



# ‘Sculpting the Void’

Mossessian & Partners’ 5 Merchant Square

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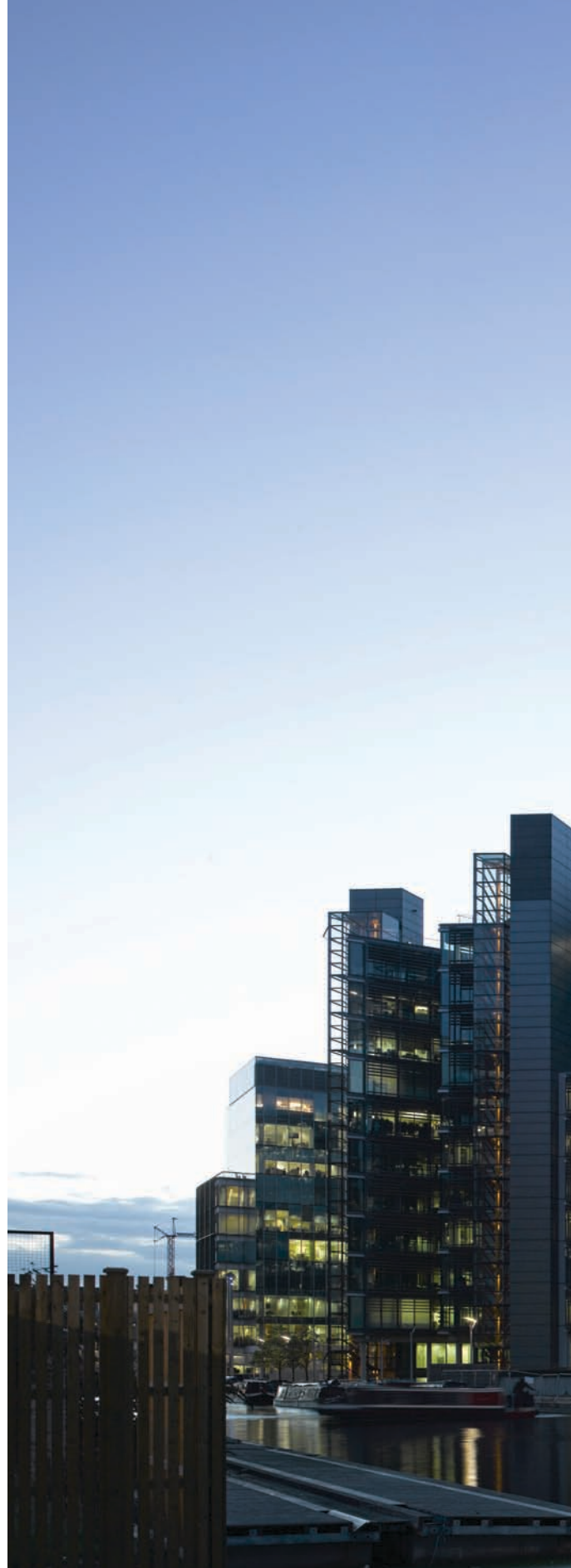
# ‘Sculpting the void’

Mossessian & Partners’ intriguing workplace fuses the conceptual with the practical, writes *Edwin Heathcote*.  
Photography by *Edmund Sumner*

Mossessian & Partners’ 5 Merchant Square is a huge building. The developer, European Land, claims it is the biggest contemporary commercial structure in London’s West End. It is also a building with a very strange context – fluid, incoherent and scrappy, if that’s a word that can be applied to context at this scale. The building completes an ensemble trio consisting of buildings by Terry Farrell & Partners and Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners (RSHP), and the rest is composed of a curious collection including St Mary’s, Paddington – surely one of the ugliest hospitals ever built – and the high-security Paddington Green Police station. This is separated only by the roar of the Westway, a hideous bridge that looks like a transparent sewer and an inarticulate and overscaled cluster of apartment

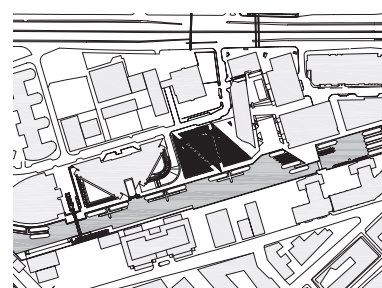
buildings. The rest of the context is yet to be determined. Michel Mossessian’s response seems to have been to begin again, virtually ignoring the bickering neighbours to create instead a novel commercial architecture of surprising elegance and delicacy.

