

# THE PHOTO GALLERY



## THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY - LONDON

**ARCHITECTS** -  
O'Donnell + Tuomey  
Sheila O'Donnell, John Tuomey, Willie Carey, Henrik Wolterstorff  
ADP (detailed design & construction phase)

**CLIENT** - The Photographers' Gallery

**PROJECT MANAGEMENT** - Cragg Management

**STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS** - Morrish & Partners

**SERVICES ENGINEERS** - Arup Engineering

**STRATEGIC ADVISOR** - Stanhope

**COST CONSULTANT** - Huntley Cartwright

**CAMERA OBSCURA** - Amazing Camera Obscura

**ACOUSTICS CONSULTANT** - Acoustics Ltd

**MAIN CONTRACTOR** - Killby & Gayford Ltd

**PHOTOGRAPHY** - Dennis Gilbert / VIEW

**Project size** - 1345m<sup>2</sup>

**Value** - £2.9m

**Duration** - 24 months

**Location** - 16-18 Ramillies Street, London

### Report by O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects

The Photographers' Gallery is located at a crossroads, between Soho and Oxford Street. The corner site is visible in a glimpse view through the continuous shop frontage of Oxford Street. Ramillies Street is approached down a short flight of steps, leading to a quieter world behind the scenes of London life, a laneway with warehouses and backstage delivery doors.

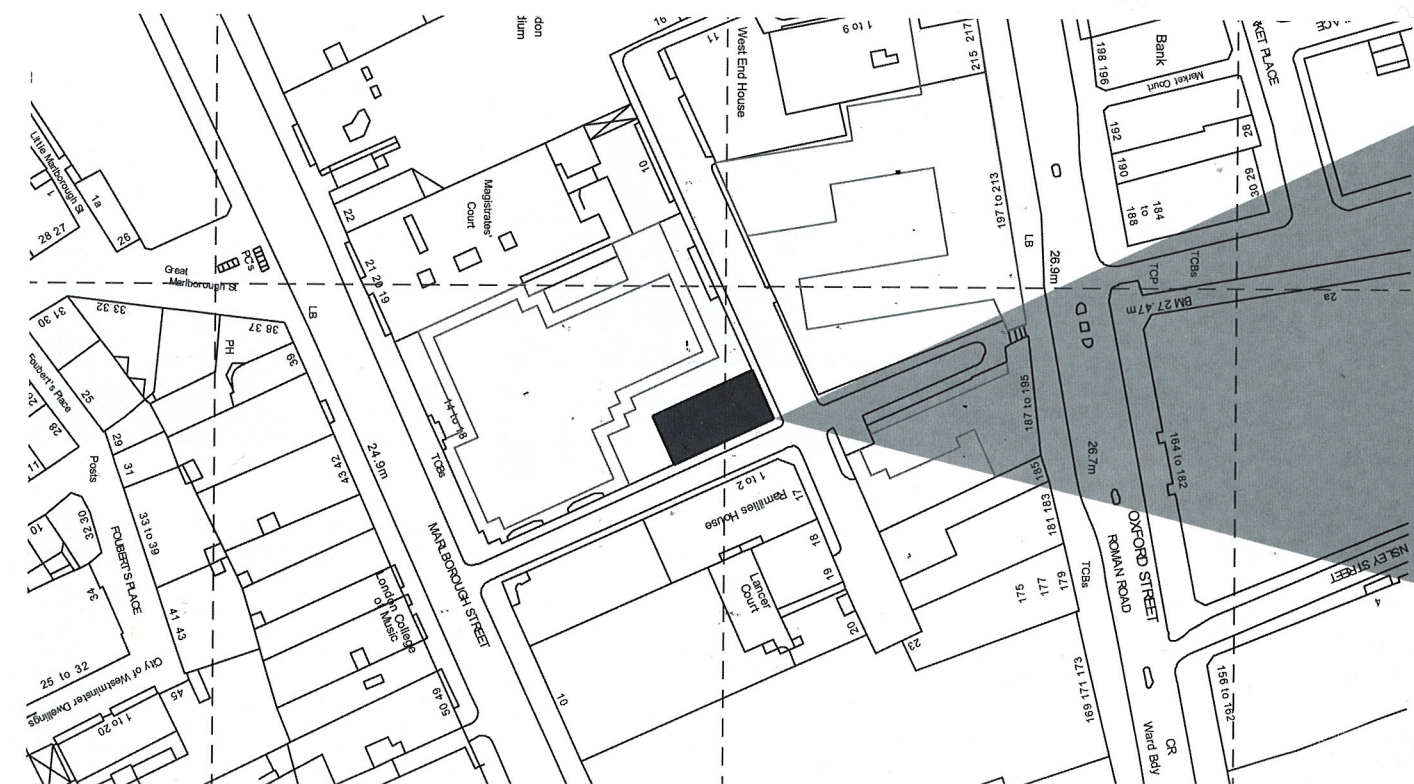
The brick-warehouse steel-frame building has been extended to minimise the increase in load on the existing structure and foundations. This extended volume

