

# THE CUSTOM HOUSE



The London Custom House is a forgotten treasure, on a prime site on the Thames with glorious views of the river and Tower Bridge.

The question now before the City Corporation is whether it should become a luxury hotel with limited public access or whether it should have a more public use, especially the magnificent 180 foot Long Room.

The Custom House is zoned for office use and permission for a hotel requires a change of use which the City may be hesitant to give. Circumstances have changed since the Custom House was sold as part of a £370 million job lot of HMRC properties around the UK to an offshore company in Bermuda – a sale that caused considerable merriment among HM customs staff in view of the tax avoidance issues it raised.

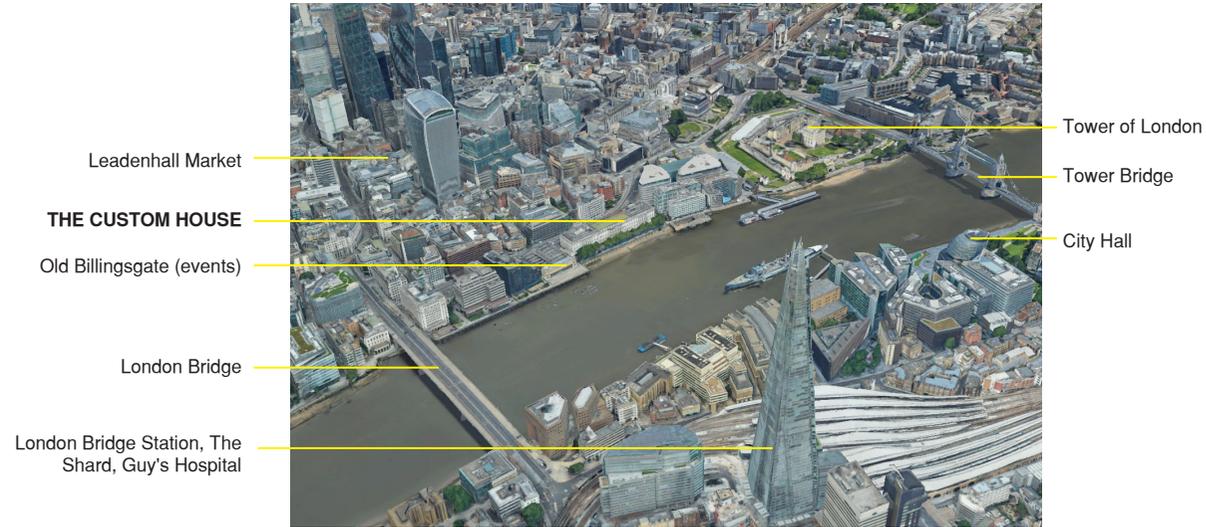
SAVE Britain's Heritage has therefore worked with the architect John Burrell to show how this monumental public building, once thronged with people, can have a more public use again. SAVE invites public debate on the future of the Custom House.



**SAVE**  
BRITAIN'S HERITAGE

## Re-connecting The City to the River Thames

The Custom House is less than 200 metres from Leadenhall Market and the Lloyds Building and the Gherkin just beyond where high-rise buildings crowd out the sky. Who among the tens of thousands of City workers emerging from their offices in search of air and light make the short journey to the river? For decades it has been made virtually impossible by the traffic fumed canyon that is Lower Thames Street. Yet recently for several weeks we have seen a London free of traffic where people can move on foot or bike without being overwhelmed by noxious fumes.