Mossessian mashes up a surprising panoply of influences into an original and intriguing concoction. There is the undeniably steely whiff of Chicago’s modern, sleek, slick, stripped commercialism in a traditional way that betrays the architect’s experience with Skidmore Owings & Merrill. There is a finesse in detailing and facade engineering that is pure European and there is a dash of French gesturalism in the red prism that bisects the building so distinctively. That seemingly wilful slash of carmine also acts as a way of breaking up the building’s hulking >>









Site plan

**Previous page**

View from south-east with RSHP development to left  
**Left** View from west with central red

wedge thrusting upward between flanking volumes  
**Below** 15-storey atrium  
**Right** East elevation



14-storey mass as well as defining its distinctive silhouette, visible from all over the west of the city.

Mossessian modestly credits the plan to his daughter who, looking at the site plan identified Farrell & Partners' corner building as one triangle, RSHP's as a pair of triangles, her dad's naturally then should consist of three triangles. He is, of course, a little disingenuous, but this simplistic derivation does create a surprisingly logical language. The creation of three triangles allows the volumes and planes to fold and wrap into and around each other in a kind of dynamic dance. The elevational expression also changes as

you move around the building so that each facade addresses a particular situation while maintaining a coherent internal language. The north elevation, facing the Ballardian borderlands created around the Westway, presents a rusty red curtain towards the traffic, the red wedge that bursts through the opposite side reappears here as a plane, a wall of fritted colour. The frit has been applied (apparently for the first time in architectural use) to both sides of the glazing.

On the outside is the red and on the inside a black, both patterns matching. The idea of the patterns is based on research that suggests there are algorithms that can change the mind's perception of form without it noticing what is happening. Here the forms are perceived as clouds by drivers skitting by on the A40 but appear as curtains from the surrounding streets. Apparently, and in an extraordinary test-case, Mossessian was not able to use the exact algorithm due to legal fears that prompting such

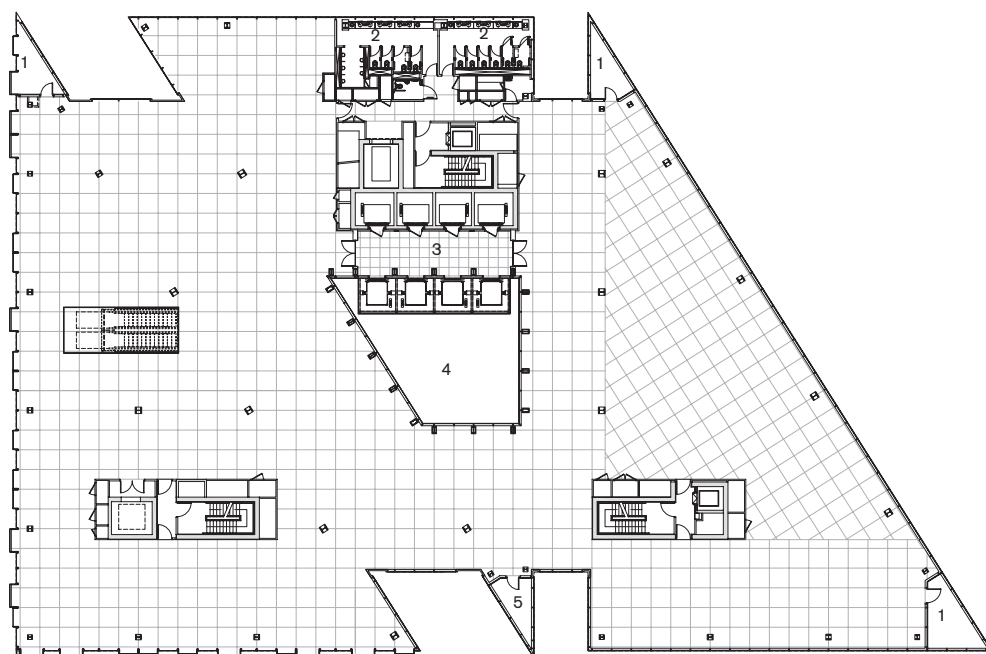
changes in the brain might be illegal – or at least lead to indefinable consequences.

