optima Architectural Glazing; arcade ceilings: Clark & Fenn, Skanska; stone floor finishes: Szerelmey; office reception and lift lobbies: Sherlock Interiors; toilet fit-out: Swift Horsman; window blinds: Claxton Blinds; feature signage: Endpoint; facade access: Integral Cradles; mechanical: Spie Matthew Hall; ductwork: Gardner & Co; sprinklers: Hall & Kay; electrical: T Clarke; lifts and escalators: Kone; security: Gratte Brothers SM; fire alarm: FFE.