houses new large gallery spaces. A close control gallery is located within the fabric of the existing building.

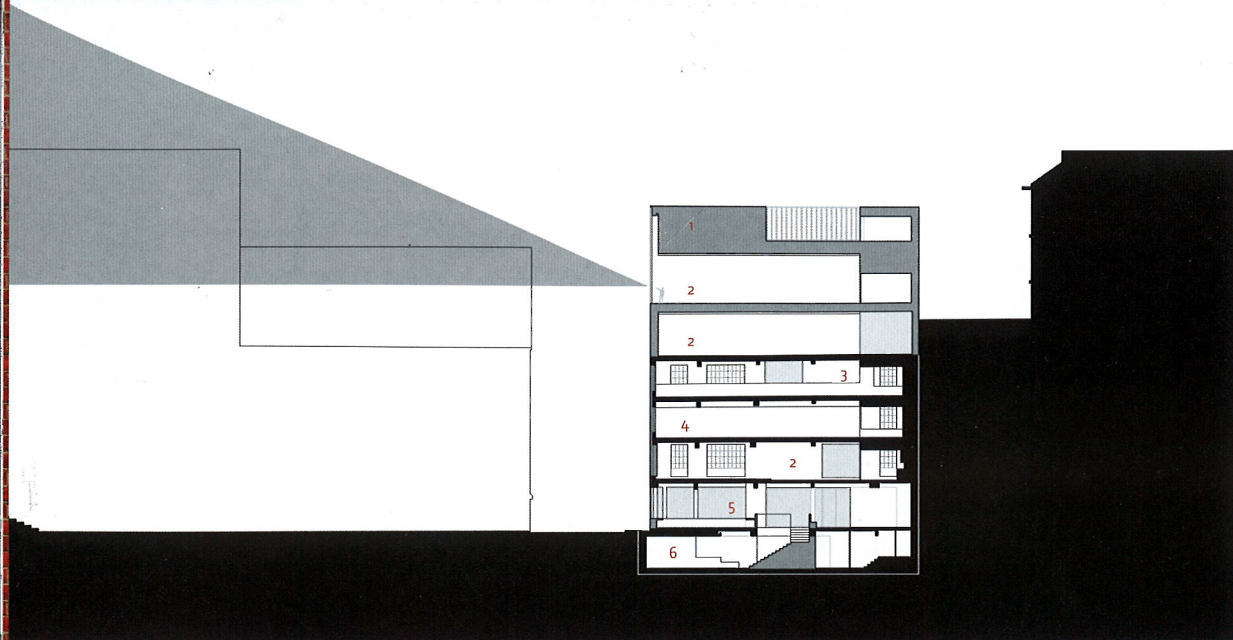
The lightweight extension is clad in a dark rendered surface that steps forward from the face of the existing brickwork. The street front café is finished with black polished terrazzo. Untreated hardwood timber framed elements are detailed to slide into the wall thickness, flush with the rendered surface. The composition and detail of the hardwood screens and new openings give a crafted character to the façade.

A deep cut in the ground floor façade was made to reveal the café. The ground floor slab was cut out to lead down to the basement bookshop. An east-facing picture window and the north-light periscope window to the city skyline were added in response to the specific character of the site.

