

HOTEL



The Dixon

LONDON

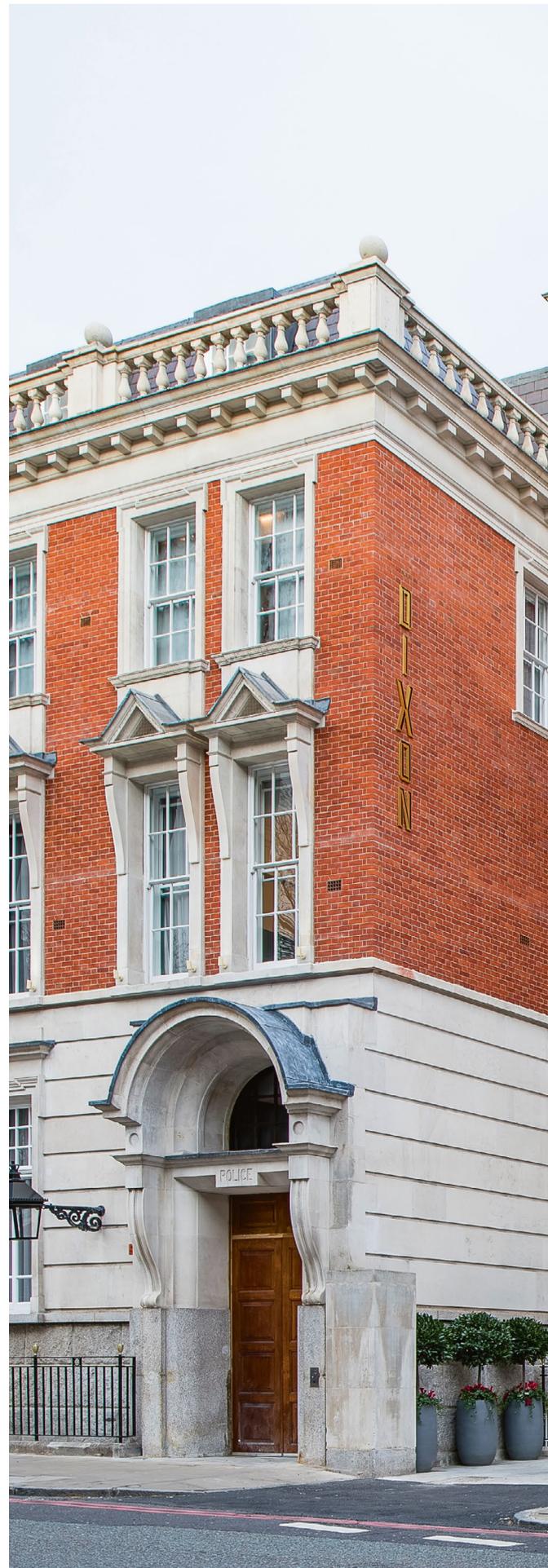
Transforming a former magistrates court, Dominvs Group and Twenty2Degrees guide a heavily listed London mainstay into a new era of form and function.

Words: Kristofer Thomas | Photography: © Paul Winch-Furness

As the world's cities become increasingly dense with structure, opportunities for newbuild projects on prime unoccupied urban land have dwindled. To find the space for entirely new ground-up creations, developers must often travel far from the desirable centre, away from the crowds, traffic and footfall. As such, a wave of high-profile conversions has washed over the hotel sphere in recent years; the model allowing operators to occupy spaces beneficial to their business, but posing designers the unenviable challenge of balancing carefully documented histories of listed or preserved buildings with both the desires of contemporary guests and the demands of capital.

In the last two years alone, an influx of increasingly complex and comprehensive conversions has seen a former Ghent post office transformed into Zannier Hotels' 1898 The Post; Edward Lutyens' landmark Midland Bank repurposed as The Ned; and an historic grain storage facility in Cape Town reimaged by Thomas Heatherwick and The Royal Portfolio as The Silo.

Whilst a towering granary or global bank may seem more immediately obvious choices to house a project with the operational







Above: The lobby welcomes guests with a combination of original features and contemporary design elements in equal measure

scope and spectrum of facilities expected from a hotel, a new opening in London's Tower Bridge is demonstrating just how effective the process can be when applied to even the most unexpected structures.

Designed in 1906 by architect John Dixon Butler – from who this hotel takes its name – the Grade II-listed Tower Bridge Magistrates Court and police station is steeped in history, but in recent years has lain dormant behind the stone pillars marking its entrance. However, now under the ownership of Dominvs Group, and brought into the fold of Marriott's Autograph Collection, the structure enters a new chapter. Drafting in Twenty2Degrees to reimagine the interiors in collaboration with Dominvs' Design Director Rani Ahluwalia, and McAleer & Rushe and Consarc Design Group to carry out careful restorations where required, The Dixon joins a community of converted structures demonstrating that, regardless of their former lives, can result in uniquely executed design concepts.

"We really wanted to be respectful to the building, but also to respond to the fact that it has to operate in a completely different way now," says Joseph Stella, Creative Director of Twenty2Degrees. "From a design point of view, the conversion process was about recognising how guests would experience the property, and creating the journey through."

This journey begins with a bold welcome to the lobby, where an imposing staircase and parallel mezzanines frame a chandelier

spanning both levels. Tucked away in a former clerk's office to the side, a check-in desk has been positioned so as not to intrude on the arrangement, which includes a metal-clad table engraved with an ensemble of scenes from the surrounding area. Whilst the processing hall of a magistrates court might not seem the hospitable introduction guests would expect, the space is softened in part by the carpet leading up the stairs – created bespoke by Ulster – adorned by fluid lines that mimic the nearby Thames, as well as original oak panelling and contemporary furnishing like the UHS-created Arkansas side chair.

