

# LONDON'S FIRST SKYSCRAPER

by Roger Tuke

**A talk on 55 Broadway given by Oliver Green, Research Fellow LTM and Simon Ricketts, Director of architecture practice Tate Hindle, on 9 June 2015**

Although attendance to this event had to be booked via the London Transport Museum it was part of The London Festival of Architecture being held between 1 and 30 June 2015. To attend one also had to forgo the monthly LURS meeting.

Anyway, the talk was held in the 10th floor meeting room at 55 Broadway and commenced at 19.00, but ticket holders were permitted access from 18.30 to the 10th floor where a pop up bar and an architectural building model (as proposed) were present. But perhaps what was appreciated by most ticket holders was the free access to the various roof top terraces, where many were seen photographing the ever changing roof top skyline of the Capital. A few, however, noticed that one could obtain good photos of the various sculptures incorporated into 55 Broadway when built, some of which are almost too high from street level to appreciate.

Oliver opened the talk showing an aerial view of 55 Broadway when completed as a beacon of white Portland stone amongst much lower, predominantly red brick buildings around, which coincidentally made it such an easy target for second-world war bombers. He followed with the context from the early years of the 20th century that led up to the construction of '55' in the late-1920s, both from the Yerkes period of electrification and expansion of the Underground and the other American influences from construction techniques and styles then present in Chicago, Detroit and New York. He then explained the station designs of Leslie Green for the three new tubes, Frank Sprague's electric multiple unit train control and the power house constructed for the network at Lots Road.

Next was Albert Stanley (later of course better known Lord Ashfield) who, whilst British born, had emigrated as a child with his family and worked in his early years in Detroit and New Jersey before returning to London. American influences again. Then Frank Pick, publicity, bringing an order to tube platform advertising, portraying the individual lines for all purposes as a system together with the General buses, the bulls eye (much later known as the roundel) and Edward Johnston's alphabet typeface. The next few images were then of Ford's American factories and production system, the General Motors production line and the American steel framed tall city centre buildings being built by commercial, civic and railway interests of the era, in stark contrast with what was portrayed as British stagnation of the period. Finally, before arriving at 55 Broadway, mention was made of the early-1920s expansion, both Chiswick Works and Acton Works, factories using these mass production influences. This was followed by the appointment of Charles Holden, the southern extension of the now Northern Line to Modern including the steel frame Portland stone entrance buildings with backlit roundels and even uplighters into the sky when first opened in dimly lit streets and then the inspirational rebuilding of Piccadilly Circus station with its escalators, subways, arcade shop windows and world time clocks, all becoming a world class reference for Metro station design.

So we arrived at 55, Holden's reputed reference to it as a "man on a horse", an immense development straddling a live railway, with entrances on all sides and by being cruciform in shape achieving maximum daylight to upper floors and wings, stepped up to a New York influenced tower that we were all sitting in. The building was truly revolutionary in London at its time, but was not art deco as some have claimed, using a modern steel frame and using traditional cladding materials and finishes, truly reflecting Pick's reputation as a "medieval modernist". Images were shown of the then controversial sculptures included as part of the development, executed by leading and inspirational artists of the day including Epstein, Gill, Aumonier and Henry Moore, whose first public commission it was.

Original interior features and facilities worth noting included: The drinking fountains, train interval clocks, fireplaces, open plan offices, the drawing office, the typing pool, the still preserved 7th floor panelled offices used by Ashfield and Pick, poster sales shop and staff library. Mention was also made to the almost original 1920s condition of the St James's Park station platforms below. Briefly what Holden went onto afterwards followed, both the Piccadilly extensions influenced more by Scandinavian and German contemporary design, than American practice and finally the project that caused friction with Pick, due to the priority and inordinate time he allocated to it, Senate House for University of London which in turn superseded 55 to the accolade of being the tallest office building in London.

Simon then took up the mantle, explaining the building's proposed future by sharing slides from the planning public consultation for its conversion into what will be primary residential use. Starting with its as-built condition, the task was to investigate best use and value for TfL, so the proceeds can be reinvested into London's transport system. It was acknowledged that 55 didn't work as modern office accommodation and that much of its previous office functions are now decanted to the Palestra building in North Southwark. It was also shown that LT/LUL have not necessarily looked after the building well over the years and that the 1980s works specifically to the lower floors lost much of Holden's original clarity and accessibility with staff uses turning their back to surrounding streets and the entrance arcade.

So the future of this now Grade 1 listed building revolves around several key decisions, interventions and can be considered as a de-cluttering exercise. Ground floor public access with retail arcade restored for shopping and restaurant use, support and back of house in the basement, (whilst future proofing the ability to introduce lifts to platform level at a later date) and office use for TfL on the south of the first floor. Removal of the 1970s building on Petty France resulting in a new public realm courtyard, an entrance to the proposed upper floor apartments via a first floor reception and allowing the upper levels and building form to again be appreciated, including views of some of the upper level sculptures that have been hidden from sight for years. Construction of a new wing over the station providing parking and on site affordable housing, something that is increasingly rare in central developments where Councils have been seen to take in-lieu payments or agree to off-site affordable provision in cheaper locations. Slightly more controversial (with planners and some of the audience present), pavilion extensions to each side of the central tower at the 10th floor level, altering the building's form slightly but less so than what had originally been proposed we were told. Simon concluded with statements on sustainability, construction logistics and CGIs. The planning application is due to be considered by Westminster Council shortly.

The evening concluded with several questions from the audience and focused on public access, what was left internally, what was being retained and the proposed high level pavilions. Following, there was still another half an hour until 21.00 to enjoy the roof terraces (*see Below, Left*) as the sun and daylight faded. **(Both photos: Roger Tuke).**

*Footnote: As part of The London Festival of Architecture there were also tours on both 13 and 20 June between 14.00 and 17.00, titled Holden Goes West, (Piccadilly Line). Unfortunately your writer is out of London on both dates so if another LURS member was able to attend either, perhaps they could record the tour for prosperity.*

