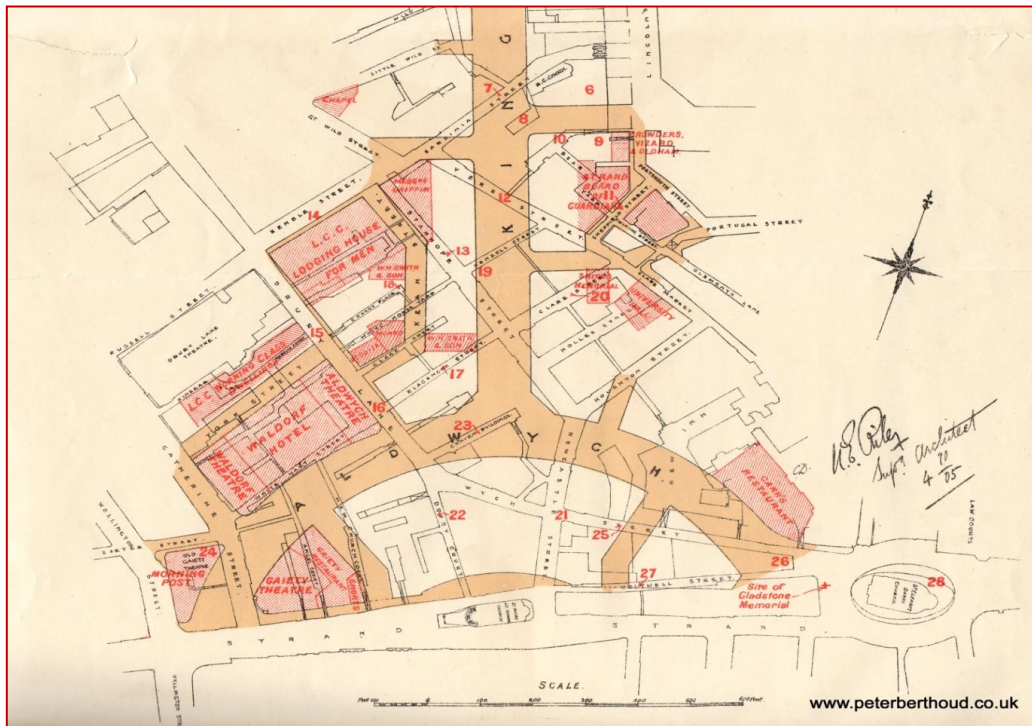


## INDIA HOUSE, THE ALDWYCH

Carefully positioned in-between the thoroughfares of Kingsway and the Strand, the Aldwych's curved vicinity disrupts what could have been a straightforward, perpendicular intersection of main roads (see map)<sup>1</sup>. Physically, as well as symbolically, the Aldwych is the heart of some of London's busiest and oldest routes and locales<sup>2</sup>. Not only a locus *within London*, it is also testament to an age where London was the centre of a global empire, and the Aldwych's semi-circular enclave encloses two striking historical monuments - Australia House and India House - creating a little island of colonial legacy amidst a stream of traffic.



The map shows the area as we know it today superimposed on the streets before its 20th century redevelopment where existing communities were displaced for the creation of the Kingsway. Many interpreted this redevelopment as part of Britain's desire to showcase its power and progress - 'an architectural project "to enhance the glory of this great empire"<sup>3</sup>, where the removal of certain peoples and spaces was a necessary forfeit. Thus, the very creation of the Aldwych is steeped in a troubling history of suppression, of overwriting. Yet, India Place (the square beside India House) suggests independence and liberation with its bust of Nehru - independent India's first prime minister

<sup>1</sup> Courtesy of <http://www.peterberthoud.co.uk/2012/04/forgotten-images-before-aldwych-kingsway/> where you can find more images of the area before its demolition.

<sup>2</sup> Aldwych - name taken from Anglo-Saxon. From <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/aldwych-and-kingsway-scheme-1905-and-1920-1929>

<sup>3</sup> See, <http://osb.revues.org/1178> for an introduction to 20th century London and imperialism. Paragraph 20 in particular.

- positioned at its centre. India House, like its conflicting histories of displacement or of independence, is full of contradictions, misalignments and even surprises.

In contrast to Australia House, India House seems restrained and demure. Not an explicit or confident boast of power, its greying symmetrical exterior and barred windows suggest a building that is self-conscious of its position in Britain's imperial history - seeking modesty, perhaps. In 1930, India House's 'great rosewood doors were unlocked by His Majesty King George V' with a solid gold key<sup>4</sup>, but, despite this pomp, the period was also one of increasing insecurity for Britain's empire due to the ever growing demand for home-rule in India, especially in light of Mahatma Gandhi's increasing influence. The changing power-dynamics between the nations is written upon the building itself. Looking at its facade you can spot pinpricks of colour dispersed amongst the sea of white and gray. These are the crests of India's princely states. Fringed with gold, many depict emblematic, 'exotic' animals - a snake, peacock, camel, cow, elephant, rhino and a tiger.



