

Architecture
The Observer



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Sun 8 Apr 2018 08.00 BST



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Centre Point and the Hoover building
review – from beasts to beauties



Denounced as vulgar when they were built, these newly desirable London landmarks have been reborn as luxury flats boasting distinctive dimensions as well as chequered pasts

The Hoover factory, now known as the Hoover building, never reached Centre Point’s heights of controversy, but when it opened in 1933 in the nascent suburb of Perivale, it was still seen as a dangerous manifestation of an arterial-road Americana that the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 would eventually stamp out. Like Centre Point, it combines stasis and motion, with the venerable forms of ancient Egypt repurposed to attract the attention of drivers on the roaring A40.



▲ The Hoover building in Perivale, west London, whose collonaded facade ‘merges ancient Karnak with American roadside industry’. Photograph: Morley von Sternberg

It, too, has been set to music, although more affectionately than Centre Point, in Elvis Costello’s Hoover Factory of 1980. “Must have been a wonder when it was brand new,” he carolled. And it has always been a delight, for its powerful horizontals offset by insistent verticals, for the exuberant ornament that plays off its solemn columns, for its absolute indifference to stylistic propriety, which allowed its architects Wallis Gilbert and Partners to throw Bauhaus glazing, expressionist corner windows and Native American forms into the eclectic mix. Its colours too: its sunny white concrete, the hopeful minty green of its steel window frames, the outbursts of red and rich blue in its glazed bricks.



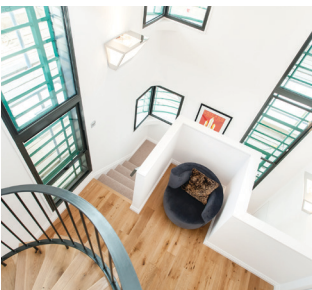
“One of these days”, as Costello sang, it’s “gonna be all the rage in those fashionable pages”. And here it is, its value enhanced by the shocking demolition in 1980 of the nearby Firestone factory, also by Wallis Gilbert and Partners, over a bank holiday weekend. (Its owners wanted to pre-empt the Firestone’s probable listing.) The Hoover building is now in its second reincarnation, having been taken over by Tesco in the 1980s. Its less glamorous rear buildings were replaced by a superstore that still stands. Its front, used for offices by the retail giant, is now apartments, laid out to the designs of the engineering and architecture practice Interrobang.



▲ The art deco splendour of the refurbished Hoover building. Photograph: Morley von Sternberg

The most interesting thing about Interrobang’s conversion, a light timber frame designed to minimise loading on the existing structure, is sadly not visible. It would have been nice to keep a sense of this, as if installing an inside-out Amish village in the old factory, but the conventions of the residential property market don’t allow for such adventure. What you get instead are flats of proportions and spatial complexity that come from their adjustment to the old fabric.

There is some weirdness – the noise from the road and from Tesco deliveries means you mostly can’t open windows and have to rely on a ventilation system for fresh air – but the spaces are still livelier and richer than you’d get in a new building.



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