# Historic Custom House in London faces debate over luxury hotel conversion and public space protection



A prominent Grade I-listed building in central London, known as Custom House and historically utilised by HM Revenue & Customs, is slated for transformation into a luxury hotel. The redevelopment plans envision 179 hotel rooms, alongside amenities such as a basement spa, a cultural café, a gallery, and event spaces. This ambitious project aims to preserve the building's rich architectural heritage while introducing modern facilities to enhance its use. Custom House itself carries a storied legacy, situated on the north bank of the Thames in Billingsgate, where it historically served as a critical hub in London’s global trading network, overseeing customs and trade activities that shaped the city’s commerce for centuries.

Despite support from heritage bodies that acknowledge the need for sensitive yet adaptive reuse, there is notable opposition from local groups. The River Residents Group (RRG) has formally objected to the plans, highlighting concerns over the potential impact on the surrounding public realm. Their principal critique revolves around the absence of stringent and enforceable conditions to curb what they term “self-generated overdevelopment.” They fear that without robust protections, the public space around Custom House could become dominated by commercial drinking activities, leading to “parasitic” uses that would detract from its character and functionality. The group argues such developments could undermine the public space's integrity, advocating for binding planning conditions to safeguard these communal areas from being perceived primarily as drinking zones.

This stance comes amid a backdrop of cautious but constructive engagement from key heritage organisations. The Georgian Group, a charity dedicated to preserving historic architecture, has been involved in pre-application discussions, lending their expertise to ensure the redevelopment respects the building’s historic and architectural integrity. Similarly, Historic England, the public body charged with caring for England’s historic environment, has weighed in by recommending specific conditions to balance development ambitions with conservation aims, yet stopped short of seeking to block the project outright. Their collaborative approach suggests a recognition of the need to adapt heritage assets while maintaining their essential character and significance.

Furthermore, the City of London Corporation, responsible for overseeing heritage stewardship within the square mile, has also supported the redevelopment on the condition that recommended protections are put in place. Their involvement underscores a common thread across these bodies: striking a balance between enabling new, economically beneficial uses for historic buildings and ensuring that such developments do not erode the historical essence or public accessibility of heritage sites.

As the redevelopment progresses, the debate around Custom House encapsulates wider tensions seen in urban heritage management—how to rejuvenate and repurpose treasured historic sites in ways that respect their past while meeting contemporary needs. The voices of local residents and civic groups like the RRG serve as reminders that safeguarding public realms and community character must accompany any commercial development. The outcome here will likely set an important precedent for future projects involving listed buildings in London’s ever-evolving urban landscape.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/listed-central-london-building-luxury-hotel-b1246997.html), [[3]](https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/services/environment-and-sustainability/heritage/Pages/Custom-House.aspx)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/listed-central-london-building-luxury-hotel-b1246997.html), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/listed-central-london-building-luxury-hotel-b1246997.html), [[7]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/river-residents-group-objects-to-custom-house-redevelopment-plans-a1246997.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.georgiangroup.org.uk/), [[5]](https://historicengland.org.uk/), [[6]](https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/services/environment-and-sustainability/heritage/Pages/City-of-London-heritage.aspx)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/listed-central-london-building-luxury-hotel-b1246997.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/listed-central-london-building-luxury-hotel-b1246997.html> - A Grade I-listed building in central London, previously occupied by HMRC, is set to be transformed into a luxury hotel. The redevelopment includes 179 hotel rooms, a basement spa, a cultural café, a gallery, and event spaces. The River Residents Group (RRG) has objected to the plans, expressing concerns about the lack of specific conditions to protect the public realm from overdevelopment and potential 'parasitic' uses arising from the space being perceived as a drinking area.
3. <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/services/environment-and-sustainability/heritage/Pages/Custom-House.aspx> - Custom House, located on the north bank of the Thames in Billingsgate, has a rich history dating back to the 14th century. It played a significant role in London's global trading network and has been a focal point for customs and trade activities over the centuries. The building's architectural significance and historical importance have made it a Grade I-listed structure, warranting preservation and careful consideration in any redevelopment plans.
4. <https://www.georgiangroup.org.uk/> - The Georgian Group is a UK charity dedicated to the preservation and protection of Georgian architecture and heritage. They provide advice, guidance, and support on matters related to Georgian buildings, ensuring that any alterations or developments respect the historical and architectural integrity of these structures. Their involvement in pre-application discussions for the Custom House redevelopment highlights their commitment to safeguarding heritage sites.
5. <https://historicengland.org.uk/> - Historic England is the public body that helps people care for, enjoy, and celebrate England's historic environment. They provide expert advice, guidance, and support on the conservation of historic sites and buildings. In the case of the Custom House redevelopment, Historic England offered commentary and recommended conditions, opting not to push for its refusal, indicating a collaborative approach to balancing development with heritage preservation.
6. <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/services/environment-and-sustainability/heritage/Pages/City-of-London-heritage.aspx> - The City of London Corporation is responsible for the stewardship of the city's heritage, ensuring that developments respect and enhance the historic environment. They provide guidance and recommendations on planning applications affecting heritage sites, aiming to balance the needs of development with the preservation of historical and architectural significance. Their support for the Custom House redevelopment, with recommended conditions, reflects this approach.
7. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/river-residents-group-objects-to-custom-house-redevelopment-plans-a1246997.html> - The River Residents Group (RRG) has formally objected to the redevelopment plans for Custom House, expressing concerns over the lack of specific conditions to protect the public realm from overdevelopment. They emphasised the need for binding conditions to prevent the space from being perceived as a drinking area, which could lead to 'parasitic' uses that undermine the character and function of the public space.