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# Buildings that can build brands

Heritage premises may be costly and difficult to maintain, but the right site can encapsulate a company's ethos, writes **Alicia Clegg**

**B**eneath a canopy of vaulting arches, terracotta carvings and gothic revival spires, the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel in London exudes the promise of high service. It may have opened just three months ago, and be owned by the Marriott chain, but the hotel claims British provenance. Its bricks and mortar are antique originals, an architectural inheritance from a celebrated Victorian railway hotel that once stood in its place. "For us, this building couldn't be any more [fitting] even if we had built it from scratch," says Kevin Kelly, the general manager.

With the launch of its London flagship in a building protected by a Grade I heritage listing, Marriott joins a select club of businesses swimming against the tide in property trends. According to Martin Fellows, a partner at the estate agency Knight Frank, most businesses would prefer a modern building that is easy to warm in winter and air-condition in summer than a characterful, cranky period piece that costs a fortune to keep up and comes burdened by the red tape that is attached to heritage status. "Relatively few businesses are willing

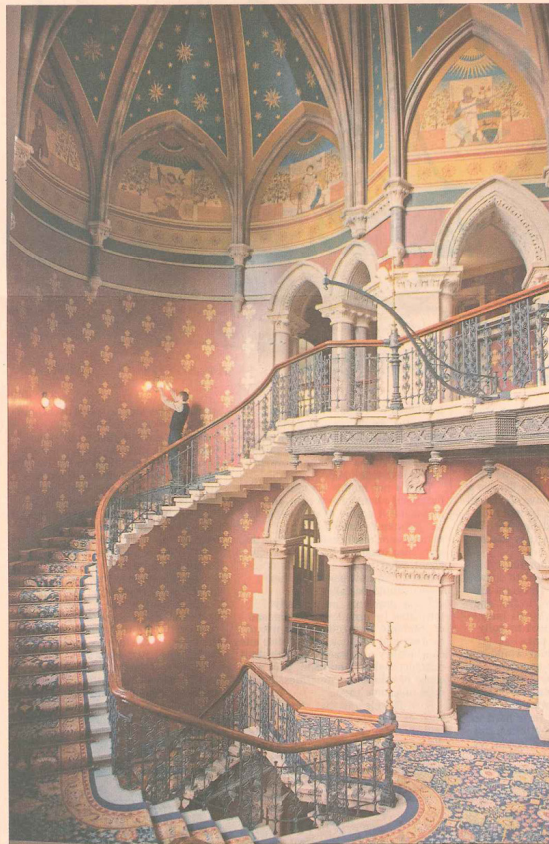
**'This building couldn't be any more [fitting] even if we had built it from scratch'**

to take on the cost and restrictions of important heritage buildings," he says.

There are, however, exceptions. Inhabiting a building with an interesting history can be a way of "buying a back story," says Charlie Stott, a strategist at brand consultancy Wolff Olins. Similarly, luxury businesses are often willing to pay a premium for elegant architecture. Alfred Dunhill, the men's wear retailer, is a case in point. To showcase the male luxury lifestyle, which it aspires to epitomise, the business has opened a number of retail-cum-leisure venues, known as the "Homes of Alfred Dunhill". The grandest sits in Bourdon House, the London residence of a former Duke of Westminster that is also protected by a heritage listing. "Whenever I am in Bourdon House, I stop having to describe what the brand is about because the building starts doing it for me," says Jason Becklev. Dunhill's global marketing director.

Distinctive buildings are also popular with creative types for whom an unusual workplace may be inspiring. Perfect Fools, a creative studio, occupies a converted 1930s cinema in Stockholm. Björn Kummeneje, the company's technical director, says the high ceilings and "fun hideaways" – the old projector room has become a sound room – gives him the sense of being in a place where "you are not limited" and where it is possible to "create stuff".

