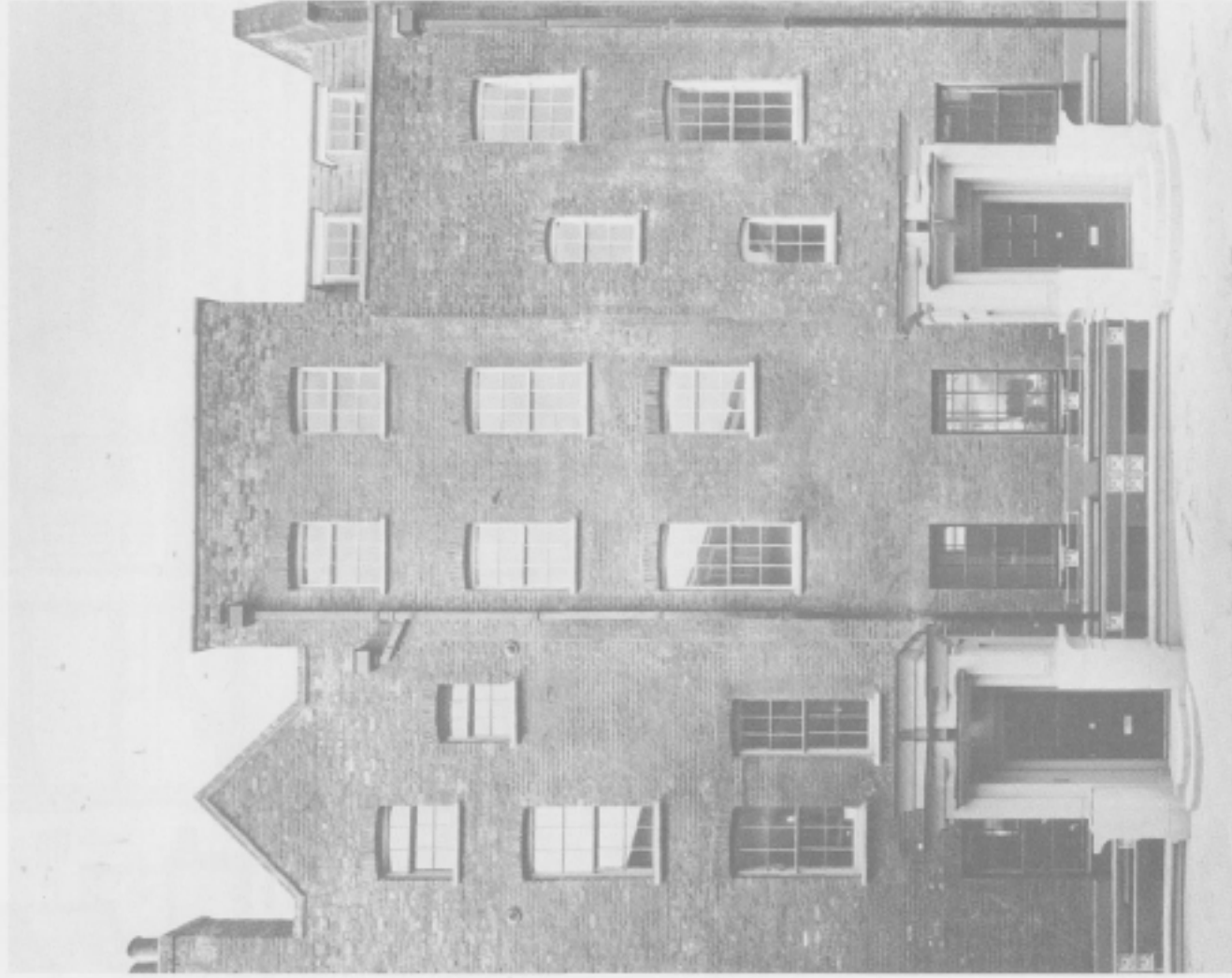




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- 14 The elevation of the Monmouth Street building has been sensitively repaired and restored, giving no hint of the new interiors.
- 15 A doerose in Ching Court glimpsed through the new passage off Shelton Street.
- 16 The rear of the Monmouth Street houses elevations have been largely reconstructed but retain their original irregularity and so give the new Ching Court—into which they face—a somewhat picturesque appearance.

paving was made at an early stage because of its strong traditional qualities (with details picked out in grey limestone). The edge of the courtyard is defined by turning up the stonework into a substantial moulded stone kerb, making a strong edge around the triangle, which is reinforced by the railings.

The upper timber porches are dovetailed into the stonework plinths and, with their vertical emphasis and varied details, express a separate yet combined identity which attempts to reduce the potentially oppressive effect of the canyon-like existing space.

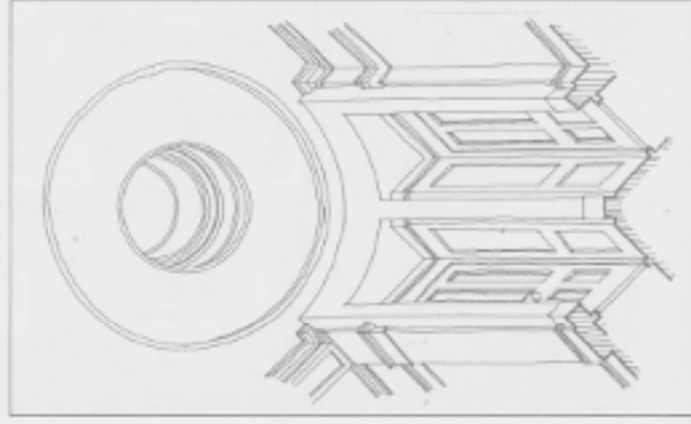
The Shelton Street passageway, including the main entrances to the apartments above, continues the expression of the courtyard by reinterpreting the detail to conform with the internal passage—this produces its own series of events culminating in the broad circular feature at the rear, which establishes the change in axis through the site.

#### Sources of speculation

Speculation as to the 'sources' and imagery of the porches in the courtyard has already arisen (not least in the GLC). However, the intention was to create a historically sympathetic yet twentieth century architectural form.

Wiltchiers, the main contractor, was selected for the first-phase works after the first stage of a two-stage tender. The form of tendering was ideal to cope with the difficulties posed by such an old structure and its inherent unknowns—a 'phrase zero' opening-up contract was carried out to gain a more detailed insight into the possible problems.

There are likely to be a total of five phases to the development; phases one and two (a) are now complete; phases two (b) and two (c) are presently in negotiation; and phase three is yet to come. The final building cost will be about £4.5 million.



