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Chater House

Central destination

by Angela Tam

While sharp suits make their way through a businesslike lobby to their financial sanctum in a well-dressed tower, fashion pilgrims from not just Hong Kong but all over Asia will soon be converging on a prominent Central address to worship and pay tribute.



Chater House, the 30-storey, 73,993 sq m building occupying the site where Swire House used to stand, is now the home of respected financial firm J P Morgan as well as the flagship stores of Giorgio Armani and Bulgari.

This was not always going to be the case, however. When plans to redevelop Swire House were first mooted, in 1995, Grade A offices were fetching some of the highest rents in the world. As a result, a proposal was drawn up for the dedication of the ground floor to a vehicular dropoff and the first floor to pedestrian flow through a network of footbridges; in return for a higher plot ratio.

The idea generated an elliptical tower positioned diagonally across the 3,450 sq m site, with a prow addressing the important Pedder Street/Chater Road junction as a corporate statement. The tower was to sit on a transfer structure which would carry the load to bedrock via a number of big transfer columns around the perimeter of the vehicular dropoff. The transfer structure would have been expensive, but worth it because of the extra plot ratio — it went up to 17:1.





As the office rental market began its decline, however, the design was changed. The architects, Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates and Aedas LPT, were asked to revisit the design that had already obtained Buildings Department approval; it made sense to create a building with a more regular shape that would cost less to build while offering a footprint that tenants preferred.

Subsequently, the ellipse morphed into a lozenge which nonetheless retained much of the former's merit, including the prow and the



diagonal aimed at capturing the view to the northwest.

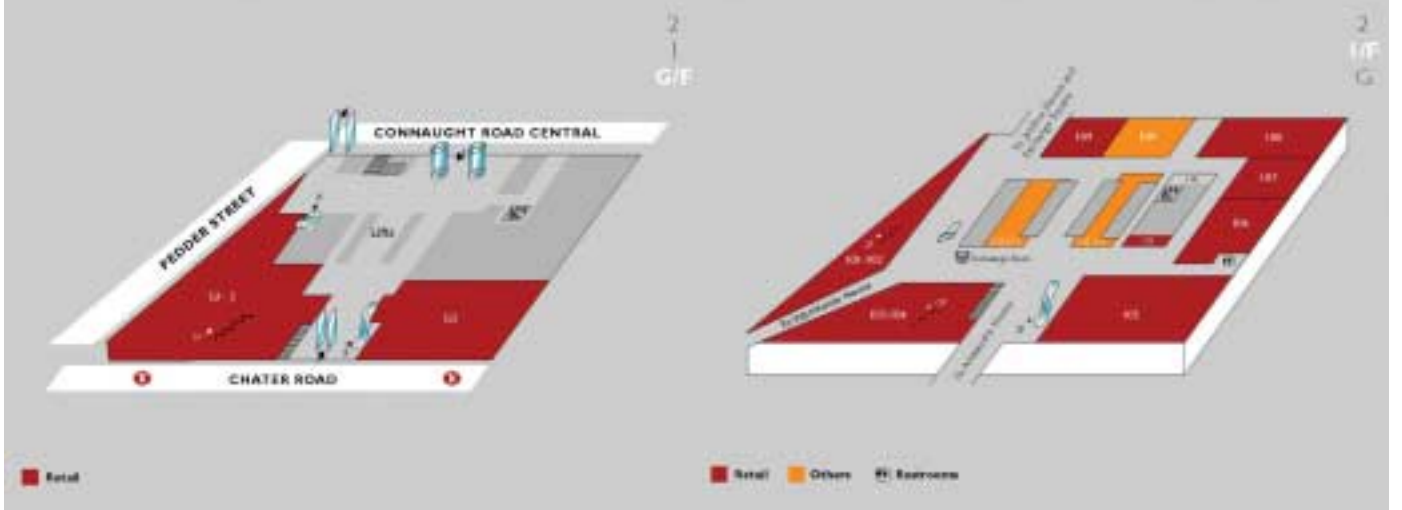
"We had finished the detailed design and were ready to go out to tender when the market came down and kept coming down," recalled Keith Griffiths, managing director of Aedas LPT; of events in 1998.

But the rental decline did not occur across the board. While office rentals fell, retail rentals for prime shopping locations held. As a result of this, the equation for Swire House's redevelopment changed completely.

The dedication of public space was discarded in favour of a three-storey podium for luxury retail. This not only created space for capturing the stable retail market but also reduced cost that would have been incurred by the construction of an expensive transfer structure.

The shape of the tower was also changed. Since financial institutions prefer a regular floor plate because of the way they operate, the lozenge gave way to a rectangle in an effort to increase the building's attractiveness to potential tenants.







"We 'maxed' out the retail on the ground floor and maxed out the regularity of the tower," Mr Griffiths said. "The office floor plate is 13.5 m deep and covers 20,000 sq ft."

The depth makes the floor plate ideal for a layout with five to six workstations per aisle.

Instead of a play on the shape of the building, the architect adopted a simpler device: vertical recesses were added to the northwest frontage, creating three corner offices at the corner with the best view. The recesses also generated a signature totem whose visibility will be enhanced by a light feature at the top.

Flagship stores demand their own identities. To strike a balance between corporate form and retail necessity, the architect designed elevations consisting of a simple gridded glass screen onto which stone plaques identifying the retail tenants could be hung.



The office lobby accessed from Connaught Road is a cool, sophisticated interior clad in white marble and granite, pale wood and aluminium. The retail floors are an entirely different affair.

Aedas LPT had experimented with the concept of shop units with combined ground and first floors targeted at international brand names








when it undertook the renovation of Prince's Building's retail podium three years ago. The popularity of the new-look shopping arcade proved that the formula works, so the architect brought it over to Chater House, another Hongkong Land property, and expanded it.

The flagship stores have internal linkages through all three floors of the retail podium, affording the shops the space and loftiness befitting their prestige while allowing them to capture as much pedestrian traffic as possible. The approach has worked beautifully, thanks in no small part to the extensive footbridge connections to Jardine House, Worldwide House north, Worldwide House south and Alexandra House on the first floor. They have created an eddy of pedestrian traffic that surges upwards towards the second floor through a simple circulation scheme.

The retailers were given design control over their shopfronts and both Armani and Bulgari announce their presence with bold but elegant three-storey high facades. Aedas LPT was

engaged by Giorgio Armani to work out the design details of its shop and has come up with a spare, sleek interior that fits Armani's modernist image. Following its success at Prince's Building and now Chater House, the firm has also been engaged by Hongkong Land to completely remodel the podium of Alexandra House. 

Hongkong Land Limited
client

HKL (Project Management) Ltd
project manager

Aedas LPT
architect (podium and AP)

Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates
architect (tower)

Ove Arup & Partners
structural engineer

WSP Hong Kong Ltd
E&M engineer

WTP Partnership (HK) Ltd
quantity surveyor