

L I M I N A L M I N D

Research Notes Series

The Trustworthy Face

City of London, Corporate Photography, and the Architecture of Visible Legitimacy

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April 2026 — Working Draft

'You can never buy back a minute of your life.'

Internal observation, City of London boardroom, c.2007

Abstract

Between approximately 2006 and 2011 I worked as a corporate photographer in the City of London, making headshots and graduate recruitment images for some of the most powerful legal and financial institutions in the world. I arrived by accident — a phone call from a legitimate British legal firm, a white backdrop bought out of necessity after leaving a corporate sales job, a business model that only worked at volume and happened to work very well for five years. Among my clients were Kirkland and Ellis, Cleary Gottlieb, Renaissance Capital, and Danske Bank's private banking division. I did not know, at the time, that I was making portraits of the human infrastructure of one of the most consequential episodes of financial opacity in modern European history. I was making people look trustworthy. That was the commission. This research note reconstructs what I saw, what I sensed, and what I understand now that I did not understand then — from the position of a photographer who was, for five years, part of the surface.

I.

The Phone Call and the White Backdrop

In 2006 a phone call arrived from Wedlake Bell, a legitimate British legal firm with origins in the eighteenth century. They wanted to know if I did headshots. I had not thought about this type of photography. My practice until then had moved between editorial portraiture — the 1986 diary of artists, musicians, and writers that constitutes the most significant body of my early work — and corporate sales roles that had nothing to do with photography at all. The City of London was not a world I had considered.

I said yes. I bought a white backdrop. The calculation was simple: I had recently left a corporate sales position and needed cash flow. Wedlake Bell paid well and on time. After years of chasing contract publishers for miserable fees on editorial work that did not interest me — insignificant people, trivial features designed to sell products — a client who paid promptly and treated the commission

professionally was not a minor thing. It was almost the entire thing.

The work was not creative. I was not pretending otherwise. But it was steady, technically interesting in its own way — forty lawyers in a day required a particular discipline of pace and attention — and it left me time for the life I had built in Chislehurst, a prosperous suburb in south-east London where my wife ran a childminding business from home and our daughter Jasmine was young enough that the hours between school pickup and bedtime were the day's most important.

Two commissions a month was sufficient. The garden office was pleasant. The equilibrium felt permanent. It was not.

II.

The American Firms

Wedlake Bell led to other firms. I contacted legal practices across the City and found that the most receptive were the American ones. This made sense: in US corporate culture the professional headshot was already standard practice, budgeted for, expected. The old British legal establishment might use you occasionally but did not systematise it. The American firms arriving in the City brought their own corporate culture, including the assumption that everyone needed a professional portrait.

Kirkland and Ellis came first. By the mid-2000s Kirkland was arguably the most powerful private equity law firm on earth, its London office handling some of the largest leveraged buyout transactions in European history. Then Cleary Gottlieb — the counterpart in sovereign and financial institutions work, the firm that governments and central banks called when they needed to interface with Western capital markets, with deep relationships across emerging market jurisdictions including Russia and Eastern Europe.

I had arrived, through a white backdrop bought out of necessity, at the legal architecture of how capital moved at the largest scale.

The setup was always the same: a mini studio in one of the boardrooms or large meeting rooms, my assistant beside me, forty lawyers coming through the door one after another across the course of a day. Each one got a few minutes of full attention. The camera creates an unusual social permission. People tell photographers things they would not tell colleagues. I was genuinely curious about them — their education, their trajectory, what had brought them to this particular office in this particular city — and they felt it. They relaxed. That was the skill.

Almost none of them had attended state schools or non-elite universities. Oxford, Cambridge, LSE, the American Ivies. Forty people in a day made the educational monoculture statistically visible in a way it would not be if you were meeting them individually. I was conducting an informal census of the successful output of a social reproduction machine — the children of professional families who had attended the right schools, gone to the right universities, done the right internships, and were now joining institutions that would pay them extraordinary sums to move capital around.

I had lived, between 1982 and 1989, in the Clays Lane Housing Co-operative in Stratford — one of the few serious attempts to house people the system had excluded. Now I was photographing the people the system had selected most carefully, and doing it in buildings whose architecture was designed to confirm

that selection.

III.

Graduate Recruitment and the Lifestyle of Capital

The firms began to ask me to produce their graduate recruitment photography. This was a different commission from headshots — the firm's shop window, the images used to attract the next intake. Getting asked meant the partners trusted you with something that mattered to the institution's future.

