After nine years, two architects and £1bn, the controversial BBC Broadcasting House refurbishment is winding up. But is it a feat of architectural elegance and practicality, or just another prime-time flop?

Ike Ijeh does the ratings

THE BBC'S Broadcasting House is now complete. The central London building has taken nine years, two architects, one major mid-project redesign and several bouts of controversy. But although several interiors are still being fitted out, the £1bn structure is essentially ready for the influx of 5,000 BBC staff set to arrive in 2013. The importance of this building to the BBC brand and operations cannot be overstated. The original Broadcasting House, a curved art deco pile at the top of Regent Street, has been the iconic headquarters of the corporation since the thirties. It has hosted broadcasts from luminaries stretching from Winston Churchill to Tony Blair and evokes a legendary, stardust quality that its sober Portland stone facade belies. Together with two new buildings now added to the original block, the new Broadcasting House complex is the UK’s first purpose-built broadcast centre. It will also enable the BBC to house TV, radio and online operations together for the first time and to group most of its London staff under one roof. This in turn will release several other sites from its considerable London property portfolio.

BROADCASTING HOUSE IS READY FOR STAFF TO ARRIVE IN 2013. SIMPLE FUNCTIONALITY AND TECHNICAL PROWESS DEFINE A BUILDING THAT WILL BE THE NEW FACE OF THE BBC
The redevelopment of Broadcasting House can be neatly split into two phases. Phase one was carried out by the original architect, MacCormac Jamieson Prichard. It survives today in the masterplan, exterior elevations and elements of the internal layout. MJP was involved in the scheme from its inception in 2002 until 2005. And then, in a process the BBC consistently refers to as “simplification”, but which the less charitable may well recognise as cost-cutting, a root and branch review of the project was undertaken and major changes enforced. An indignant MJP was subsequently replaced with renowned commercial fixer Sheppard Robson. It completed the interiors as MJP exited the scene, sworn to secrecy.

Although Sheppard Robson may be responsible for the completion of Broadcasting House’s interiors, the exterior is all MJP. The masterplan is simple yet effective. In townscapes terms, Broadcasting House stands behind one of the most critical points on Regent Street: John Nash’s gracefully delicate All Souls Church. The regency church’s distinctive circular profile and spire act as a pivot that negotiates the subtle shift in axis as Regent Street curves west and merges into Portland Place. They also lie at the end of the long vista from the other end of Regent Street at Nash’s famous Quadrant, three-quarters of a mile away.

Before the redevelopment, Broadcasting House’s contribution to this carefully composed urban view was an incipient mass of clumsy blocks and rooftop extensions that seemed menacingly behind the slender silhouette of All Souls. These largely post-Second World War additions to the east of the original Broadcasting House have now been removed and replaced with a public space that makes a sweeping incision deep into the site. The space culminates in a curved apse that acts as a subtle echo of both All Souls and the semi-circular profile of the front of the original Broadcasting House to the left. A broad, street-level opening in the north-east corner provides access to a front of the original Broadcasting House to the left. A broad, street-level opening in the north-east corner provides access to a

Before the redevelopment, Broadcasting House’s contribution to this carefully composed urban view was an incipient mass of clumsy blocks and rooftop extensions that seemed menacingly behind the slender silhouette of All Souls. These largely post-Second World War additions to the east of the original Broadcasting House have now been removed and replaced with a public space that makes a sweeping incision deep into the site. The space culminates in a curved apse that acts as a subtle echo of both All Souls and the semi-circular profile of the front of the original Broadcasting House to the left. A broad, street-level opening in the north-east corner provides access to a

Before the redevelopment, Broadcasting House’s contribution to this carefully composed urban view was an incipient mass of clumsy blocks and rooftop extensions that seemed menacingly behind the slender silhouette of All Souls. These largely post-Second World War additions to the east of the original Broadcasting House have now been removed and replaced with a public space that makes a sweeping incision deep into the site. The space culminates in a curved apse that acts as a subtle echo of both All Souls and the semi-circular profile of the front of the original Broadcasting House to the left. A broad, street-level opening in the north-east corner provides access to a

Before the redevelopment, Broadcasting House’s contribution to this carefully composed urban view was an incipient mass of clumsy blocks and rooftop extensions that seemed menacingly behind the slender silhouette of All Souls. These largely post-Second World War additions to the east of the original Broadcasting House have now been removed and replaced with a public space that makes a sweeping incision deep into the site. The space culminates in a curved apse that acts as a subtle echo of both All Souls and the semi-circular profile of the front of the original Broadcasting House to the left. A broad, street-level opening in the north-east corner provides access to a

Before the redevelopment, Broadcasting House’s contribution to this carefully composed urban view was an incipient mass of clumsy blocks and rooftop extensions that seemed menacingly behind the slender silhouette of All Souls. These largely post-Second World War additions to the east of the original Broadcasting House have now been removed and replaced with a public space that makes a sweeping incision deep into the site. The space culminates in a curved apse that acts as a subtle echo of both All Souls and the semi-circular profile of the front of the original Broadcasting House to the left. A broad, street-level opening in the north-east corner provides access to a
The same is true at Broadcasting House. While the building has an undeniably muscular tone, with deep window reveals and vigorously projecting bays, it appears too fragmented to convince as a single object. It resembles a monster kit of parts rather than a finished whole. The fragmentation increases the impression that a series of cosmetic surfaces has been clumsily overlaid onto an otherwise blank corporate box.

**PHASE TWO**

Phase two and the work of Sheppard Robson is primarily revealed in the interiors of Broadcasting House. The BBC maintains that the process of “simplification” was a result of the natural evolution of a project with a decade-long lifespan. As Keith Beal, W1 project director for BBC Workplace, explains: “It was about design development. We asked ourselves if we had asked the best of the design and adapted it to suit conditions we could not have foreseen at the start.”

These adaptations included relocating plant from the basement to the roof, combining two staircases in the main foyer into one and amending the public route through the building. Phase two also displays moments of extraordinary technical ingenuity. A six-storey bridge is “hung” from a giant roof of extraordinary technical ingenuity. A building.


The newsroom is conceived as the engine room, it will eventually be filled with a teeming mass of journalists and reporters and, from 2014, will form the iconic backdrop to BBC TV news bulletins. It is essentially the architectural face of the BBC, a physical manifestation of its cultural legacy for future generations may mean the hefty bill for Broadcasting House is a price we all have to pay. It resembles a monster kit of parts rather than a finished whole. The fragmentation increases the impression that a series of cosmetic surfaces has been clumsily overlaid onto an otherwise blank corporate box.

The process of “simplification” was a result of the natural evolution of a project with a decade-long lifespan. As Keith Beal, W1 project director for BBC Workplace, explains: “It was about design development. We asked ourselves if we had asked the best of the design and adapted it to suit conditions we could not have foreseen at the start.”


Beal maintains that this newsroom has been more natural light and is more transparent than its phase one counterpart. In keeping with the BBC’s political and social responsibilities, the theme of transparency is constant throughout the development and the newsroom is directly overlooked by a public gallery. Here, the public will be able to see what Beal describes as the “immediacy and impact” of modern news production.