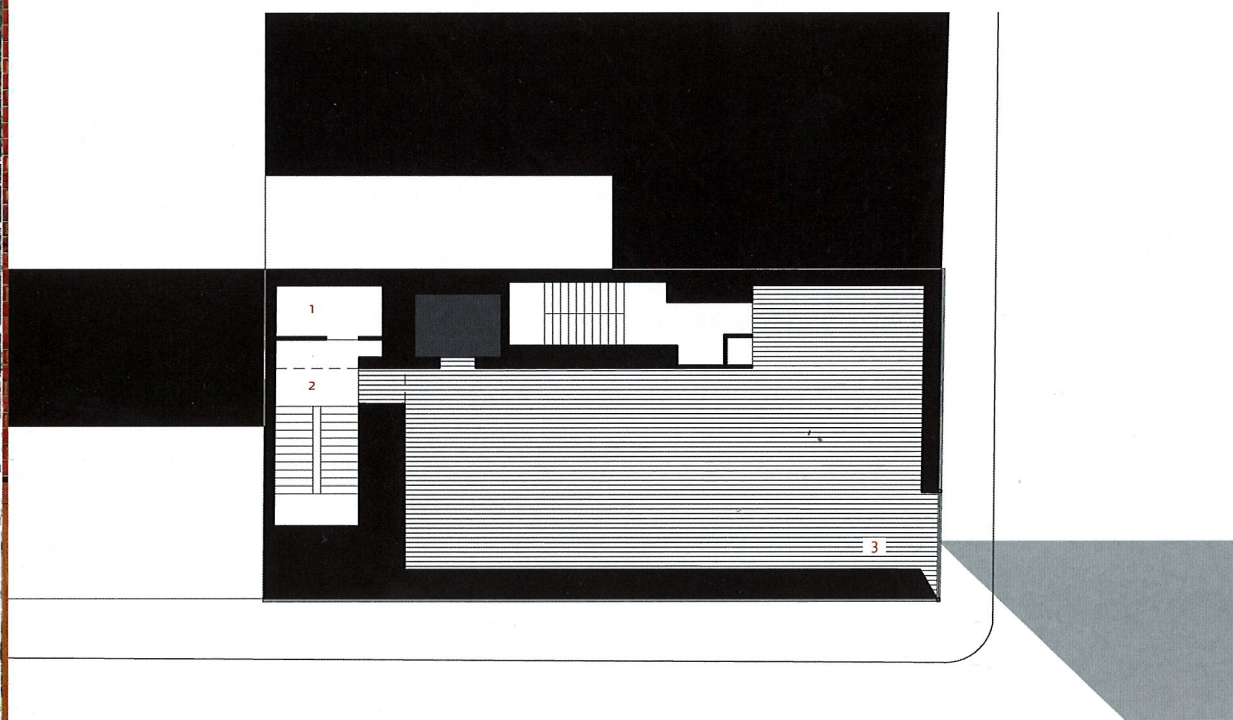
 Site plan



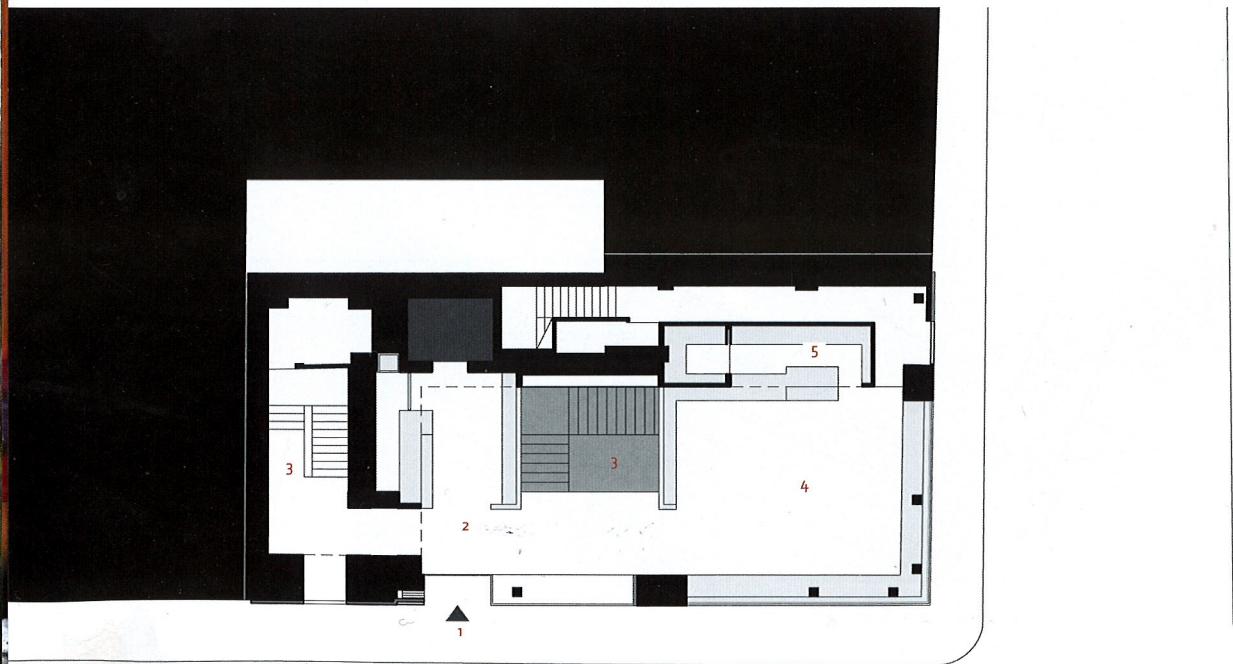




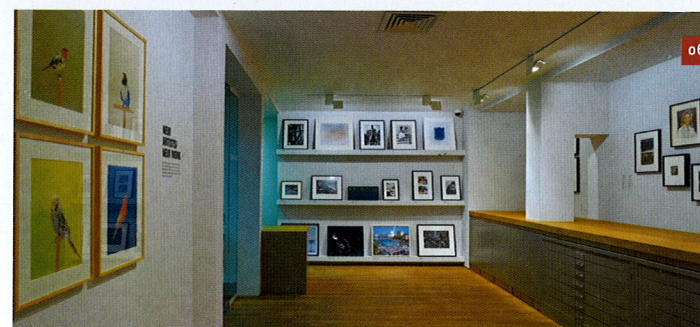
- Section**
- 1 Services
  - 2 Gallery
  - 3 Education
  - 4 Close Control Gallery
  - 5 Cafe & Reception
  - 6 Shop



- Level 5**
- 1 WC
  - 2 Stair
  - 3 Gallery



- Ground Floor**
- 1 Entrance
  - 2 Reception
  - 3 Stair
  - 4 Cafe
  - 5 Servery



- 1. The dark rendered surface steps forward from the brickwork
- 2. The north-light periscope window captures street views
- 3. The new gallery spaces
- 4/5. The cafe is finished in black terrazzo and has been cut into the facade
- 6. The basement bookshop





## STANDING GIANT

Review by Niall McLaughlin

Straight off Oxford Street a narrow gulch drops away into an alley framed by black walls. A steep flight of steps takes you down into the patchwork of lanes and dead ends behind the commercial strip. I have crossed this gap a hundred times and never even looked in. Now, my passing glance meets a single staring eye. It is only a window, but it is placed so that it seems to gaze unblinkingly out from the back of the alley. It is mounted on the corner of a building suggesting that it has craned slightly to the side to get a clearer view. I feel for a moment that I have been held in this gaze and appraised; the effect is just a little unsettling.