The work took me out of the boardroom and into the City itself. I used the architecture of the prestigious offices, photographed graduates interacting with colleagues, walked with groups through the streets, shot outside the College of Law. Lifestyle work: the suggestion of a life rather than merely a career. The Wren churches and Roman wall fragments beside the gleaming glass towers as backdrop. The ancient city as daily environment, offered as aspiration.

Sometimes I was in the room when a senior partner briefed the new intake on life at the firm. It did not sound as pleasant as it looked. Long hours. Intellectually demanding work in stressful situations. The daily reality described with a certain pride, even nostalgia, by people who had survived it and could no longer quite recall what surviving had cost.

The graduates absorbed the information with careful neutral expressions. They had made the calculation already, at twenty-two or twenty-three, and decided the trajectory was worth the cost. The compensation was very good. Within a short time they would be making serious money. The hours and the pressure were priced in — disclosed, agreed to, and in some cases almost energising for the people built for that kind of work.

I was the person in the corner making pictures of the aspiration while the contract was being read aloud. To me it sounded like sacrificing your young years, giving up your life. I had already understood — from the garden office, from the school pickup, from the summers at the seaside — that you could never buy back a minute of your life. The money accumulated in year three could not purchase year one. The graduates in the room had not yet learned this. Some of them never would.

I was not judging them. I was seeing them clearly. That is a different thing.

IV.

Renaissance Capital, 1 Angel Court

Among the financial institutions that came to use me was Renaissance Capital — RenCap — founded by New Zealander Stephen Jennings and operating, by the mid-2000s, as one of the most prominent investment banks focused on emerging markets. In September 2008, at the height of the financial crisis, ONEXIM Group — the vehicle of Russian billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov — purchased a fifty percent stake for five hundred million dollars. RenCap operated out of 1 Angel Court in the City, a respectable address close to the Bank of England, unremarkable from the outside.

Their investor conferences were known for their scale and their glitter. I photographed the events. The glitz was not incidental — it was the product. RenCap was selling a vision: Russia as a legitimate destination for Western capital, the New Russia as an investment opportunity rather than a political risk.

The parties and the high-level networking were the argument made visible. I was making images of the argument.

They wanted to pay using an American Express card. A Russian finance company simultaneously executing a five-hundred-million-dollar acquisition and settling a photographer's invoice by Amex. This is not a contradiction. It is a description of how serious money operates: the large sums move through structures you never see; what you interact with at the event-photography level is theatrical normality. Receipts. Invoices. Everything looking completely ordinary on the surface.

September 2008 is a remarkable moment to be inside that world. Lehman Brothers collapsed on 15 September. The entire Western financial system was in freefall. And ONEXIM was writing its cheque. The money you could sense was not hidden — it was simply stratified. What I saw was the presentable layer. The structures underneath it were what the lawyers in the City offices were managing.

V.

Danske Bank: The Private Banking Portraits

I also photographed for Danske Bank — specifically for their private banking division. Portrait commissions: the relationship managers, the client-facing professionals whose images would appear on the bank's materials, whose faces were the human interface of the institution.

Private banking is built on discretion and personal trust. The relationship manager is the product as much as the financial service. Clients entrust not merely their money but their confidence in the institution's integrity, embodied in the person sitting across the desk. My portraits were constructing that image: professional, authoritative, reassuring. These are the people you can trust with your money.

Danske Bank's Estonian branch was subsequently identified as the centre of one of the largest money laundering scandals in European history — approximately two hundred billion euros in suspicious transactions processed between 2007 and 2015, much of it from Russian and former Soviet sources. The non-resident portfolio that sat within private banking operations was at the core of it.

I did not know this. I was making portraits. The commission was to make the relationship managers look trustworthy. I completed the commission.

My assistant on those days was Lithuanian. He spoke Russian. The City of London's legal firms, by the mid-2000s, had developed specialist practice sections for Russian interests — I had observed this across multiple client visits, in the conversations that happened in the room when people assumed the photographer was not listening, or could not understand. My assistant could understand. He chatted with these professionals in their first language while I set up the lights.

I was getting the English-language professional presentation. He was hearing whatever shifts when someone speaks in the language they think in.

VI.

The Surface and What Was Underneath It

The City of London is a one-square-mile medieval enclave with its own governance, its own police force, its own accumulated history of operating at the intersection of British law and international capital. It presents itself as the respectable face of global finance: the ancient institutions, the prestigious addresses, the architectural confidence of a place that has been doing this for centuries.