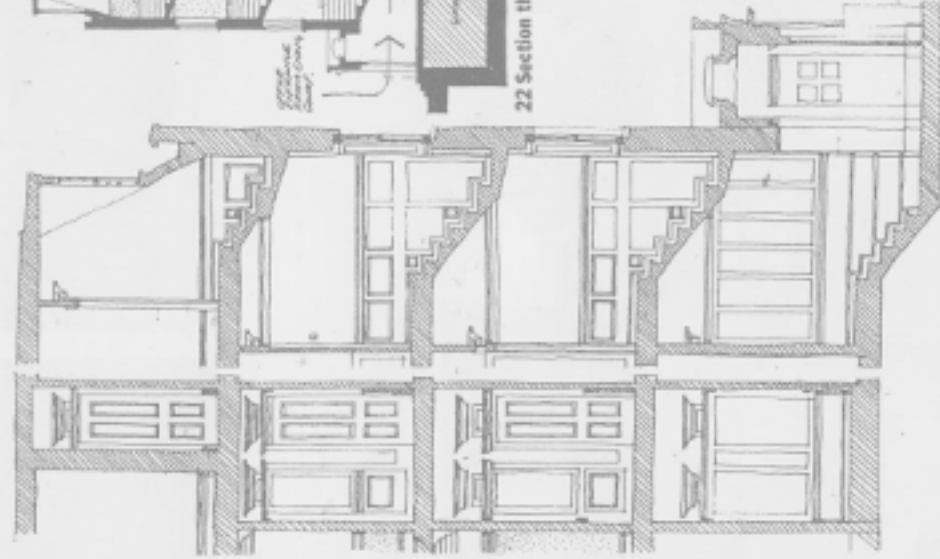
17 Door and ceiling, third floor front of No 57.



18 Early eighteenth century style windows.



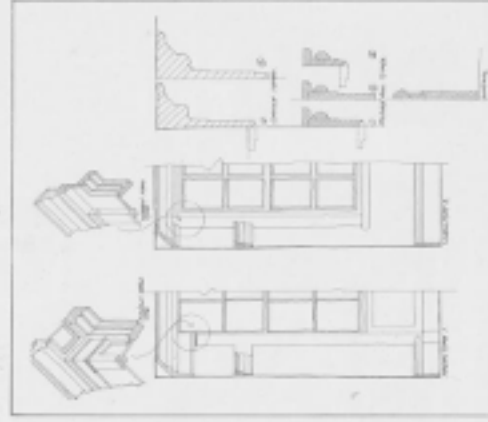
21 Details of wall treatment in No 63.



22 Section through No 57 Monmouth Street.



23 Typical detail system for second floor.



20 Typical detail system for first floor.

19 Section through No 57 Monmouth Street and height of decoration on different floor levels.

24 The relocated arch in the entrance hall of No 55 Monmouth Street. The box cornice above shows the standard range of eighteenth century mouldings. Top, a cyma recta separated by a fillet from the smaller ogree moulding. The deep fascia divides the top pair of mouldings from a lower pair.



## Appraisal

### Dan Cruickshank

Terry Farrell Partnership's scheme for Comyn Ching is interesting on two different levels. First, it tackles the problem of accommodating suitable new uses within long decaying historic buildings on an inner city site and, second, it attempts to reconcile the demands of correct self-effacing repair and restoration of the listed buildings with the development of a decorative vocabulary for interiors and rear elevations that is sympathetic to the old but not a pastiche of eighteenth century decorative traditions.

#### Traditional inspiration

The new work is both bold and minimalist in its repertoire. The mouldings—used as cornice, dado and skirtings—are inspired by traditional profiles, but the scale of the elements is larger and the profiles simpler, with runs of primary mouldings replacing the subtle and more complex traditional mouldings, such as the ogree, cyma recta and ovolo.<sup>24</sup>

The composition of the basic elements used by Farrell—semi-

circular mouldings (astragal or torus mouldings to use the traditional name), fillets of different sizes and all usually contained on a multi-planned

architrave-like panel—vary from room to room and house to house. Obviously an attempt has been made to create variety by tailoring the decorative system to different window and room heights. Hence some rooms at top levels optimise their locations and are given dramatic top-lighting.

But it is, perhaps, in the staircase design that the variety of appearance within the generally uniform theme is most striking.

In four of the Monmouth Street houses, the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century stairs have been retained (as in No 53), incorporated from elsewhere (No 55), amalgamated from original remains of the staircases (No 61), or are replicas of old staircases (No 63).

In No 57 a seventeenth century stair baluster has been reproduced. Strangely the architects have chosen to model their copy on a baluster from one of the Inns of Court rather than on any of the surviving stairs on site.

Consequently, being a copy of a stair designed for a set of chambers, it is of unusually bold and robust design (certainly bolder than domestic contemporaries). The reproduction of this staircase would look decidedly odd in its setting if the new work that surrounds it were less forceful. As it is, the bulbous seventeenth century

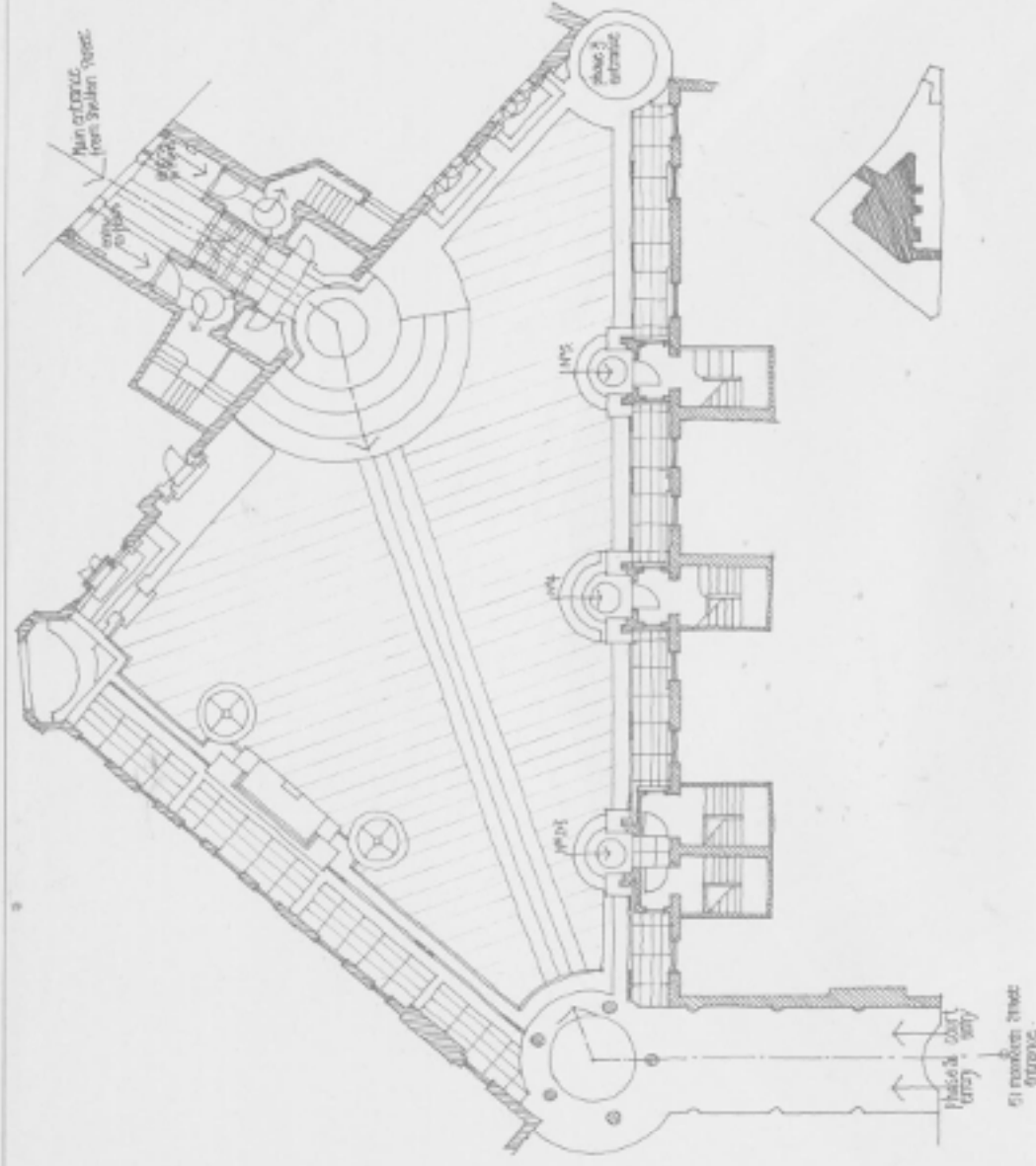
balusters are very much at home with the large scale motifs devised by the architects.

