

Royal Institute of British Architects

66 Portland Place

History

The present headquarters of the Royal Institute of British Architects, opened on 8 November 1934 by King George V and Queen Mary, was designed by G Grey Wornum CBD FRIBA (1888-1957), who won the competition that attracted 284 entries. The Institute's former headquarters were at 43 King Street (1835-37), 16 Grosvenor Street (1837-59) and 9 Conduit Street (1859-1934). The foundation stone of the present building was laid by Howard de Walden on 28 June 1933.

In 1970, on the recommendation of the Historic Buildings Council, the building was listed by the Minister of Housing and Local Government as a Grade II* building of historical and architectural importance, one of the very first examples of 'modern' architecture to be so recognised.

Exterior

The six-storey building is steel framed and faced in Portland stone. The sculpted figures on the Portland Place front depict

the spirit of man and woman as creative forces of architecture. The centre figure is by Bainbridge Copnall, the figures on the columns by James Woodford. Along the Weymouth Street elevation, above the third story window line, are five relief figures, by Bainbridge Copnall, depicting a painter, sculptor, architect (Sir Christopher Wren), engineer and a working man.

Entrance

The pair of massive cast bronze outer doors each weigh 1½ tons are the work of James Woodford. The deep relief design depicts London's river and its buildings, including the Guildhall, the Houses of Parliament (left hand door), St Paul's and the Horse Guards (right-hand door). The three children on the right-hand door represent the architect's own children. The bronze railing designs above the door and the figure of Mercury on the concealed letter box (at the base of the right hand column) were by Seaton White.



Entrance Hall

The walls are lined with Perrycot stone and the names of the Royal Gold Medallists incised on the left-hand side and Past Presidents above the Bar window – lettering by Percy Smith. The inner hinged entrance doors have silver bronze frames: the revolving doors, also silver bronze, were installed in 1975. The main floor area is in pre-cast terrazzo panels surrounded in Hopton wood stone and grey birdseye marble. Inset along the cross axis, which runs from the lift lobby to the Bookshop entrance there are three small panels by Bainbridge Copnall.

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Henry Jarvis Hall & Foyer (down stairs)

At the head of the left hand flight of stairs is a bronze of the architect Grey Wornum. The stairs lead into the Foyer, which is separated from the Jarvis Hall, (a fully equipped lecture theatre) by a 'disappearing wall'. On the hall side of this is a canvas depicting the 'Empire-wide scope of the RIBA' by Copnall and Nicholas Harris. The hall panelling is of teak, olive ash and black bean. Note the acoustic panels above the door (Copnall).

Stairs

The central stairwell is the most striking aspect of the layout of Grey Wornum's design. The main staircase is figured Demara marble and black birdseye marble.

The balustrading is silver bronze frames encasing plain and deep etched armourplate glass panels (by Jan Jura); the raked balustrades have an abstract pattern and those at the first floor level show the Royal Coat of Arms, the RIBA badge and the coats of arms of Commonwealth countries. All the panels can be lit from beneath. The handrails are polished gold bronze with ebonised mahogany inlaid centres. Rising above the stairwell are four massive columns, concrete clad steel stanchions, each cased with 16 sections

of polished Ashburton marble with delicate red figuring.

First floor

Facing the stairs are the ceremonial doors to Gallery One (formerly the Reception Room) which is used for exhibitions and functions. They are of heavily moulded English walnut and figured Indian laurelwood, surrounded by an architrave of Australian walnut, ebonised mahogany and silver bronze strip. The floor panel, depicting animals and flowers, is by Bainbridge Copnall.

Six finely moulded plaster panels (by James Woodford), depicting the main English architectural periods, are set in the ceiling of the landing area. The figures in the perpendicular panel were modelled by the architect's wife Miriam. The soffit of the stair flight to the upper floors is a gold overlaid stone decoration (by Copnall), illustrating the tools used on the building.

On the far side of the landing is the Henry Florence Hall (named after a former Vice President), the building's largest and most richly decorated public area, used for meetings and receptions, now houses the RIBA Café and exhibition space. The main floor area is in polished Indian silver greywood and

the two sets of five rectangular areas that flank it are in polished teak with black and grey birdseye marble surrounds. The most interesting decorations in this room are the very fine fibrous plaster ceiling reliefs (James Woodford) which illustrated various building industry trades and crafts and the craftsmen involved with the building itself; and the carved Perrycot stone window piers (Woodford) which depict 'man and his buildings through the ages'. At the far end of the Hall is a screen of carved Quebec pine (presented by William Gerstle) which illustrates, in 20 separate panels, scenes from Commonwealth countries based on designs by Dennis Dunlop.

Second Floor

The wide gallery which runs from the lift area, passing the President's office, Aston Webb (RIBA President: 1902-04) room (lined in leather) and Lutyens meeting room, is the best vantage point from which to appreciate fully the special ingenuity of the core of Grey Wornum's design. Facing the glass balustrades are the great glass and silver bronze screen and doors of the Henry Florence Hall, giving a dramatic elevated view of the whole floor; rising to the full height of the central stairwell are the four black marble columns that define the corner points of the gallery as they pass; and

above is the original lighting scheme (which the architect thoughtfully inset into the floor of the library, directly above, to facilitate maintenance).

Third Floor

The Sir Banister Fletcher Library is at this level with an internal gallery containing the Periodicals section. There are over 130,000 books and 850 periodicals, the majority housed in the original open-access book stacks. The rounded ends of the cases are radiators, an innovation in its time. The desks and most of the chairs are original. The Library represents the largest and most comprehensive collection of published material on architecture in Western Europe and one of the three largest in the world. The colour scheme was devised by Miriam Wornum.

The CETLD Bene Education Room was opened in April 2006. The room was created from a library storage area.

Fourth Floor

The only public area is the Council Chamber landing which features a series of finely modelled plaster ceiling panels by Morris Wiedman, depicting scenes of the construction of the building. Note the figures reading books over the Library

doors. Also of interest is the set of six engraved and sandblasted glass panels, by Raymond McGrath, in the doors onto the terrace, depicting the six great periods of architecture (the Greek has been removed for conservation).

In 1934 the Council Chamber was the uppermost room in the building. In 2003 it was substantially altered to suit 21st century requirements, by agreement with English Heritage. The original floor remains under the now levelled one. The fittings have been preserved and the room could be reinstated in the future. A photograph of the original chamber can be found in the guide.

The fifth and sixth floors of building were added in 1957 and were originally administrative offices. The floors have recently been altered and are now used for meetings and conferences.

Guidebook

A full colour guide to the building is available from the RIBA Bookshop on the ground floor entitled *66 Portland Place : the London headquarters of the Royal Institute of British Architects* / written by Margaret Richardson and revised by Charles Hind. London : RIBA Enterprises, 2004.

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RIBA British Architectural Library

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