Here too begins a thread of detailing that continues throughout the project, speaking to both the structure's previous function and its new life. The hanging chandelier for instance – formed from threads of gold leaf glass beads pulled into a plume – incorporates a series of transparent handcuffs that refract the light for pockets of illumination, whilst artwork curated by Peter Millard & Partners carries a floral motif in a visual nod to the local area and a relief from the court's inherent formality.

"The character of the property has been a key attribute to the design," Ahluwalia explains. "As a Grade II-listed building with an incredible heritage, this project focused on the celebration of the history and original architecture, while reflecting the vibrancy and cultural diversity of SE1. From very early stages the design concept has been heavily focused around restoration, with much of the building





Above: Suites in palettes of teal or mustard incorporate portraits of the hotel's defining characters alongside sheers, curtains and cushions by Shuffles

and its history being kept and preserved." Stella agrees, noting: "We wanted to create something that took inspiration from the worlds of old and new, rough and refined, and all the little juxtapositions you find in the SE1 postcode."

In a corridor leading off, guests are introduced to the three characters that act as spiritual consultants of sorts in defining the hotel's identity through a triptych of portraits depicting novelist George Orwell, explorer Ernest Shackleton and actor Charlie Chaplin. Each a resident of the area at some point, and here depicted with a modern floral twist printed into their image, these hang in close proximity to a pair of artworks incorporating original cell keys and holding benches – the latter with notes from detainees still etched into the surface.

A door adjacent leads to the building's listed courtroom, wherein now sits the aptly named Courtroom Bar. But whilst the unique function and strict listings certainly posed a challenge, they have been incorporated in a manner that results in an equally unique result. Intrusive partitions that once separated judge, jury, prosecutor and defendant have thus been used to create a series of nooks and private sections, and a flow from the intimate sunken bar at the head of the room – occupying the judge's lectern – to open seating at the back.

But whilst the foyer and courtroom both provided set starting points and a series of established historical beats to work from,

guestrooms required a more tactic approach, using the aesthetic vocabulary set out on the lower levels to inform the new form and function above.

"The non-uniformity of the structure actually allowed for some really interesting design to happen, and a lot of unique spaces," Stella explains. "Guests can find something different every stay, and there are details that differ from space to space that either nod to the building or interpret it in a very contemporary way."

A panelled wall in each room has been designed in the exact same profiles as the Edwardian period panels in the lobby, whilst carpets carry distinctive geometric patterns mimicking designs from the same era's mosaic trend. "It's a slice of the original, just not as you'd expect it," Stella adds.

A contrast between herringbone wood flooring and the white marble of the bathrooms speaks again to the meeting of old and new, as do scaled down reappearances of one of the hotel's three ambassadors. Rounded furnishings in teal or pastel yellow and an abstract lighting fixture lean towards more modern sensibilities, but are anchored by the stateliness of the dark wood and structural mouldings. "It's about paying respect to the past, however long ago that might be," Stella notes. "But it's about the present too, and all the little points in between that lead us here, as well as the future ahead."

This line of thinking leads to the design's logical conclusion within



Above: Provisioners marks a departure from the established scheme with bright colours, bold patterns and tables created bespoke by RHA Furniture

Provisioners, where Twenty2Degrees were given permission to depart from the aesthetic vocabulary of the wider hotel in favour of an F&B space that, although drastically different, remains coherent. Set in the newbuild portion to the rear, the space takes its cues from Bauhaus and modernism in equal measure, as well as the overarching influence of British industrial designer Sir Kenneth Graham, whose original archive sketches and conceptual drawings hang on the wall of a private room following their donation.

Linked visually to the rest of the scheme by subtle touches including an expansion of the teal and yellows debuted upstairs and linear brass partitions recalling the lighting fixture hung over the check-in desk, the space sees details including the European-style coffee bar, main restaurant portion, private booths and main bar distinguished by varying designs of terrazzo flooring, with the tight perimeters of former holding cells outlined by thin rows of black tiles punctuating. Just the one cell remains intact, subtly incorporated as a coffee storage room at the centre, so as not to disregard its past.

“Grade II-listed buildings require a lot more consideration when it

comes to design, and this is something that excited and challenged us right from the beginning,” Ahluwalia concludes. “Old meets new is a key part of The Dixon’s ethos, which directly responds to SE1 and the surrounding area. You have incredible historic structures including Tower Bridge and the Tower of London, beautifully contrasted by the likes of The Shard and City Hall. Our ambition has always been to add to this stunning landscape, valuing both the building’s rich history and the vibrancy of the local neighbourhood when it comes to architecture and interior design.”

An impressive conversion of form and function, The Dixon takes the tried and tested approach of melding old and new but elevates the result with an acute attention to detail and closely studied response to history and locale. In the lobby, at the top of the stairs, is the portrait most representative of this idea. With no known images of Dixon himself available, the property’s creator makes his cameo by way of an enigmatic portrait with the head obscured by a set of the flowers that flow through the hotel, greeting guests with an image of Dixon, boldly reimagined.

EXPRESS CHECK-OUT: 193 guestrooms | 1 restaurant | 1 bar | Meeting rooms; Boardroom; Theatre | Gym | www.thedixon.co.uk
 Owner / Operator / Developer: Dominvs Group | Architecture: Consarc Design Group | Interior Design: Dominvs Group; Twenty2Degrees
 Lighting Design: Lighting Design International | Art Consultant: Peter Millard & Partners | Main Contractor: McAleer & Rushe