The solution to Britain's WFH problem? Make office life fashionable again

London's renovated Space House is such hot property it hosted a show during Fashion Week. Could it lure workers back to the office?

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Roksanda held its Spring/Summer 2025 show on Space House's rooftop Credit: Jack Chipper

"Stamped with an individual panache" was how, in 1970, the Architects' Journal described the buildings of Richard Seifert & Partners, then one of London's most successful architectural firms. Though it could not resist adding: "Like it or not."

Two years earlier – a year before the US moon landings –Space House opened in WC2, a Seifert-designed cylindrical office tower on Y-shaped pillars, looming over Edwardian Kingsway, Covent Garden and the 17th-century mansions of Lincoln's Inn Fields beyond. Space House's entrance block was respectful in form to its doughty neighbours. But its tower was clad in precast concrete cruciforms that turned its edifice into something like an enormous keypad. Its startling modernity cemented the arrival of the technological age. It was also part of a world almost as old as London: speculative real estate.

This week, after a multimillion-pound refurbishment, Space House reopens as luxury offices, a project led by architects Squire & Partners and modern-day speculative developers Seaforth Land. "The coolest new office development of 2024," is how heritage body the Twentieth Century Society describes it.

Even before its opening, its revival captured attention. During London Fashion Week, Roksanda held its Spring/Summer 2025 show at Space House, high up on the rooftop terrace, with models gazing out at London's sprawl as they stomped past zig-zagged concrete.

But Space House's two-year refit was complex and costly. Since the mid-1970s, it served as offices for the Civil Aviation Authority – dreary, carpet-tiled, sometimes neglected, and with ageing energy systems. The price tag for upgrading it has not been revealed, but Seaforth says "our total development cost, including the original £165m [cost of the land and building] after all the works are complete, is more than double".

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Almost brutalist: the renovated Space House opens this week Credit: Claire Menary

Many UK postwar houses and civic buildings have found new appreciation in the past decade. But Space House's refit is a bellwether for the modernist architecture of business. Employers are struggling to persuade workers to return to the office. Will anyone want to spend a working day in a 1960s relic?

Seaforth thinks so. Two storeys of office space have been added to the tower, complete with replica concrete cruciforms, contributing to nearly 20 per cent more workspace. The developer is betting on Space House's modernism as an advantage, not a hindrance.

"We take for granted that it's here. But actually you could never rebuild Space House, even today," says Tyler Goodwin, Seaforth's CEO. "There's this nervousness about coming out with such a full architectural style in an area like this."

Historic England agrees that it is an unusually dynamic and expressive building, awarding it grade-II listing in 2015, partly in recognition of its "assertive styling".

Two floors are already let. But despite Space House's retro-cool, success is not guaranteed. London has more empty commercial real-estate than it knows what to do with. After the pandemic, even workers in the newest, glassiest offices are reluctant to return to them. Vacancy rates in the centre are about eight per cent, according to Savills. The average worker spends just 2.7 days in the office a week, says the Centre for Cities. Fast-emptying Canary Wharf is frantically trying to turn its 20th-century office towers into hotels.

The 34-storey Centrepoint was once one of London's most divisive buildings Credit: Alamy

Still, Space House is not quite brutalist, which makes it a palatable form of modernism: pale and sleek rather than butch and hermetic; Los Angeles rather than London.

"Materially rich," is how Ewan Harrison, lecturer in architectural studies at the University of Manchester and a Seifert expert, describes it. "A lot of postwar architecture is cheap and drab. I don't think you could describe it as either. It's the antithesis of the depressing, stained concrete monstrosity."

Those concrete cruciforms, says Harrison, were "elegantly bevelled so the form is sculptural, but it's also practical – rainwater ran off them so it doesn't stain. That's why Space House is so white."

Space House may seem incongruous, but its design was carefully calibrated. Its cylindrical shape allowed neighbouring buildings to retain light. "I found early sketch drawings in which they considered doing the precast cruciforms on Kingsway," says Harrison. "They abandoned the idea because it was too shocking on the streetscape."