After all this, the razor-sharp corner turns and wraps around to meet a seemingly radically differently modelled wall of protruding and receding volumes, a play of shadow and depth, which gives a sense of movement as the sun makes its way around the building. This in turn wraps around the structure to be terminated by the reappearance of the red shard and morphs into a sleeker, repetitive curtain wall of more conventional but extremely refined detail. Mossessian breaks up the mass of this east elevation towards its ends by removing a vertical chequerboard of panels, leaving them unglazed and open so the elevation seems to begin to fade out towards the edges. These ends express one of the building's most distinctive features. The sharp, expressionistic spaces left as the apexes of the triangles are opened up to the city and become terraces shooting out >>

## The sharp spaces become terraces shooting out into the landscape

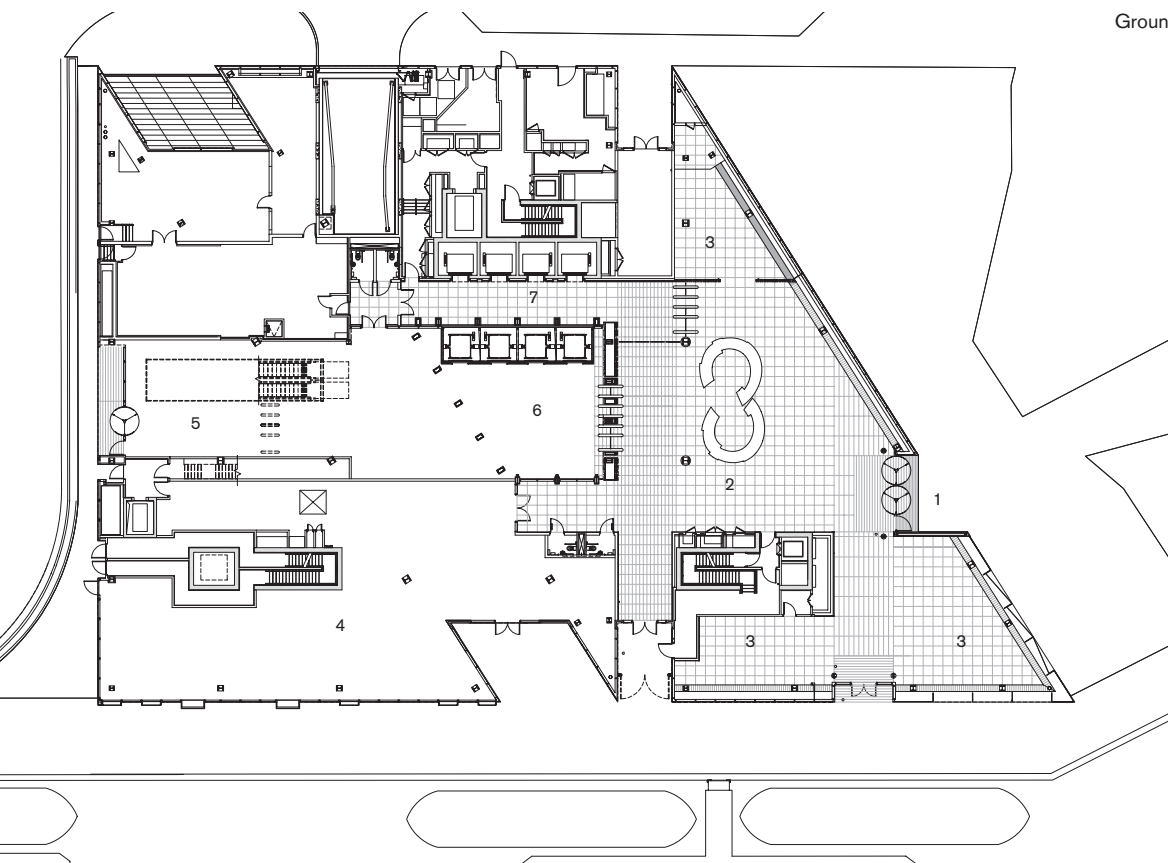






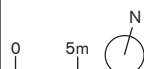
Typical floor plan

1. Corner terrace
2. WC
3. Lift lobby
4. Atrium
5. Terrace



Ground-floor plan

1. Entry
2. Lobby
3. Retail
4. Restaurant
5. Tenant entry
6. Tenant lobby
7. HR lift lobby





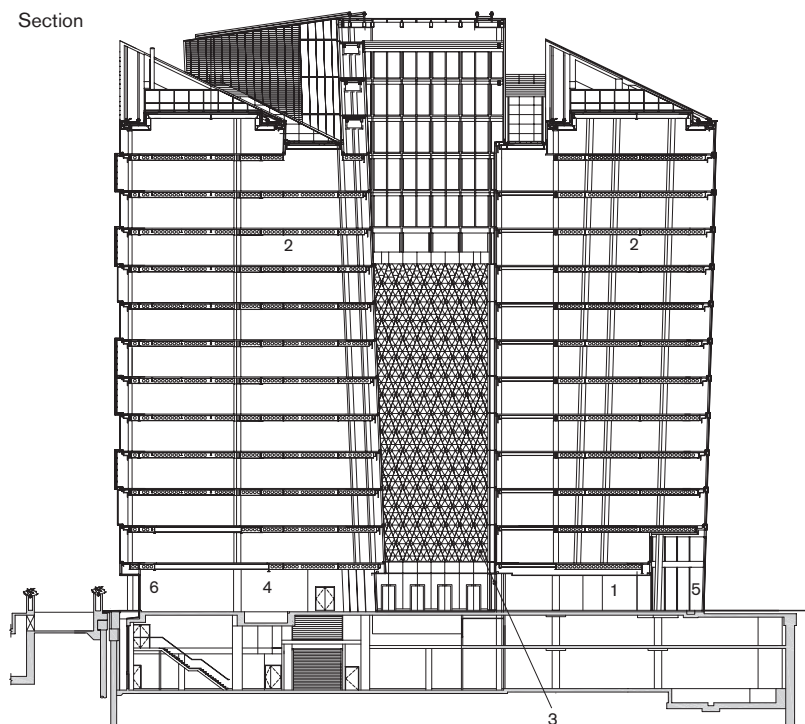
into the landscape, relieving the interiors before they become exhausted. Destined to become smokers' refuges, these aerated corners, ironically, seem to allow the building to breathe – albeit only the none-too healthy air of Paddington. Certainly at over 10 storeys up they inject the lungs with a sharp intake of cool, leaded air.