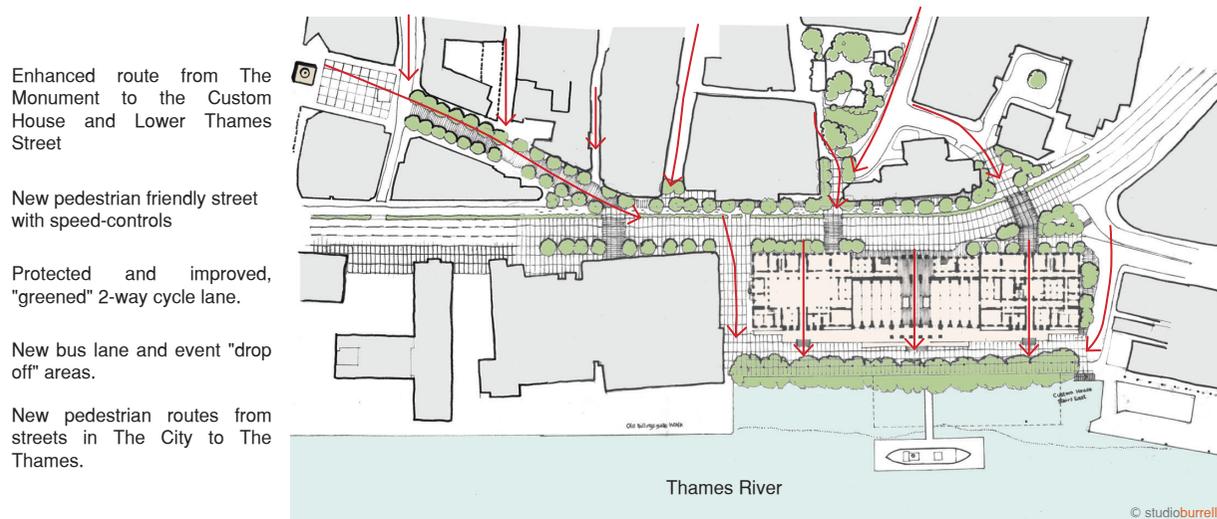


In previous times many streets and passageways led from the then narrow Lower Thames Street to the working active quayside of the Thames and the Pool of London.



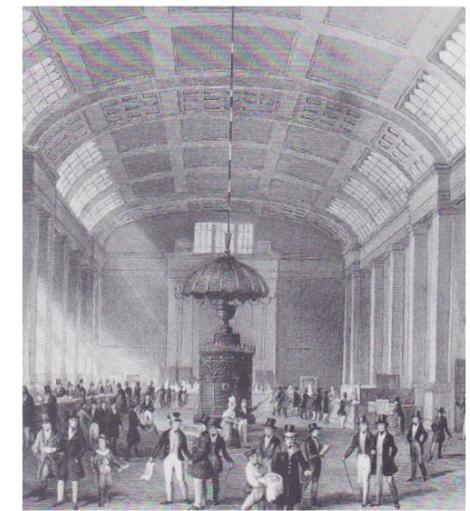
## A new public place in London

The architect John Burrell has worked with SAVE on visionary schemes for Smithfield General Market and the south side of the Aldwych around St Mary le Strand to create new public space. There is already a bike route opposite the Custom House along the north side of Lower Thames Street. By extending the narrow pavements a much better pedestrian route can be created linking with the Tower of London and the lovely Wren church of St. Magnus the Martyr below London Bridge.