But it is not the staircases that catch the attention; it is the treatment of the stair compartment walls. All are essays upon the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century London domestic tradition and all are different. No 53 is perhaps the most successful—with simple wall panelling suggested by the use of incised mouldings. The effect is almost Soan.

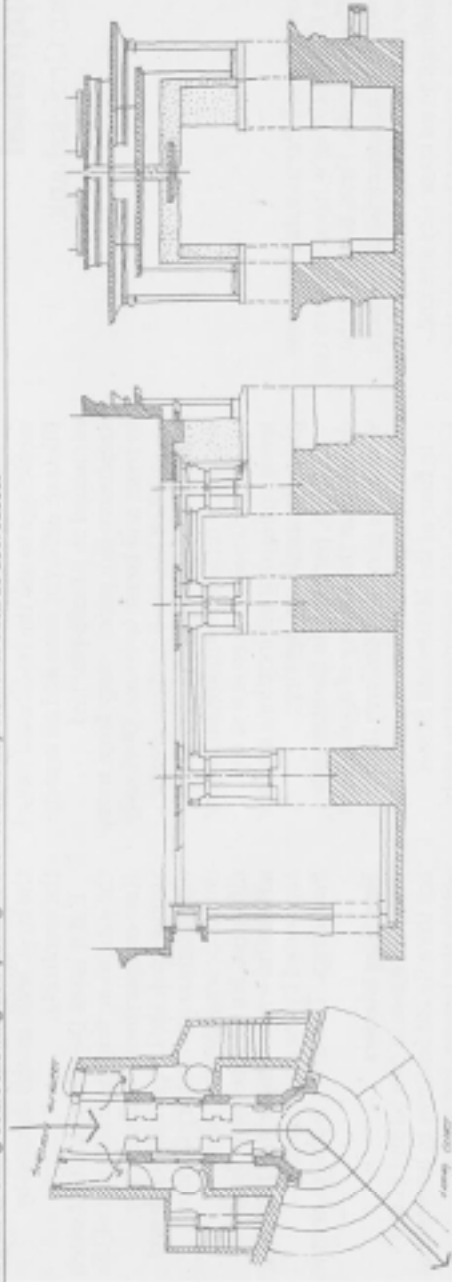
#### Surprising interiors

The staircases in Nos 53 and 61 are not the only old features to be retained within the houses, but they are certainly the most important, and comparison between the transformed interiors and the gently repaired exteriors of these houses is, at first sight, surprising. In Nos 61 and 63, the original roof trusses, relieved of any structural purpose, are exposed, stained and put on display. Floor structures are retained (ruling out the introduction of ducts for services and wiring) but are concealed, and some of the retained staircases have been extended in a most bizarre fashion, with standard length balusters reproduced and extended on tall plinths to create balustrade landings.

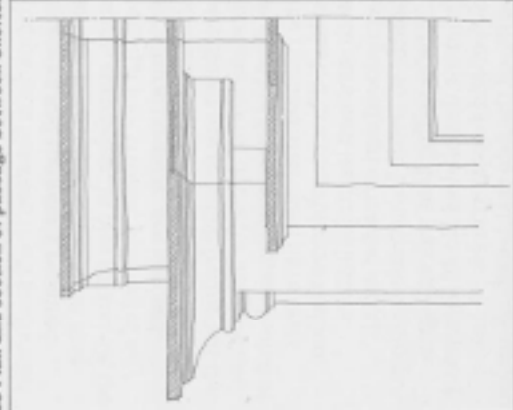
The panelling that was salvaged from the demolished No 49 Monmouth Street and relocated in No 55 has suffered the fate that befalls all ancient finny pine panelling moved by



25 Plan of Ching Court showing how paving is used to unite key elements such as doorcases.



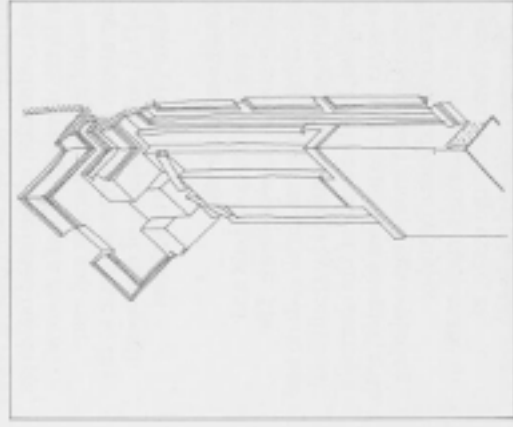
26 Plan and section of passage between Shelton Street and Ching Court.



