



REFRESH

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS

The Liberty hotel, which opened in 2007, was formerly Boston's Charles Street Jail. Among the past inmates was Malcolm X

IMAGES ALAMY, REX

Vacated recently by the previous tenants, these properties offer central locations, convenient public transport and lively nightlife. Characterful, period architecture comes as standard, and security measures include a large central gate, bars on all windows and panopticon vistas from every room to a central observation post.”

Selling a prison must offer the ultimate test of any estate agent’s ability to focus on the positives. But with many of the traditional jails built by 18th-century reformers now unfit for the task of rehabilitating criminals – and sited in lucrative urban locations – the sheer force of the market makes commercial and even residential reuse a viable proposition.

So, in theory, the UK government’s plans to sell off its inner-city estate to part-fund a £2bn “super jails” programme could not have come at a better time. First on the block is Reading, which has been closed since 2013, while others potentially in line for disposal include Brixton, Pentonville, Wandsworth and Wormwood Scrubs – all household names thanks to their underworld associations.

However, redeveloping these prisons will prove easier said than done. Many of the structures are historically important, requiring sensitive refurbishment, and their cellular layout means they are often ill-suited to other uses. Meanwhile, there is also the fundamental architectural

consideration that these buildings are literally walled off from their surrounding neighbourhoods – hardly a feature that makes them easy to weave back into the fabric of local life.

Until a few years ago, the idea of turning a prison into a desirable property investment would have been dismissed as crackpot. Trevor Osborne FRICS, chairman of the eponymous property group and the developer who refashioned Oxford’s historic prison into the city’s boutique Malmaison hotel in 2006, remembers the reaction when he first got involved in the project: “A lot of the local councillors really thought I was mad.”

However, Osborne has had the last laugh, recently selling the hotel to the Westgate Oxford Alliance – a joint venture between Land Securities and the Crown Estate. “Now, looking back, it’s hard to find anybody who doubted it,” he says. “But they did.”

Oxford offers a classic example of the challenges that prison redevelopments throw up. For example, much of the site, including the Norman keep, is listed.

Architect Mark Panter, whose practice Panter Hudspith worked with Osborne on the project, also found the inherent structure of a prison problematic. “The challenge is finding sustainable uses for particular buildings. It’s quite restrictive. There are lots of cells, they are often densely developed.”

Osborne’s first problem was working out a new use for the prison. The “starting point,” he says, was not to shy away from the site’s historic character. “You must let the building speak for itself. By doing that, »

ARMED CHARACTER

Historic features, city centre locations, willing vendors – redeveloping a prison sounds like a golden opportunity for any property entrepreneur. But how do you make a building designed to be so forbidding, more appealing?

Word: David Blackman

you can come up with some pretty interesting answers." In the case of Oxford, he hit upon the idea of turning the prison into a hotel.

Malmaison has never attempted to disguise its former use, with guests sleeping in the prison's old cells. "You know it's a prison but you don't feel as if you don't want to be locked up for the night, quite the contrary," says Osborne. "You have to be intrigued that it's different to staying in a standard hotel room."

At Boston's the Liberty hotel — formerly the Charles Street Jail, where civil rights activist Malcolm X was a former inmate — some of the cells have been preserved as bars, with names such as Clink and Alibi.

A hotel also provides a neat solution for the biggest headache facing those embarking on a prison redevelopment project: the cells. They are generally too small for alternative uses but integral to the structure of the buildings. Osborne says: "You can amalgamate cells but you have to be very careful because you could have sequential collapse if you went about it in the wrong way."

At the Liberty, which took its first paying guests around the same time as Oxford's Malmaison, developer Carpenter & Company removed the cells, meaning that the roof had to be propped up while building work was going on.

Brian Anderson, who heads the Hong Kong office of architecture practice Purcell, faced a similar problem when contemplating the conversion of the city's Victoria prison (box, opposite). There, the individual cells were even smaller than those in Oxford prison, measuring about 48 ft² (4.5 m²). And, like Oxford, each cell was a load-bearing structure. "They relied on cross walls for structural stability, which gives engineering challenges. If you take those walls away, you have to redistribute that load."

An added issue for Anderson was finding space for services, particularly the air-conditioning that is such an essential feature in Hong Kong's often sweltering temperatures. "With the room dimensions being small and the windows being quite high, even if you were to put in a suspended ceiling to disguise the services, you would have to cut off the tops of the windows, which would look rather awkward," he says.

"[Residential or hotel use] would never have worked in Hong Kong

because their comfort expectation is much higher than in the UK," says Michael J Moir FRICS, director of property for the scheme's developer, the Hong Kong Jockey Club.

As a result, says Anderson, the project team had to be creative about the complex's future use, eventually plumping for a contemporary arts complex. The cells in one block will be retained to show visitors how the prison used to be. Most, however, will be converted into art archives, complementing the site's wider cultural use. "Once you have air-conditioning in there, the massive brick walls will create a very stable environment that lends itself rather well."