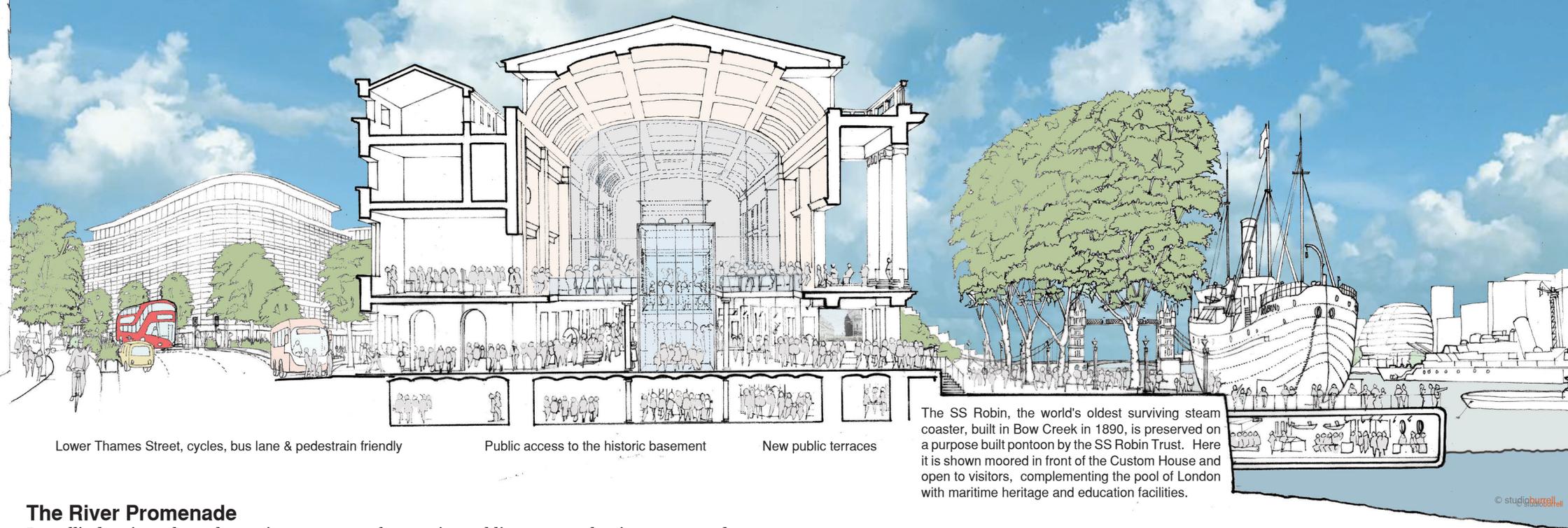
## The Long Room

The great feature of the Custom House is the Long Room, 180 foot long, looking out over the river and rising through three stories, larger than any of the famous Livery Halls and currently in desultory use for offices.



## Open this magnificent interior to new varying uses

Burrell proposes opening up the original central public entrance to the Custom House and creating a new access through the building to the river terrace. To make this more prominent, inviting new paved surfaces will be introduced to signify pedestrian priority across Lower Thames Street.



Lower Thames Street, cycles, bus lane & pedestrian friendly

Public access to the historic basement

New public terraces

The SS Robin, the world's oldest surviving steam coaster, built in Bow Creek in 1890, is preserved on a purpose built pontoon by the SS Robin Trust. Here it is shown moored in front of the Custom House and open to visitors, complementing the pool of London with maritime heritage and education facilities.

## The River Promenade

Burrell's drawings show alternative treatments for creating public access to the river promenade.

The ground level on the riverside of the Custom House is 1.5 metres below Lower Thames Street, allowing the creation of a raised terrace (also aiding flood protection), for the ground floor rooms and below, a broad public promenade with trees, seats, kiosks and cafes for the public. The present 'go away' railings can be removed, and the river brought into immediate view. The existing lamp standards can be retained. Further possibilities are to extend the terrace with a pontoon floating on the river and a ramped access to the museum ship SS Robin which is part of the UK's National Historic Fleet and would be a major attraction in this location. Just as Napoleon described St Mark's Square in Venice as the most beautiful salon in Europe so the present desultory Custom House car park can become the loveliest terrace in London, equalling, even surpassing, the great river terrace at Somerset House as it is on the river without traffic in front.

## The hidden levels of history

The King's Warehouse is a large multi columned lower hall (now obscured by partitions) opening onto the river terrace.

## Looking at options

Inspired by the magical restoration of St Pancras Station, Burrell proposes a cut in the floor of the Long Room rather like the voids opened at St Pancras to allow stairs and lifts to ascend from ground to platform level. These lifts are shown as glass lifts reducing their visual impact. They could be reduced in size if their impact is considered too great. Equally important they could be extended into the basement opening up a whole largely disused level for multiple uses that do not require daylight. The great length of the Long Room may restrict the numbers of hirings to very large events and exhibitions. Therefore, John Burrell proposes an alternative, introducing clear glass screens rising to the ceiling. These would divide the Long Room into a central hallway looking out through to the riverfront and separate grand saloons on either side. These could be used for separate events or a single large event.

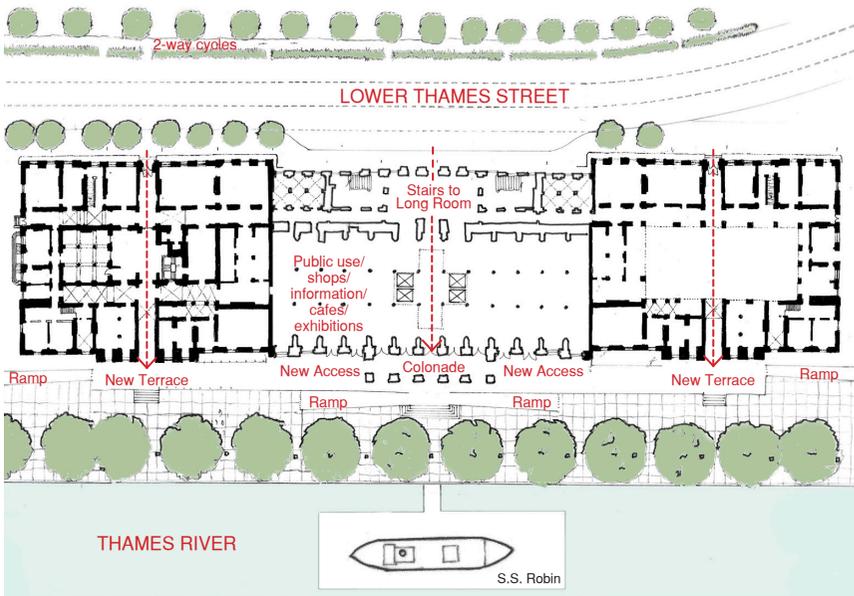
Options for event combinations:

