

Case Name: Twentieth Century House, 31-32 Soho Square, London

Case Number: 1466946

Background

We have been asked to consider Twentieth Century House, 31-32 Soho Square, London for listing.

Asset(s) under Assessment

Facts about the asset(s) can be found in the Annex(es) to this report.

Annex	List Entry Number	Name	Heritage Category	HE Recommendation
1	1467452	Twentieth Century House	Listing	Do not add to List

Visits

Date	Visit Type
09 October 2019	Full inspection

Context

Twentieth Century House, 31 and 32 Soho Square is part of wider development site being considered for planning permission. The owners are currently in discussion with the local planning authority on amending the proposals. The formal consultation on these amendments will be carried out once there is a decision on the listing assessment.

The planning proposals have generated a lot of public interest and the applicant has provided a copy of the petition which has been signed by over 1,500 people objecting to the proposals.

Twentieth Century House, Soho Square is located in the Soho and China Town Conservation Area; it is recognised in the conservation area audit as an unlisted building of merit.

Assessment

CONSULTATION

We have consulted the applicant, owner's representative, local planning authority, Greater London Historic Environment Record (GLHER) and the Twentieth Century Society, on the facts of the case. The GLHER and Twentieth Century Society responded stating that they did not have any comments to make. The other responses are set out below.

The local planning authority responded stating that the building is in the Soho and Chinatown Conservation Area and the City Council consider that it makes a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area, and that there is a presumption to retain it. This is set out in the Soho and Chinatown Conservation Area Audit.

The applicant responded with some suggested corrections to the factual details and these have been made as appropriate. They have also provided some more substantive comments which are addressed below:

COMMENT 1: they have questioned the omission of reference to the surviving original 'Crittall' windows in the courtyard elevations.

RESPONSE 1: a historic image provided by the occupant shows that the windows in the courtyard elevations, including the stairwell, have been replaced with later and simpler metal frames.

COMMENT 2: they state the consultation report makes no reference to the issue of 'group value' in relation to the adjacent buildings on the south-west side of the Square, namely 33 to 34 and 35, Soho Square.

RESPONSE 2: the purpose of the consultation report is to set out the facts of the case; an assessment of its level of architectural and historic interest, including its claims to group value, are addressed in the discussion below.

COMMENT 3: they state that the consultation report seriously underplays the particular significance of the continuing association of the building and this area of Soho with the important UK film and media business; they also highlight the information contained in Leslie Hardcastle's Note on the history of 20th Century Fox Film Corporation in Soho of 9th September and Brian Robinson's List of films from 20th Century Fox with British cultural elements which they have supplied.

RESPONSE 3: the consultation report notes that the building has been home to Twentieth Century Fox Film Ltd since it was built and it identifies this company as one of the major film studios of the C20. The two references mentioned in the applicant's response summarise the films which the company have produced and note that the administration for many of these productions would have taken place in 31 to 32 Soho Square. The references have been added to the factual details sources section and the history section has been slightly amended, although neither document provides significant new information. An assessment of the building's historic interest is made in the discussion below.

COMMENT 4: both the applicant and the owner refer to one of the surviving oak-panelled second-floor rooms as a board room.

RESPONSE 4: the 1936 plan of the building identifies the two second-floor panelled rooms as offices for company executives. The board room was located at the south end of this floor and has been replaced by later office spaces.

The owner's representative has supplied information regarding the current planning application. This information does not relate to the special interest of the building; however, a summary of the building's planning history is included in the context section of this report. They have also provided a report in which they assess the building against the Principles of Selection and conclude that it is recent in date and falls far below the special architectural and historic interests which would merit its statutory listing as an office building of the 1930s.

We have received several additional emails from members of the public in support of the listing; these have not supplied any significant new information. The emails have been added to the case.

DISCUSSION

The Principles of Selection for Listed Buildings (2018) states that from 1850 to 1945, because of the greatly increased number of buildings erected and the much larger numbers that have survived, progressively greater selection is necessary. The Historic England Selection Guide for Commerce and Exchange (2017) states that many commercial building types, including offices, are largely C19 creations. Because they survive in such large numbers and were subject to a high degree of standardisation, selection for designation needs to be very discriminating. Providing a smart image remained paramount for the C20 office as it developed. As with public buildings, there is a clear hierarchy of importance, with architectural effect being reserved for the principal spaces – foyers, stairs, and boardrooms.

