ROYAL EXCHANGE BUILDINGS

A CASE STUDY

GTH/ architects

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, GTH/ were appointed by DTZI to deliver design services for the refurbishment of Royal Exchange Buildings. The project involved the upgrade and repositioning of a six-storey Grade II listed office building, including a Category A+ fit-out. Delivered in multiple phases by a consistent professional team and main contractor, the main works were completed in November 2025, with a final phase currently under construction.

Crucial project objectives, for DTZI, besides the obvious successful commercial letting of the building were: Achieve a BREEAM Excellent accreditation and that the EPC rating be improved from D to B.

It should be noted that DTZI are a signatory of the Better Building Partnership.

Collaborators:

DTZ INVESTORS

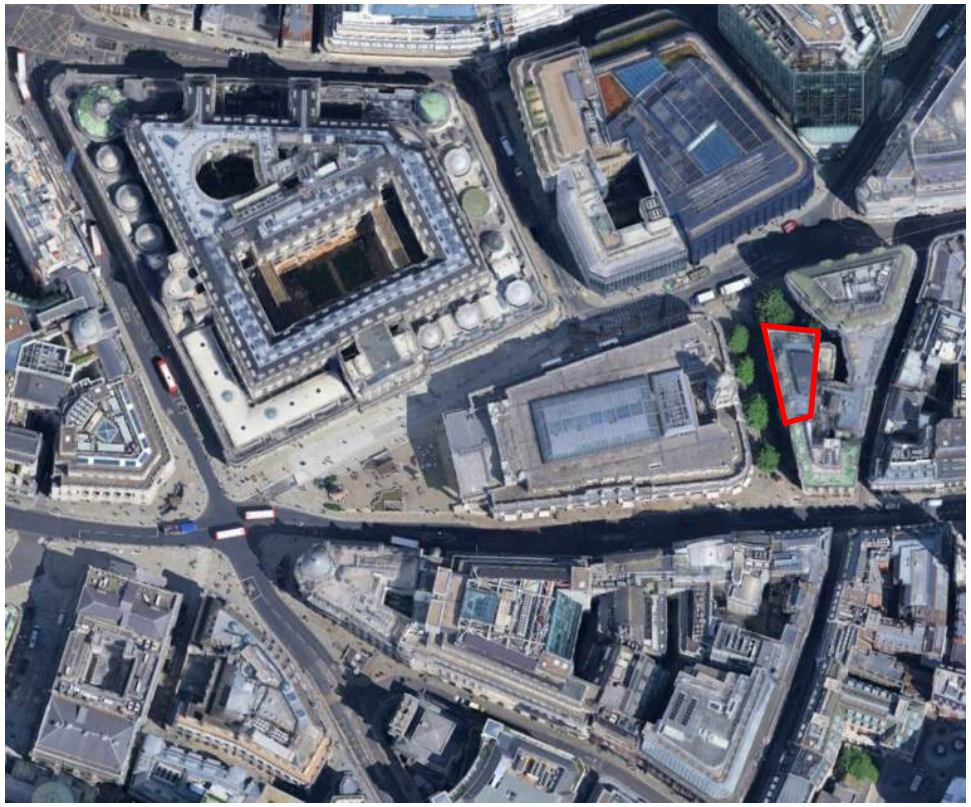
QUANTEM

QUINNROSS

Date of Publication: 05/05/2026

Background

PROJECT OVERVIEW



Royal Exchange Buildings is a recently completed project. Commissioned by DTZ Investors.

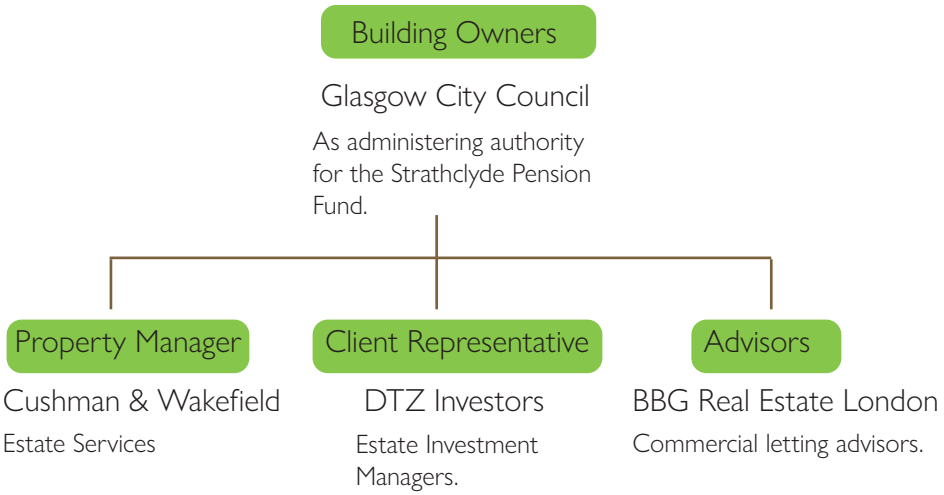
- ☑ BREEAM Excellent
- ☑ EPC B
- ☑ Listed Building Consent