What the architects have done with the facade is more ingenious than it first appears. The variegated elevations are achieved with a completely standard facade section. Each combination of facade, smooth Miesian, projecting bays, red-fritted glazing and open balcony spandrels, is designed using the same extruded aluminium sections and the same proportional module; the huge building is wrapped in a system that produces its own internal logic, visually tying the elevations together.

The elevations wrap themselves around a stack of vast floorplates. If the triangular sections would seem to suggest an inconvenient plan, it quickly becomes clear that they don't, instead the interior is uncluttered and lofty. At its heart is a soaring 15-storey atrium. Contained within glass walls of red, it appears like a central organ, pumping light and air into the interior as the lifts create rhythm and movement. The main core is also housed within this central triangular element, but rather than dominating the centre it is pushed to the rear so that the washrooms defining its edge are allowed to overlook the A40. The glazed walls behind the vanity units provide a strip of incessant movement – which makes these among the most animated spaces in this oddly dead chunk of half-developed territory.

The lobby is enlivened by a public café, its elegantly attenuated 5m >>

Section



1. Lobby
2. Office
3. Atrium
4. Tenant lobby
5. Entrance
6. Tenant entrance

Top Reception area with contrasting desks

Contained within glass walls of red, it appears like a central organ



revolving doors creating a genuinely transparent facade, an effect that is nearly spoilt by the addition on the other side of a cheap automatic access door and its awesomely inelegantly chunky sections. Above the entrance a band of glazing on a zig-zag plan brings a touch of expressionist emphasis to a glazed entrance in a glazed elevation.