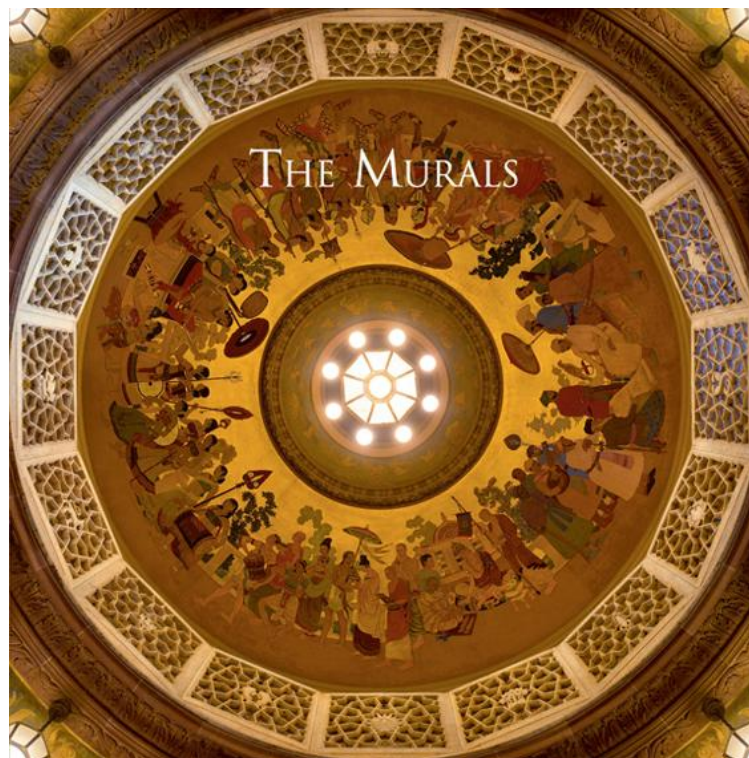
These crests are a recognition of the regional centres of power that pre-existed Britain's control and it seems there is an attempt to blend the 'mosaic that is India' with the West, renegotiating a colonial relationship so that it is based on appreciative union rather than explicit subjugation. Regal looking marble elephants support upper windowsills signifying that collaboration between the two nations is essential for the very existence of the building. The elephants are symbolic of Britain's dependence on India - without the elephants, without India's labour and trade, the infrastructure of India House would collapse, and so too, metaphorically speaking, would this symbolic core of Empire in the Aldwych. Interestingly, two circular crests remain unpainted suggesting the building is unfinished and

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<sup>4</sup> From Manmohan Singh's (Indian Prime-minister) speech at India House on its 75th anniversary: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=10161>

waiting for a new India to be represented. The story behind India House is, therefore, ongoing, and the building remains open to change despite its apparent granitic permanence and self-confinement.

The building is a palimpsest of histories and voices - 'a time-mark', according to Manmohan Singh - whose 'walls [once] bore silent witness' to upheavals, and which I believe still do. Throughout the year, it is often the site of protests. In early February, I spoke to a group of UK based Kashmiri protesters who were rallying outside, wanting the disputed land to be independent from both India and Pakistan. Through this protest I realised that India House continues to draw two very distant locations together. Nevertheless, the largest mass gathering is usually the queue of nervous (or bored) visa applicants who are forced to wait outside. A tiny door at the back is manned by a security guard and windows are shuttered or tinted. A clear barrier between interior and exterior, this is also extended to the visitors entrance on the main road which is frustratingly hard to access. An extremely heavy door refuses to open until you are thoroughly questioned by the all powerful Intercom. So despite being opened by King George as a celebration of empire, what is to be found behind those 'rosewood doors' remains locked away for the everyday observer. If you are lucky enough to get inside though, you may be surprised with how airy and bright it is in contrast to the murky greys of the exterior. Shafts of light pour into the upper balcony and bounce off a colourfully garlanded statue of Mahatma Gandhi. High above you, a golden dome is bursting with activity. The ceiling is completely covered in a brilliant mural of classical Indian figures wearing saris, turbans or curled shoes, all engaged in different actions.



*See p.14 in the India House guidebook found on <https://www.hcilondon.in/ebook/indiahouse/>*

Golden light ineffectively shaded by blinds touches intricately carved mahogany panelling (wood imported from India), palm fronds, hanging lamps and pinkish marble flooring. Yet despite this colonial grandeur, the main lobby is empty except for security guards watching flickering CCTV screens of unoccupied rooms. The eerie stillness of the lobby contrasts strikingly with the queues of people who are waiting to be allowed in to deal with their immigration queries. The lobby is a celebration of India's art and tradition, yet the welcoming attitude to diversity from within is overwhelmed (or even contradicted) by the unwillingness to let people in. Ironically, these visa applicants are waiting to sort out issues of mobility, of travel. Entering new countries seems to be made a hostile process by the decidedly inaccessible building they have to enter. From within, the building seems timeless, stable and protected, yet from the outside India House is vulnerable to human activity: a divided history and an uncontrollable present interact and collide with its rigid presence.