This window is the most visible outward manifestation of O'Donnell and Tuomey's towering refurbishment of an old warehouse for the Photographer's Gallery in Soho. The building is a complex project, but I want to concentrate only on the way in which the positioning of this single window charges the space around it. Its effect is not accidental. In another version of the design for the site by this practice an even bigger window in the same off-centre position dominated the approach from the narrow gap opening off the main street.

When I saw this window, I knew that it would terminate a journey through the building and I would be able to look back along the alley and see the spot from which I first glimpsed the building. In this sense, the whole interior space of the building was implicitly drawn into the public realm. I entered, expecting to be lead through a chain of interlinked spaces that would take me to that high vantage point. Instead, the front door faced a lift. At the top of the lift was a long gallery with only that one opening at the far end. I didn't pause to look at the photographs on the walls. I walked straight to the window and saw that the view back up the alley was just the foreground of a half-mile vista up Great Titchfield Street. The correlation between the tiny gap in the south wall of Oxford Street and the long stretch of Great Titchfield Street to the north can only be historically accidental. Today, the alignment of the alley to the gap and the long view is not merely revealed by the position of the window. It is deliberately created by it. The window is an object and a spatial throw, a projection out, opening up a completely new space in the city. The layered framing of the new aperture and the narrow slot of the alley render the long view strangely two-dimensional.