Twentieth Century House, 31 to 32 Soho Square is an office development built between 1936 and 1938, and designed by Gordon Jeeves for the owners, Conduit Property Investment, and the occupiers, Twentieth Century Fox Film Ltd. It has a neo-Georgian design to the principal elevations. Neo-Georgian architecture was used in many offices and public buildings from the late-C19 and through the first half of the C20. To merit listing, buildings of the 1930s must stand out amongst their contemporaries, particularly with office buildings where the architectural calibre of listed examples is high. The style of 31 to 32 Soho Square complements the neighbouring buildings that surround the square including a number of late-C17 and C18 buildings. Although an elegant building with a good contrast of brick and stone finishes, it is overall a restrained design with limited additional decorative embellishment. The courtyard elevations have a largely utilitarian appearance and they have lost their original multi-pane crissall-style windows that had afforded them a more Modernist appearance; the replacement metal windows are plainer with larger panes. Listed contemporary London offices such as 23 to 27 Cornhill (1929, Grade II) and 14 to 15 Langham Place (1930,

Grade II) show a good use of materials, and have elegant designs enhanced by well-carved stone detailing and decoration. In comparison Twentieth Century House is a more standard design which does not distinguish itself from other inter-war office developments.

The architect Gordon Jeeves was a prolific designer of offices and housing developments, frequently employing neo-Georgian idioms. His contemporary works include 129 to 137 Marylebone Road (unlisted), which was completed the same year as 31 to 32 Soho Square, and several of his flat developments including the colossal complex of Dolphin Square (subject to a Certificate of Immunity from listing). 31 to 32 Soho Square is a typical example of his work. While Jeeves is associated with some listed buildings, most of these are in collaboration with other architects and have greater design merit, including Palladium House, 1 to 4 Argyll Street (Grade II, 1928-1929), on which he collaborated with the renowned New York sky-scraper architect, Raymond Hood; it is listed as a very unusual instance of a London-scaled American tower-block design, embellished with Art Deco or 'Moderne' details.

Internally, as with most offices, the majority of the floor spaces in Twentieth Century House are largely open-plan areas with bordering offices that have been subject to various alterations. The most impressive rooms are the oak-panelled offices on the second floor. Although one survives with its full panelling including a decorative chimney piece, the other has been widened and lost one wall of panelling. The curved staircase has a Modernist-inspired finish with its simple rendered banister, but the stairwell is overall very plain. The screening rooms show more overt styling with heavily stepped detailing to entablatures, walls and the ceiling; however, there is little else in the way of decoration. Although the screening rooms are a distinctive feature of the office building, reflecting the work of the film company, they are small spaces with relatively simple levels of decoration, have lost their original seating and projection machinery, and, as late 1930 screens, are not particularly early examples of cinema auditoriums. The main reception area has some limited decorative features to the walls and is now dominated by a large modern reception desk. Given the nature of the external design, the internal detailing is not of sufficient merit to raise the overall architectural interest of the building.

By the time that 31 to 32 Soho Square opened in the late 1930s, Twentieth Century Fox Film Ltd was one of the most important film production companies in Hollywood along with RKO Radio Pictures, Universal Studios, United Artists, Warner Brothers and Columbia Pictures. In the mid-1920s the company's main studios moved to near Beverly Hills, California. They pioneered film production techniques, including Movietone, a sound-on-film system created in the late 1920s, and Cinemascope a wide-screen process based on an anamorphic systems of lenses, first shown in a screen of *The Robe* in New York in 1953. Twentieth Century Fox produced internationally renowned films including those with strong links to British culture such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1939) starring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, and *How Green Was My Valley* (1941). While these, along with many of their other movies, were produced in the United States of America, some films were produced in the United Kingdom. These include *As You Like It* (1936) starring Laurence Olivier, *Wings of the Morning* (1937) the first Technicolor full-length feature film to be filmed in Europe, and *We're Going to be Rich* (1938) starring Gracie Fields, the latter two of which were filmed at Denham Film Studios, Buckinghamshire.

