

White Heat London 2 / Publishing

Daily Mirror building Modernist newspaper base

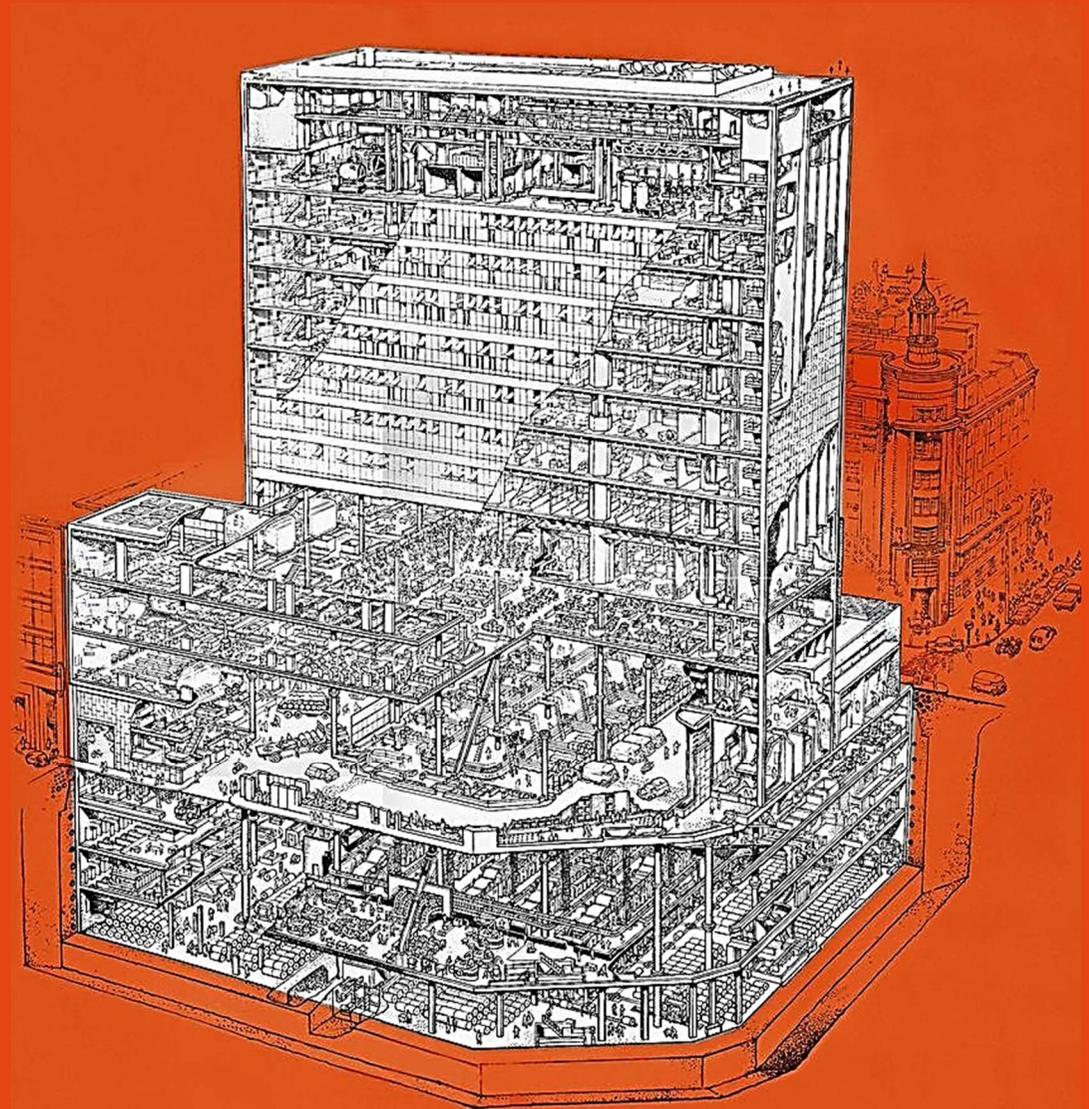
Owen Williams with Anderson, Forster & Wilcox

