



The QEII Centre has its fair share of detractors but when it comes to location and track record, most people are in agreement that it would be sorely missed

Open for business? Not if QEII closes

The capital is once again facing the possibility of losing a key industry venue. With so much uncertainty surrounding Brexit and the exchange rate in freefall, can London really afford to close its doors on the QEII Centre?

Gareth Roberts reports

Last month *M&IT* launched a campaign to stop the proposed future appropriation of London's QEII Centre as a temporary home for the House of Lords during its much needed renovation. Many outside this industry may not sense any real concern as the proposed starting date for construction work to begin is late 2019.

As it stands, the venue, central London's largest conference space, contributes around £122 million annually to the economy. London means business, and this prestigious location is a major draw in a city that, by international standards, has a paucity of world-class exhibition and conference space.

Former mayor of London and now foreign secretary Boris Johnson



wholeheartedly backed the campaign to keep the centre open for business and this has been reiterated by his successor Sadiq Khan, who this summer launched his own #LondonIsOpen campaign. Speaking exclusively to *M&IT* the mayor of London's office issued this statement: "Sadiq wants the world to know that London is open for business, and he hopes that a solution can be found that both protects London's reputation for hosting great exhibitions and events, whilst ensuring the House of Lords can relocate to a suitable venue. London lacks sufficient major conference space to

meet the huge international demand as it is – the Mayor is determined to keep London open to prestigious international events and the jobs they generate."

The centre's brutalist aesthetic is derided by some and loved by others. The current mood is somewhat unsympathetic towards the unelected peers, many of whom when contacted about this had yet to form an opinion on the matter.

Indeed, many are asking if the House is fit for purpose anyway and perhaps would be better re-purposed as a museum. The peers themselves could then be relocated to a venue outside of London. It worked for the BBC.

The fact is, the Palace of Westminster is in very real danger of

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sinking into the Thames without much needed expensive and time-consuming restoration.

The recent proposal by architectural firm Gensler to house Parliament on a purpose-built floating structure anchored off Westminster has raised a few eyebrows but if their costing is correct – they claim the saving to the taxpayer will be in excess of £1.8 billion – then it could become reality. At least that’s the hope of Ian Mulcahey, managing director at Gensler.

“The concept provides a simple solution to what is a very complex problem. The challenge has been to find a location that enables all the key components of Parliament to be located together in close proximity to the wider Government estate in Whitehall. The objective has been to minimise disruption and reduce the cost to the taxpayer.

“The Palace of Westminster is one of the most important symbols of democracy in the world. This scheme provides a powerful expression of continuity and reinforces the UK’s world-leading creative expertise.”

Putting aside for a moment the fact that London, now more than ever, should be focusing on drawing in business from around the world, the economics look simple: the revenue loss of closing the QEII for events will be huge.

Bear in mind, too, that the QEII Centre is owned by the Government and is operated by an executive agency within the Department of Communities and Local Government. It currently pays an annual dividend to the Exchequer, cutting out any need for financial support from the taxpayer. Remove this revenue stream and you’re left with a considerable bill that will have to be settled from the public purse.

The conundrum facing the government will likely get more contentious as the renovation date gets closer. Parliament’s independent appraisal committee has estimated the work, if done in one concentrated period of time, will take six years.

The restoration and renewal of a Grade I-listed building that is part of the greater UNESCO Westminster world heritage site will not be taken lightly and relocation and its associated costs will become a key issue.

A spokesperson for the Palace of Westminster renewal and restoration programme said that in order to keep costs to a minimum, the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster will rely on temporary



The Poseidon Project: the floating structure has been shelved due to security concerns

arrangements that would allow both Houses to make continued use of as much of the Parliamentary Estate as possible while work is under way.

“The QEII Centre was identified as being potentially a suitable option for additional temporary accommodation for the House of Lords, including its Chamber, but these recommendations are subject to further feasibility work and value-for-money assessments.

“The Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster did consider proposals for a temporary structure on the River. However, this was discounted for a number of reasons, most significantly on the grounds of security.”

“London lacks the conference space to meet international demand”

It will be interesting to see if, post-Brexit, the option for a temporary structure is still side-lined or if and how the budget for these renovations still makes sense when the political horizon looks so hazy.

This month sees the QEII Centre celebrate its 30th birthday. What better time to evaluate its role in making London the global leader in the meetings and conference industry? As with most institutions, it needs to modernise and, much the same as Westminster, it needs to evolve and adapt with the times. ■

HANDS OFF
THE QEII CENTRE 

To sign our petition go online to www.change.org/p/theresa-may-mp-save-our-qeii-centre

QEII fact file

- The building was designed by Powell Moya architects and occupies the site that originally housed the Parliamentary Mews. Work started on construction in 1981 and was opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 1986.

- The QEII Centre is capable of holding high profile international events, press conferences, meetings and global conventions for up to 2,500 delegates.

- The centre hosts more than 400 events every year, with 32 customisable event spaces. Its client portfolio includes leading UK associations, retailers, local and national government, charities, campaigning organisations and financial institutions. Some of the centre’s regular clients include The British Council, Santander, Sainsbury’s, Tesco, House of Fraser, John Lewis and global corporations such as Rolls-Royce and Rio Tinto.

- Since 2014, the QEII has been undergoing a £12m capital investment programme of rebranding and refurbishing, upgrading and modernising facilities. Since the rebrand, the centre has been hosting a wider variety of events including awards ceremonies, fashion shows, product launches and banquets