The administration and oversight of film distribution, financing, marketing and publicity, and the co-ordination of press screenings for the company's British productions, would principally have been handled through the Soho Square office. The original building design included various partitioned areas and offices for these activities, as well as executive offices, a board room and screening rooms; however, many of the original partitions have been removed or replaced in later years. Although it is clear that the building has strong links to the international film industry through its continuous use as Twentieth Century Fox's British headquarters, other listed buildings associated with the British film industry demonstrate a clearer manifestation of the film-making process and retain spaces that demonstrate specific functions including studio spaces. In contrast, the activities which occurred in the building in Soho Square, although essential to the co-ordination of the company's work, were principally more standardised commercial and administrative practices associated with the wider film industry, such as casting and distribution, which do not have the same level of historic interest demonstrated by those listed buildings that better reflect specialist activities directly related to film making and production.

Listed buildings related to the film industry include Bushey Film Studios, Hertfordshire (Grade II) a converted and extended former mid-C19 Methodist Chapel, which incorporates Sir H Herkomer's early-C20 daylight film studio, the earliest surviving film studio in England. Stages 2 and 3a at Ealing Film Studios, London, which are listed, along with the former office building, the reused early-C19 White Lodge (both Grade II), includes a suite of offices and dressing rooms as well as film studios spaces where many British productions were filmed including *Whisky Galore* (1948) and *The Ladykillers* (1955). Finally, there is the former laboratory building to Denham Film Studios, Buckinghamshire (Grade II), built in 1936, where films were produced and

edited before being distributed around the country; it also has very strong architectural interest for its sleek design created by one of the founders of the Bauhaus school, Walter Gropius.

In addition to the longstanding historic association with Twentieth Century Fox, the office building is located within an area of Soho which is considered by many to be the heart of the British film industry. An association with a historically significant company can add interest to a commercial building, particularly where that is manifest in the building fabric. However, given the number of mid-C20 office buildings which were erected, particularly in London where many major companies established their British headquarters, to merit listing a building's architectural merits must also be of a very high calibre. In this instance, despite some limited external and internal expression of the film company's association, the building is largely a typical inter-war office structure.

Twentieth Century House, 31 to 32 Soho Square fits in well with the architecture of surrounding buildings and forms part of a good group with many of those that border Soho Square, including some which are listed. It is fittingly recognised as making a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area in the Soho and Chinatown Conservation Area Audit. However, this group association is not sufficient in its own right to raise the overall interest of this inter-war office development in a national context.

Despite its local interest as an elegant inter-war office development which has a long and continuing association with an internally renowned film company, Twentieth Century House, 31 to 32 Soho Square does not display sufficient architectural or historic interest to merit listing in a national context.

CONCLUSION

After examining all the records and other relevant information and having carefully considered the architectural and historic interest of this case, Twentieth Century House, 31 to 32 Soho Square, City of Westminster, London, does not meet the criteria for listing.

REASONS FOR DESIGNATION DECISION

Twentieth Century House, 31 to 32 Soho Square, City of Westminster, London, is not recommended for listing for the following principal reasons:

Degree of architectural interest:

- * the neo-Georgian design of the principal elevations, although fitting for its location on the corner of Soho Square, does not display sufficient architectural distinction or detailing to distinguish it from other similar office buildings of this date and style;
- * the internal decoration, fixtures and fittings do not demonstrate particularly high levels of quality, rarity or survival.

Degree of historic interest:

- * the association with the film industry in Soho, particularly with the internationally renowned Twentieth Century Fox Film Company, although longstanding, is not of sufficient interest in a national context to compensate for its degree of architectural interest as a relatively typical inter-war office development;
- * the activities which occurred in Twentieth Century House, although essential to the co-ordination of the company's work, were principally more standardised commercial and administrative practices associated with the wider film industry which do not have the same level of historic interest demonstrated by those listed buildings associated with the film industry that better reflect specialist activities directly related to film making and production.

Degree of group value:

- * the group association with several other listed buildings bordering Soho Square and its contribution to the conservation area it stands in is acknowledged but does not confer special interest.