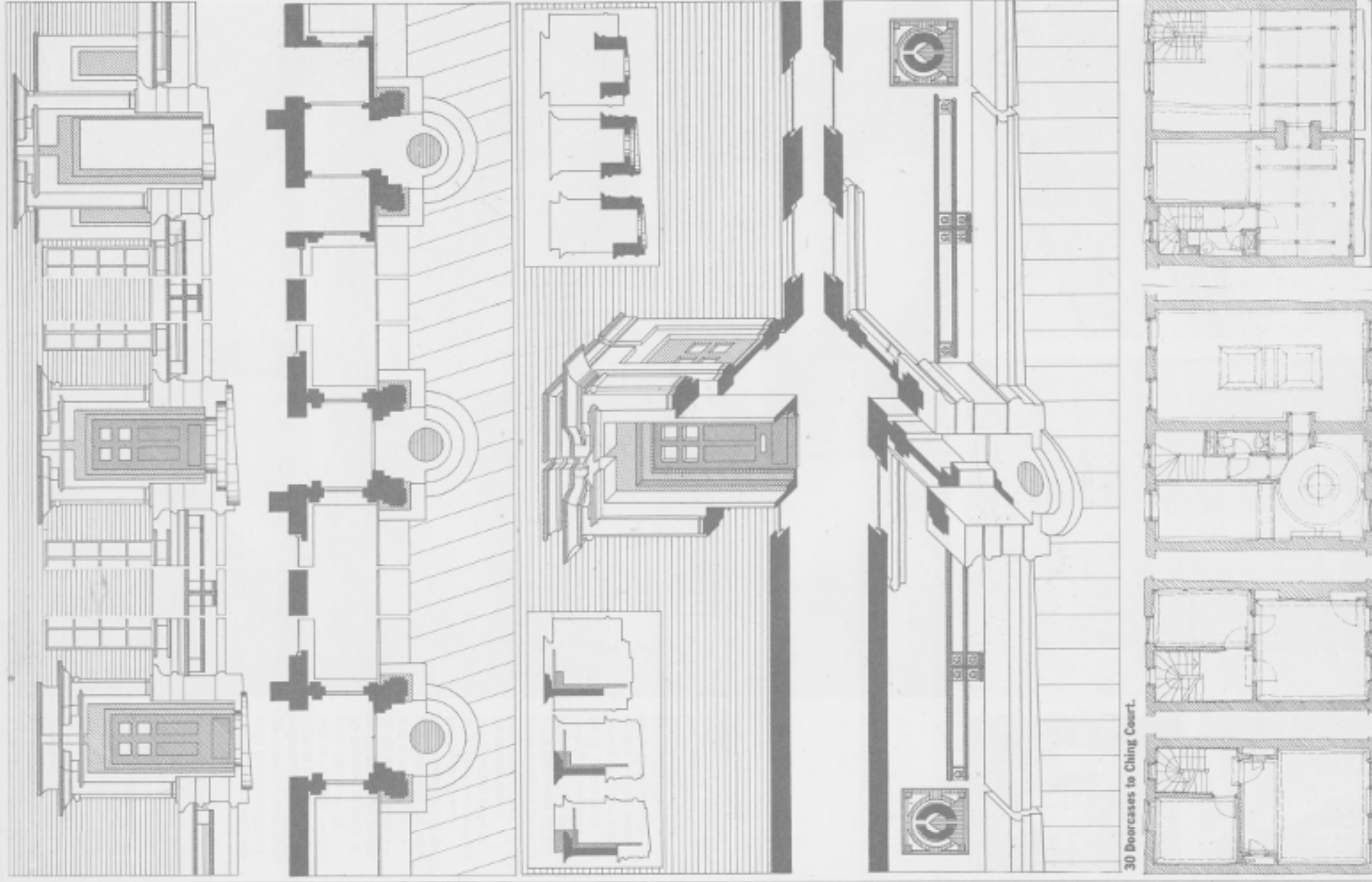
27 Typical detail elevation of doorcase.