A wall of theatrically black Greek marble is grooved, which makes it look somewhere between a curtain and a water wall, but the effect chimes with the fritting on the glazing. The only faintly disturbing note is the evocation of the gushing green numbers that characterise the transition from the matrix to the real world in the eponymous film, an unsettling suggestion of a lack of materiality imbued into the materials themselves.

Moving up through the floors, the meaning of the elevational articulation becomes clearer. The protruding sections act as cantilevered bays expanding the floorspace into nothing while also creating niches for the inevitable agglomeration of stuff that characterises corporate life. They also act as a block on the monopolisation of the corners as management enclaves. In a reaction to the US model, which sees the corners as prestige office space, Mossessian has democratised the corners, ensuring that they remain the building's *de facto* public spaces.

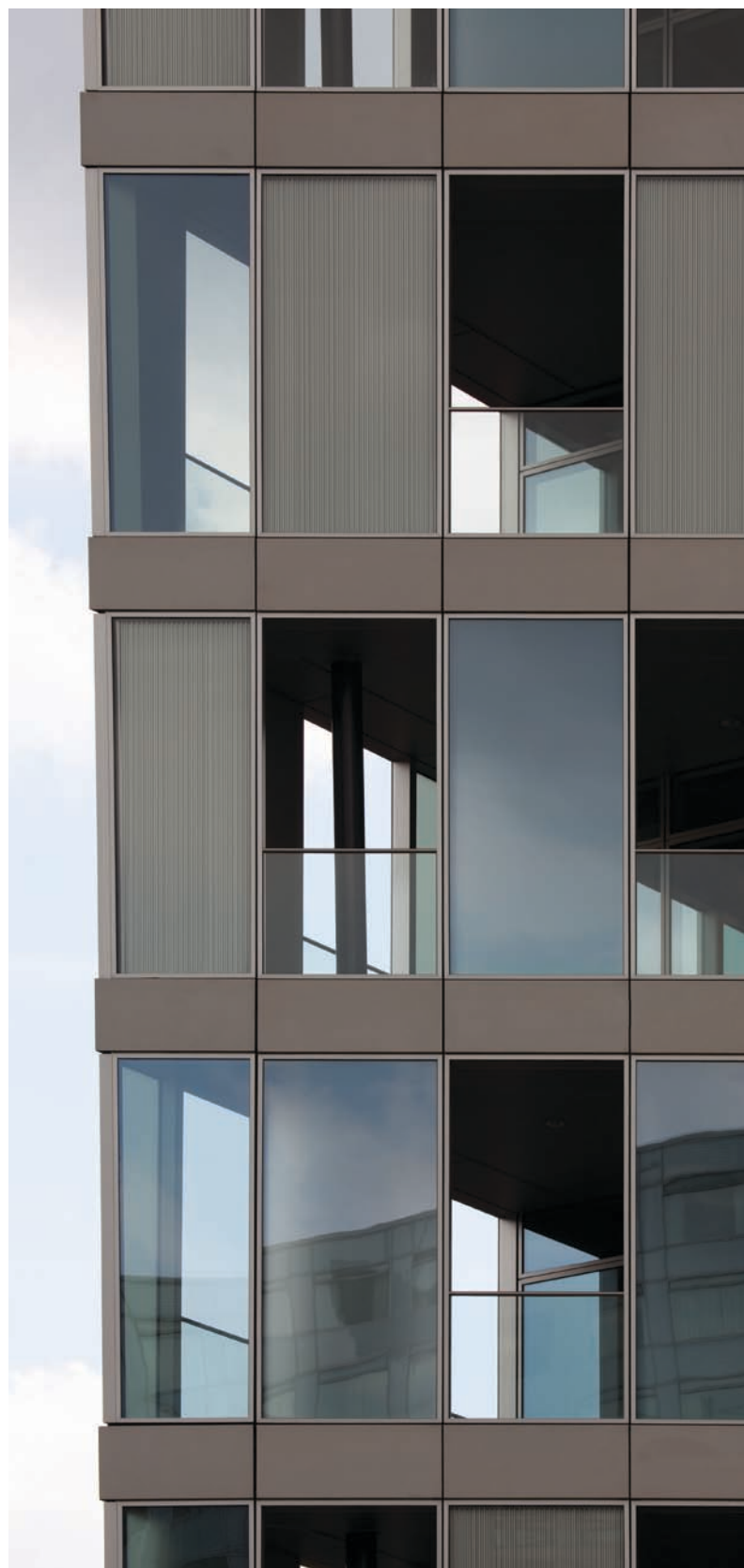
The possibility of escape from the building, while remaining contained within the envelope, reveals itself at each of those wincingly sharp corners, and the architects have happily eschewed the usual nautical clichés >>

