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Case Study
Photographer’s Gallery—London, UK

The Soho district of central London, established in the 1600s with a past extending well beyond this, is steeped with the history of its own built fabric and the impact this small area has had on the world. It is bordered in the east by Charing Cross Road, the west by Regent Street, the south by Leicester Square and Coventry Street, and by Oxford Street in the north (Figure 9.3).1

The Photographer’s Gallery, located in this district, is a large public gallery devoted to photography that has its own history in the area: it began life in 1971.
on Great Newport Street as the first independent gallery of photography in Britain. After their initial expansion into a neighboring building to accommodate increasing space requirements, the gallery made the decision to move into an older Victorian brick warehouse building on Ramillies Street, just south of the major shopping area along Oxford Street (Figure 9.4). The Irish firm of O'Donnell + Tuomey were brought in to re-envision the space in 2007. The existing warehouse, like most of the buildings in the area, was five stories tall with a piano noble of stone on the ground floor topped by a three-story brick façade and a dormered roof above a cornice line of brick. A steel-framed structure holds up the brick and stone skin. The typical character of the buildings in the area is brick and steel construction with shared party walls, extending from four to eight stories. At the ground level, nearly all of Soho today consists of shops, restaurants, or small offices, while the floors above are typically housing.

The buildings that make up the district are constructed on an incredibly tightly packed and shifting grid of narrow street widths with almost complete frontage at the street; this fabric is only interrupted by narrower blind alleys and occasional throughways—passages that cannot accommodate cars and frequently do not go through entire blocks. The fabric is both contained and delineated by the larger avenues that border the district; Oxford Street, the northern border, can be seen on the location plan for the gallery. The viewing triangle on this plan highlights the narrow throughway off of Oxford Street that leads directly to the gallery, which was a primary focus for the overall design. Historically, as the city grew, tenement housing and poor living conditions persisted well into the 1800s in Soho. Because of its density and poor infrastructure, this area became the infamous location for a deadly outbreak of cholera in 1864, associated with the Broadwick Street pump (south of the gallery), which physician John Snow used to prove his theory that cholera is waterborne. Evidence of Soho’s grittier past remains today in the local pub named for Snow, as well as the sex shops and active late-night life found in the area.

The character of the fabric is critical to understanding the nature of the transformation the warehouse at Ramillies Street underwent through the design by O’Donnell + Tuomey. John Tuomey defines their process as “thinking like archaeologists might do, metaphorically prodding the ground, searching for traces of what made it the way it was, and sifting to unearth clues to inspire further transformation.” The gallery takes advantage of the warehouse structure on the site by building two additional stories on the original steel frame structure and reconfiguring the brick façade so that the addition and existing building could read as a whole. The exterior mass and skin, seen from your approach to the building, was of substantial importance to the architects, and their scheme relies on understanding, in many respects, the building that existed before its transformation. The façade of the upper two stories is made of black render, which is a kind of exterior plaster similar to stucco. The architects worked to integrate the addition by choosing not to extend the existing brickwork; instead, they integrated new and old by pulling the black render façade down over portions of the original brickwork, which, because the render sits in front of the original façade, gives the impression that the building may be entirely brick. The effect appears geological; similar to a ridge face made visible through tectonic action, the historical layers of the older fabric appear to be more visible by reading as if they have torn through the newer façade (seen in the model shown in Figure 9.5). John Tuomey describes this aspect of the project as “the day that Oxford Street cracked ... what happened when London’s tectonic plates shifted and this great geological rift appeared”? This idea is also captured in their sketch of the project—the façade performs the same action that the narrow throughway does from Oxford Street, revealing the history through a crack in the fabric.

This “geological rift” plays a role not only in the massing of the overall building, but specifically in the way the openings in the façade have been restructured. The original building (Figure 9.7), as a steel frame structure with a brick façade, maintains a consistent aperture size for the upper three stories.
of the openings are inset behind the brick and stone; the ground floor façade also maintains inset windows of a repeating size. This gives the whole façade a sense of rhythm that is echoed throughout Soho and London. The elevation of the new building (Figure 9.8) creates an opportunity to alter the existing rhythm of this fabric by introducing oversized picture windows that run against the grain of repeated openings on the street. Sitting slightly outboard of the façade, these new windows (Figure 9.8) carve out small interior spaces to view the city. As architect John Tuomey describes it, these restructured windows create “little niches and viewing points that punctuate the purity of the container, moments of relief to refresh your concentration.” The disruption in the pattern of the existing façade does as much to draw attention to the pattern as it does to its exceptions. Inside the galleries, these windows can almost be mistaken for a piece of art on the wall. While the gallery itself contains photographic prints, the large picture windows literally frame the urban context as an alternative photograph, becoming a part of the gallery. The apertures’ resemblance to large photographs persists on the exterior due to the reflectivity of the glass, reflecting back the city to its inhabitants.
On the ground floor (seen in Figure 9.10), the rhythm of the façade is broken by a large horizontal expanse of glass, making the building appear as though the load-bearing corner has been cut away to expose the ground floor retail space. This window has a dramatic impact on the relationship of the building to the street; the expansive aperture captures the activities inside for passersby, as well as pulling the circulation of pedestrians off the street into the space. The strength of the design lies in how it works to integrate with the urban fabric and the program. Using the visible history embedded in the surrounding fabric as well as the nature of the photograph to seize a moment in time, the transformation of the existing building becomes the revelation of its history and the perpetual capturing of its present use. By exploiting the existing structure, the building is embedded in the existing fabric and subject to that structure's limits. The transformation of the façade masks the two-story addition on the original warehouse, but continues to work within the height range and depth of the surrounding buildings. Exposing the original brickwork in a way that interplays with the new fenestration and design allows the old and new to coexist in a state of equilibrium.

The project inherently performs in a similar manner to photography to capture time. The play of time visible on the façade—seeing the passage of time in the weathering of materials and the transient moments caught through windows and reflections—is deeply intertwined with a larger transformative narrative that begins at the street level. The newly designed windows catch your eye as you walk down the street, cutting against the existing fenestration pattern of the neighboring buildings. You enter by crossing into the largest of these apertures at the ground; through a newly hollowed out opening in the ceiling, a staircase delivers you into the gallery spaces above. In the galleries, the same windows that drew you into the building now draw your eye back to the street as you walk through the photography on display. These windows are distinct from the typical façade—they literally invite you into them—they are niches created by design to return you to the street. The tectonic shift described by JohnTuomey is apt: by shifting the urban fabric, the façade opens rifts and creates ridges, and a new and occupiable vertical urban terrain is created between interior and exterior, new and old.

Notes

7. This is similar to the tradition of street photography extending back to Eugene Atget, Walker Evans, and Robert Frank, where the photograph is as much a portrait of the city as a medium with which to capture the human condition. For more on the history of street photography, see: Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 2001).