28 View down Shelton Street.

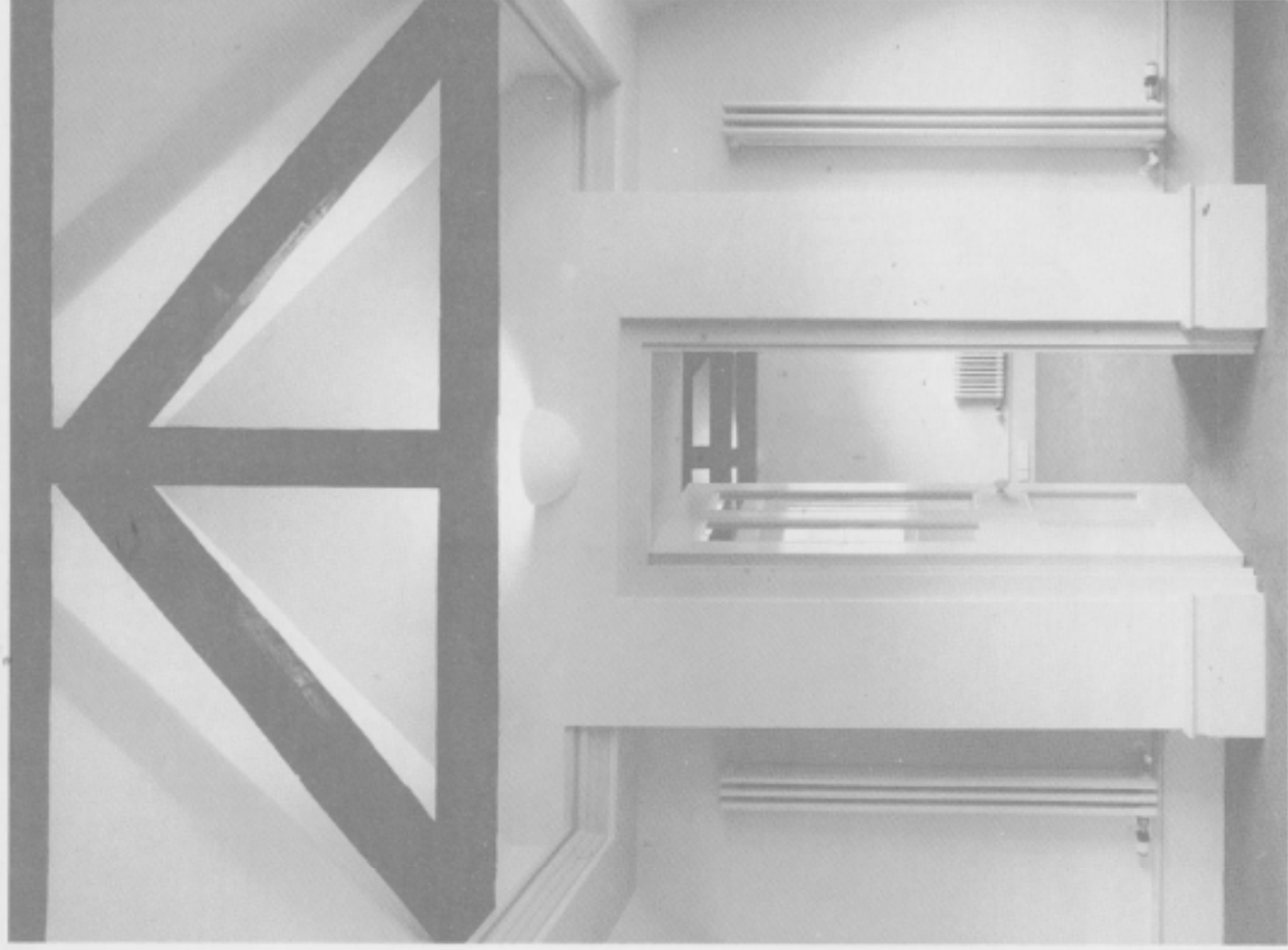


29 Passageway pillar detail.



30 Doorcases to Ching Court.

31 Major floor levels of Nos 53-63 Monmouth Street (left to right): No 53 single office unit; No 55 offices with relocated panelling; Nos 57-59 paired office unit; Nos 61-63 paired unit with preserved roof trusses.



32

32 Vista along top floor front of Nos 61-63 Monmouth Street, showing preserved trusses.

33 First floor front room of No 61, cornice and a moulding at picture rail height, which implies a capital and so transforms the wall between windows into a pilaster strip. These bold mouldings are typical of those used generally in the scheme.

34 First floor front room at 57 Monmouth Street (compare top floor shown in figure 7). Door to left leads to rear room and that on the right, through party wall, to No 59.

35 Entrance passage at No 55 Monmouth Street.

36 Retained balusters—with a delicate profile—and essay upon eighteenth century panelling at No 53 Monmouth Street.

37 Original balusters and new panelling at No 61 Monmouth Street.

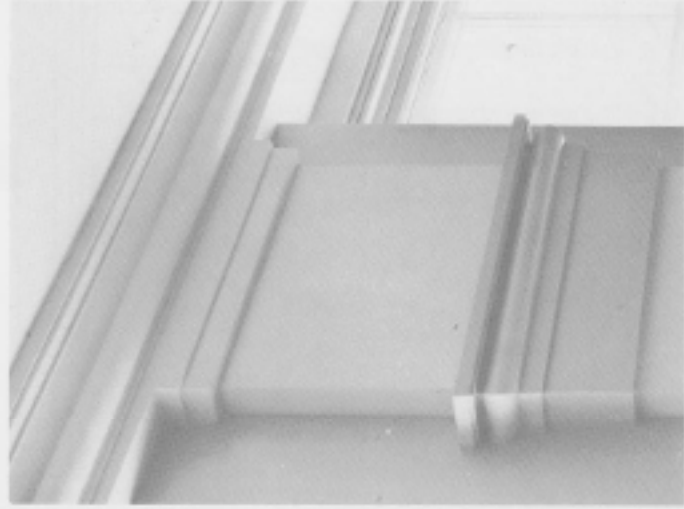
38 Retained staircase and newly designed panelling at 53 Monmouth Street.

39 Inns of Court pattern balbous balusters at

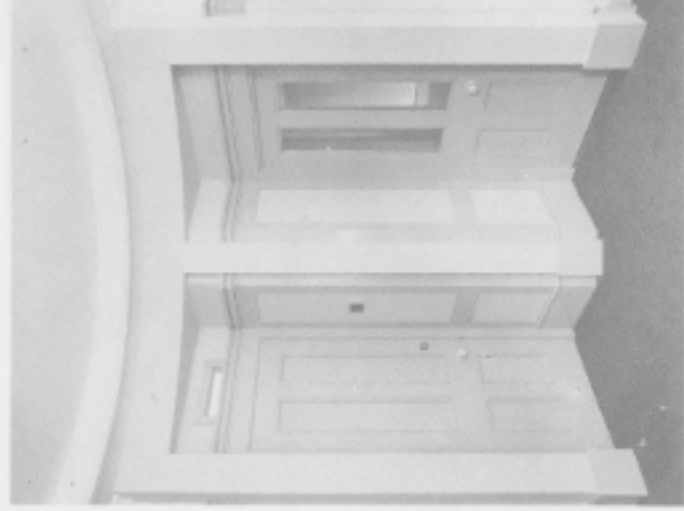
No 57. Lights to the landing are fitted within cornice profiled boxes.

40 No 53 Monmouth Street, third floor.

Traditionally profiled balusters set upon elongated plinths to form landing balusters—the effect is most odd.



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contractors from one house to another: the ceiling heights and room proportions of the new location were subtly different, the condition of the panelling was worse than expected and so on. The end result is that much that was reusable had to be cut to fit and then papered over to cover cracks so that both retained pine and new plywood panelling have very much the same texture and appearance.

#### **Courting the public**

But, despite the inventiveness of the new interiors, it is on the back elevation of the Monmouth Street and Shelton Street terraces that the architects have made the major public display of their decorative intentions. Apparently the initial idea was simply to design modest neo-Georgian porches, but neither the GLC historians nor the architects liked this approach—so a modern version of a classical doorcase has been created. As with the interiors, the doorcase mouldings are large scale, simpler and cruder than eighteenth century prototypes and are put together with the vigour and inventive freedom of Vanbrugh rather than the archaeologically inspired finesse of Adam.

These doorcases succeed in convincing the speculator that the main entrances to these buildings are through the back elevation rather than the front on the street. Certainly they give the court a striking character.

## The GLC view

Brian Ashley Barker, surveyor of historic buildings, GLC historic buildings division

By the time work began in 1988, the old fabric of the buildings forming the triangle had long since passed through the deceptively engaging phases of picturesque decay and had become dangerously crumbling and friable.