What I was photographing, for five years, was the human layer of that presentation. The portraits, the graduate recruitment images, the event photography — these were all exercises in constructing legitimacy, making the institutions and the people inside them look like what they claimed to be. I was part of the surface. That was the commission, and I completed it without understanding its full implications.

I was not complicit in what I did not know. But the position I occupied — inside the rooms, trusted with the image-making, present at the moment when the New Russia was being sold to Western investors and when private banking relationships were being constructed that would later be identified as the channels of historic money laundering — that position carries its own kind of evidence.

The photographs exist somewhere on a hard drive in storage. They document the surface of a world whose geology was considerably more complicated than the surface suggested. The RenCap investor conference in 2008. The Danske private banking portraits. The Kirkland and Cleary graduate recruitment shoots — the young lawyers whose educational monoculture I catalogued, one after another, through a boardroom in the City.

I did not know what I was inside. I was the photographer in the room. The camera records the surface. The surface was my commission.

VII.

The End of the Interval

Around 2011 the work began to thin. The structural problems were several. The business model only made sense at volume — forty lawyers in a day justified the drive from Chislehurst; a single commission did not. Younger photographers were establishing themselves closer to the City, available for the single headshot without the logistical overhead. The post-2008 austerity squeeze was working through even the most profitable firms. Graduate intake numbers were being quietly reduced.

The credit cards maxed out. Bills were missed. The credit score collapsed. The equilibrium that had felt permanent revealed itself as contingent — built on a business model with no resilience, no buffer, no plan for when the phone stopped ringing.

The City photography chapter had been, in its own terms, a kind of semi-retirement — a five-year interval of sufficiency between one institutional necessity and the next. The garden office in Chislehurst. The school pickup. The seaside in summer. The National Trust properties, the urban farms, the London museums. A specific and unrepeatable domestic happiness, available precisely because I had not maximised, not built, not accumulated.

When it ended it ended completely. The corporate sales world was waiting. The interval closed.

Somewhere in storage, on a hard drive I have not yet opened, the images remain. The trustworthy faces of people managing money I could not follow, in institutions whose internal geology I could not see, in a

square mile of the city that operated, as it had always operated, at the intersection of the visible and the invisible.

I was inside it. I did not know what I was inside. That is the honest account.

VIII.

Connection to Quantum Memory and the Research Notes Series

This research note belongs to the Liminal Mind embedded observation sequence — the biographical archaeology that underlies the broader practice. The through-line from NAAFI in 1991 to Valleys to Coast in 2026 runs through Clays Lane, Easynet, Cable and Wireless, and now the City of London interlude: successive institutional encounters, each one adding a layer to the understanding of how legitimacy is constructed, how surface and structure diverge, and what the photographer in the room is actually recording.

The City of London material adds something the other research notes do not have: the photographer not as observer of institutional transformation but as active participant in the construction of institutional image. At NAAFI I documented an institution photographing itself at the moment it became redundant. At the City firms I was making the image that said: this is trustworthy. This is legitimate. These are the people you can trust with your money.

The Quantum Memory project asks what it means to witness something before you understand what you are witnessing. The allotment photographs at Clays Lane were made without a theoretical framework I could name — I did not yet have Heidegger or Bohm or Cynefin as vocabulary for what I was doing. The City portraits were made without knowledge of what the institutions I was serving were doing beneath their surfaces. In both cases the photographs are evidence of a moment. In both cases the full meaning of that evidence only became legible later.

The hard drive in storage is worth opening.

Note on Sources and Method

This research note is reconstructed from personal testimony. The author worked as a corporate photographer in the City of London between approximately 2006 and 2011, with clients including Wedlake Bell, Kirkland and Ellis, Cleary Gottlieb, Renaissance Capital, and Danske Bank. Photographs from this period are held in the author's personal archive and have not yet been systematically reviewed.

Historical context regarding Renaissance Capital, ONEXIM Group, and Danske Bank's Estonian branch money laundering case is drawn from public record sources including journalism, regulatory findings, and court documentation. The Danske Bank scandal has been extensively documented; the author's connection to the institution is incidental and predates any public knowledge of the conduct subsequently identified.

The analysis of the City of London's role in international financial flows draws on Oliver Bullough, *Butler to the World* (Profile Books, 2022) and Tom Burgis, *Kleptopia* (HarperCollins, 2020), both of which provide documented accounts of the ecosystem this note describes from the inside.

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