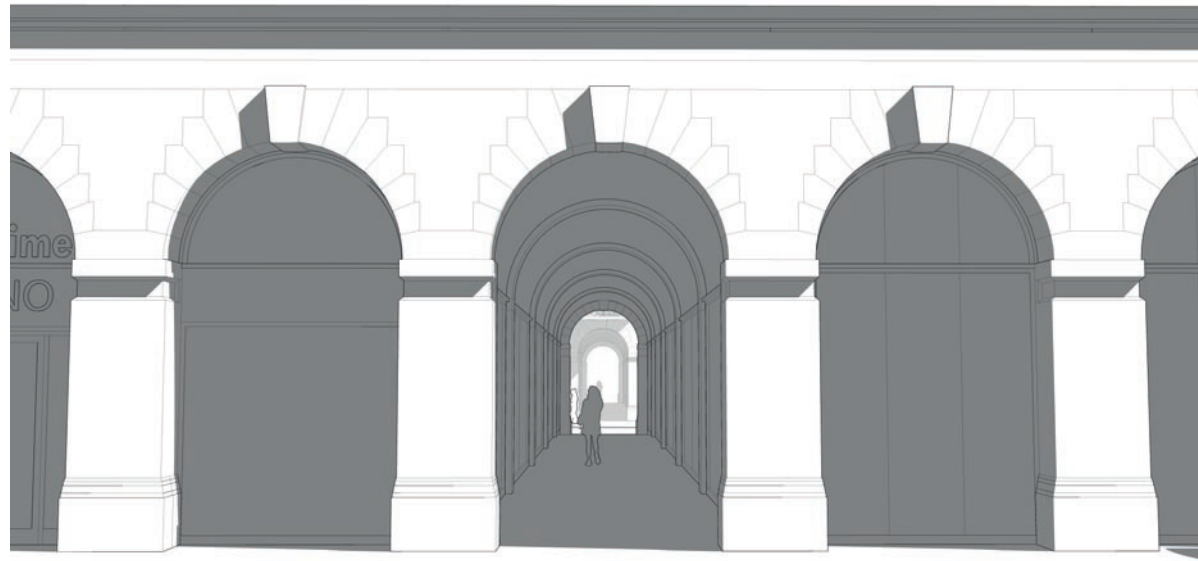


# The Gerrard Arcade

Willingale introduces his vision for a new arcade in London that resolves a 346-year-old problem in the urban grain of the West End



## 33 GERRARD STREET

There is a case for a new arcade in London that resolves a 346-year-old problem in the urban grain of the West End by providing new connectivity and infotainment between Soho and Leicester Square: the Gerrard Arcade.

### The problem

The 17th century Military Ground, used for military training and parade, was an open area of two and three-quarter acres enclosed by four walls between King Street and Leicester House. Nicholas Barbon, responsible for the financial innovation of leasehold development in London following the Great Fire, turned his early profits to developing terraced housing west of St. Martin's Lane telling his ally, the property lawyer Roger North, "it was not worth his while to deal little; that a bricklayer could do." In July 1677 Barbon purchased a 51-year lease of the Military Ground from Lord Gerard along with some other land. He demolished the walls to the north, east and west but kept that to the south, as it formed the boundary to the grounds of Leicester House built in 1635 by the Earl of Leicester on land the earl had enclosed in the Parish of St. Martins-in-the-Fields. Barbon laid out Gerrard Street across the middle of the Military Ground parallel to the boundary wall and divided up the south side into plots to be developed first for the larger houses. He needed to improve access without

relying on the existing streets east and west including the notoriously narrow Whitcomb Street on the route of Wardour Street. His solution was to form Macclesfield Street, a tribute to Lord Gerard who became the Earl of Macclesfield, aligning this north across King Street to Dean Street to provide access through the area being developed by Henry Compton and Richard Frith across Soho Fields to the main thoroughfare of the Tyburn Road.

The area evolved to become Soho and the main thoroughfare was soon to acquire the name Oxford Street. Barbon started building some of the larger houses himself, including Gerard House for Lord Gerard facing north along Macclesfield Street, and leased other plots to builders including sites for smaller terraced houses on the north side. Completed in eight years, Gerrard Street was a successful development becoming part of Soho connected north to Oxford Street.