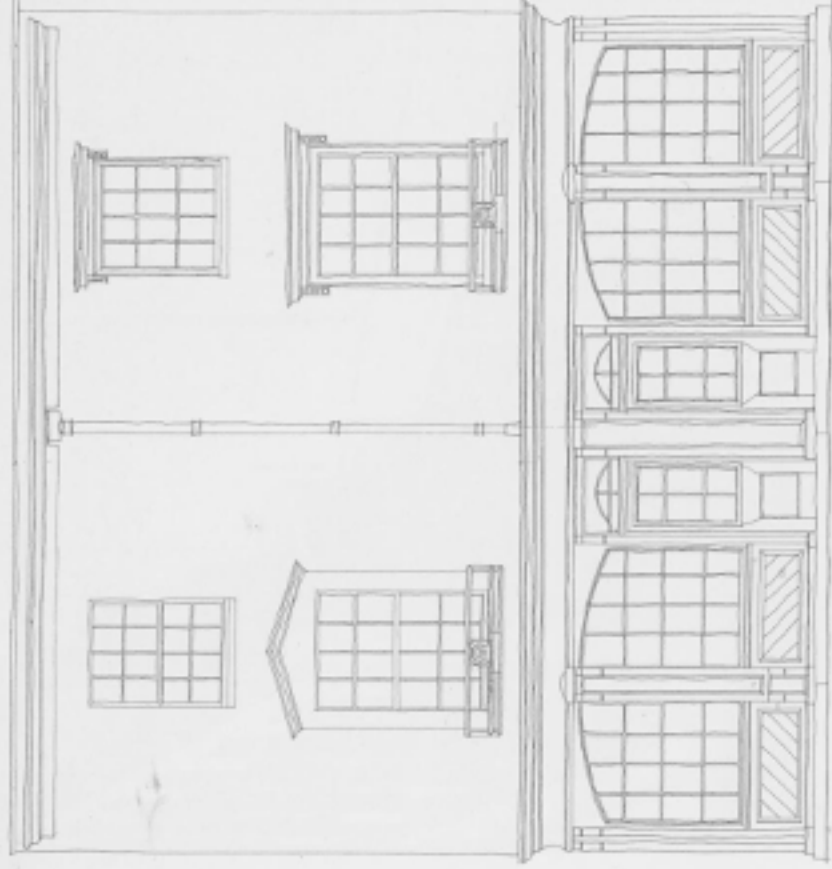
The assessments in GLC historic buildings reports from 1976 onwards had been increasingly pessimistic about how much could continue to stand. But in the results now visible on site any regret about what has been lost is far outweighed by the enjoyment to be found in a piece of living London re-emerging with an enhanced rather than a diminished identity.

The extent of the inevitable surgery strikes one as remarkably well judged, but the real advancing of architectural frontiers in this work comes in the relationship between what remains of the old and the highly ingenious invention that appears in the new work. Where the old fabric has been kept it is revered and treated seriously; but in the final result we are not so much aware of old and new co-existing side by side as of one single lively identity embodied in the still recognisable historic streets.

### Not just pastiche

This work should silence all jibes about pastiche. Much of the new design is so surprising in its ingenuity that the architectural historians will have a field-day in defining its inspirations. This is particularly so in the courtyard approach and porches. Do these owe debts at a great distance to Borromini, Vanbrugh, the Orient or the genius of the place itself? The keyword in the Comyn Ching scheme is continuity rather than preservation. But it is a continuity that can only come from an understanding of the old fabric and the ability to take inspiration from it.

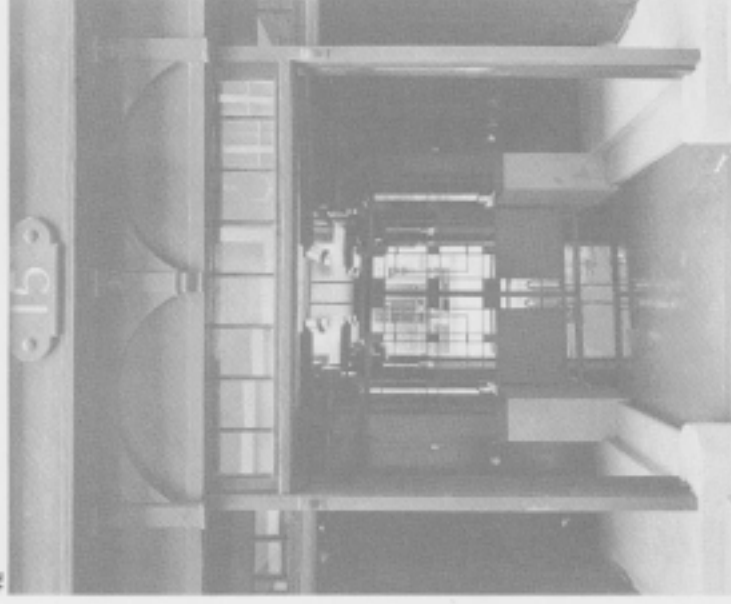
At one level this is architects' architecture and some may criticise the new design as wilful and mannered—but it operates on many levels and certainly it has been minutely and freshly considered. The ordinary Londoner who needs the reassurance of the familiar scene will still know where he is and will, without doubt, enjoy something of the novelty that has been added to his town. The connoisseur of architecture will find it well worth a detour, and the character and history of Seven Dials will have been enriched instead of eroded. But, above all, the self-consciousness of conservation has been washed away by the assurance of architecture.



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41 New shop on Shelton Street.  
42 Elevation of office building proposed for corner of Moormouth and Mercer Streets.  
43 Gateway to Ching Court from Shelton Street.  
44 Elevation of residential block proposed for corner of Shelton and Mercer Streets.