The project involved the refurbishment of a six-storey Grade II listed office building, including a Category A+ fit-out (Levels 1–5), new lower basement showers and cycle storage, fire protection upgrades throughout, and replacement of all office M&E systems.

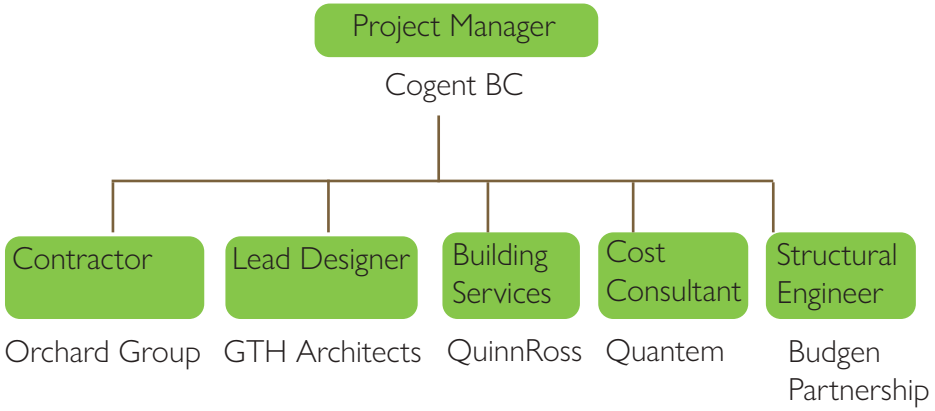
BUILDING HISTORY

Royal Exchange Buildings (REB) is a Grade II listed office building originally designed by Sir Ernest George and Yates and built in 1907-1910.

STEWARDSHIP AND PROJECT TEAM



The success of the Royal Exchange Buildings project was driven by a collaborative consultant team working within the constraints of a Grade II listed building. Close coordination, clear communication and a shared problem solving approach were essential in balancing heritage requirements with ambitious sustainability and performance targets.



PROJECT BRIEF

The client's brief for Royal Exchange Buildings was centred on repositioning the asset as a high-quality, sustainable workplace capable of attracting a wide range of modern occupiers. The ambition was to deliver a commercially competitive, future-ready office environment, with clear targets for BREEAM Excellent and a significant uplift in EPC performance, ultimately achieving a B rating.

A key driver was flexibility. The client envisaged a building that could accommodate both single-floor tenants and multi-level occupiers, offering equal quality and a consistent identity throughout. This led to a focus on adaptable floorplates, intuitive layouts, and a coherent "look and feel" that would appeal to a broad tenant mix. There was also a strong aspiration to provide a CAT A+ style offering, enabling a more immediate, plug-and-play occupation model aligned with contemporary leasing trends and ESG priorities.

GTH worked closely with the client to interpret and develop the brief, testing options and refining strategies to balance flexibility, sustainability and commercial value. Through careful space planning and a service-led design approach, the team enhanced usability while supporting long-term adaptability. This collaborative process ensured that the final scheme not only met the client's ambitions but added value, delivering a workplace that is efficient, appealing and resilient for future tenants.

