

Art meets architecture in Mayfair

Ray Philpott looks at the unique commercial development that's a perfect fit for London's Savile Row, famed for its bespoke tailoring

Modern office and retail buildings frequently incorporate showpiece works of public art somewhere on the premises to endow them with an elevated aesthetic appeal.

However, structures where the art is an all-encompassing and intrinsic aspect of the design are far less common.

One such rarity is the new, seven-storey office and retail development soon to grace Savile Row, a street renowned for bespoke tailoring in London's swanky Mayfair.

Designed by London-based EPR Architects, it's literally clad in art – in the form of 10,000 hand-glazed, hand-fired tiles created by internationally renowned ceramic artist Kate Malone. What's more, each and every one of those tiles is genuinely unique!

To complete the picture, the building sits on a plinth decorated with decorative sand-cast bronze plates by the same artist that echo the tile glazing designs.

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EPR believes this unusually intensive collaboration between artist and architects make it almost certainly the only office building of its kind in the UK.

Associate Stephen Pey, lead architect for the project, said: "The word bespoke was invented in Savile Row, where suits were 'to be spoken for' by a specific client. So, we knew we had to create a bespoke building, featuring material and design of

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The high-quality finish of the building reflects the area's great artisan heritage



'The tiles reflect and refract daylight in interesting ways, capturing differing moods'

Stephen Pey, associate and lead architect for the project, EPR Architects

the sort of quality to match and echo that tradition. We wanted to offer something really distinctive to our clients, to Mayfair and the capital. Like a Savile Row suit, we knew the building had to be cut from the finest materials.

"The amazing crystalline finishes of the tile glaze are effectively three-dimensional. They come in four glazes of differing textures, three white and a black tile with blue crystals. The tiles reflect and refract daylight in interesting ways, capturing differing moods to give the building a subtly changing appearance and tone, depending on the weather and time of day.

"There may be a few other buildings with ceramic cladding in London, but there is no other building with fascia of

top-quality, artisan-created tiling like this."

The visual impact of the exterior is complemented by impressive sustainability features that have earned the building a BREEAM Excellent rating. In fact, it's one of the first buildings in London to be entirely LED-lit. It boasts living 'green' grass and vegetation roof areas complete with terraces, more than 1,000 sq ft of photovoltaic panelling and a highly efficient Daikin VRV cooling system.

Commenting on the use of cutting-edge lighting, Pey says: "While LED is much more affordable to install these days, you still need an enlightened client that's willing to move forward with it."

A terraced building effect is achieved in Conduit Street (far left) while Savile Row (below and bottom) features both projecting glazing and flush-fit windows

The clients, Aerium and the Terrace Hill Group, acquired the site speculatively to develop it commercially. They launched a project design competition in 2011, which EPR won, earning itself the commission for the multi-million pound office and retail outlet project.

The site of Savile Row was originally home to a postwar concrete and brick building and a 1980s replica period building on the corner plot where Conduit Street and Savile Row meet. To Pey and project team members, Associate Director Zlatko Slijepcevic and Architectural Assistant Emma Croyle, neither was of architectural merit. Demolition and rebuild was the obvious way forward.

Slijepcevic explains: “The way the two streets – originally unconnected – were joined together historically left us with a floor plan that was partly single plot-width and partly one-and-a-half plot-width. That had an important influence on our design.”

The team wanted their design to be sympathetic to the streetscape and preserve the historic plot widths. For example, the Conduit Street elevation has been carefully designed to look like two buildings, to retain the original terraced house look.

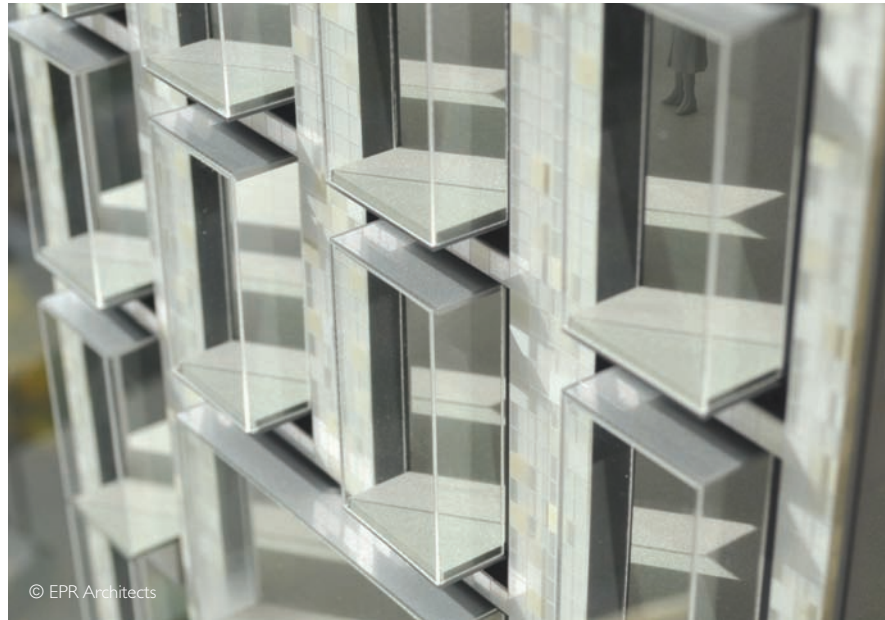
He adds: “The site’s location in the Mayfair conservation area demands a superb quality of finish and design, reflecting Savile Row’s heritage. We worked hard to maximise floor space and keep within the cost boundaries to make the design as commercially viable as possible for our clients, without compromising on quality or being intrusive on the surroundings.

