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# OFFICE POLITICS

*The need for more homes in London plus more relaxed planning laws are spurring on developers to turn more and more offices into homes, reports Nigel Lewis*

A few months ago I walked past an office block in Clerkenwell where I'd worked during the 1990s and to my surprise it had a Savills' residential For Sale sign hanging outside it.

It turns out that the care-worn Art Deco offices I once toiled in are now a set of top-notch apartments which, since my walk-by, have all sold for between £2m and £4.5m.

This is happening all over London. Recent government house building figures show an 11% jump in the number of new homes, an increase that the figures show was down to the number of former industrial and office workplaces being turned into apartments.

The largest one-off conversion in London is Delta Point in Croydon town centre, which has turned 29,000 sq m of former office space into 848 new homes. Similarly large schemes have also been given the go-ahead in eleven other London borough including, most notably, Richmond, Barnet, Islington, Camden and Lambeth. This deluge of office conversion is largely down to planning changes which in 2018 temporarily relaxed 'permitted development rights' (or PDR) regulations for offices being turned into residential.

These rules have just been made permanent, it was revealed recently, so the surge in office conversions is likely to continue with thousands of new homes be built within former offices next year. It's a trend that politicians are desperate to

encourage as they try to solve the housing crisis. "We promised to turbo-charge housebuilding so more people can have the security of their own home, and that is exactly what we are doing with the biggest increase in the number of new homes in many years," said Housing Minister Gavin Barwell recently.

But the huge increase in office to residential conversions does not come without controversy.

Jane Duncan, president of the Royal Institute of British architects says she is "concerned that office-to-residential conversion is occurring without proper oversight by local authorities, and that as a result homes are being delivered at a

**"It's a trend that politicians are desperate to encourage as they try to solve the housing crisis"**

standard which would otherwise be deemed totally unacceptable".

Developers, as you might imagine, disagree and are getting stuck in to this emerging new sector. "The impact of the revision of permitted development in England is already being felt," says Jean Liggett, MD of Properties of the World.

"Developers are using their imaginations about how to transform some of the country's beautiful but neglected buildings into stylish, modern apartments, breathing new life into them while preserving their original architectural appeal." Hossein Abedinzadeh, founder of developer MHA London, is currently busy converting a former Brutalist office block on Old Street into flats and says office spaces can make good, affordable housing. "We had an opportunity here to take a tired, run-down office block and turn it into a trophy building to demonstrate our capability to construct and deliver something extraordinary," he says.

The building, formerly called Barbican House and until 2010 let to accountants Franks LLP for



£164,000 a year, was a five-storey block that has been essentially refaced with a modern skin that will render it almost unrecognisable. 80 Old Street will have shops on the ground floor but also contain eight two- and three-bedroom luxury apartments starting at £1.265 million.

A more unusual example of an office conversion can be found in Westbourne Grove in Maida Vale. It's a large Grade II listed police station built in 1911 that's being converted into 25 apartments by developer Redrow.

It's famous because the station is where Russell Brand was taken after being arrested during the 2001 **May Day riots in central London.** But more typical of the office

redevelopments you find in central London is Beau House on Jermyn Street in St James's. It's named after Beau Brummell, the 18th century fashion icon whose statue stands on the street. The former offices at the property, will soon contain eight apartments from developer Dukelease which has partnered with interior designer Oliver Eurns for the project.

But all this conversion activity has also been blamed on a reduced supply of office space in London. Ask anyone who has recently tried to find an office in London and you'll soon hear tales of months spent searching for available space, and sky-high rents.

Nicky Gavron, chair of the London Assembly Planning Committee says:

"Employment space is vulnerable to developers looking to make a quick buck by converting it to housing.

"It's not as though London doesn't have plenty of space for houses – it doesn't need to sacrifice employment space. Doing so threatens the businesses and jobs London needs to grow." But the desperate need for homes in London is spurring on office conversions regardless of these concerns. London Councils, the organisation which presents the capital's 32 boroughs and the City of London, says that over the past three years at least 830,000 sq m of office floor space has been converted into 16,600 homes in 2,639 developments. And my old office was probably one of them. ♦