The Project

INITIAL DESIGN PROPOSAL

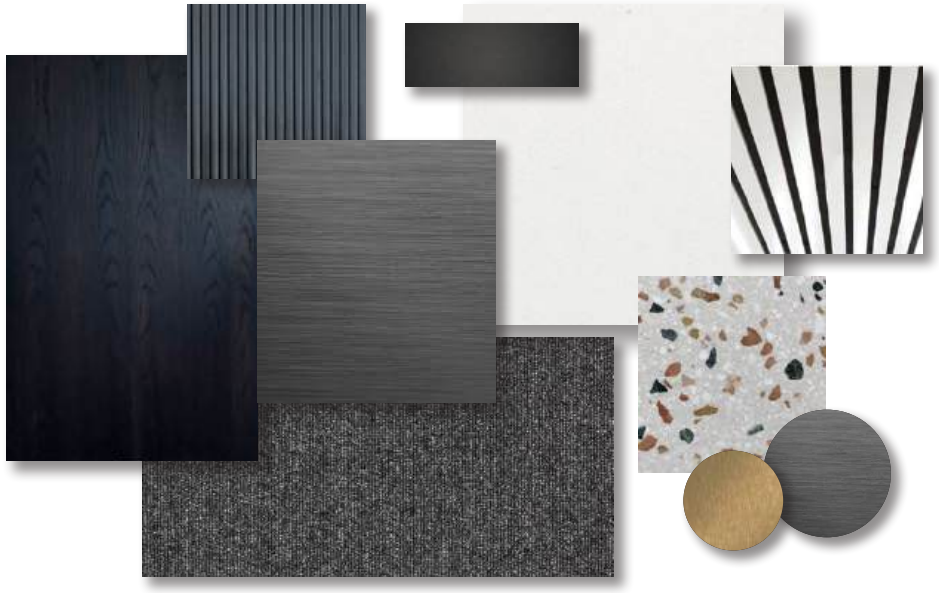
The design approach established a sensitive response to the Grade II listed building while delivering a high-quality, future-proofed workplace environment. Given the limitations on altering the existing fabric, the strategy prioritised performance improvements through building services upgrades and intelligent space planning.

A comprehensive improvement option evaluation informed the retrofit and decarbonisation approach, resulting in the incremental 'de-gassing' and replacement of building services, including low-energy lighting, high-efficiency heating and cooling systems, and advanced controls. This has enabled a significant enhancement in operational performance, improving the EPC rating from D to B while maintaining the integrity of the building's historic significance.

The scheme adopted a consistent and refined material palette, combining durability with a timeless aesthetic. Translucent black-stained oak veneer is used to articulate the building core, complemented by satin brass fittings to create a unified and high-quality finish throughout. This consistent "look and feel" ensured visual continuity across floors, supporting both multi-floor tenancies and single-floor occupiers.

Supporting amenities such as cycle storage and end-of-trip facilities were integrated to enhance occupier experience and align with contemporary workplace expectations.

Concept Image of 5th Floor Workspace



Materials Pallette

SPATIAL STRATEGY

The spatial strategy was driven by a clear “service-rich / service-light” arrangement principle, responding directly to the building’s shallow floor plates (approximately 5.5m from façade to core) and the presence of blank perimeter walls.

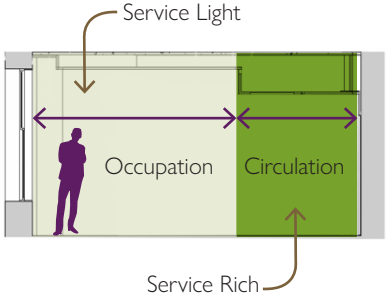
A highly serviced zone was positioned adjacent to the building core and aligned with principal circulation routes. This zone consolidates building services, utilities, and fixed elements, while also accommodating fan coil unit zones in accordance with BCO-informed performance criteria. In contrast, a low-serviced, highly flexible zone is established along the glazed façade, maximising access to natural light and enabling a wide range of occupational configurations.

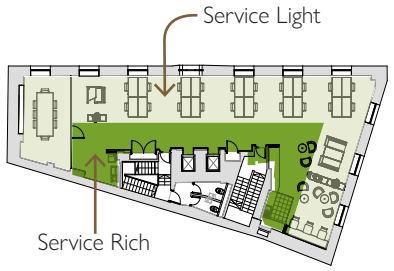
The flexible “service-light” zone was designed to support multiple layouts, including open-plan workstations, cellular offices, meeting rooms, breakout areas, and other agile working environments. The objective here was to achieve the highest possible ceiling heights adjacent to the external facade.

Adaptability was further reinforced through the integration of accessible bulkheads and raised access floors, allowing for straightforward maintenance, reconfiguration, and long-term servicing of building systems. This ensured the space could evolve over time in response to changing tenant requirements.