For The Summit Group Communications, a marketing consultancy based in Salt Lake City, moving in to a converted 1920s electrical store has helped resolve a recruiting dilemma: how to build a workforce with a diversity of opinion in a provincial city in which the Mormon Church, which has its headquarters in Salt Lake, is the overriding cultural influence. Todd Wolfenbarger, the company's president, says that the building's unconventional appearance – it sits under a



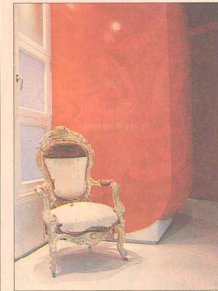
## St Pancras Renaissance Hotel

**Benefits:**  
 ● High-Victorian architecture lends Marriott a sense of British heritage.

**Challenges:**  
 ● The shelving in one of the hotel's bars is not allowed to touch the walls, which have special protected status.  
 ● Fixtures, such as wooden door knobs, are original or custom-made replicas.

neon sign depicting a lightning bolt that once advertised the store – has piqued the curiosity of "bright young marketers" and, ultimately, made it easier to recruit. "The building itself has produced a little bit of a culture shift," he says.

Where some businesses see buildings as functional, others spot an opportunity to engage in visual branding. Advertising agency M&C Saatchi Spain occupies part of a renovated palace in Madrid, dating back to 1807. Urs Frick, the company's president, says the building's exuberant mix of neoclassical, rococo and Andalusian architecture sets the agency apart from its competitors, most of which inhabit "glass and concrete" boxes that mirror the corporate look of their



## M&C Saatchi Spain

**Benefits:**  
 ● Idiosyncratic setting differentiates it from rivals' corporate-style offices.  
 ● Clients used to want M&C Saatchi to go to them, but now they prefer meeting in the agency's offices.

**Challenges:**  
 ● Achieving a fusion of heritage and contemporary styles.  
 ● Building improvements must be collectively agreed with other tenants.  
 ● Any changes have to be approved by the retained heritage architect, right down to the colour of the window frames.

clients. If an agency "looks a bit glamorous", he says, it signals that "something special is going on inside".

One risk for businesses that aspire to heritage chic is that they end up resembling museum pieces. M&C Saatchi's solution was to add ultra-modern touches. These include an outsized semicircular concrete reception bay and a collection of African art juxtaposed with formal 19th century portraits.

Combining 18th century decor with 21st century officialdom can be more problematic. After hiring craftsmen to renovate Bourdon House – the curved oak staircase was built in situ and the gold leaf adorning the interior of the private members' club was hand-brushed into place – Mr Becklev was dismayed to discover that Dunhill still had to put in standard health and safety signage. "Neon [fire escape] signs stuck on antique ceilings are not a good look," he observes.

Getting heritage approval for a retrofit can be time-consuming, even for buildings that retain few of their original features. Sony Music assumed that creating a contemporary workplace behind the celebrated Art Deco facade of the former Derry & Toms department store in London would be straightforward, as the space it was taking was essentially a shell. But to get the go-ahead for the reclaimed pine flooring that it wanted – the conservation officer favoured period-style parquet – Sony had to research the store's history. "We found that the back half of the floors were originally the warehouse for the store, and that helped us," says Mike Blacklee, Sony Music's facilities director.

Some three months into the Marriott job, Mr Kelly says that coping with the hotel's heritage has not proved the "nightmare" he sometimes feared. But each day brings challenges, such as what to do if one of the custom-made door knobs breaks. "If a door handle broke in my last hotel, someone would go down to B&Q and by the afternoon we would have fixed it," he says. "Here [sourcing a replacement] can take weeks or even months."

A fine old building can bring a brand to life, but even heritage buffs may draw the line when replacing a door knob has to be project managed.



## Bourdon House (Alfred Dunhill)

**Benefits:**  
 ● The house's history plays to the brand conceit of Dunhill as the epitome of the male luxury lifestyle.

**Challenges:**  
 ● Retail layout has to respect the house's room structure.  
 ● Period materials, such as lime-based paints and silk sprung wall coverings, have to be sourced from specialists.  
 ● No ducting meant cables had to be embedded in the building's fabric.  
 ● No lifts, because of heritage-building restrictions.