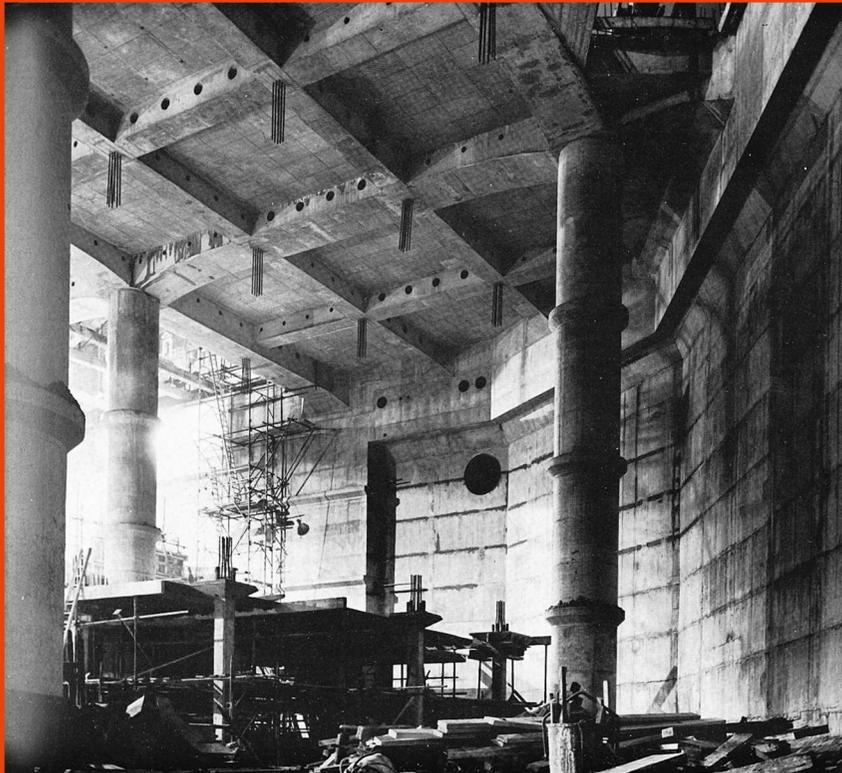
1955-61

In the era of hot metal typesetting, newspaper premises were part factory and part office block. Williams was a structural engineer who had spent forty years innovating with reinforced concrete, not least with his Daily Express building in nearby Fleet Street two decades previously. At Holborn Circus he worked within a new massing concept that had been introduced by American commercial architects after the war – the tower and podium.

Management, advertising and other administrative departments occupied the upper levels of the tall slab, whose concrete columns stood 15' apart. They rested on beams that were cantilevered out from concrete arches cast into the top floor of the podium, where the compositors manning Linotype machines began the process of turning typed copy into printing plates. These arches in turn sprang from the central columns of the four-storey basement but, to maximise space for the printing presses, those columns were placed at 45' centres. This transition between two structural systems was Williams's key achievement.

Technology in the building included mechanical wrapping of the finished editions, a first in Britain, vacuum tubes for moving written material between floors and sophisticated lift and telephone systems. The Mirror stayed at Holborn for over thirty years, only leaving when the industry as a whole moved out of the area. The building did not survive that historic shift.





Unusually, given he was not an architect, Williams was almost always responsible for the exterior of his buildings as well as their structure. Here, though, he partnered with friend Andy Anderson who – working with planners reshaping the post-war City – devised the cladding of clear and red glass.

The basement before insertion of the floorplates, their locations indicated by flanges on the columns. These were formed by digging deep shafts and filling them with concrete; when they and the ground floor slab had cured, the two together provided enough support for the first few levels of the building to be erected above even as the earth was removed below. It was a pioneering step that saved a year of construction time. Conveyors built in to the floors eased the movement of reels of newsprint weighing half a ton each.

At street level a road within the building itself allowed vans to collect bundled newspapers from a large loading hall. This activity could be observed by the public through windows in the inner wall of a raised, covered but otherwise open walkway that wrapped around two sides of the building's podium. The lobby included display panels and an exhibition area, seen here providing updates on an international car rally.