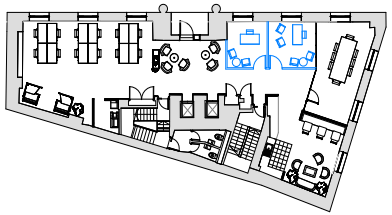
Typical Floor Plan

Functional Adaptability

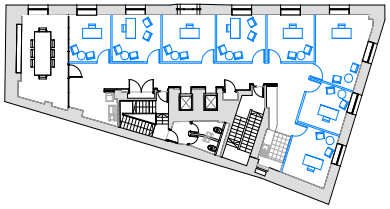




Hybrid Office Plan



Cellular Office Plan



FIRE PROTECTION

A comprehensive programme of fire investigation and upgrade works formed a critical part of the project. Early non-intrusive assessments indicated that the building broadly met expected standards; however, as works progressed and ceilings were opened up, more detailed intrusive investigations were undertaken to fully understand the existing structure and its fire performance.

These investigations revealed areas where historic alterations had potentially compromised the original floor construction, including the original clay pot (Frazzi) floor system. In response, GTH worked closely with the structural and fire engineer, project team and conservation officer to develop a robust and sensitive solution that both enhanced safety and respected the listed fabric. Listed Building Consent was sought and secured to enable the proposed works.

A coordinated fire strategy was established, targeting enhanced compartmentation throughout the building and aligning performance with contemporary standards. This included the introduction of upgraded fire-rated floor assemblies, improvements to doors and shafts, and the integration of a comprehensive building-wide fire alarm system.

Following detailed evaluation, a high-performance cementitious spray solution was selected to reinstate fire protection to the existing structure. This approach allowed the team to achieve the required 90-minute fire resistance while minimising impact on the historic fabric.

View of existing Farzzi floor system

View following application of fire protection layer

CONSTRUCTION PHASE

During the construction phase, a proactive and collaborative approach was taken to navigate the Listed Building Consent process, demonstrating how thoughtful retrofit could be successfully delivered within a historic context. Working within the constraints of a Grade II listed building, the project showed how careful intervention, rather than wholesale change, could unlock meaningful improvements in performance and usability.

Early and ongoing engagement with the Local Planning Authority and conservation officers established a constructive dialogue, allowing design proposals to evolve in response to feedback while maintaining programme momentum. This approach reflected a shared commitment across the project team to balance heritage significance with the need to future proof the building for contemporary use.

Rather than relying on a formal pre application route, the team adopted a responsive strategy of direct consultation and coordinated submissions. This enabled key elements of the retrofit to progress efficiently, with detailed information provided both at application stage and through the discharge of conditions. As is often the case in retrofit projects, site discoveries required agile responses, and the wider consultant team worked closely with the Local Planning Authority to secure timely approvals for sensitive interventions.

Through close coordination of specialist inputs and alignment of technical, environmental and conservation priorities, the team ensured that statutory requirements were met with confidence. The result was a successful example of retrofit in a listed building, enhancing performance, extending building life, and celebrating its historic character while supporting modern workplace needs.

Sequential views of typical floor plate progressing towards completion.

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability was a key consideration throughout the Royal Exchange Buildings project, approached as a careful balance between improving environmental performance and respecting the constraints of a historic asset. While absolute net zero targets were not the primary driver, clear ambitions were set and achieved, including a BREEAM Excellent rating and a significant uplift in EPC performance.

Improvements to building services formed a central part of this strategy, with efficient heating, cooling, lighting and controls delivering measurable gains in operational performance. These upgrades were carefully integrated within the existing fabric, ensuring that sustainability enhancements were achieved without compromising the building's character.

Beyond energy performance, sustainability was considered in its broader sense. The project embraced principles of heritage stewardship, extending the life of the building and maintaining its cultural value. At the same time, flexible and adaptable spaces were created to support long-term occupation and reduce the need for future change.

The result is a balanced and pragmatic approach to sustainability, aligning environmental performance with heritage and commercial priorities.

Contextual view from Second Floor terrace

The Completed Building

ROYAL EXCHANGE BUILDINGS

The completed building presents a calm, refined and contemporary workplace within a historic shell. A restrained palette, high quality finishes and carefully integrated services create a coherent and uncluttered environment. The balance of light filled spaces and discreet core elements delivers a workplace that feels both timeless and adaptable, supporting a wide range of occupiers.

Views of completed project.

Views of completed project.

