ARCHITECTURE

Once vacant, London's grand department stores are getting a new lease on life

Thanks to imaginative redevelopment, these historic landmarks are being reborn as residences, offices, gyms and restaurants. Here's what's behind the trend

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(Image credit: Richard Chivers)

BY EMILY WRIGHT PUBLISHED 2 DAYS AGO IN FEATURES

Some of London's most iconic department stores are, quite literally, being given a new lease of life. The city's most coveted shopping destinations, many of which were devastated by seismic shifts to brick-and-mortar retail, are opening their doors once more. But the shop floors and hanging rails have largely gone. In their place are residences, workspaces, gyms and restaurants.

There's Foster + Partners' £1.1 billion redevelopment of Whiteleys, a famous shopping centre on Bayswater's Queensway, which will comprise 139 luxury homes and a 90-room Six Senses Hotel. Then there's Clapham Junction's Arding & Hobbs Building, a former Debenhams dating back to 1876 that's been transformed into a mixed-use office by Stiff + Trevillion. These buildings, among other examples popping up across London, show that department stores are prime for retrofit and redevelopment thanks to their sprawling footprints, unique aesthetics and longstanding brand recognition.

The Whiteley building, redesigned by Foster + Partners
(Image credit: Foster + Partners)

Interior of The Whiteley's first show apartment, by Kelly Behun, as seen in the Wallpaper* issue of January 2024
(Image credit: Photography Paul Raeside; Art direction Michael Reynolds)

The trend was arguably kicked off by Squire & Partners back in 2017 when it transformed a dilapidated Edwardian department store in Brixton into a workspace and community hub aptly named the Department Store. This was followed by developer General Projects' £20 million transformation of the Heal's building on Tottenham Court Road into the Manufactory, a 'next-gen workspace campus,' completed last March.

The Department Store by Squire & Partners
(Image credit: James Jones)

With the Whiteley Building and Arding & Hobbs joining the fold, it's clear that London's great department store reinvention won't be slowing down any time soon. This trend is also proving the power of large-scale restoration in favour of demolition, despite the challenges that come with breathing new life back into the old bones of historic buildings.

The redesigned Heal's by General Projects
(Image credit: Chris Wharton)

Ground floor communal space the reworked Heal's building
(Image credit: Chris Wharton)

'This is a beautiful building with a 120-year-old façade,' says Alex Michelin, co-founder of Finchatton, one of the developers spearheading the reimagined Whiteley. 'It's a London landmark. But restoration isn't always straightforward. We couldn't find anyone to restore the old, lead windows. We eventually found one guy who could do it, and we had to get him to train up other people to do it with him. It was worth it because, from a sustainability and aesthetics perspective, this was really important to us. But we had to create a whole new workforce to replicate the original windows in a modern way.'

It has been a similar story for the team behind Arding & Hobbs, which, in its new iteration, features workspaces, a rooftop terrace, an indoor escalator kept from its department store days and a private member's club set to open this month.

These uses, says Sascha Lewin, chief executive of commercial property specialist W.RE and the developer behind the project, have been carefully and deliberately curated given the nature of the structure and the complications that can arise when a historic building is restored rather than rebuilt from scratch.

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A view inside the redesigned Arding & Hobbs. The interiors show off a new timber-wrapped core
(Image credit: Richard Chivers)

'The building is architecturally stunning, but the reality is that these are difficult buildings to reposition in terms of uses,' he says. 'They are often quite deep without much natural light, the cost of conversion is high, and the value proposition really needs to stack up. That's why we have focused on developing for commercial rather than residential tenants. It has been quite a tricky building to work with, but at its core, it had these unbelievably beautiful historic features both externally and internally.'

And those, he says, were worth salvaging.

As for what this approach to large-scale development could mean for London's historic buildings more widely, there are already stories of similar restorative projects beyond defunct department stores emerging.

The redesigned rooftop at Arding & Hobbs
(Image credit: Richard Chivers)

Walworth Town Hall, a regal Victorian building in south London, is a prime example. The building sat vacant for more than a decade, after being severely damaged in a 2010 fire. Now, it has a new life as a community, business and cultural centre.

'As such an important cultural and heritage asset in the city, it was essential that a viable, long-term plan was implemented to reinvent it,' says Jacob Loftus, founder and chief executive of General Projects, the developer behind the building's restoration.

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A view of the revitalized Walworth Town Hall.
(Image credit: Chris Wharton)

'Commercial viability can be a challenge, but the success of Heal's, Walworth Town Hall and many other examples prove there are ways to make these projects work,' he adds. 'With the right creativity, imagination and hard work, London's former department stores, town halls and other prominent historic buildings can, and must, be restored, reinvented and protected for generations to come.' ★

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Emily Wright

Emily Wright is a journalist and moderator with over twenty years' experience writing about and commenting on real estate, architecture, design and innovation. Formerly head of content and global editor at leading real-estate title Estates Gazette, she now writes for a range of titles including Wallpaper*, The Times, Dezeen and The Spaces and has interviewed architects, developers and political figures including Zaha Hadid, Richard Rogers, Norman Foster, Terence Conran and Donald Trump. A passionate advocate for human-centred design she also writes Well-Placed, a monthly Substack focussed on the importance of places and spaces designed and developed with the end-user in mind.

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