

INVESTING IN BRITAIN'S ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

Many of Britain's most prominent old buildings are getting new leases of life and entirely new purposes, writes *Rita Lobo*

Britain is a nation with a proud architectural tradition; from grand Norman abbeys to Victorian industrial sites, there is an appreciation for the cultural heritage in architecture. But that has not always been the case: up until the start of the 20th century there was no legal obligation by proprietors or councils to protect buildings of historical significance. As a result, many precious constructions were lost, before The Ancient Monuments Consolidation and Amendment Act was introduced by Parliament in 1913. This marked a turning of the tides towards preservation. However, it has only been in the last few decades that property developers have taken an interest in historic architecture with a view to reinvigorate buildings and update their use.

The Tate Modern building, once the Bankside Power Station, is perhaps the most iconic transformation. Converted in the late 1990s by leading architects Herzog & De Meuron, the old power station is now Britain's most visited museum and gallery. Conversely, Battersea Power Station, three miles up the Thames, struggled to attract a suitable project as developers covered before its enormous size, difficult shape and Grade II listed status. However, it is now nearing completion in an ambitious mixed-use development, attracting huge interest from overseas investors, and acting as the focal point of the transformation of one of central London's largest regeneration zones.

High-profile redevelopments help make the case for preservation, rather than demolition, though it is not always

easy. Restoring heritage architecture can be costly, and many regulatory burdens must be met. This is a high bar for some investors, especially given the tax relief new builds receive.

"In Britain there is a significant appreciation for historical buildings," says Mike Fox, Deputy Director for SAVE Britain's Heritage, an architectural heritage conservation group that has campaigned to save Smithfield Market, Battersea Power Station and many more old buildings. "For the most part, Britain has robust laws and legislation to protect historic buildings from inappropriate development."

CREATIVITY AND ADAPTABILITY

Save Britain's Heritage works with listed and non-listed buildings – recognition that not all buildings of historical, cultural and design value make it onto the register. However, the Grade Listing system is imperative to ensure the maintenance and conservation of heritage architecture.

The list emerged after World War II, when the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) raised the alarm about the extent of the damage caused by shelling. It was originally a tool to determine which buildings should be restored or rebuilt after the bombings. Grade I buildings are of exceptional interest and sometimes internationally important; Grade II listed buildings are those that carry special interest, and account for the majority of listings. Redeveloping a Grade II listed edifice can breathe new life into a community, and boost the local economy. >



THE CURRENT INSIDE OF SMITHFIELD MARKET. RIGHT, AND HOW IT MIGHT LOOK ONCE THE MUSEUM OF LONDON MOVES IN, FAR RIGHT.



“for 15 years, the market buildings at the western end of Smithfield were boarded up and left to decay. They stand as focal points of an important conservation area and in July 2015 a government planning inspector concluded they had been the subject of ‘deliberate neglect’ by their owners.”

Schemes to redevelop the building into office space were ultimately rejected because of the irreparable damage it would cause to the original features. Salvation came from the Museum of London that was looking for a bigger site. It has taken over the space and is in the process of tendering bids in an architecture competition. The redeveloped building will preserve much of the original market in order to rehouse the museum. “One of the major benefits of developing cultural institutions in historic buildings is that they can help regenerate the wider

It can be a challenge to redevelop heritage architecture and not all of it will lend itself to large-scale uses, such as housing, although architects have proved time and again that a little creativity can go a long way. Bristol Paintworks, located at a former Victorian paint factory to the east of the city centre is such a development. Once abandoned, Verve Property and Crest Nicholson have since successfully redeveloped it into a creative hub featuring cafes, restaurants and media enterprises, as well as plenty of desirable housing.

“My goal with Paintworks was to show that you can build a good community from scratch,” explains Ashley Nicholson, Founder of Verve Property, a property developer that specialises in converting brownfield sites and regenerating existing buildings. It has certainly worked, Paintworks is expanding around the original development and has become a desirable area to live and work in, despite its distance from the city centre. “I think a lot of the time, perfectly good, even humble, buildings are often lost and replaced with something less good,” says Nicholson.

Developers can often be put off by the state of the building. That was the case with Lister Mills. Once the largest textile mills in northern England, the building still dominates the Bradford skyline, but had been gutted after years of neglect and abuse during the 2001 Bradford Riots. Developer Urban Splash saw the potential of the two handsome Italian-style

sandstone blocks and, with architect David Morley, relaunched Lister Mills with 131 apartments, a retail area and space for a disabled performing arts charity centre. The addition of futuristic zinc bubbles on the roof, which house the luxurious penthouses, has redefined Lister Mills’ appearance without compromising its historic importance.

REDEVELOPING COMMUNITIES

Not all redevelopments are straightforward, though. Battersea Power Station’s road to recovery took almost four decades and it came to the brink of demolition on at least one occasion. It was tipped to become an indoor athletics arena first, then an indoor amusement park in the 1980s, before lying roofless and abandoned. Two decades of disputes and filed plans ensued, but eventually a Malaysian consortium acquired the building and adjoining land. Their plans are to relaunch the main building with events spaces, retail, offices and residential areas, parts of which are scheduled for completion in late 2017.

The £8bn project is a colossal redevelopment. It will house close to 4,000 new apartments, three hotels, more than 250 shops and restaurants, leisure facilities and a six-acre riverside park. Upon completion in 2025, it will house 25,000 people and will have created more than 20,000 jobs, according to the developer’s own research.

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For developers, there will always be the temptation to knock something down and start again, but even with unlisted buildings, that is not necessarily the best, or most profitable way forward. Such is the case of Astley Castle in Warwickshire, a Grade II site. The 12th century fortification had been in continuous use until a fire gutted the moated castle in 1978. It was not until 2005 that the Landmark Trust decided to put Astley Castle back into use. Architects Witherford Watson Mann won the 2013 RIBA Stirling Prize for their work on the project. Stephen Witherford and William Mann commented at the time: “Astley shows that working with historic buildings does not just have to be about repair or reinstatement. It can be a reinvention or reimagining, making something richer and more engaging than what was there before.”

BEYOND REAL ESTATE

Even though there can be a big appeal in redeveloping heritage to create housing, this is not necessarily the only answer. Take Smithfield Market in London. SAVE’s Marcus Binney writes in *Big Saves*, their Heritage anthology book,

areas around them, providing a focus and impetus for further investment,” says Fox. “Bankside Power Station – now Tate Modern – is a fantastic case in point.”

There are challenges to investing in heritage architecture. Listed buildings will often require additional work and redesigns will need to meet conservation conditions. However, the rewards can be plentiful; the prestige and positive publicity that come attached to these redevelopments, when done right, cannot be underestimated. “It is about the importance of the historic environment, and how buildings and landscapes contribute positively to people, areas, and economies,” says Fox. “People like historical buildings and areas. If you look at some of the most successfully regenerated and commercially attractive areas around the world they are often within historic areas – Covent Garden, for example, is one of the most popular destinations in London, and the area’s historic buildings and streetscapes are a huge part of its success and its appeal.”

Property development is a thriving industry in the UK, and it is the synergy between heritage architecture and modern design that makes cities unique and desirable. ■

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