I realised when I turned away from the glass that the rest of the building is designed as a planned descent. The discovery of spaces and the framing of views unfolded much

more naturally in reverse order. The organised downward route brought me back and left me easily outside the entrance to the café and bookshop. So it seems that the precipitous, telegraphic ascent from the neck of the alley to the long vista back is a deliberate construction. It is what is intended. If that is so, then the spaces and lineaments of the building are set up to dramatically stage this monocular phenomenon.

The framing of the high window is eccentric. From the exterior it is pushed right out to the top corner of the building so that the external wall and the roof depth are partly visible behind the glass. From the interior the framing is almost baffling. You can see the left hand and bottom window frame, but to the right and the top the glass just disappears into the indeterminate depth of the construction. It is as if an eye had been captured half way through blinking. Critics have suggested that this may be a Design and Build inaccuracy, but the detail is repeated exactly elsewhere and it was specified in detail up to Stage E. It is clear that the coherent corner positioning of the window on the outside of the building has been prioritised at the expense of interior naturalism. I looked back at other projects by the architects to see whether it belonged to a consistent or continuous practice. Projects like the Tower House on Lough Corrie, The Hudson House, The Medical Laboratories in UCD, The Glucksman Gallery and the buildings around Meeting House Square all suggest standing forms powerfully charged by singular windows which seem to be deliberately figurative in their composition.

John Tuomey speaks about this project in a consistently associative fashion. He uses multiple metaphors involving geology, excavation, encasement, instruments, optical devices and human skin. There is no doubt that he is courting a highly figurative understanding of the work of the practice. Puritanical British critics often indulge or overlook these descriptions as lyricism or an unnecessary poetic gloss on the work. But if that is all it is, I would not feel such a strong sense that the buildings are somehow looking back at me.

In the 19th century Robert Vischer proposed a psychological basis for our perception of form. He suggested that our minds try to establish an empathetic connection between our understanding of our own bodies and any external form that we perceive. We do this by casting ourselves into the form and comparing it with ourselves, as if from within. In an extraordinary metaphor, he

said, "we thus have the ability to project and incorporate our own physical form into an objective form, in much the same way as wild fowls gain access to their quarry by concealing themselves in a blind." In this construction, form is understood through an animistic spirit. It is more than a figurative idea. It suggests that the things we perceive in the world are always haunted by representations of our own bodies.

When I visit Meeting House Square in Dublin I am reminded of Madelon Vriesendorp's drawings of the buildings of Manhattan animated by human passions. I feel myself in the presence of figures similarly animated by a corporeal spirit. They might move if I turn my back. The projection booth on the Photographic Archive reminds me of the power of the eye. This is not just to import visual information but also to cast out a sense of inner animation. I understand the large window in the Photographer's Gallery in London to be an extension of this animistic experiment. The presence of a camera obscura on the sidewall underlines the persistence of this mechanical-corporeal theme. The strange effect the building has in the narrow alley is that, being a body itself, it animates everything else. The blind alleys, air conditioning units, garage doors and boarded up windows all participate in this newly charged mise-en-scène.

These associative aspects of the building form seem to extend a tradition leading from La Tourette to a generation of British architects like Stirling, Lasdun and Goldfinger where the human body and the mechanical device are barely submerged formal suggestions. O'Donnell and Tuomey have created a whole suite of sleeping and standing giants and their new London projects take their place in a community of familiar figures. The Photographers' Gallery qualifies this tradition in an interesting way. By conflating the camera, the eye and the standing figure they invite comparison with Samuel Beckett's *Film* in which the invisible but implied presence of the camera generates a labyrinth of monocular associations. The opening and closing shots of this piece show a huge single eye, blinking open and shut, slowly panning over the tattered surfaces of Manhattan back alleys. The effect of the film and the gallery building are uncannily similar. Beckett says "It is a movie about the perceiving eye, about the perceived and the perceiver...[it] has the effect of making all with whom it comes into contact self-aware".