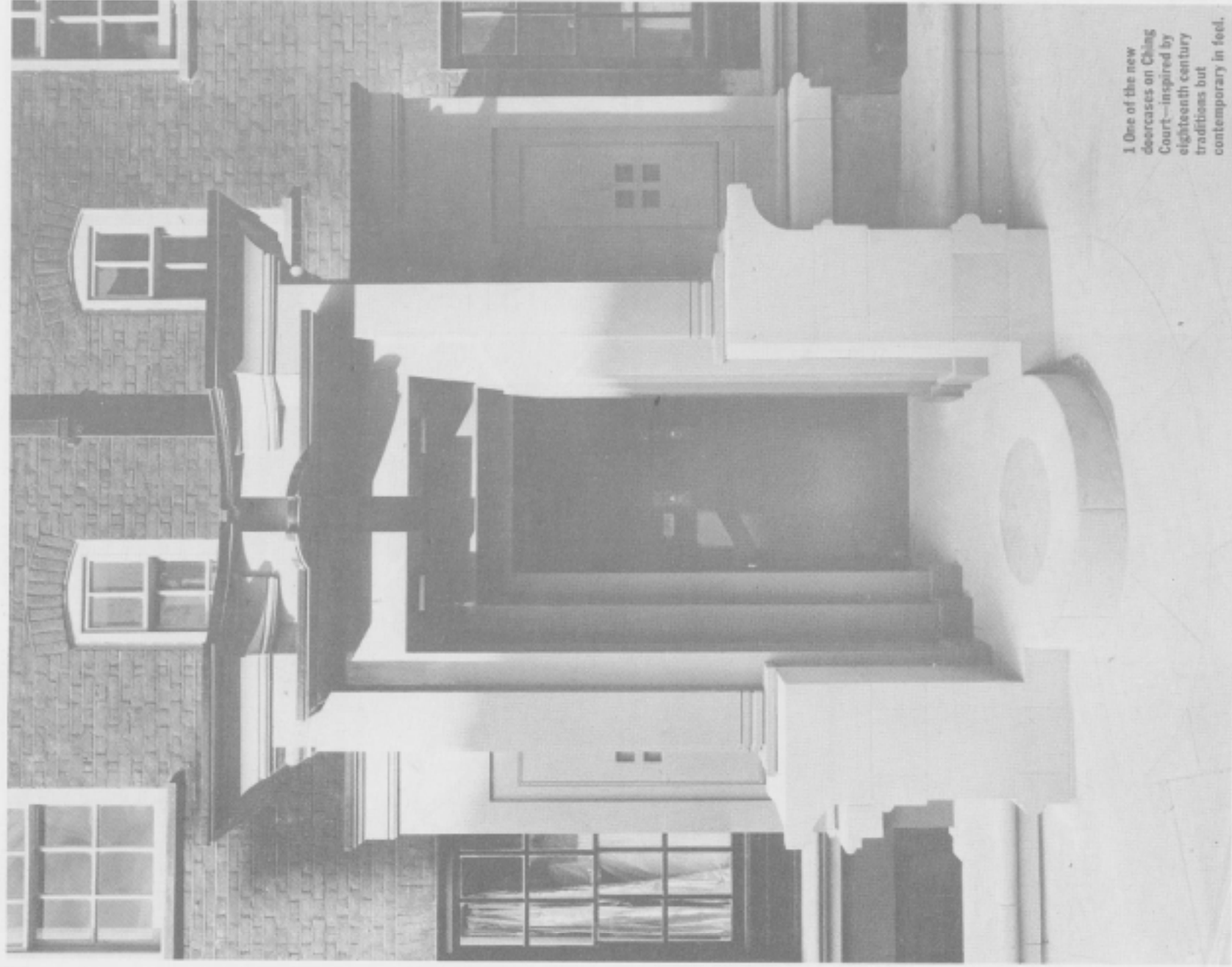
client Comyn Ching (Developments) Ltd  
architect Terry Farrell Partnership; Sumays Barlow, John Chawin, Jim Corcoran, Terry Farrell, Jonathan McDowell, Laurie Poza, Gary Young  
project architect Steve Bibbston  
project manager Brian Jackson  
possibly managers Burrell Hayward & Bidd  
structural engineers Balglen & Partners  
development advisers Swebby Cowan McElaheen  
main contractor Wiltshiers



The rehabilitation of the eighteenth century buildings in the Comyn Ching triangle at Seven Dials in Covent Garden, London, is a fascinating example of urban renewal. Terry Farrell Partnership, the architects, have repaired and restored the front elevations in a correct and self-effacing manner while, for the interiors and rear elevations, they have

developed a decorative repertoire that is sympathetic to eighteenth century tradition. On the following pages Steve Ibbotson of Terry Farrell Partnership explains their approach; Dan Cruickshank appraises the interior design; and Brian Ashley Barker gives the GLC historic buildings division viewpoint. Photographs by Peter Cook.

# HISTORIC PRECEDENT



1 One of the new doorcases on Ching Court—inspired by eighteenth century traditions but contemporary in feel.

## Architect's account

Steve Ibbotson

'I went to see the building beginning near St Giles where seven streets make a start from a doric pillar plac'd in the middle of a circular area.' This extract from John Evelyn's diary, dated October 1694, establishes the date of developer Sir Thomas Neale's Seven Dials plan.

Today's developers, architectural ironmongers Comyn Ching, acquired their premises in 1723 and have, over the years, bought the remaining buildings on this triangular segment of the Dials. This has prevented the piecemeal development seen elsewhere in the area.

### Pioneering speculation

The system of its development was that pioneered in 1666 by the speculative builder Nicholas Barbon

for the reconstruction of the City of London after the Great Fire.

Building leases of 61 years were granted by Neale to individual speculative builders who undertook to complete the shell of their buildings within two years. This shell—and the remainder of the lease—was sold on to an occupier who would fit out and embellish the house to suit his own taste and pocket.

The advantage of this system was that the landlord, for the minimum expense, got his estate developed and on the expiry of the lease possessed the buildings, while the builders stood to make a profit on the sale of the shell. The problem, of course, was that the builders had no incentive to build well, or to last, but only to build cheaply and quickly. The quality of the work had to be maintained by estate supervision, which at Seven Dials seems to have been very weak.

Certainly it was inconsistent with the ambitious aims of the development as represented by the striking French-inspired baroque plan of *voies point*—embellished with a central column supporting six sundials (removed in 1773)—and the radiating streets that Evelyn so admired. One can only assume that the class of builder Neale hoped for was not attracted to this 'marshland close' site

on the north-western edge of London.

So instead of the 'many substantial brick houses according to a certain model' of which he spoke, Neale got—over a period of about 20 years—an irregular collection of modest terrace houses. These were, even by the undemanding standards of early eighteenth century speculative building, of astonishingly flimsy construction. By the 1740s the area had acquired the sort of reputation that made it the natural setting for Hogarth's *Gin Lane*.

### Eighteenth century framework

Although processes of maintenance and shifting tastes have taken their toll since the early eighteenth century, a large part of the building fabric—stairs, floors and the Comyn Ching shopfront in Shelton Street—has survived to provide the framework for the restoration and refurbishment.

The framework established for the triangle's redevelopment can be split into two categories; first, the strategy for the whole-site development; second, the detailed considerations around phase one restoration work. Both of these required close consultation between the GLC historic buildings division and Camden council's planning department. Despite early legal difficulties that threatened



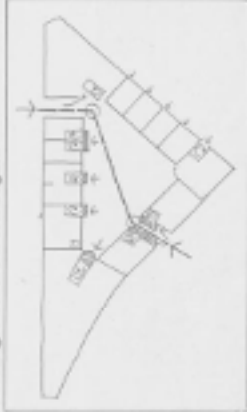
2 Seven Dials as proposed, 1691. Site outlined.



3 Permitted demolition (tinted).



4 Triangle before work began.



5 Access and circulation through Ching Court.



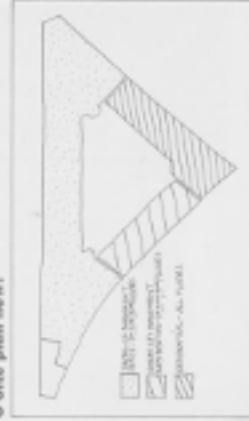
6 Map of 1746 showing Seven Dials as built.



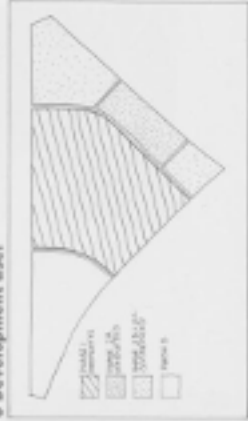
7 Triangle before clearance of centre.