**Above** Typical office space

**Right** Acute corner apexes are used as terraces

**Far right** The north facade facing the Westway is a wall of fritted colour

**Next page** View from the west across Paddington Basin



LEFT & OPPOSITE: ED REEVE





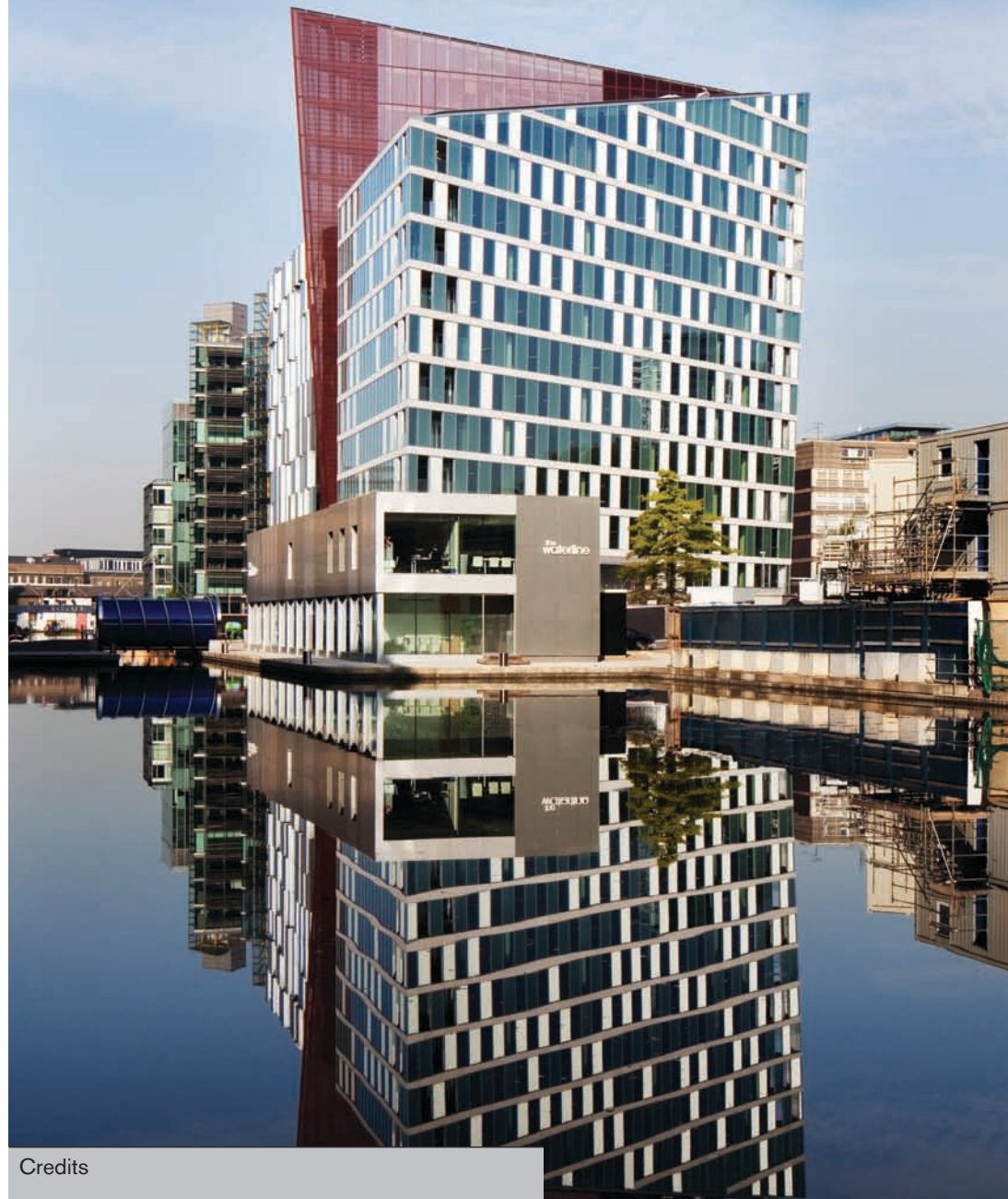


of the prow. It becomes clear that what appeared an optical illusion from the outside, the walls gently canted and leaning outwards, is in fact the case. Even the structural columns set back from the facade reveal a slight but surprising two-degree incline from the perpendicular. This was done partly to help articulate the curious angularity of the facades; to make them sharper, but also to create tension (what Mossesian refers to as 'sculpting the void') between this structure and its forthcoming but still architecturally indeterminate residential neighbour.

This is quite an unusual building. Mossesian has managed to build at a large scale, to work within the tropes of commercial architecture and to create a structure that manages to function as a recognisable object while presaging – if not dictating – its future context. That most of the building was snapped up as the corporate headquarters of Marks & Spencer demonstrates its attractiveness as a place to work. Paddington Basin has, for all its faults and its awkwardness, broadly managed to avoid iconism, and Mossesian's building slides effortlessly in.

Both at the macro and the micro scale it is a thoughtful, considered and finely-wrought structure, folded into its setting, both reflected in and reflecting the waters of the canal. It sets a tone of a serious, sleek and ambitious commercial building, of a type still largely lacking in the west of the city and it will be intriguing to see how it begins to influence its emerging context. ■

