

HM Treasury

New office accommodation for the Treasury at the Government Offices Great George Street, Whitehall, London, opened on 25 September 2002. This building study explains how a considered and consultative approach to the refurbishment of the building has resulted in a 100-year-old building being transformed into a bright and modern working environment.

Architect's account

by Philipp Eichstadt

Project Architect, Foster and Partners

The design challenge here was to transform a 100-year-old building, with its deep plan punctuated with light wells and courtyards, into a highly energy-efficient, contemporary and accessible workplace. One of our main priorities was to radically improve accessibility by bringing as much transparency to the building as possible. Located along the northern side of Parliament Square, the Government Offices Great George Street (GOGGS) building occupies an entire block between Great George Street and King Charles Street, stretching from Parliament Street to St James's Park. Built between 1906-1916, the GOGGS building was constructed as pure office accommodation and bore none of the distinctive flourishes of the neighbouring Foreign Offices.

Visitors to the unrenovated building entered through a disproportionately small entrance on Parliament Street from where there were several steps up to a dark cluttered reception hall, with further steps to the ground floor, elevated two metres above street level. The interior was a confusing labyrinth of corridors leading onto hundreds of virtually identical cellular offices, laid out around three large courtyards and 16 smaller light wells. All architectural means of orientation within the interior were obscured. The courtyards and light wells were completely inaccessible and

provided only light and air, rather than focal points. In addition, all the windows were sealed and hung with thick and grubby net curtains that would prevent injury in the event of a bomb blast. Facilities were more accidental than deliberate, with only four lavatory locations per floor and three small lifts – all of which were severely out of date and did not meet best practice standards. Only the large circular courtyard in the centre of the building was accessible from the street – and that had been asphalted for use as a car park. A single, badly positioned sign directed disabled visitors to the building's Goods Entrance where a steep ramp, cluttered with pallets of paper and other office supplies, provided access to the back-of-house areas.

The design brief

The brief was clear: the building needed to be made as transparent and open as the 100-year-old masonry structure would permit. The cellular working layout needed to be abandoned in favour of an open-plan layout that would offer a more efficient use of available space, and promote a modern, communicative working



Ariel view of the Treasury

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environment. In addition, all the existing building services needed to be replaced. Although the Grade II listing of the building precluded any exterior alterations, the replanning of the interior was undertaken with the intention of enhancing accessibility and aiding interior orientation.

In consultation with English Heritage and our structural engineers, the interior corridor walls were demolished or opened up wherever possible to create full- or semi-open-plan working environments. Only the outer layer of cellular offices was retained as a reminder of the original interior, and a guarantee that the building would appear unchanged from the exterior. The original sash windows were upgraded with tougher, laminated glass that removed the need for the bomb blast curtains. With the exterior stonework washed and cleaned, the formerly darkened interior was transformed into an open legible layout, filled with warm, reflected daylight off the glazed brick and Portland stone façades.

Light and ventilation

The unused light wells and courtyards offered further opportunity to add much needed ground-level space, accessed through newly installed connecting doors. A roofing system of computer-controlled louvres and air-inflated transparent ETFE cushions covered the previously open light wells, which allowed natural light and ventilation to penetrate deep into the building. These light wells now provide ground-floor space for a restaurant, café, library, training centre, and informal assembly and breakout spaces – all of which are new facilities for the building occupants. Colourful banners, designed by Danish graphic artist Per Arnoldi, hang in the covered light wells, creating a warm glow reflected off the glazed tiles and providing colour-coded orientation for the building users.

The two large courtyards at each end of the building have been converted into lushly landscaped gardens, accessed from all sides. These courtyards form a new processional route through the building, connecting the original Whitehall entrance to the new enlarged entrance at the St James's Park façade.