Countersigning comments:

Agreed. We have carefully considered the architectural and historic interest of this case and have concluded that although the building has local interest it does not meet the high bar required for listing buildings of this type and date. SG 14/01/20

Annex 1

Factual Details

Name: Twentieth Century House

Location: 31-32 Soho Square, London, W1D 3AP

County	District	District Type	Parish
Greater London Authority	City of Westminster	London Borough	Non Civil Parish

History

Twentieth Century House was built on the site of three late-C17 buildings. 31 Soho Street and 67 Frith Street formed a four-storey corner mansion house. 32 Soho Street was a separate building with an L-shape plan; one of its former occupants, the noted botanist Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820), is commemorated in a stone plaque set within the front elevation of current building.

Plans for 31 to 32 Soho Square were drawn up by the architect Gordon Jeeves in 1936 for Conduit Property Investment. By this time it appears that Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation had been established as a tenant; the proposed internal plans identify the location of business specific spaces including two screening ('try-out') rooms, offices for key staff, a board room and areas for individual departments.

Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation is an American film studio which was founded in 1935 from a merger between Fox Film Corporation and Twentieth Century Pictures, and became one of the major film studios of the C20. The office on Soho Square was the company's British headquarters and it was supported by eight branch offices in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

The building was opened on 13 May 1938. The opening ceremony was commemorated on film and shows one of the company's executives, Francis Harley, presenting the keys to his colleagues Sydney Kent and Walter Hutchinson. Those in attendance included the actors Gracie Fields and Monty Banks. The film includes various shots of the building under construction and some of the complete interior including the entrance hall and a wood-panelled office.

The building continues to be leased to Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, and over the years has been visited by various well-known members of the international film industry and the production of many notable films were managed from this office in Soho Square. This area of Soho came to be considered by many as the centre of the British film industry due to the location of the headquarters of several of the big production and distribution companies based in the area. This included the headquarters of the British Board of Film Classification (3 Soho Square, listed Grade II), the former headquarters of the Associated-British Pathé film company (The Pathé Building, 103 Wardour Street, unlisted) and the former headquarters of Hammer Productions Limited (Hammer House, 113 to 117 Wardour Street, unlisted).

There have been several alterations, including changes to the arrangement of partitions on all of the floors to varying degrees. The public lifts have been modernised, although the original service lift has been retained. The original metal casement windows in the courtyard elevations have been replaced with later metal windows.

The architect Stanley Gordon Jeeves (1888-1964) undertook his initial architectural training under Thomas Cockrill AMICE. Following active service in the First World War, he set up his own practice in 1924 and became a fellow of the RIBA the following year. His primary work was in the design of offices and flats, as well as 26 shoe shops for Lilly and Skinner, built between 1930 and 1932. One of his buildings, Palladium House, City of Westminster, designed in collaboration with Raymond Hood in 1928-1929, is listed at Grade II, and is an office block faced in black polished granite with gold enamel Art Deco features. Other designs include Latymer Court, Hammersmith (1934), Dolphin Square (1934, subject to a Certificate of Immunity from listing), Cramner Court (1935), and he was reportedly involved in Sir Reginald Blomfield's redesign of the Quadrant arcade along Regent Street (various sections listed Grade II). He also was responsible for introducing a Classically-detailed staircase to the late-C19 building, 4 Curzon Square (listed Grade II).

Details

Office, built between 1936 and 1938, designed by Gordon Jeeves for Conduit Properties Ltd and Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

MATERIALS: the building has a steel-framed construction. The street elevations are faced in ashlar, reconstituted Portland-effect stone on the lower floors and fourth floor, and brick laid to English Bond on the intermediary floors. The windows are a combination of timber sashes, metal casements, and timber dormers. The mansard roof is covered in clay tiles, and the flat-roof floors above are faced in brick. The courtyard elevation is faced in grey brick; the courtyard windows have mostly been replaced with later metal frames.

PLAN: the building has a broadly L-shaped footprint with the front elevation facing Soho Square to the north-east. The office and facilities are arranged on each floor around a corner staircase and lift shafts.

