



REINVENTING AN ICON

Plans unveiled this week aim to turn 'flawed' London landmark Centre Point into a commercial success for the first time in its history. Julia Cahill gets a first look

The artist Eduardo Paolozzi welcomed it as "London's first pop art building". *Building* magazine said at the time of its construction that it "made London swing" more than any other development.

Centre Point's critics have been less kind. But whatever your opinion of the Richard Seifert-designed tower, there is no denying that as an office building it has only ever been a commercial flop.

Since property tycoon Harry Hyams completed the tower in 1966, its 34 floors have almost never been fully let. More recent owner, Targetfollow, refurbished the building and dreamt up plans for a mixed-use scheme on adjacent land, topped by two 20-storey

towers. Those plans never got off the ground.

Today, space is almost given away to cover the costs of running a 117m high, Grade II listed skyscraper built on a floorplate of only 4,500 sq ft.

"It is very much a flawed icon," says Mike Hussey, who bought Centre Point out of administration 12 months ago, with an ambitious plan to make it financially viable.

Hussey's Almacantar and joint venture partner Frogmore will this week unveil their £350m proposals, which would see Centre Point's 145,000 sq ft of office space reinvented as 82 apartments.

The sales of the best apartments, they believe, could fund a wholesale redevelopment of the site, seen here for the first time and due to be

unveiled at a public exhibition at Centre Point today.

"This is not a typical development where you create margin by doubling your space through planning," explains Hussey. "We have to create our margin from what is there. So the tower – and really the top half of the tower – needs to generate sufficient returns to pay for everything else. It is a challenging concept."

Part of what it would pay for is the creation of 44,000 sq ft of restaurants and shops – up to 18 units – in the adjacent, low-rise Centre Point House, as well as the vast glass bridge linking it with the tower (see above).

The six floors of residential space at the top of Centre Point House are privately owned and would be left intact, while the base of the building – currently

blighted by traffic – would be opened up to create double-height retail and leisure space. The designs produced by Rick Mather Architects reveal how the new space would appear with the existing mezzanine level removed and the front of the building extended out.

But crucial to making this work are council and Transport for London plans – already drawn up, but as yet unfunded – to strip out the congested road running through the site in order to create a public piazza around the tower and the new Crossrail and underground station next to it.

"We are in discussions with Camden, Westminster, TfL and Crossrail about delivering co-ordinated public realm. All the parties see it as important," says Almacantar development

director, Kathrin Hersel.

The piazza is part of a slew of public realm activity and commercial development

aimed at turning the area into a hub between Oxford Street and Covent Garden. For Hussey, this "unique set of circumstances" means that now is the optimum time to revitalise Centre Point.

So critical is the piazza to its plans that Almacantar was initially keen to direct its main planning contribution into making it happen.

However, discussions with Camden are now understood to be progressing along more conventional lines, whereby Almacantar would make a general public realm payment and an affordable housing contribution. Both are factored into the estimated £350m cost of the scheme, but are still under negotiation with Camden.

The challenge now for the

developers lies not only in convincing Camden's politicians to allow the change of use from employment space to residential, but also to accept a scheme with no affordable housing on site.

Winning the change of use argument will hinge on proving that Centre Point's whopping service charges of £12-13 per sq ft and severely constrained floorplate have rendered it both unviable and unattractive to occupiers: half the space is currently let at below market rents, while 55% is let for a term certain of less than a year and 64% for less than three years.

Similarly, Hussey argues that the building's operating costs would be unacceptable to a registered social landlord, whereas a private buyer would be accustomed to the high level of maintenance required for a good quality residential unit.

And these will be special flats. Designed by Sir Terence Conran, they range from 80m² to spectacular, double-floor, 600m² homes.

"We can't be all things to all men," says Hussey. "We can provide a wonderful new hub right on top of theatreland; we can increase the retail floorspace and create 450 to 500 retail jobs; we can rejuvenate the asset and keep a listed building moving, but something's got to give."

The plans will be submitted next month.

For a full interview with Mike Hussey see next week's EG



HISTORY OF A LONDON LANDMARK

Centre Point and Centre Point House were designed by architect Richard Seifert and constructed as a mixed-use development between 1963 and 1966 by property tycoon Harry Hyams.

The 117m tall landmark tower remained empty for almost a decade as Hyams held out for a single tenant willing to pay £1.25m. It was 42 years before it was fully

occupied by tenants, which include the Confederation of British Industry.

Parts of the building were let to companies linked to then-owner Targetfollow Property Investment & Development, which went into administration in October 2010. Targetfollow had purchased the site for £85m in 2005, backed by a property-hungry Bank of Scotland.



Public space: a new piazza will be created around the tower