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Bland on the run

The business districts of most major world cities are comprised of endless tower blocks of glass or mirrors, too often reflecting very little but their own banal-ity. In one sense, that’s what the architects are proud of, but to pull off something different costs the same as money that is never spent on potential tenants or cost them the time that they think.

Clients, even those building speculatively, may be changing their tune now that the benefits of original and varied design can be seen in their recent London office developments. SMC, Allied Properties in Southwark, South- east London, is surely the most striking landmark in the City: a box of glass and steel, with a roof garden and a rooftop pool.

There’s an idea that city buildings should be made, to reflect and incorporate, but it’s not entirely workable for many clients. They approach any new development with a different attitude. The beauty of Land Securities’ role as developer of New Street Square is that they used natural red cedar for the external shading system. At 30 storeys high, it is one of the first applications of natural material on an office building that scale. It was a bit of a leap of faith on the part of the client, he admits.

Dominic Macleod, director of architecture at SMC, Allied Properties in Southwark, South-east London, is surely the most striking landmark in the City: a box of glass and steel, with a roof garden and a rooftop pool.

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Speculative office buildings are often unashamedly banal. And if they’re not banal they’re frighteningly expensive. But two recent London schemes make novel use of the facade to create exciting buildings that won’t scare off clients or their tenants.

By Beatrice Gaillaird

Palestra’s coated facade

In facade engineering the skill is in testing the options available to the designer in order to ascertain the most effective means of reducing a building’s carbon footprint. Overcoming the facade design may not necessarily bring significantly better results: optimum solutions are those that provide adequate reductions in solar gain without compromising the budget. Which you want is a question of the design. To design an external shading system that is negligible relative to the benefits that you could gain from applying low "E" coatings and has the surface of the glass itself.

Coatings obviously cost, but set against the price of a comparable mechanical shading system, the benefits they yield may be justified. The "g" value of Palestra’s upper box (above and below left) is 0.28, and the lower box 0.22, effectively meaning that 24% and 29% of the external heat is entering the building. By comparison, a single sheet of glass would give a value of 0.70, says Kara.

The key point to note is the aesthetics. Coatings are about reflecting energy to mitigate solar gain, and the aesthetic of the facade is the highest priority. This means that the facade must be high in reflectivity to the glass. Thus the mirror-like quality of Palestra’s upper box, which is a no-nonsense decision, but a visible manifestation of a glazing system working harder to keep the occupants cool.