- completely separate events organised by different hosts – say a lecture in one half and a dinner in the other
- a single host wanting a launch and a presentation in one saloon and a dinner in the other
- an art exhibition or auction in one or both saloons.

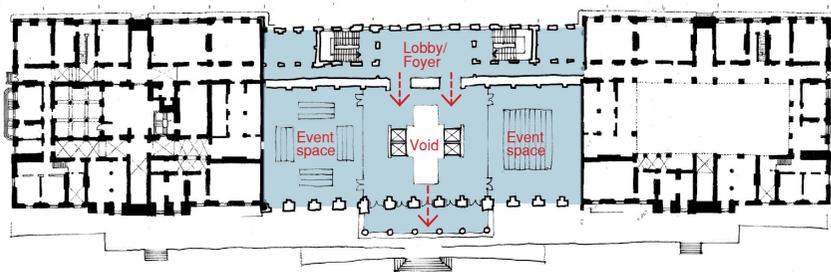
Coincidentally these saloons have similar dimensions to the Wigmore Concert Hall near Oxford Street which has London's finest acoustic.



The Long Room could be made fully accessible with lifts to create two new linked performance/event spaces with access to the external terrace under the portico.



Ground Floor - Quay Side Level



First Floor - Long Room Level © studioburrell

### The Office Hub - a new way of working suited to the times

The City Corporation maybe reluctant to change the present office use classification to hotel. A second alternative is to turn the Custom House into a workspace hub with a mix of lettable office and studio spaces. The east end of the Custom House was rebuilt as modern office space after World War II bombing and can be reconfigured as open plan or cellular offices.

The Western third of the Custom House retains its original layout of larger and smaller offices for customs officers and clerks of varying rank. In the Covid era these provide a degree of containment which would suit many office users. High ceilings, airy corridors and large sash windows also provide excellent ventilation with fresh air.



### SAVE sets out alternative strategies - a sparkling mix of uses

*An adventurous transformation - forgotten splendour transformed for public use.*

#### The Art Gallery

Around the world collectors are looking for large and unusual spaces to display their art treasures, both historic and modern. Examples of new Galleries in historic buildings are legion – **the Saatchi Gallery** in Chelsea Barracks, **the Boros Gallery (a)** of contemporary art in a World War II bunker in Berlin; **the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art** in a 1950s state owned former munitions factory in Beijing (**798 Art District**).

An inspiring parallel is to be found in the **Hauser & Wirth Gallery** in Zurich **(b)**, installed in the former Lowenbrau Brewery, a building of similar dimensions to the London Custom House. Long, tall spaces are well suited to gallery use, e.g. Liverpool's purpose designed **Lady Lever Gallery (c)** and the repurposed **Les Abattoirs Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art** in Toulouse **(d)**.

SAVE argues that arts and gallery use can transform the City of London's arts offer. A large-scale art gallery can be available to both artists and collectors and to commercial art galleries. Christie's and Sotheby's could hold previews of sales in the Long Room.

This is not just a pipe dream. By exhibiting in the City, salerooms and galleries would be bringing the art to the highest concentration of potential buyers in the world. Every financial institution in the Square Mile would be in walking distance of the Custom House. With its magnificent riverside position and river terrace the Custom House can be a "must visit" arts venue nearly every week of the year.

There are also opportunities for outdoor exhibitions of sculpture like the brilliantly successful giant horse's head (Still Water) by Nic Fiddian-Green at Marble Arch which has become a destination in itself.



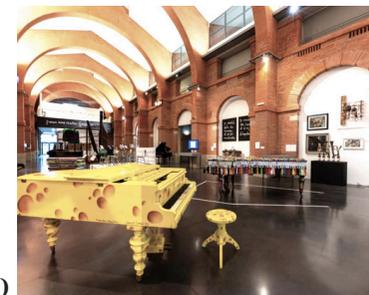
(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)