But Space House is an outlier because it is protected. The UK is mostly brutal towards unlisted mid-20th century offices and slow to recognise architectural and heritage value, even where it does exist.

Take Bastion House, a much-admired, once-prestigious City block by Powell & Moya built in 1977, earmarked for demolition to make way for a gargantuan development.

ITV's former studios and production offices on the South Bank are to be

demolished to make way for a million sq ft of speculative office space, 225 per cent larger than its 1972 modernist predecessor. Edinburgh's Scottish Widows HQ, a series of hexagonal blocks opened in 1977 by the practice of Sir Basil Spence, architect of Coventry cathedral, is also under threat. Campaigners including the Twentieth Century Society have tried – and failed – to save all three, not only on heritage grounds. They argue that upgrades save carbon already embodied within ageing offices.

"Space House was worth saving for its perkily futuristic architecture," says Barnabas Calder, an architectural historian at the University of Liverpool and author of Architecture: From Prehistory to Climate Emergency. "But… the default position needs to be that we reuse buildings rather than replace them – even if they don't have this charm."

Bastion House is earmarked for demolition Credit: Alamy

It is nearly always cheaper for developers to demolish and start again. Even in an age of carbon consciousness and sustainability targets, 20th-century commercial blocks are seen as costly and difficult to refit with modern systems of heating and cooling.

Concrete Dreams, a new exhibition at Newcastle University's Farrell Centre, makes a case for architects and developers to remake postwar buildings through retrofitting.

"Generational shifts are central to the changing way we perceive them," says Owen Hopkins, the centre's director. He believes more refitting is inevitable. "For a lot of people, modernism is no longer in living memory. And however flawed or hubristic, however misguided it may have been, there's a lot we can learn."

But technical aspects of Space House's refurbishment were expensive and fiddly. Ageing energy systems were ripped out and replaced with all-electric heating and cooling, earning its design a BREEAM outstanding rating, one of the first listed buildings to achieve the energy efficiency standard. That, says Seaforth, is of value to employers with net-zero commitments. Higher energy-efficient buildings are more likely to attract longer leases, according to research by Knight Frank.

More money has been lavished on Space House's interiors. Its reception is panelled in timber and ribbed concrete; the granite-clad entrance block is remodelled with an art gallery in mind. One floor houses a private club, and the tower's former underground car park is now bike storage and a 16,500 sq-ft party space.

At street level, the former petrol station, which once serviced motoring commuters, will become a swish restaurant. There are silent, high-speed lifts.

"We hope other developers will follow," says a Twentieth Century Society spokesperson. "There is character a-plenty in our tired post-war buildings; revitalising rather than razing them… produces something with far more élan than the usual corporate spreadsheet architecture."

ITV's former studios on the South Bank are set to be demolished Credit: Alamy

Whether élan will be enough to tempt office-workers to spend all week at work remains to be seen. But then, much of London was built on speculation.

Lincoln's Inn Fields started out as a speculative venture in the 1630s. So was much of Georgian London, which has withstood generations of upgrades.

The 34-storey Centrepoint, Seifert & Partners' other central London modernist landmark, completed at the junction of New Oxford Street with Charing Cross Road in 1966, was once one of London's most notorious and divisive examples – and not only for its futuristic appearance. Like Space House, it was designed by Seifert's partner George Marsh for the speculator Harry Hyams.

In the first half of the 1970s, Hyams allowed Centrepoint to stand empty – probably as an accounting trick, says Harrison. "Widely believed at the time and it seems highly credible."

"Because of the way capital value was extrapolated from potential rental, if you kept a building empty during periods of rising rents you could make a killing," he says. "People became angry and Centrepoint became a visible symbol of inequality."

Centrepoint is now luxurious and expensive apartments – its controversies mostly forgotten by new generations of Londoners. Space House was another Hyams-Marsh speculative venture. It is now ready for the 21st century – like it or not.

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