What appeared  
an optical  
illusion, is in  
fact the case



#### Credits

**Start on site**  
October 2007  
**Contract duration**  
30 months

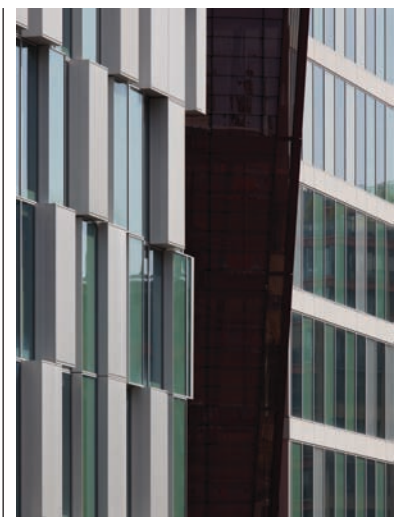
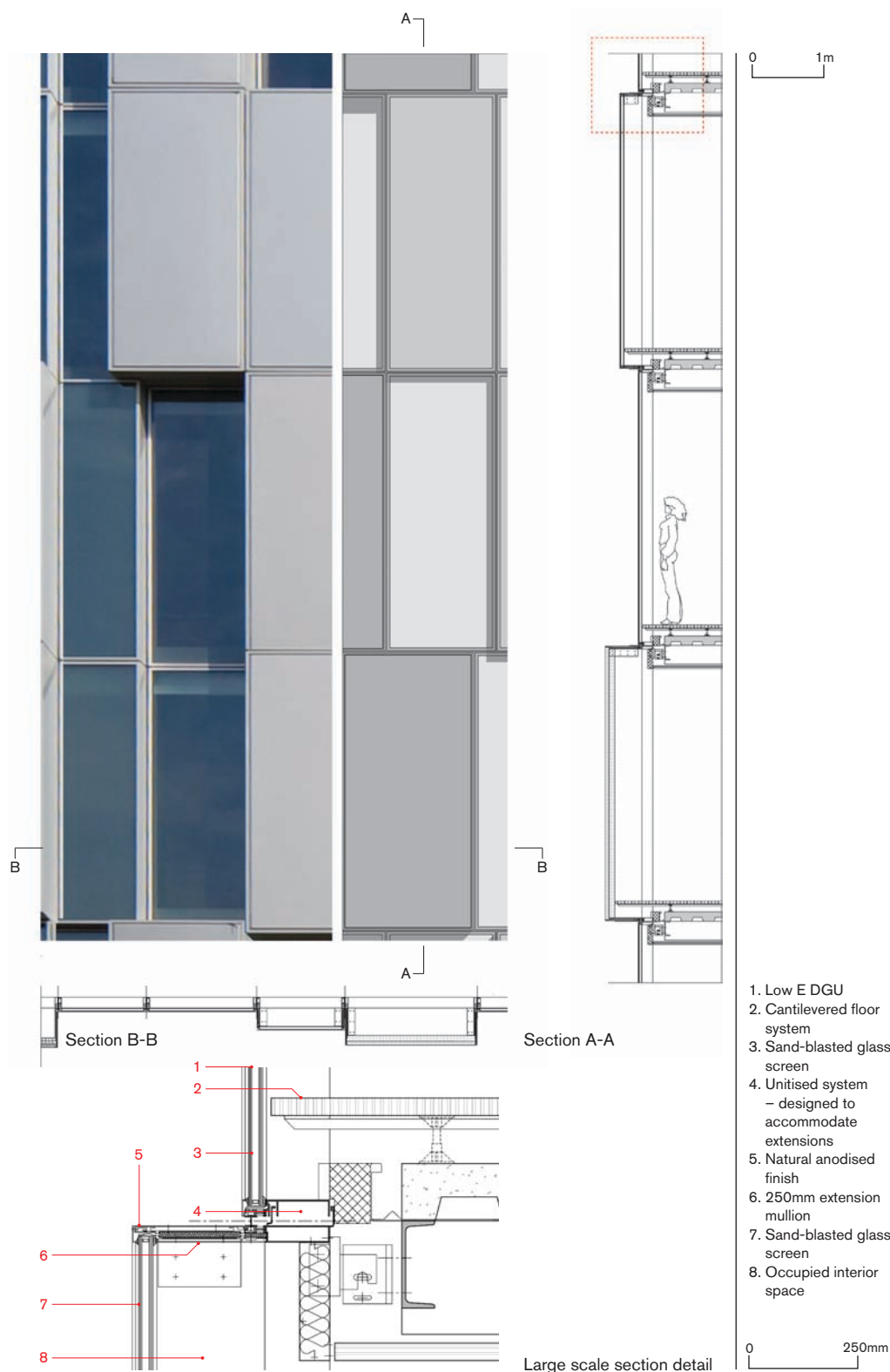
**Form of contract** Design Build  
**Cost per m<sup>2</sup>** £2,583  
**Total cost** £90 million  
**Client** European Land  
**Architect** Mossesian & Partners  
**Structural engineer** WSP  
**M&E consultant** NDY  
**Quantity surveyor** Goyne Adams  
**Project manager** AECOM  
**Main contractor** Laing O'Rourke

Gross internal  
floor area

34,374m<sup>2</sup>

ED REEVE





ED REEVE

## 5 Merchant Square

Mossessian & Partners

External wall detail

The three elevational expressions are derived from their relationship to sunlight. The west elevation has projecting bays, emphasising shade and shadows; the east elevation is defined by light and transparent variegated flat panels; and the north elevation emphasis on 'perception as facade' reads differently from far to close.

Cantilevered bays, projecting up to 500mm, give form to the west elevation and increase the lettable area.

The projections also provide shade to the adjacent glazed surfaces, reducing afternoon glare. The translucent areas add light to the floor plate, while allowing flexibility in office planning.

The clear glazed areas, with a changing pattern from floor to floor, are designed to accommodate open plan and cellular layouts with a clear window every three metres. The design minimises the number of unique elements and a single mullion enables variations by using an add-on extrusion.

*John L. Veikos, technical design director,  
Mossessian & Partners*