

# GOD IS IN THE DETAILS

Historic buildings can often be converted to retail use with spectacular results, writes Brian Waters

Sir John Soane's Holy Trinity Church in Marylebone Road is to become a "destination" luxury store and restaurant.

The contribution that the historic environment can make to regeneration is increasingly being recognised and its value to sustainability is emerging. Taken together, the recent white paper *Heritage Protection for the 21st Century* and new thinking by English Heritage (EH) suggest that a more constructive approach to development where it involves listed buildings and conservation areas is emerging.

EH's consultation paper *Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance* introduces a values-based approach. "Every reasonable effort should be made to eliminate or minimise adverse impacts on significant places," it says. "Ultimately, however, it may be necessary to balance the public benefit of the proposed change against the harm to the place. If so, the weight given to heritage values should be proportionate to the significance of the place and the impact of the change upon it."

## 'Weight given to heritage should be proportionate'

The new approach is summed up: "Proposed changes which would materially harm the heritage values of a significant place should be unacceptable unless a number of criteria are met, including: the changes are demonstrably necessary either to make the place economically sustainable, or to meet another public policy objective."

*Conservation Principles* recognises that our attitudes to our historic environment are in a constant state of change and that changes in the historic environment as a whole are inevitable. It also seeks to relate conservation to sustainability.

The refreshing new direction is also seen in the EH and British Property Federation document *Heritage Works*. Its headline messages include:

- Critical to the success of regeneration is finding a viable economic use that can support initial refurbishment, provide the owner or developer with a reasonable return on their investment and which generates sufficient income to ensure the long-term maintenance of the building fabric and any associated public open spaces
- In short, the listed buildings consents regime does not prohibit any change; rather it establishes criteria against which "acceptable change" can be assessed
- The re-use and adaptation of heritage assets is at the heart of sustainable development
- The impact of successful schemes is felt beyond the boundaries of the heritage asset itself and can boost the economy of the whole town or city.

PPG 15 states that "Generally the best way of securing the upkeep of historic buildings and areas is to keep them in active use. For the great majority this must mean economically viable uses if they are to survive...it requires balancing the economic viability...against the effect of any changes they entail in the special architectural and historic interest of the building".

A redevelopment scheme at No.1 Marylebone Road - Sir John Soane's Holy Trinity church of 1828 - was an example where I have applied the new approach. The site in question was given to the church by the Crown in the 1820s. After construction started it was found to be a gravel pit. This caused a deep vaulted crypt to be built. The resulting builders' claim probably led to the loss of the clerestory roof extension shown in all of Soane's design options.

The church fell victim to unsympathetic restoration as a bookshop and offices in the 1950s and the space around it is now a mishmash of poor railings, broken pavement, parking and traffic signage. According to Sir Terry Farrell, Marylebone Road has the



Shrine to shopping: Sir John Soane's Holy Trinity faces a very different future