In the meantime the Leicester Estate to the south had begun to develop land around Leicester Fields. To the northeast the grounds of Leicester House were laid out with modest plots in 1682-83 for the development of terraced houses on Leicester Street, Sidney Street and the western end of Lisle Street. Leicester House was demolished c1791-92 for the continuation of Lisle Street east to Little Newport Street and for the development of Leicester Place south to Leicester Square. So by the late 18th cen- >>>



Mark Willingale is principal of Willingale Associates

>>> tury the grid of streets between Soho Square and Leicester Square had been established, with Gerrard Street and the former Military Ground south boundary wall dividing those looking north to Oxford Street from those looking south to Leicester Square. The only other significant change to the pattern was the Metropolitan Board of Works 1877 – 86 development of Shaftesbury Avenue incorporating King Street between Piccadilly and St. Giles. This eased congestion by opening a new route between the West End and the City, becoming the focus of theatreland, but the busy route tended to increase the separation of Soho to the north from Leicester Square to the south.

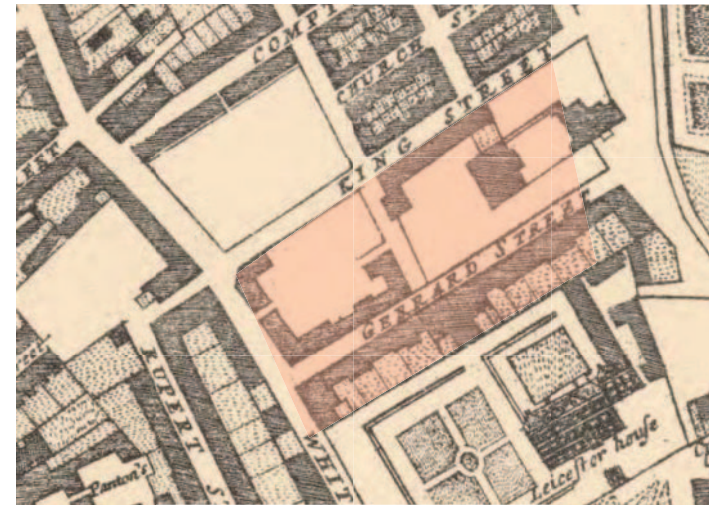
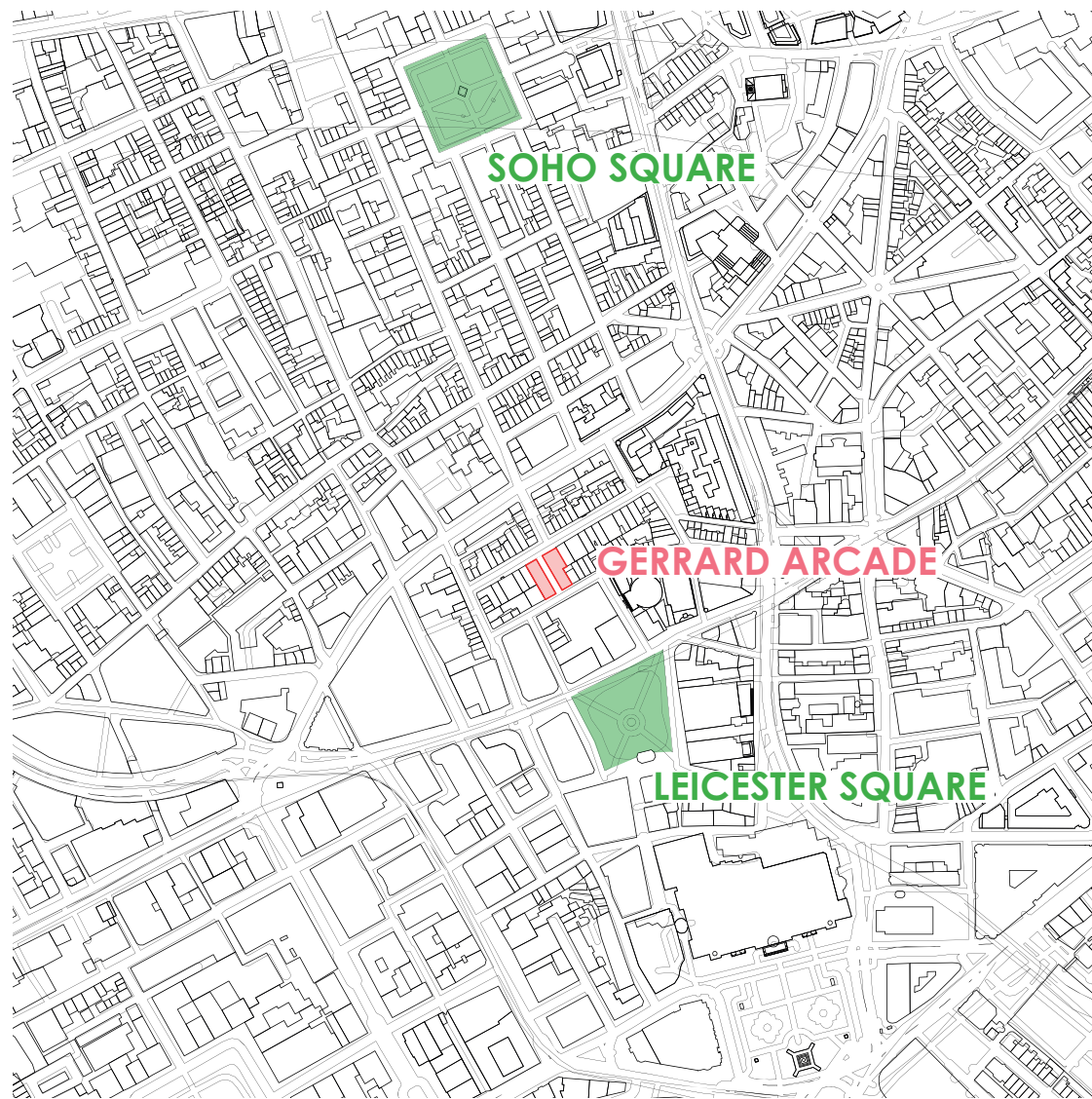
Earlier in the 19th century Leicester Square had first attracted the development of music halls and theatre to emerge as the centre for entertainment this continuing through the 20th century with cinema, casinos and venues for tourists. From the 18th century the Chinese in London had settled beside the Docks in the East End. This community was dispersed by the bombing of WW2 and from the 1970's a new focus formed in Soho south of the Shaftesbury Avenue to become