Level access

One of the main challenges was to provide level access into the building and onto the raised ground floor. In close liaison with English Heritage, Foster and Partners worked extensively

to design acceptable external alterations to these entrances. At the new, historically less significant, Park entrance, a paved ramp was built to gain access into the entrance space, from which a newly inserted lift allows access to the elevated ground-floor level and new reception hall. At the historic Whitehall entrance, a new doorway was cut at street level, leading to a concealed platform lift that allows access to the reinstated old reception hall. From this level, a second platform lift was sensitively inserted into the most historically valuable part of the building, providing access from the entrance reception to the ground-floor level.

The extensive reorganisation has enabled the entire Treasury staff, previously disbursed across several buildings, to be comfortably housed in the western half of the GOGGS building, allowing the remainder to be used by other government departments. Staff who had worked in the building prior to the renovations happily comment on the difference between working in the formerly gloomy and oppressive offices and the new light, open-plan and accessible layout. The renovation transforms a historic building into a modern workplace, designed to fit contemporary needs, while respecting the building's history.

Access consultant's account

by Dr David Bonnett

David Bonnett Associates

The Treasury is now fit for the 21st century, arguably a better building now than it has ever been. As one would expect, the Government sought value for money in this recently completed and comprehensive transformation of its Whitehall premises. But so also did the developer, the building contractor and the architect. All have a long-term interest in this major project with regard to their reputations, experience and profitability. These concerns are best met by getting things right first time around while all participants are engaged in a working partnership – making changes retrospectively is always more expensive and usually messy.

This simple principle elevates the importance of well-founded decisions in the early stages of a project, and requires the early involvement of consultants, including access consultants, for providing design advice. Our work began at



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Ramped access to the Treasury from Horse Guards Road

planning stage when influence on the design was still possible. Access for disabled visitors and staff was considered at the outset, along with other key considerations such as security, green issues and sustainability. This decision was taken by Stanhope, the developer, to help avoid the risk of late design changes and consequent delays to the contract, or worse still, alterations after completion. Early access consultancy such as this is regrettably still unusual, even on large projects.

Risk avoidance

Like any building project, the Treasury has risk potential with regard to access and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA). In our experience, the antidote to such risks is, where possible, consultation with building users. Fortunately, the Government departments preparing to move into the refurbished Treasury already had well-established disabled staff representative groups and experienced union and management support. Early presentations were made describing the design brief, the access standards adopted for the project, and the key design decisions made. Attending these meetings were ourselves, the client, including staff representatives, the architects and, critically, facilities management. We all had a long-term interest in arriving at practical and sustainable outcomes, and as access consultants we played a key role at these meetings in clarifying the implications of different design options. This

allowed all parties to share views and explore possible risks before arriving at final decisions. Sharing the design process this way validates the decisions made and reduces potential for misunderstandings.

