

HERITAGE

Buy your own piece of Americana

The Hoover was a statement art deco building in the Thirties, a slice of Hollywood in west London. Now you can live there, says *Peter Watts*



Leaving its mark: the Hoover Building acted as a giant advertisement on the road Credit: Alamy

Strawled by the side of the A40 as it bypasses Perivale, the Hoover Building is one of outer London's most distinctive landmarks. It helps that the words HOOVER BUILDING are spelt out in gigantic letters on the front but, even without that, you couldn't miss this gorgeous piece of Thirties Americana roadside architecture transplanted to the London suburbs.

It's a building that acts almost as a billboard, designed to personify the sleek notion of modern living epitomised by the Hoover product itself. Now it's been converted into luxury apartments. As Elvis Costello wrote in his song named after the building, "one of these days the Hoover factory is gonna be all the rage in those fashionable pages".

Opened in 1933, the Hoover Building at one point housed more than 3,000 employees. It was both the factory and offices for Hoover, but the company stopped using the building as a plant in 1982, and the listed building was taken over by Tesco in the Nineties.

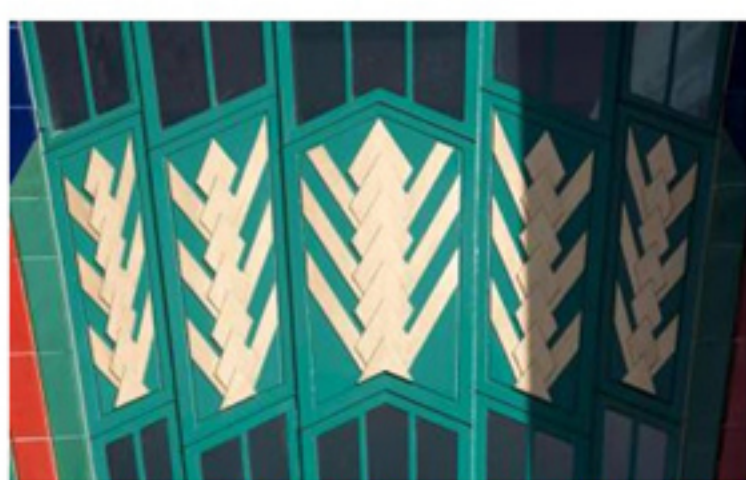
In 2015, it was acquired by IDM Properties, which converted the Hoover into a residential building of 66 luxury flats earlier this year. "We inherited a beautiful building," says Lara Carneiro, IDM's design manager. "I'd much rather work on a building like this that had a history and which you can give a new lease of life. We love reinventing buildings and there are so many out there that just need a bit of TLC."

The Hoover Building was designed by architect firm Wallis, Gilbert & Partners, which was active in the Twenties and Thirties. The company built industrial buildings and factories in a style that borrowed from art deco and Bauhaus, but also embraced commercialism and some of the concepts of American architects Albert Kahn - Associates, who designed more than 50 factories in the Twenties. The Hoover was one of a string of buildings along the Great Western Road and elsewhere in the UK that capture the spirit of the interwar age - stylish, forward-thinking and often located alongside major roads.

The Hoover has striking large windows and gorgeous, frantic detailing around the entrance. Public areas seem to refer to both American Indian art and Ancient Egyptian temples - but with a dash of Hollywood and Madison Avenue. The dazzle wasn't just meant to impress outsiders. The Hoover's architect Thomas Wallis argued that the use of bright colours and good design had a "psychological effect on the worker, if he is a good worker and good workers look upon their buildings with pride".

However, he also understood the power of advertising, noting that "a properly conceived and well-defined façade on a main thoroughfare will give proportionately better results" than you could get from "usual advertising". In that case, he was talking about the since demolished Firestone Factory, but it applies just as much to the Hoover, too.

When transforming the building into apartments, IDM were able to embrace that sense of glamour and history. Art deco features were incorporated into various levels of the design, such as the light fittings, the numbers on the apartment doors and the patterns around baths and showers. IDM also salvaged items from the original factory, such as old sinks that were reused as planters for the public gardens.



Statement features: Art deco details inside the restored Hoover Building

Architectural archaeology took place, so that IDM could be sure they were using the correct paint scheme, and the company studied old images so they could replant the front garden as it had been in the Thirties. They worked with forensic paint experts, planners and the Twentieth Century Society to ensure accuracy. In the process they were able to confirm that the entire building had been painted in camouflage paint during the Second World War. "We picked up the art deco theme very carefully, the numbering and the small details like the skirting, the ironmongery around the doors," says Carneiro. "We didn't want to make it overwhelmingly art deco, but we wanted to ensure there was an art deco feel."

"We went back and forwards several times looking at the different colour palettes to find the right one. We also approached Hoover and they were very happy to be involved. All the white goods are made by Hoover, and they even offered to give every resident a free Hoover when they moved in. It was a lovely touch." There are just two properties in the building still on the market: a two-bedroom flat for £550,000, and a studio for £348,000, both through IDM Properties.

There were problems along the way, such as the fact that Tesco still shares some of the floorspace, so services had to be brought into the building in a way that didn't have an impact on its offices.

The Hoover was also designed with fully mechanical ventilation in all the rooms, which placed restrictions on what could be done with the original windows. Now complete, it once again looks out on the A40 with pride.

Buildings like the Hoover were often designed for big American companies, and over them hangs a certain sense of ambition and boldness that could be described as Americana. Nearby, on Brentford's Golden Mile, you can see similar buildings such as the Gillette factory and the Pyrene Fire Extinguisher factory. There are others around the country, sometimes translated into cinema, service station, car showroom or hotel designs, but often in factories and office blocks.

One of the most impressive was Brentford's Firestone Tyre Factory, also designed by Wallis, Gilbert & Partners. This was demolished over a Bank Holiday weekend in 1980 by developers who discovered it was about to be listed. There was a public outcry, which resulted in the rapid listing of numerous Twenties and Thirties buildings, including the Hoover Building and Battersea Power Station, as well as the complete reappraisal of the listing process by Michael Heseltine, then secretary of state for the environment.

"It woke people up to the fact we were in danger of losing a whole chapter of architectural history," says Catherine Croft, director of the Twentieth Century Society. "As a society, it made us realise we had a job to do and that we were timely and necessary."

Although Croft doesn't commit to the catch-all label "Americana", she acknowledges the influence of the United States on these buildings. "I do see it as commercial," she says. "There are many things happening with it: it's a mixture of art deco and modern. But I think that sense of America is what you were meant to think of when you looked at the Hoover."

"It's alongside a motorway, so it dates from the period when cars were glamorous and watching them go by was a fun activity. It was modern, clean, fast, speedy and luxurious. This was the beginning of people understanding that graphics, architecture and packaging could all come together to create what we now call 'the brand'."

It evokes American Indian art and Ancient Egyptian temples with a dash of Madison Avenue