Chinatown around Gerrard Street.

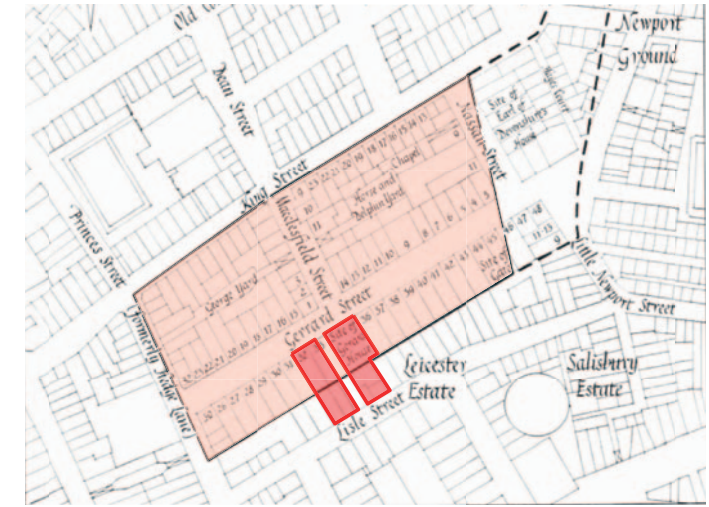
The districts of Soho and Leicester Square evolved to become the West End we know today, still divided by the former boundary wall of the Military Ground, resulting in poor north-south connectivity. Gerrard Street forms a barrier between Soho and Leicester Square and regularly experiences some of the highest footfalls in the metropolis, with Wardour Street and Newport Place often becoming congested, sometimes dangerously so, requiring pedestrian flow management during festivities like the Chinese New Year. In contrast, only a block to the south, unsupervised areas of Lisle Street behind the Empire Leicester Square provide a haven for anti-social behaviour on the northern fringe of the Leicester Square entertainment and tourism district.