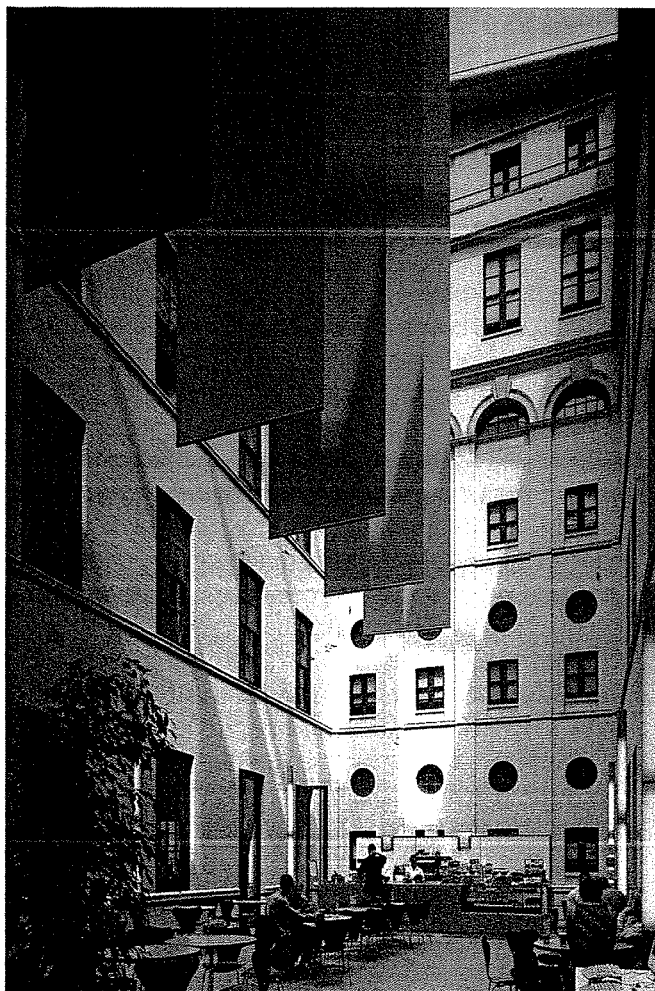
Consultation

Despite insistence on it from many funding agencies, there are still no clear guidelines on the consultation process. This absence of clarity can often raise expectations, often leading to disappointment and delay. This was avoided at the Treasury by the professional approach adopted on all sides. Clients must be allowed to control their projects, architects must be allowed to design, builders to build and managers to manage. This is a professional expectation, with each participant intent on making a professional contribution to cost control, design integrity, completion on time and a building that is practical to manage. Any consultation that contributes to these aims is certain of a welcome; where it confronts these aims, there will be tension. More work is required on this process.

Effectiveness

Disabled access groups are not usually drawn from a professional pool of expertise and can be frustrated by what may appear to them to be ineffectiveness. In our view, effectiveness lies with sharing user experience, both positive and negative, referring in particular to equipment specification, staff training and management support. These experiences will include gaining information, engaging with security controls, ease of circulation, day-to-day access to facilities and, critically, fire drills. These experiences were shared in a structured and timely way at the Treasury and were guaranteed attention by the project team. They helped contribute to improved acoustics in meeting rooms, the design of circulation maps, more visible signage and to building management issues.

By contrast, disappointment is likely where a group sets out to direct overall design, overturn agreed standards, or ignore time and cost implications. As access consultants, our role at the Treasury was to contribute to these key considerations, making our case always for best practice standards and thinking laterally about access solutions, essential with listed buildings. This can only be achieved by having a firm grasp of both vision and detail, by establishing early agreement on standards, and by ensuring that the thinking behind key decisions is explained,



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The newly designed café at the Treasury featuring strong use of colour

justified and recorded. This gives credibility to the access consultation process as effective, transparent and worthwhile.

Future proofing

The Treasury project has a 30-year life before any major change is anticipated, but it would be unwise to predict the future of DDA 'best practice' in the workplace, or to suggest change is unlikely. Even during the Treasury project period, Part M of the Building Regulations was revised and BS 8300:2001 published. Nevertheless, as access consultants, we had to develop a strategy for the longer term with regard to future-proofing against changes in standards. For this we looked to the DDA itself. First, since the introduction of building controls nearly 20 years ago, designers and regulators are now substantially clear about what constitutes 'physical access' and how to provide it. Significant changes are not anticipated even to this listed building. Second and conversely, it is clear that equipment and systems improve continually and constant awareness of these improvements must

be anticipated and responded to on a planned basis. Third, despite the best efforts of designers and the project team, individual 'adjustments' to the workplace will be required after occupation. This will fall to management on a day-to-day basis and to assist, we provided a post-occupancy document.

In conclusion

The Treasury project has broken the perception of civil servants' offices as dusty bastions of convention. Instead, it has set an example to follow, competing with the best of the corporate world. I would go further and suggest that this project is ahead of the game regarding access. The ramped entrance and purpose-designed platform lifts set helpful precedents for other listed buildings. The strategic distribution of key facilities helps overcome the sheer scale of the building; coloured banners aid orientation and much effort went into the design of the signage. Finally and critically, it has in place a responsive system for monitoring and review.

If you are an aspiring civil servant with a disability, you could do no better than apply for a job at the Treasury today and work in an office designed for the 21st century.