“Consequently, we carefully considered massing and bulk. To reduce massing, we’ve used three segmented styles of frameless windows in different sizes: projecting, flush-fit and, in Conduit Street, recessed to reflect the historic detail. They have varying levels of very efficient UV coating but the light that falls there is largely ambient, so we’ve avoided the green-tinted look.”

The 42,000 sq ft block contains 8,000 sq ft of retail space in the basement, ground and first floors, while the remainder of the building features high-quality office accommodation. The uppermost storey is deliberately set back so it is not too imposing and softens the massing. It’s also zinc-clad because it uses a different glazing system with larger panels and ceiling panels that allow in more light, making this level the project’s premium office space.

Fundamentally, the structure consists of a clad steel frame with a single concrete, firefighting core. “We worked hard to achieve a single staircase in the core as this maximises the buildings commercial potential,” says Slijepcevic.

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Stephen Pey

Naturally though, it is the artisan tile cladding that will inevitably grab the attention of those who see this building. As Stephen Pey puts it: “This is the crux and beauty of the project, because it’s all about the arts and crafts aspect of the design.”

Essentially, the manufacturing process involves taking a strong, well-proven 30cm by 30cm extruded tile design from Europe and then applying the unique glazes meticulously produced by hand by Kate Malone and her studio team at her Islington studios. The tiles are hand glazed and fired at a specialist artisan tile-making factory in Surrey that can handle the scale of production. They are then quality-assessed and sorted and shipped to site.

“These tiles not only look fantastic, they’ve undergone every possible EU test including weathering, UV exposure, frost, acid rain, bond adhesion and checking the basic strength of the underlying tile. We’ve adapted the design to any resulting changes required,” says Pey.

EPR developed a great working relationship with Malone when they worked with her on their recently completed One



John Street, American Express’s purpose-built new development in Brighton (above). On the building’s exterior are some 15,000 of her handmade, hand-fired ceramics – a highlight feature designed as a story-telling tool for the community.



"Architects and artists actually come from quite different disciplines," says Pey. "So the success of your product depends on the strength of your dialogue with each other. We knew how good Kate is and how she works, so, we brought her in on the Savile Row project and 18 months and 1,000 sample tests later we finally got the product right.

"It's been a true collaboration between architecture, art and artisan manufacturing – and the relationship between us has been exceptional. It's been a labour of love."

The artist agrees. "It is the most intensive, complex and challenging project I have ever done. This has been a very technical project. I'm creative and normally creativity comes first, but when you are working on a project like this getting the technical part right is critical.

"We have had to overcome many challenges and for me particularly it's been the challenge of getting the glaze right. Normally I glaze tiles that I have completely made myself but in this case I was using somebody else's product.

Malone adds: "I have been developing high-fired crystal glazes for nearly 30 years. The last three years with EPR has

been the most intense period of all. The Savile Row project has increased my technical knowledge tenfold. My glaze research archive is now organised into a serious tool that will feed both my art and architectural work. The field of architectural studio-produced ceramics has forged forward thanks to this project and it's been a pleasure to be involved."

The formulation of the hand-mixed glaze and the sensitive process it undergoes is core to the unique finish of the product and is a closely guarded secret. Essentially, it involves heating the glaze-covered tiles to exceptionally high temperatures (for ceramics) in excess of 1,200°C, so the glaze becomes very fluid.

"Then they are cooled in a carefully controlled way so that crystals form and grow – effectively simulating volcanic activity. The resulting 'incubated' crystalline surface means every tile really is individual," explains Malone.

"I really credit EPR for having the confidence to involve me. I would like to see architects using the brilliant crafts talent we have in this country a lot more – it would definitely benefit the built environment and the communities that occupy it."

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Kate Malone's fascia tile designs feature four different glazes (left) creating a unique crystalline pattern on each individual tile. EPR has also worked with the artist on its One St John Street design in Brighton (top left)

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Kate Malone, artist



The building as seen from
New Burlington Place

Architects:

EPR Architects

Ceramic and artwork
design: Kate Malone

Main contractor:
McLaren Construction

Structural engineer:
Capita Property and
Infrastructure

Planning consultant:
Rolfe Judd (Planning)

Every tile is hand checked before being delivered to site for fitting by the main contractor McLaren Construction. The contractors, EPR and Kate Malone meet once a month to discuss progress and ensure quality control is strictly maintained during construction.

Pey says: "The building is framed with a Kingspan-insulated Metsec rainscreen system onto which the tiles are gravity hung on rails. This system helps the contractor and the construction process. They can get the building water tight using the rainscreen system and then get on with interior work, and simply hang the tiles as they arrive in batches."

With planning consent gained in March 2012, construction work began in March last year and Savile Row is expected to be open for business in the last quarter of this year.

The project team is currently waiting for Westminster City Council to grant planning consent to the impressive bronze designs Malone has created for the plinth.

"These wonderful bonzes are our 'official' work of public art," adds Pey. "I think most people will appreciate how amazing they are, but I'm also confident they will embrace the whole building as a great example of art and architecture working in harmony."