Some developers have, however, taken on the challenge of residential conversion. In 2009, Maruhn Real Estate Investment launched BerlinCampus, a development of 147 luxury apartments in the city's former Rummelsburg prison. Osborne's property group bought Shrewsbury's defunct jail for £2m in November 2014, and is planning something similar.

EXTENDED STAY

At Oxford's Malmaison (below), rooms have been converted from three adjoining cells: two for the bedroom, one for the bathroom





Plans submitted in January for the £42m development feature private flats, a health club, cafe, restaurant, and a walled garden. The former cell blocks, meanwhile, will be turned into student accommodation. Panter, who is working on the prison's conversion, says the sizes of the cells at Shrewsbury are not much smaller than bedrooms in typical student halls.

A further complication for redevelopment projects is that many prisons contain historically important buildings. Listed structures in the UK's Victorian prisons include the gatehouse at Wandsworth and the clock tower at Brixton. Across the Atlantic, redeveloping the Liberty in Boston involved restoring the former prison's historic rotunda.

Panter says such historical features can be retained if there is a willingness to maximise plot densities. "As long as you are comfortable with high-density developments, you can do a lot with the more recent buildings and offset the fact that there's not much you can do with the old stuff."

And the most obvious barrier to a successful prison redevelopment is also its most literal: they tend to be surrounded by walls, which means they are segregated from the surrounding urban fabric. "Obviously, prisons can't have too many doors," says Osborne. And the walled nature of the sites means that vehicular access will be constrained, limiting their re-use.

But Osborne, who increased the number of entrances and exits at Oxford from one to five, says that their location has to take the surrounding neighbourhoods into account. "You can't just knock holes through walls. You have to work pedestrian flows out."

Purcell's Anderson describes Hong Kong's Victoria prison as looking "like a fortress, like an island within the city, a place designed to keep people out and in".

"You must let the building speak for itself. By doing that, you can come up with some interesting answers"

TREVOR OSBORNE FRICS The Trevor Osborne Group

However, the Jockey Club is making a virtue of the fact that the Tai Kwun scheme offers 3.7 acres (1.5 hectares) of relatively low-density development in the city's congested downtown. "We made it quite permeable. It's a big site so we wanted to create pathways through it so that people can walk through it wherever they want to go," says Moir.

Breaking down these barriers brings a real benefit to the communities in which they are located, believes Osborne. "The change from being places of incarceration to employment can regenerate areas enormously."

"They have been no-go areas and the lack of permeability completely affects the way everything has developed around them," adds Panter.

Prison redevelopment is clearly fraught with challenges. But Osborne says it is a prize worth pursuing: "It's not just their age, some of these are very good buildings." ■

IN GOOD NICK

The Liberty's developer restored the jail's historic rotunda (above, left), and turned some of the cells into bars named Clink and Alibi

IMAGE: MALMAISON HOTELS

CASE STUDY

Artistic flair comes to Hong Kong's "big house"

Hong Kong's Victoria prison was central to the history of the colony from the 1840s onwards, says Michael J Moir FRICS. As director of property at Hong Kong Jockey Club, Moir has overseen the redevelopment of the prison into an arts complex.

The prison consists of nine blocks, all of which were built by the British between 1841 and 1956, several of which are declared monuments – equivalent to the UK's grade I-listed buildings. "The general consensus is that if it's a declared monument, it can't be touched," says Moir.

Hong Kong's government handed over the Central Police Station Compound, in which the prison is located, to the Jockey Club in 2007 to find a new use for it. Following a couple of false starts, the club settled on heritage and cultural activities as the main uses for the site, creating the territory's first dedicated contemporary art centre. The scheme is called Tai Kwun, or "big house", in the local dialect, which was the nickname for the former police station.

More than 25% of the HK\$3bn (£250m) scheme's total floor space will be leased as shops,

bars and restaurants, which should enable Tai Kwun to "pay its way and be financially sustainable", says Moir.

One of the site's nine cell blocks will be preserved to show visitors what a colonial prison looked like. "People will be offered the experience of spending a night in the cells if they want to," says Moir. The rest will be used as art archive space.

However, none of the existing buildings were big enough to accommodate the gallery and auditorium that the scheme's backers felt were needed to fulfil the site's role as a

contemporary art hub. To house these, renowned Swiss-based architect Herzog & de Meuron is designing two new buildings.

Moir is confident that the Tai Kwun scheme will develop an international reputation based on what he describes as "pretty positive" feedback from visiting curators. The choice of a radical design, which some might feel is at odds with the site's heritage status, is aimed at putting it on the map, says Purcell's Brian Anderson. And he is confident that, in a few years' time, Tai Kwun will be one of the "top 10 things to do in Hong Kong".