Individual appraisal

by Alan Russell

Access auditor, CAE

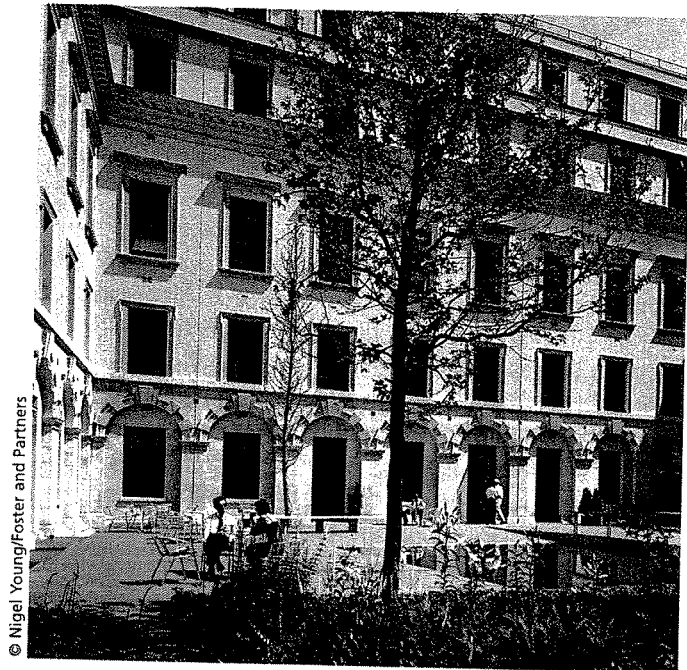
The Treasury, housed in an impressive Grade II listed building, has had many features updated internally that belie the traditional exterior of the building. In addition to the external stairs where you enter the front of the building, there is a nicely crafted ramp that brings you round to the front, from the side. The ramp has a gentle incline, which makes it convenient to use for wheelchair users and people with mobility impairments.

Once inside the building you are greeted by security staff that escort you to your destination. As the Treasury is not open to the public, other than by appointment to see an official, staff always chaperone visitors around the building. This compensates for the distinct lack of quality signage. Given its traditional exterior, it is surprisingly modern and open-planned inside. The recent refurbishment has created a pleasant feeling of space, with the modern blending in well with the old. As you are escorted to the

reception area to sign in and get your visitor's badge, you are struck by the generous amount of circulation space, which would be easily manageable by wheelchair users and people with mobility impairments. Without careful management, the space could be confusing for people with learning difficulties and sensory impairments, due to the lack of signage and the reflective floor.

Once again, the circulation space around the reception would enable people with guide dogs and wheelchair users to sit alongside people using the seats provided. The seats themselves, although comfortable to sit on, are all the same type. Best practice would recommend a variety of seating with different heights and some with arms and some without, to cater for a variety of user needs.

When escorted to the lifts to take us to the first floor, the need for careful management is reinforced by the amount of glass and the lights recessed into the floor, which could be visually confusing and a trip hazard for people with mobility impairments. On the first floor, we were shown around impressive open-planned offices with wide doors, although on the heavy side, and with good circulation space. With hearing enhancements provided, these offices provide good access for a variety of users and are to be commended. On the first floor, it was noticeable how the traditional blended in with the new, for away from the open-plan offices, we were shown around the older part of the building.



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Internal courtyards provide tranquil spaces for networking

These still had white doors whose colour blended in with the walls, which would make them difficult to pick out. The handles were knob style, rather than lever or D handles, making them difficult to use for some users with dexterity impairments. The accessible WCs in the same area would present problems for people with visual impairments, not only because the accessible WC sign is too high, but also because it blends in with the background, being white on white, along with the door, door frame and walls. The original staircase has a handrail on one side and the treads are more than wide enough. However, perhaps putting a handrail on the opposite side that extends 300mm beyond the stairs at the top and bottom and introducing contrasting nosings on the treads would make it safer for people with mobility and visual impairments to use, especially if the lifts are out of use, during a fire alert.

Having finished our tour, being guided by knowledgeable and helpful staff, we were left with a very good impression of the refurbishment and the efforts made to make the building far more inclusive to a variety of people. It was a job very well done.



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