Conclusion

CONCLUSION

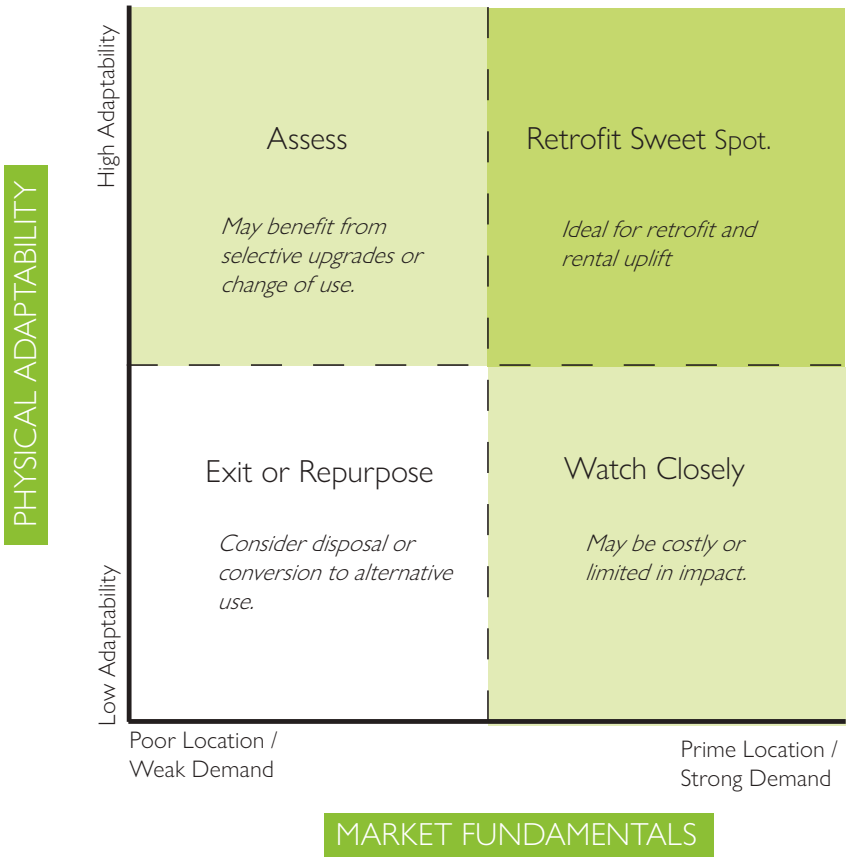
The Royal Exchange Buildings project stands as a clear example of how thoughtful retrofit can unlock the potential of historic buildings while meeting contemporary commercial and environmental demands. Working within the constraints of a Grade II listed structure presented typical challenges, including unforeseen conditions, coordination of new services within limited zones, and the careful integration of fire and structural upgrades. These hurdles were addressed through a considered, collaborative approach, demonstrating the value of a skilled and communicative consultant team.

The project illustrates how retrofit can move beyond preservation alone, delivering high quality, flexible workspace that responds to modern occupier expectations while significantly improving building performance. It highlights the importance of early coordination, clear strategy and a shared commitment to problem solving across all disciplines.

GTH's Retrofit Approach

GTH'S RETROFIT APPROACH

GTH Architects continue to prioritise retrofit as a core area of practice, particularly in response to the increasing focus on the UK Net Zero Carbon Buildings Standard. We recognise both the environmental imperative and the commercial drivers shaping this shift. Our experience on projects such as Royal Exchange Buildings reflects a clear understanding of evolving planning policy, sustainability requirements and the need to deliver viable, future proofed assets within a dynamic context.



Retro-fix Matrix

Retro-fix Triage Diagram

GTH uses a 'triage' approach to retrofit, prioritising limited resources for maximum impact. Buildings are assessed across key criteria including fabric condition, energy and fire performance, and GIA potential, then interventions are sequenced to deliver timely, effective outcomes without delay or rework. This approach creates a clear decision making framework, directing resources where they are most effective and aligning with the building brief and long term asset strategy.

GTH

We understand new and existing buildings!

GTH is a RIBA Chartered architecture practice based in central London, with extensive experience across residential, commercial, industrial and education sectors at all stages of delivery.

We believe sustainable and practical design should not only perform well, but bring joy. Partnering with ambitious clients, we deliver their objectives through enduring and exciting architecture.

Let's Talk!

+44 (0)20 3696 5530

info@GTH-architects.com

GTH/ architects

www.gth-architects.com

Studio 211
The Print Rooms
164 Union Street
020 3696 5530