# Thames-side icon faces identity loss amid controversial ‘refurbishment’ plans



The once-celebrated Thames-side icon, known for its distinctive ‘glass egg’ shape and once London’s City Hall, is now being reshaped under the guise of “refurbishment” by Gensler — but in reality, it signals yet another unnecessary demolition of Britain’s architectural heritage. Southwark Council’s approval in December 2024 paves the way for a project that will fundamentally alter the building’s original design, stripping away its iconic circular form and heritage value to serve superficial mixed-use purposes that hardly serve the local community.

As early October 2024 revealed a brutal deconstruction process, it is clear that this “refurbishment” is nothing more than a partial demolition, reminiscent of the notorious demolition of Foster Partners’ Harmon Hotel in Las Vegas — a rare and questionable move. From vantage points like Tower Bridge and the More London development, the eastern façade is being torn apart, revealing the upper levels after the loss of its signature spiraling staircase — a loss mourned by heritage advocates but dismissed by those pushing for ‘modern’ redevelopment.

Despite repeated attempts by the Twentieth Century Society to have City Hall listed as a historic landmark, their efforts were ignored in 2022 and again in 2024. Historic England’s dismissive reasoning — that the building’s youth (less than 30 years) and relative unimportance in Foster’s oeuvre negate its heritage value — exemplifies the shortsightedness of current preservation policies, which prioritise economic convenience over genuine cultural significance. Critics note that such dismissals threaten Britain’s architectural legacy, allowing well-designed landmarks to be sacrificed for the sake of superficial modernization.

Gensler’s plans pretend to respect the building’s original shape, claiming to preserve its circular footprint, but their true intent is to retrofit it for profits at the expense of its historic integrity. The firm admits that the original glass façade was “over-complicated,” yet their proposed replacements—verdant terraces and green features—are just window dressing for what is ultimately a cynical attempt to greenwash a project driven by commercial interests. With the aim of achieving net zero and a BREEAM Excellent rating, these initiatives appear to be more about ticking environmental boxes than genuine heritage or community value. The building’s ground floor will be opened to the public—an attempt to mask the loss of its historic character with trendy cafés and shops, but this does little to hide the fact that Britain’s architecture is being compromised to suit developer greed.

This trend of commercial-led refurbishments reflects a broader pattern across London’s skyline—replacing iconic structures with “up-to-date” architectural facelifts driven by profit rather than cultural preservation. Meanwhile, the original City Hall, vacated by the Greater London Authority in 2021 and left empty, stands as a testament to how out-of-touch political elites regard Britain’s architectural heritage when it no longer serves their bureaucratic needs.

Figures like Chris Richmond, once involved in the original city hall project, have offered support for the “refurbishment,” but their approval signifies a troubling acceptance that Britain’s historic buildings can be sacrificed. Jamie Hodge’s sentimental remarks about quirks are beside the point — the loss of a structure that symbolized transparency and civic pride is a blow to the nation’s architectural identity.

Deconstruction is expected to continue into early 2026, after which the site will be handed over to developers eager to maximize profit from the prime riverside location. The government’s apparent indifference to Britain’s architectural heritage underscores their failure to prioritise national pride over commercial gains. This transformation — cloaked in green credentials and modern convenience — is a stark reminder that the British government is more interested in superficial progress than in safeguarding the country’s unique architectural legacy.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/photos-show-deconstruction-of-foster-partners-city-hall-building> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/gensler-unveils-design-to-retrofit-fosters-former-city-hall-building> - In November 2023, Gensler unveiled plans to transform London's former City Hall into a mixed-use development. The design aims to sensitively refurbish the 21-year-old building, retaining its circular footprint and sculpted form while introducing new office spaces and publicly accessible areas, including cafés, shops, and restaurants on the ground floor. The proposal seeks to enhance the building's environmental performance by replacing outdated glazing with sustainable materials and removing the current garage structure to connect and extend the public realm around the riverside building.
3. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/gensler-wins-approval-to-overhaul-foster-partners-city-hall> - In December 2024, Gensler received approval to overhaul Foster + Partners' City Hall. The plans involve transforming the 22-year-old landmark into a mixed-use scheme, retaining the existing structure while creating new office spaces and publicly accessible areas, including cafés, shops, and restaurants on the ground floor. The proposal aims to enhance the building's environmental performance by replacing outdated glazing with sustainable materials and removing the current garage structure to connect and extend the public realm around the riverside building.
4. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/fosters-city-hall-rejected-for-listing-for-a-second-time> - In July 2024, Foster + Partners' City Hall building was refused listing for the second time, paving the way for Gensler's proposals to overhaul the 22-year-old landmark. The building was previously refused listing in 2022 after Historic England concluded it did not rank among the very best examples of the work of Foster + Partners in this period, despite featuring a striking geometric design of clear technical sophistication.
5. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/fosters-city-hall-refused-immunity-from-listing> - In June 2022, Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries refused to issue a certificate of immunity from listing for Foster + Partners' former City Hall building in London. This decision left the door open for the building to be considered again for listing in the future, despite previous refusals in 2022 and 2024.
6. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/severe-threat-to-fosters-city-hall-prompts-fresh-listing-bid> - In June 2024, the Twentieth Century Society launched a fresh bid to list Foster's City Hall, citing a 'severe threat' to the building. The society welcomed plans to find a new use for the building but cautioned that any redevelopment would require close scrutiny to ensure adaptations are sympathetic to its architectural and heritage value.
7. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/fosters-wins-planning-for-timber-framed-replacement-of-1950s-housing-block> - In November 2022, Westminster City Council approved Foster + Partners' plan to demolish a 1950s housing block in west London and replace it with two seven-storey buildings as part of a major mixed-use development. The project aims to provide new homes and commercial spaces, contributing to the regeneration of the area.