EXTERIOR: the building is seven storeys with a plant-room above and a basement level. The street elevations have five storeys, a one-storey mansard roof with dormer windows, and a flat-roof storey above with crittall-style windows. These elevations employ a neo-Georgian style, with a regular window arrangement and rusticated lower floors. Most of the windows are sashes; the first-floor windows have ashlar surrounds and the second to fifth-floor windows are topped by brick voussoirs with central keystones. The entrance elevations wrap around the south-west corner of Soho Square and in front is a low chain-link fence attached to small stone obelisks. The five-window north elevation has an off-centre projecting porch with two pairs of Tuscan columns supporting a large entablature with metal lettering reading 'TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX FILM CO LTD/ 31 to 32'; within is a pair of modern glass doors flanked by pairs of Tuscan pilasters. To the right is a two-window return with a large ground-floor window which replaced an earlier display window; this return also has a stone plaque to Sir Joseph Banks who occupied an earlier building on this site. The eight-window elevation facing onto Frith Street includes a basement light-well topped by metal railings. On the north-east corner of the building is a pair of plaques reading 'TWENTIETH CENTURY HOUSE'. A round neon sign with the Twentieth Century Fox logo is attached on the north side of the flat-roof storey above. To the south-west, the courtyard elevations are topped by parapets and there is an external metal stairway. Projecting into the courtyard is a single-storey flat roof wing which incorporates the screening rooms.

INTERIOR: the ground-floor reception areas displays some Modernist-style detailing including coved ceiling with stepped cornicing, a deeply stepped architrave that leads down to the screening rooms, tall stepped skirting and paired painted-timber linear dado rails. Down a flight of stairs, with double curtailed bottom steps, are the two screening rooms with connecting hall that has a ceiling with deeply stepped cornicing, corner pilasters and paired dado-rail decoration along the walls. The ceiling and walls of the largest screening room are covered in modern finishes which may hide earlier detailing; there appears to be a stepped arch around the screen. The smaller screening room walls are also covered in modern finishes; however the stepped coved ceiling is visible. Both rooms have modern seating and adjoining projection rooms which retain earlier timber doors, and have modern projection equipment.

The second floor retains two raised-and-fielded, oak-panelled executive offices. The corner office includes Classically-detailed dentil ceiling-cornices with egg-and-dart moulding, and a Classically-detailed, carved and bolection-moulded oak chimney-piece with marble around the stainless-steel fireplace and above a stylised clock. The adjoining office includes a similar clock; the hallway wall has been pushed out and the panelling flanking the door has been replaced with full-height glass screens. The offices are linked by an ensuite bathroom with monochrome tiling, and a panelled lobby topped by a vented coved ceiling. There are also corner offices on the first and third floors with cornices and chimney pieces; the first-floor office retains the adjoining lobby and ensuite bathroom. Most of the other original partitions have been replaced or removed. Some floors have a dentil dado rail around the walls which may be part of the original decorative scheme. Most ceilings are covered by later tiles; where the ceiling is visible it is undecorated.

The walls of the lift-lobbies and stairwell are decorated with paired dado rails. The original service lift survives with doors and grates; the public lifts have been modernised. The open-well staircase rises through the building with a curving reinforced concrete side, polished-brass handrail and double-curtailed base steps. There are also some original plain architraves to the bathrooms and kitchens. A few original timber doors survive, particularly in the service areas including the basements, where an early metal safe door is also located.

Selected Sources

Books and journals

S, Bradley, N, Pevsner, *Buildings of England, London 6: Westminster*, (2003), 430
Sheppard, FHW, *Survey of London: Volumes 33 and 34: St Anne Soho*, (1966), 116-120
'Office Soho Square' in *The Builder*, Vol 154, (May 1938), 894

Websites

Video of the building opening in 1938, accessed 17 October 2019 from
<http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/youtube/58855939980348f1abffd4639211fa36>

Other

Gordon Jeeves Architect Biography File, held at RIBA Library

List of Films from 20th Century Fox with British Cultural Elements, prepared by Brian Robinson for the Soho Society, 2019

Note on the History of 20th Century Fox Film Corporation in Soho, prepared by Leslie Hardcastle OBE

Honorary President of the Soho Society, 2019

WCC:Acc0009/2/80143 WDP2/T0040/0 31-32 Soho Square W106 and 07 Frith Street. Owner Messrs Conduit Property Investment, held in City of Westminster Archive

Map

National Grid Reference: TQ2968081166



© Crown Copyright and database right 2015. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number 100024900.

The above map is for quick reference purposes only and may not be to scale. For a copy of the full scale map, please see the attached PDF - 1467452_1.pdf