



TfL Corporate Archives Research Guides

Research Guide No 8: 55 Broadway

Most famous buildings are identified either by their name, or by their occupants or purpose. It is rare for a building to be known principally by its postal address. 55 Broadway is one such property. Under its postal name, it is not only readily associated with London Transport but also enjoys a much wider architectural reputation. Yet the actual building - because of its location - is relatively unknown, even to Londoners.

The Site

In 1898 the Metropolitan District Railway Company moved from its offices in Victoria Street to offices above St James Park Station. On its creation in 1902, the Underground Electric Railway Companies of London Ltd took control of the Metropolitan District Railway Company Ltd. This amalgamated company, the UERL or 'Underground Group', was to become the most powerful transport undertaking in London. As the UERL and its subsidiary companies expanded their control over public transport operations in London, the offices were rebuilt and extended. The building was enlarged in 1905 and again in 1909, by 1909 it was called 'Electric Railway House Broadway SW1'.

By the late 1920s, the UERL Board was anxious to house all of its 'head office' staff in one new purpose-built office block on the site.

55 Broadway - The Design Concept

The Underground Group wanted its new headquarters to reflect its bold vision of the future for public transport in London. In the 1920s, it was still considered radical for a company to occupy its own premises rather than to rent accommodation. But the plans developed by Adams, Holden and Pearson, the architects commissioned by the Group, were even more radical:

- 55 Broadway would be the tallest office building in London;
- there would be a *cruciform design* - in place of the customary hollow rectangle format - which would offer staff more natural daylight in wings projecting from a central core housing lifts, staircases and essential services; and

- Contemporary artists would be invited to sculpt decorative features directly onto the stone facade.

Charles Holden

The name of Charles Holden, one of the partners in the commissioned firm of architects, is always associated with 55 Broadway and with the Underground Group, for whom he undertook many other commissions. For 55 Broadway, Holden adopted an ingenious solution for a site made complex both by its irregular shape and by the railway only 7.3 metres (24 feet) below street level. Holden provided a route for pedestrians through the ground floor of the offices and across the new station booking hall, thereby reducing the circuitous walk between Victoria Street and the Park. This "short cut" became the principal axis of Holden's cruciform design, although the purely cross-shaped layout for office accommodation was only adopted from the second floor upwards. On the ground and first floors, the "hypotenuse" of three of the triangles between the wings was additionally used as working or commercial space.

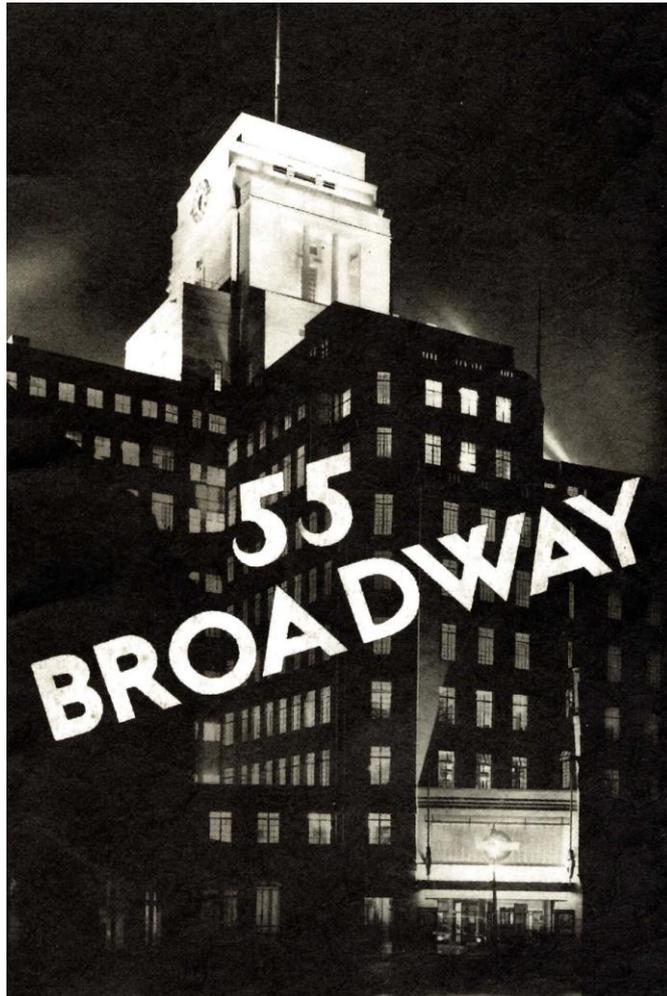
Features of Construction

55 Broadway was constructed between 1927 and 1929. 700 reinforced concrete piles sunk to an average depth of 12.2 metres (40 feet) below basement level support the building. Nineteen massive load-bearing steel girders span the railway, and special insulation was used to reduce vibration from the trains. Above ground, the building was constructed around a steel girder skeleton and faced with 2,200 cubic metres (78,000 cubic feet) of high quality Portland stone.

The building has a bold appearance, enhanced by progressive stepping back above the sixth, eighth and ninth floors – giving an uneven pyramid effect. The clock tower, 174 feet high, has a similar stepped back effect.

Granite for the ground floor came from Norway whilst the Travertine marble - used extensively in the interior - came from Italy. Some Belgian marble was also used on the ground floor. The Portland stone used as the main facing on the exterior came from Broadcroft, Dorset. Although Portland stone is usually sanded to give a smooth finish, in 55 Broadway it was left as it was cut with the chisel marks still on it.

The outside arches were constructed to prevent the wings of the building from wavering in high winds.



The Royal Institute of British Architects awarded 55 Broadway its 1929 London Architectural Medal. The façades were embellished with decorative features, carved in situ. Two are just above street level and a further eight are above the sixth floor windows on each side of all four wings. The sculptors were:

- At street level - Jacob Epstein (2)
- At sixth floor level - Eric Gill (3); Henry Moore; Alfred H Gerrard; Eric Aumonier; Allan Wyon; Samuel Rabinovitch

55 Broadway since Construction

In World War II the west wing received considerable damage as a result of bombing. It was rebuilt but without Portland stone facing as it was not available at the time. The Portland stone was re-instated in 1963.

In the Spring/Summer of 1962 the exterior of the building was cleaned and window frames painted. The building was cleaned using “Just water, a bronze wire brush and elbow grease” (see LT Staff Magazine 08/1962).

In the 1980’s, 55 Broadway was refurbished. The exterior stone work was cleaned and the windows replaced with exact replicas. Internally a new central heating system was installed, toilet facilities replaced, lifts renewed, and the staff restaurant refurbished. Also, a new street-level shopping mall allowed the reopening of the eastern entrance to the building.

In 1970 the façade, the main staircase, the lift lobby areas on each floor and the panelled wing including the office of Lord Ashfield (the first Chairman of London Transport), were all listed Grade II and in January 2011 the building achieved Grade I listing.

Sources for the History of 55 Broadway

- Useful documents regarding the architecture of 55 Broadway, particularly the sculptures can be found in LT000282, LT000028 and LT000044.
- Plans of the building can be found in LT001499, LT001855, LT001546 and LT001354. Please be aware that not all plans are as yet publicly accessible.
- The following series contain fascinating documents about the role and history of the building during World War II: LT000107, LT000131, LT000172, LT000347, LT000341, LT000501 and LT001862.
- Limited information on the history and development of the building can be found in LT001607, LT000665, LT000527, LT000371 and LT000030.

The above is intended as a general introduction to the building. If you have a more specific enquiry please contact us and we will be happy to search our catalogue for you.