Like us on Facebook facebook.com/eveningstandard
Follow us on Twitter @thestandardarts



# The Zig Zag pack

## Dull and dreary Victoria Street is getting its groove back – and two new buildings by Lynch Architects are the stars of the show

Robert Bevan
Architecture Critic

VICTORIA Street has been an in-between place for half a century, a dreary direct line between Victoria station and Parliament. Its dullness now makes it hard to imagine the opening scene of Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway, in which her heroine crosses the street towards St James's Park, listening to the boom of Big Ben dissolving like leaden circles in the air.

Modernist rebuilding left little of the 19th-century thoroughfare that first opened in 1851, with its Gothic cliffs of sooty mansion blocks and the old Army & Navy store, from which just about anything could be bought and shipped to the colonies.

Instead, an SW1 office ghetto was built in the early Sixties by developer Land Securities with a frontage so smoothly bland that it resisted all attempts by history to leave some character on its features – it became grubby rather than acquiring a patina.

Over the past decade or so, Land Securities has been comprehensively rebuilding its Victoria Street estate for the second time. The results have been a curate's egg: at the western end, the corner of Cardinal Place by EPR Architects slams down a glass and steel talon to get a purchase on the pavement near the corner with Bressenden Place. It provides places to eat and shop off the main drag, as well as drama.

Just east of Westminster City Hall, however, architect César Pelli has recently erected a slab of inflected glazing at number 62 that is simply the 21st-century version of Sixties American corporate dumbness. Pelli's building reflects the recent obsession in architecture with skin, the surface of buildings that digital design has made malleable and which launched the globalised architecture beloved of context-lite "starchitects".

Thankfully, London seems, very tentatively, to be moving beyond this approach. Two new buildings by Lynch Architects encapsulate this new mood, which looks to a European tradition.

The first, Kings Gate, is a stone-fronted apartment building – a luxurious mansion block for our age – while next door is the Zig Zag office building in steel and stone. Both are 12-storeys high and both have deep façades angled to the street featuring vertical fins, balconies and roof terraces. New passageways with trees and artworks have been created between the buildings and these begin to link the main road back to its secretive hinterland. Shops and restaurants occupy the ground and mezzanine floors. The anonymous office blocks they replace have already been forgotten.

Patrick Lynch, who founded Lynch Architects in 1997 with his architect wife Claudia, brings a skein of ideas to bear on his buildings. These are unspooled rapid-fire, an erudite tumult of jokes and philosophical quotations, art historical references, expletives and Catholic theology.

> The Zig Zag building is Modern Baroque, but far from old-fashioned, incorporating the latest in ecological thinking

He has a profound interest in the Baroque and his Victoria Street schemes reference the period in contemporary ways. Kings Gate's façade, with its Jura limestone columns diminishing in number as they rise up the building, pays homage to Spanish architect Rafael Moneo's City Hall in Murcia and the civic qualities it brings to a historic city square.

Lynch is also influenced by post-war medium-rise residential towers in Milan that created density on a humane scale, quite unlike the hundreds of banal skyscrapers now in the pipeline for London.

These ideas informed the practice's Civic Architecture exhibition at the Building Centre last year, in which Lynch contrasted "the porous and ornamental character of the buildings in Piccadilly and the impenetrable and mute Sixties facades along Victoria Street".

Lynch's previous largest project, the London Black Women's Centre of 2004, had a budget of under £300,000 and was burned down in an arson attack less than three months after it was finished. Which makes Land Securities decision to take a chance on the practice with a project valued at £338 million even more admirable and astonishing.

Land Securities had already engaged Lynch Architects to design a small office and library building nearby (neither yet built) but the practice beat international luminaries such as Rem Koolhaas and Herzog & de Meuron to the Victoria Street job. The developer didn't just entrust the design concept to the studio but most interior details too, right down to the door handles. That's a rare honour in an era of contractor-specified no-frills buildings and off-the-peg components.

Still, with the massive commission dangling, Lynch took a lesson from the young Saatchi brothers, who set up an office complete with fake employees to make their agency look big enough to land the British Airways account.

With only a handful of employees, Lynch likewise drafted in his students and their laptops to make the studio look humming when the developer was due to call. In 2010 he also hired the experienced David Evans from EPR Architects as a fellow director. Land Securities was probably no more fooled than BA about the scale of the business, but decided to invest in Lynch and his chutzpah anyway – and it is a debt that has been fully repaid.

Kings Gate is the more straightforward of Lynch's two new buildings, but it is still notable for its qualities, not least the generous depth of its self-supporting balconies. The lobby is reached via a side entrance, where a cruciform column marks the bronzed doors. Its concrete has been printed with leaves and birds in an urban toile by Glasgow designer Timorous Beasties. Outside, artist Rut Blees Luxemburg has printed images of birch trees in a concrete wall.

Inside, the 100 apartments have flexible living space, tall dark oak door-frames and stone thresholds leading off corridors that are angled to avoid an institutional feel. Specially designed door handles in white bronze are square at the top (a firmer shape on which to push) but chamfer to a cone at the bottom (a softer shape on which to pull). In the penthouses, bronzed staircases feature stone treads in a continuation of the game the buildings play in the interaction of stone and metal.

In the Zig Zag Building (named by marketeers for its angled frontage) this door-handle design becomes a giant-scale white concrete column in an art-filled lobby that has shallow triangular vaults as its ceiling. Modern Baroque indeed, but far from old fashioned, with the offices incorporating the latest in ecological thinking.

Careful sun-shading, openable windows and cooled ceilings, mean mechanical ventilation shouldn't be needed. It's a pity some of the financier tenants have opted for suspended ceilings that not only cover up the fine concrete but also reduce the ceiling's inherent cooling qualities. It is a building designed to last more than a century rather than be discarded and rebuilt.

Lynch's Victoria Street buildings are part of a strategy by the architect, developer and the council to bring civic qualities to SW1. The aim is to create a town centre that brings together church and state, echoing the verticals of Westminster Cathedral, City Hall and, soon, the new library next to the Victoria Palace Theatre that Lynch is also designing. They will help turn a nowhere into a somewhere – Victoria as a neighbourhood, a place rather than simply the route between destinations.

> The aim is to create a town centre that brings together church and state

DAVID GRANDORGE

**New to the neighbourhood:** the Zig Zag building on Victoria Street

**Work and play:** the façades of the Zig Zag building, top left, and Kings Gate, top right, and their interiors

HANA VOJACKOVA

**Winning team:** left to right, Lynch Architects' Rachel Elliot, David Evans, Claudia Lynch and Patrick Lynch

**Going Out**
The best of what's on and, where to go, arts, film and music
Tomorrow and every Friday