



Central St. Giles

2001 – 2010 London, United Kingdom

Central St. Giles was the Renzo Piano Building Workshop's first completed project in London. Set in the center of the city, north of Soho and close to the British Museum and Covent Garden, the new complex took the place of a lackluster brick building, premises used by British intelligence, dating from the sixties. Central St. Giles restores this piece of the city to its life. The previous building was closed, unwelcoming, with plain, featureless walls, while Central St. Giles is open, lively at all hours of day and immediately recognizable by its multiform colored façades.

The project consists of two parts: a U-shaped building to the east and a cuboid building to the west on Earnshaw Street, bringing together 60,000 square meters of land, of which more than half is to be used for offices, in addition to 109 home units (53 of them let at subsidized rents) and numerous businesses that provide the necessary functional and social mix. The imposing mass of building is set back, off axis and slightly rotated to break it down into six buildings carefully integrated into the finer texture of the neighborhood. In the center, there is an elegant public square with an oak tree 20 meters tall. This square, the true heart of the urban complex, is enlivened by cafés, restaurants and businesses, open to the district by five passageways and glass façades six meters high that form the perimeter of the retail and business activities at ground level. These screens, stiffened by uprights in structural glass, are set back about two meters from the line of the upper façades and have the effect of disconnecting the buildings from the ground and at the same time opening up elegant porticoes inflected by pillars with circular sections.

The 22 façades in six bright colors are the key element in the project. Each has its own orientation, differing in height and above all of a specific color that changes slightly depending on the weather conditions. Whichever street you approach Central St. Giles by, you will perceive a different image. This multiplication of orientations and sightlines favors their integration into the urban context. The colors that characterize the outer façades contrast with the courtyard, all a uniform light gray which, together with the stone paving, sets off the imposing oak tree. Only one of the external walls is light gray, to provide a suitable backdrop to the nearby Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church. The other 12 façades are red, orange, yellow or green: color inserts in a city where tones of grey predominate. The choice was made by color analysis of the wooden frames of the pubs and shops characteristic of London. The façades are attached to the reinforced concrete structures of the buildings: hung on the edge beams in the roof and anchored between the pillars on the various levels. They consist of 3,306 units, for a total of over 121,000 pieces of ceramic assembled on 22 types of modular panels in aluminum produced in Germany by Schneider Fassadenbau. Each unit of the façade measures 1.50 meters wide and varies in height from 3.90 meters for offices to 3.00 meters for residences. The ceramic elements are made by the



German NBK company, shipped and assembled on site. Each piece is unique, made by an artisanal chain. The ceramic used is composed of a mix of different types of clay extruded,

allowed to dry for some days and fired at high temperatures for about 24 hours. After being cut, colored and glazed, the pieces were fired for a second time.

At the tops, the façades continue beyond the line of the buildings, acting as parapets for terraces and walkways. The roofing is occupied by extensive green areas and generous terraces covering some 1600 square meters: an open space offering spectacular views over the city.