**The proposal**

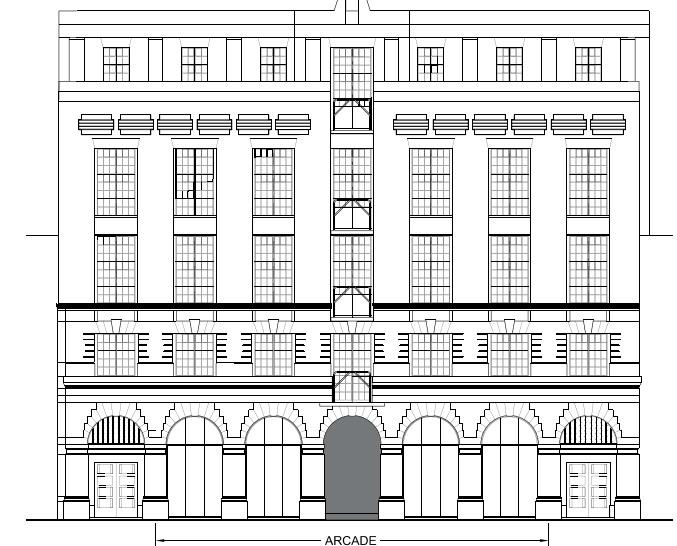
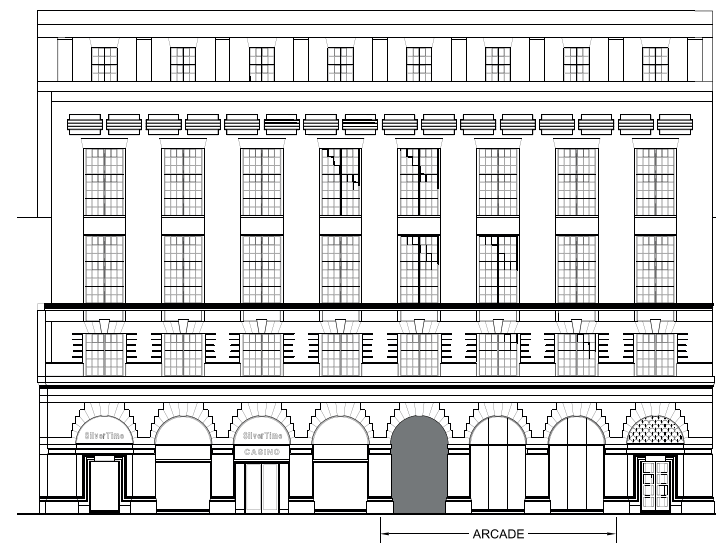
Nos. 32-35 Gerrard Street including the site of Gerard House and 8-10 Lisle Street were redeveloped as a post office and telephone exchange designed by



1682 WILLIAM MORGAN MAP WITH GERRARD STREET DEVELOPED ON THE SITE OF THE MILITARY GROUND



1919C MAP WITH SITE OF THE FORMER MILITARY GROUND ENCLOSED BY A WALL



Leonard Stokes that opened on 28 September 1907. This was the first building to breach the former Military Ground boundary wall and have fronts on both streets. With demand for telephony soaring Stokes' building was replaced in 1935-37 by the current building by Frederick A. Llewellyn, two storeys higher with matching grey granite arcades on the ground floor fronts, eight arches for Gerrard Street aligned with seven for Lisle Street. Ninety years later and the telecommunications functions are now mostly located on the roof leaving the space below free for alternative uses. The China Exchange, a venue for the promotion and exchange of Chinese culture in the UK and Silver Time, an adult gambling venue, occupy five of the arches on Gerrard Street, leaving three on this frontage, and the end arches on Lisle Street provide access to the other floors leaving five on this frontage still part of the telephone exchange and free for use subject to internal re-arrangement.

Here is the opportunity to create the Gerrard Arcade, with a high pedestrian flow, by providing a new north-south connection between Soho and Leicester Square through the Telephone Exchange on Gerrard Street, making good use of the existing architectural composition. The arcade is realised by linking the arch on Gerrard Street beside Silver Time through the ground floor to the central arch on Lisle Street without requiring other alterations to the elevations or to the China Exchange and Silver Time leaseholds. A small change in levels between the streets is accommodated within the plan by a shallow ramp to Lisle Street.

A traditional arcade with barrel vault is illustrated but within the building the proposed space can be free-form and include immersive technology, like the Outernet Now Building, for display and entertainment. Blinding of electronic dis-

plays by direct sunlight is prevented by the orientation of the arcade and the streets enclosing each end. On the rear wall of the Empire Leicester Square in Lisle Street an axial mirror doubles the virtual vista and reflects the experience. Immersive screens on the east side can be used for advertising products and services with inputs from the China Exchange and Silver Time. Boutiques on the west side and the Lisle Street frontage can include access to available areas in the basement and on the first floor. The arcade spaces and adjoining areas can be lined with screens to become separate immersive experience rooms. Hence the arcade can provide seamless or cellular immersive experiences to generate revenues from the display of products and services in addition to advertising and retail use. The minimum area required on the ground floor to complete the pedestrian link is the arcade itself, along with a small area for the site manager, IT equipment and security. The arcade can be shuttered at night, as deemed appropriate for security and insurance, or during times when telecommunications equipment is being raised to the upper floors and roof from Lisle Street, as occasionally required to update BT operations.

The Gerrard Arcade opens a direct new route north to Soho and Oxford Street and south to Lisle Street and Leicester Square. Congestion in Gerrard Street, Wardour Street and Newport Place is relieved and currently anti-social parts of Lisle Street become well frequented and supervised. With a capacity of up to 10,000 people per hour many will find the arcade an efficient and entertaining new route between Soho and Leicester Square throughout the day and late into the evening, a route that provides an immersive experience while introducing them to the products and services of Chinatown, China, London and the UK. ■ >>>



