



Making waves in the city

Inspiration can be found anywhere, from the forms and lines of nature to the pages of the greatest novel, or even from a music video of a certain bootylicious superstar! For 61 Oxford Street in London, Allford Hall Monaghan Morris found it in the iconic fluid lines of an Alvar Aalto vase

TEXT:
Sophia Cullen
PHOTOGRAPHY:
Courtesy of Allford Hall Monaghan Morris, Dukelease Properties and © Timothy Soar

A £150m landmark mixed-use development, and the first major new-build scheme to be delivered in the regeneration of the previously forgotten east end of London's Oxford Street shopping district, this project was created by Prime Central London developer Dukelease Properties. Over 70,000 sq-ft, the six-storey scheme introduces two floors of Grade A office space, six high quality residential apartments and 35,000 sq-ft of retail space, which is now home to the flagship store of Spanish retailer Zara.

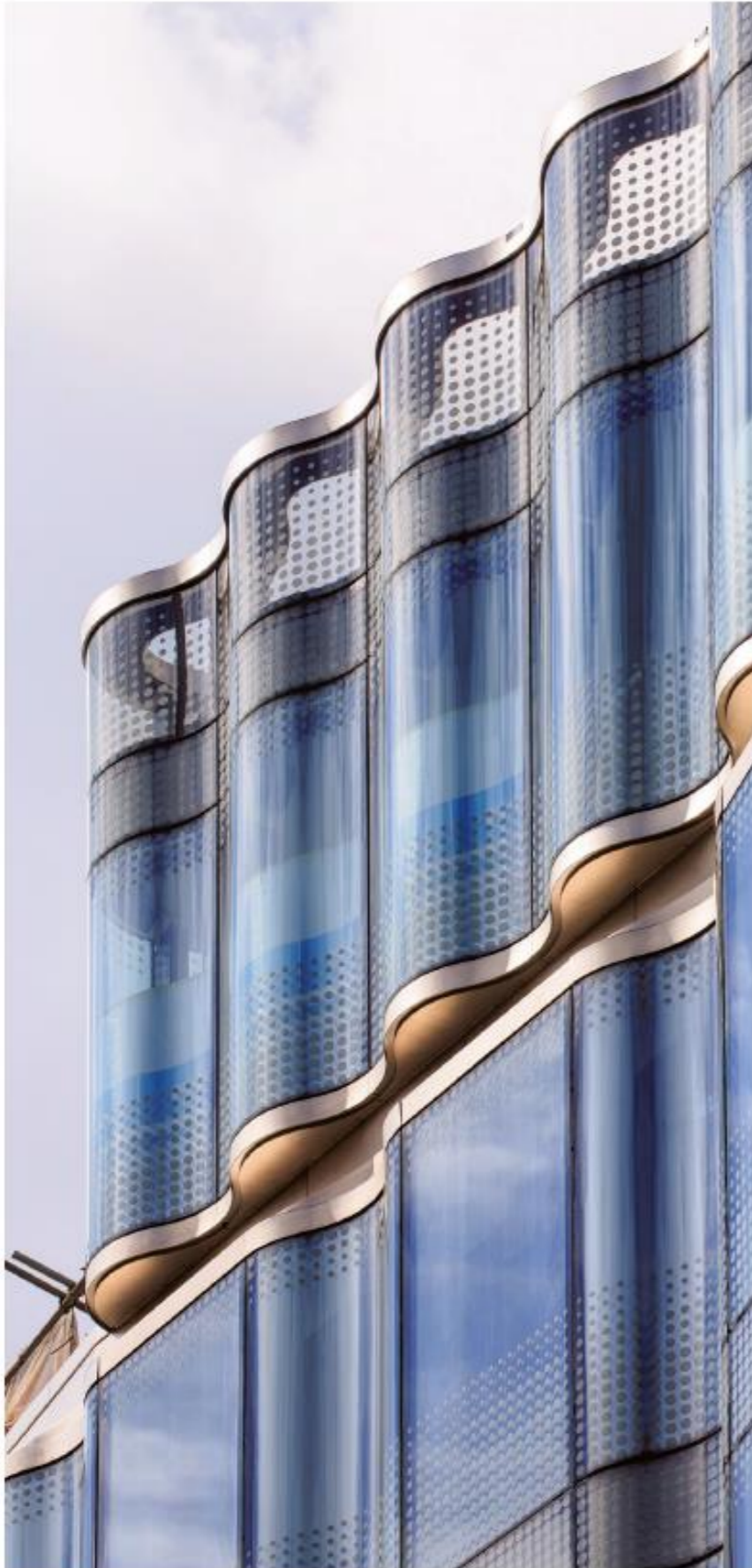
Developers saw potential in the area and sought to create a new landmark for east Oxford Street that would stand as a distinctive and recognisable reference point for years to come. For this, they approached Allford Hall Monaghan Morris (AHMM), and the practice designed a highly contemporary structure that takes its inspiration from a 1930s Aalto vase.

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“There were a number of requirements that needed to be met to ensure that the regeneration was successful and lasting,” notes Wolfgang Frese, project architect for the build. “We agreed that the new development must be a replacement of the previous disparate mix of building fabric with a single keynote structure. It was important for the building to sit sensitively alongside the historic fabric, while providing a contemporary design and still delivered to the highest possible standards.”

Featuring a distinctive curved glass design across the whole façade, the distinctive ‘wave length’ of the exterior tapers up to the bespoke glass lantern that sits at the top of the building, accentuating the corner location and providing a modern successor to the original Victorian masonry feature of the structure. The lantern illuminates with a lighting effects sequence, from dusk until early morning daily, with colours and patterns varying through the seasons.

The six-storey mixed-use development was designed to create an impact in the area



From top
The curved form of the scheme took inspiration from a vase created by Alvar Aalto in the 1930s - Access to surrounding views and daylight has been maximised for office and residential occupants through set-backs, external terraces and internal planning

"With a focus on glass – the material of choice for retailers – the scheme explores the area's one and only shared material quality and, in undulating that glass, nods to the historical milieu of expressive glazed shopfronts. A six-storey new façade is articulated with a hierarchy of curved 'oriel' or bay windows to unify ground and upper floors and establish the building's place both on the street and on the skyline," Frese explains.

The 'wave length' of the vertical undulation shortens at the upper levels and combines with horizontal banding to distinguish the retail (the four lower levels, including lower-ground) from the office (the two middle levels) and residential (the upper two levels). Views, amenities and daylight are maximised for office and residential occupants through set-backs, external terraces and internal planning.



From top
The distinctive 'wave length' of the exterior tapers up to the bespoke glass lantern that sits at the top of the building, accentuating the corner location - The new building was designed to sit sensitively amid its historic surroundings

While many firms opt to avoid the use of curves in their designs due to economics, design complexities and execution problems, the advances in digital technology have helped to overcome such issues, and often convincing clients to take the bold move of introducing the form to a design can be the biggest challenge.

"There is a saying among craftsmen that 'the profit ends where you leave the straight line'. What that means is that, traditionally, curved things have a more complex geometry and tend to be more difficult to design as well as to build, unless the free form is built into the process of making (like glass blowing). In the case of 61 Oxford Street, we were very lucky to have a very good client who supported us in creating a unique and complex piece of architecture on this important inner-city site," concludes Frese.

The striking scheme is a refreshing landmark for the area, and the inventive design by AHMM won a coveted RIBA London 2016 Award.

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