8 Site plan new.



9 Development use.



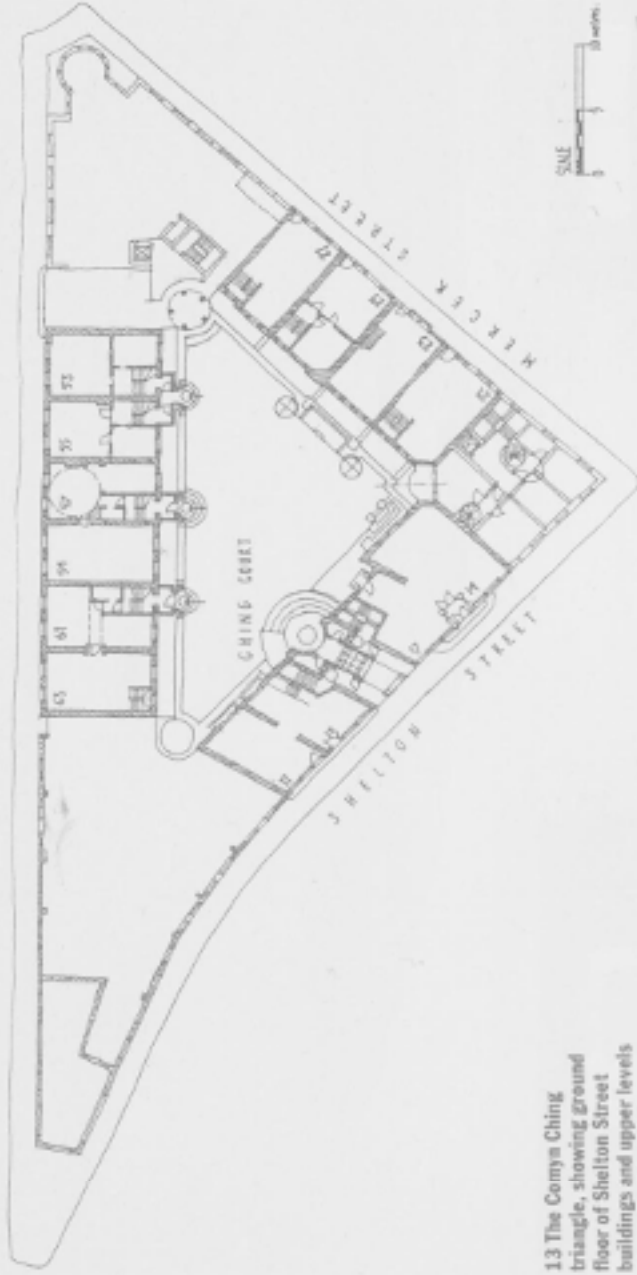
10 Phasing diagram.



11 Envisaged completed development.

12 First floor front room  
of No 57 Monmouth  
Street; the classical  
language of eighteenth  
century interior design  
is reinterpreted.





13 The Comyn Ching triangle, showing ground floor of Shelton Street buildings and upper levels of Monmouth and Mercer Street buildings.

the viability of the scheme, this relationship flourished.

Agreement was reached eventually for a balance of residential to commercial uses and for the co-ordination of the sequence of development dictated by the local authority's section 52 agreement, which positively shaped the phasing of the work, 2-4, 8-10.

Negotiations to gain consent to demolish the two mainly Victorian corner sites, 8, ran in parallel with those to allow the construction in phase two of a new office building on the Seven Dials corner and a residential block on the Shelton/Mercer Street corner. The demolition proposals were important because the new offices would help to create revenue, making the restoration work viable, and provide access for the major work required in phase one, including the complete demolition of the outbuildings to create Ching Court, the new public space in the centre.

#### Paneling removed

Opening up the Seven Dials corner entailed an agreement to remove the 270-year-old paneling and staircase from the interior of No 49 Monmouth Street (inside the demolished area) for reinstatement in phase one. The paneling was duly surveyed in detail, drawn, coded and stored until it was resurrected in amended form in No 55 Monmouth Street two years later.

This small restoration exercise introduced us to the second stage of the process, which was the close investigation and survey of the areas in phase one to be preserved, methods of replacement for missing historic details and agreement on the design of new elements. The attitude of the GLC historic buildings division was necessarily decisive, and applied to all of the external envelope, including

shopfronts and roofs, and internally to original timber floors and (most importantly) the five late seventeenth century staircases remaining in Monmouth Street. Agreement was reached on the replacement of all roofs and windows.

The detailed agreement on the restoration/replacement work coincided with the settlement of the lengthy legal entanglement with Camden council. In June 1983 work started on phase one. The initial construction work dealt with the stabilisation of the very friable structures, which required wholesale underpinning and major repairs to party and rear walls, threading large amounts of steel into and around the retained parts, and the replacement of the agreed areas (roofs, windows, etc).

During this initial construction period the design of the phase one new parts began to form against the formidable background of preservation.

#### Idiosyncratic plans

The interior plans for the Monmouth Street offices were generated by the need to pair Nos 57-59 and 61-63, leaving Nos 53 and 55 with the restored paneling as individual units, and the desire to accommodate the retained staircases with escape lobbies, service cores and WCs. Working within these constraints produced a set of idiosyncratic plans, 13, 31, which in turn required a strong yet malleable system of detailing.

The main office spaces rely on a combination of fibrous plaster cornices, softwood dados, picture rails and window paneling—the core and WCs have simple applied paneling and the staircase enclosure uses a finer paneling system (constructed in non-combustible materials), which complements the level of detailing to

the existing stairs and responds to the curious geometry of the winding stairs. These were carefully cleaned of 300 years of paint.

The variety of office plans, fused with the additional layer of detail, gives a richness that, it is hoped, reflects something of the original development's spirit.

#### No pale imitation

It was apparent during the design of the interiors that the GLC historic buildings division had a radically different attitude to the new parts—anything added to the historic background should maintain a textural sympathy but have a robust individual presence in order to avoid a conflict between the old and new. Pale imitation was to be avoided.

Ching Court is, of course, essential to the triangle as the element that will bind together the old and the new. Understandably Comyn Ching were anxious about the feel of the space because the firm will be strongly identified with it.

The triangular courtyard provides a diagonal public route from Seven Dials to Shelton Street, with a series of events on the periphery. The main events are: three office doorcases (prepositioned by the restored stairs) arranged against the rear of Monmouth Street and engaging the courtyard over the basement lightwell; the rear passage entrance from Shelton Street flanked by the large scale rear windows to the shops; and the seat placed centrally in the simple kerb edge to the Mercer Street side, 25.

The design, restricted to ground floor level, had to be able to respond to an uneven background organisation of existing stairs, openings and levels and positive enough to enliven the sheer restored rear elevations.

The decision to use York stone