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# Just the spot

Designing outstanding hotels for difficult to develop locations pays off, writes Ray Philpott

**T**wo impressive, high-end hotels have been created in interesting but rather challenging sites in the heart of London.

On the South Bank and boasting breathtaking views over the River Thames, the 359-room, transatlantic travel-themed Mondrian London hotel is about to launch following a three-year redevelopment of a complicated 1970s office block – Sea Containers House.

In the West End, the Ham Yard Hotel development has seen a luxurious boutique hotel with a retro-warehouse exterior and a new public space breathe new life into a long-neglected and disconnected part of the capital's vibrant Soho area.

Both use creative architecture and design to realise the full potential of two very different places that, despite being situated in desirable areas, were not the easiest places to develop.

## Hotel on the Thames

When Morgans Hotel Group officially opens the Mondrian London next month, guests will enjoy spectacular views over the Thames and comfortable interiors with a transatlantic liner designed by Design Research Studio under the creative direction of Tom Dixon.

The hotel's premier rooms are on levels three, four and five of the river-facing 'north block' with other rooms in the 'south block' behind it. The remaining space in the north block is for Ogilvy offices designed by architects TP Bennett, also responsible for the shell of the building with its all-new glazing.

But the renovation and conversion inside was anything but straightforward for the team at EPR Architects that designed the interior architecture. Associate Director Tom Hupe explains why. "Ironically, it was originally designed as a hotel and at first everybody thought this would make the job easier – but that wasn't the reality.

"Back in the '70s the developers progressed as far as constructing the hotel shell but a downturn in market confidence in the London hotel industry led to a re-evaluation of the scheme and the building was redesigned as an office. Warren

*Continued overleaf...*



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The Mondrian London Hotel offers superb views over the River Thames from South Bank

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**‘Every room is of a different width and every bulkhead in each room is a different size’**

Tom Hupe, associate director,  
EPR Architects

trusses were installed on the roof, from which the concrete floor slabs were suspended, enabling the hotel internal walls to be cut back to free up office floor space. This still left significant remnants of the original hotel room shell in place.”

Working closely with the Design Research Studio interior designers and main contractor Byrne Group, EPR’s role was to redesign and modify existing internal architecture so that the complex interior designs would work and ensure services could get through.

Hupe says: “Essentially, we had to take their concept to a detailed design level to shape the walls and other structural elements so the design could be realised. Such a complex and convoluted structure is hard to work in, with hanging Macalloy bars and short walls and very many variations. As the building was stripped out more issues and challenges were revealed that had to be overcome.

“In a new hotel you might have up to 10 room types but

here, every room is of a different width and every bulkhead in each room is a different size. Therefore our design has had to accommodate those variations.”

Even the relatively uniform bathrooms, with exterior timber panelling manufactured in Ireland, had to be custom-fitted on-site by skilled carpenters to accommodate individual variations in each room.

Major structural works had to be put in to enable structural fin walls to be taken out to create a large open space for the river-view balcony suites overlooking the river. Elsewhere, the columns at every party wall have been ‘lost’ within the design and wall systems.

However, huge original columns on the ground floor had to remain and have been covered by a bespoke cladding system or metal and copper finishes to designs drawn by EPR to suit each situation.

“Everyone recognised that good processes and communica-



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Top: The interior of a large, attractive river-facing suite at the Mondrian

Right: the stripped back original internal structure of the 1970s office building, now suites and bedrooms



tions were essential right from the start. So, we, Tom Dixon and Byrne worked closely together with regular progress meetings throughout – it's been a good relationship," says Hupe.

With the Thames Path running along the front of the hotel, its entrance at the rear of the north block. The lobby features a 'ship's hull' design – an enormous, sweeping three-dimensional sculpture clad in copper that forms the reception desk in the double-height lobby before sweeping into the restaurant overlooking the Thames.

"Incorporating this important feature into the space was a

particular challenge," says Hupe. "We had to move existing columns, rework existing walls and marry the new floor levels with the Thames Path."

The building has an attractive glass and steel roof-top bar, one of the few additions to the exterior, and features an aqua bathhouse and spa and 56-seat screening room in the basement as well as 5,500 sq ft of meeting rooms and conference facilities.

Hupe says: "For us, the opportunity to take this building back to its original function – to realise the hotel that never was – has been interesting and rewarding."

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Grand designs: In the basement of the Mondrian is a screening room (far left) and bathhouse and spa (above and left)