

Rising delegate rates and a steady stream of new and refurbished venues are the tell-tale signs of London's flourishing meetings and events scene. *Catherine Chetwynd* assesses the market

CAPITAL GAINS

LONDON CONTINUES to be the powerhouse of the British economy and the centre of the UK conference and events industry. The number and diversity of venues on offer in the capital, and the sophistication of the transport infrastructure, remain the city's key strengths.

"Supported by strong demand, delegate rates have been recovering and we expect to see them pass their pre-recession level during 2015," says managing director of etc. venues, Alastair Stewart.

"Competition between venues remains fierce, particularly during off peak periods, and clients are rightfully demanding high levels of service and technology," adds Stewart.

He continues, "Specialist venues have benefited from hotels focussing on (record) room occupancy and serviced office groups seeing strong demand for office desks and therefore reducing their interest in the meetings market."

Although short lead times in bookings endure, increased competition and demand may force bookers to think further ahead.

"We have experienced reduced venue availability in the past year or so," says senior events manager for Chambers Travel, Mike Leeson. "Previously, hotels were a lot keener to secure business and were willing to reduce rates and add extras, but recently they have not been

so willing to do that straightaway."

The average length of meetings remains short, continuing a trend towards non-residential events (82 per cent) but "we expect this to change over the coming 18 to 24 months, as the market bounces back", states Capita Travel and Events' benchmarking report.

In addition to financial considerations, this is partly because companies do not want people out of the office a long

time, says consultant Bridget Baker. In addition, organisations are increasingly using internal space and video-conferencing to reduce costs and improve quality of life for travellers.

"We now book ten internal customer meeting rooms for every external space," says Capita's director of consulting services and meetings, Sam Welch.

Consultant to the hotel industry Melvin Gold says, "There has been considerable transaction activity in the London hotel sector and in 2015 we will see a lot of investment in hotels from those owners, many of which have been starved of capital for years. But because investors tend to hold on to properties for a relatively short time, any asset needs to show appreciation on the capital fairly quickly and this will put upward pressure on prices."

The capital city is constantly reinventing itself, not just

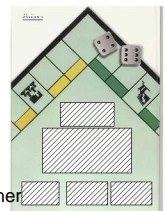
with new properties and venues but new areas as well. The South Bank now has The Shard at London

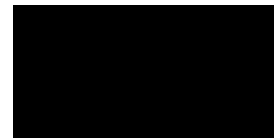
Bridge, the Mondrian Hotel near Blackfriars Bridge and Hilton London Bankside follows this year. Battersea Power Station is being regenerated, the former Verta at the heliport is now a Crowne Plaza and further east, Nine Elms has a Staybridge Suites, one of several anticipated properties once the American Embassy moves to the district.

St. Pancras and Kings Cross have also seen a re-telling, with a Renaissance, Pullman and the Great Northern Hotel to support the creative urge from Central St. Martin's and Kings Place concert hall, whose spaces are available for events.

Although there is no major meeting venue there yet, as Melvin Gold points out: "Years ago, you would not have been going there for a good night out in the sense that most of us would think it was a good night out."

Meanwhile, super-cool Shoreditch has lost none of its buzz with an Art'otel, M by Montcalm, Z Hotel and a Gansevoort





Hotel Group property on the cards.

"Some areas of the capital outside the West End and central London can deliver better value for money, including Kensington, which has a good number of hotel options with reasonable rates," says UK director, American Express Meetings & Events, Lisa Thompson. "Clients are now open to alternative destinations within London."

The range of new and renovated hotels and venues gracing London's meeting portfolio is eclectic. The QEII Centre is being comprehensively refurbished to the tune of £12 million, bringing improved registration facilities in a new entrance foyer and a staircase that connects the Churchill Auditorium to the expanded Pickwick Suite. →

Nearby, the former InterContinental London Westminster has become the Conrad London St. James, with seven meeting spaces. Hilton London Waterloo opened in 2014 and is attracting smaller boardroom events and, "guests are self-sufficient, making Skype calls rather than requiring videoconferencing, for example, and they are adding catering to room hire on the day, allowing them to tailor packages as they go", says director of sales, Angela Cowper.

InterContinental is looking east and opens later this year at the O2 with a conference centre that includes a pillar-free 3,000m² ballroom and 20 multi-functional meeting rooms. The hotel will be operated and managed by Arora Group and although budgets are still tight, "we are often able to handle in-house services that would otherwise have been outsourced at an extra cost, thus saving the client money," says commercial director, Raj Shah.

Etc. venues also get good feedback on being able to offer all services in-house. "I pick up growing frustration at some of the larger London venues where you have to deal with the caterer separately, the AV company separately and most of the services are sub-contracted," says etc.'s Stewart.

Chambers Travel sees larger chains starting to get account managers

involved where volumes of business are involved. "With a high volume of enquiries or big bookings, large groups have been quite sharp in picking up on that and we often get contacted by an account manager to say 'let us know if we can help or if you are interested in meeting us to discuss how we can work together'," says Mike Leeson.

The Lanesborough re-opens this spring with seven private dining rooms and will be courting business through a high-end food and beverage service, excellent product knowledge and flexibility.

Also targeting the event organiser is Marriott Hotels, which is in the process of upgrading meeting facilities under the title Meetings Imagined. Customers can use meetingsimagined.com to communicate with hotels and design tailor-made experiences.

The group is also revolutionising its meeting spaces and first in the UK is the London Marriott Kensington, whose £1.3million renovation delivered five meeting rooms that can be linked to make one space or divided into nine. Included are wifi access, wireless enabled LED screens and projectors, and a BARCO Click Share system. Creativity is catered for with interactive walls and the Red Coat Direct app allows event planners to communicate with the hotel team without even leaving the meeting room.

Marriott Park Lane has also benefited from a makeover, including a new look for its three meeting rooms.

Head west and there's regeneration here too. The Dorsett Shepherd's Bush hotel launched last year with three meeting rooms. Hotel Xenia on Cromwell Road opened a roof garden, available to residential guests; also on Cromwell Road, The Rockwell has converted its restaurant into meeting space for up to 25; and on a larger scale, at Heathrow Airport, the Park Inn by Radisson has refurbished 41 conference rooms and 26 syndicate rooms.

Elsewhere, BMA House is upgrading its internet infrastructure to offer faster and more reliable bandwidth for conferences, and is including standard AV in meetings

and events packages.

"Larger events requiring specialist wifi provisions may incur a charge but we envisage being able to accommodate 99 per cent of current requirements on a complimentary basis," says the venue's head of events, Sarah Bright.

Last year, etc. venues added 155 Bishopsgate, which caters for larger events plus training and meeting space at Monument; and this year it adds a new floor at its St. Paul's, 200 Aldersgate and Liverpool Street (Norton Folgate) locations, plus new meeting and training space at Marble Arch. A venue at Canary Wharf is under "detailed" consideration.

In Holborn, The Apartment at The Hoxton has opened with six meeting rooms around an open-plan kitchen, available for ersatz snacking throughout an event. "Companies want relaxed, down-to-earth venues that break down boundaries," says regional meetings and events sales manager, Emily Gallagher.

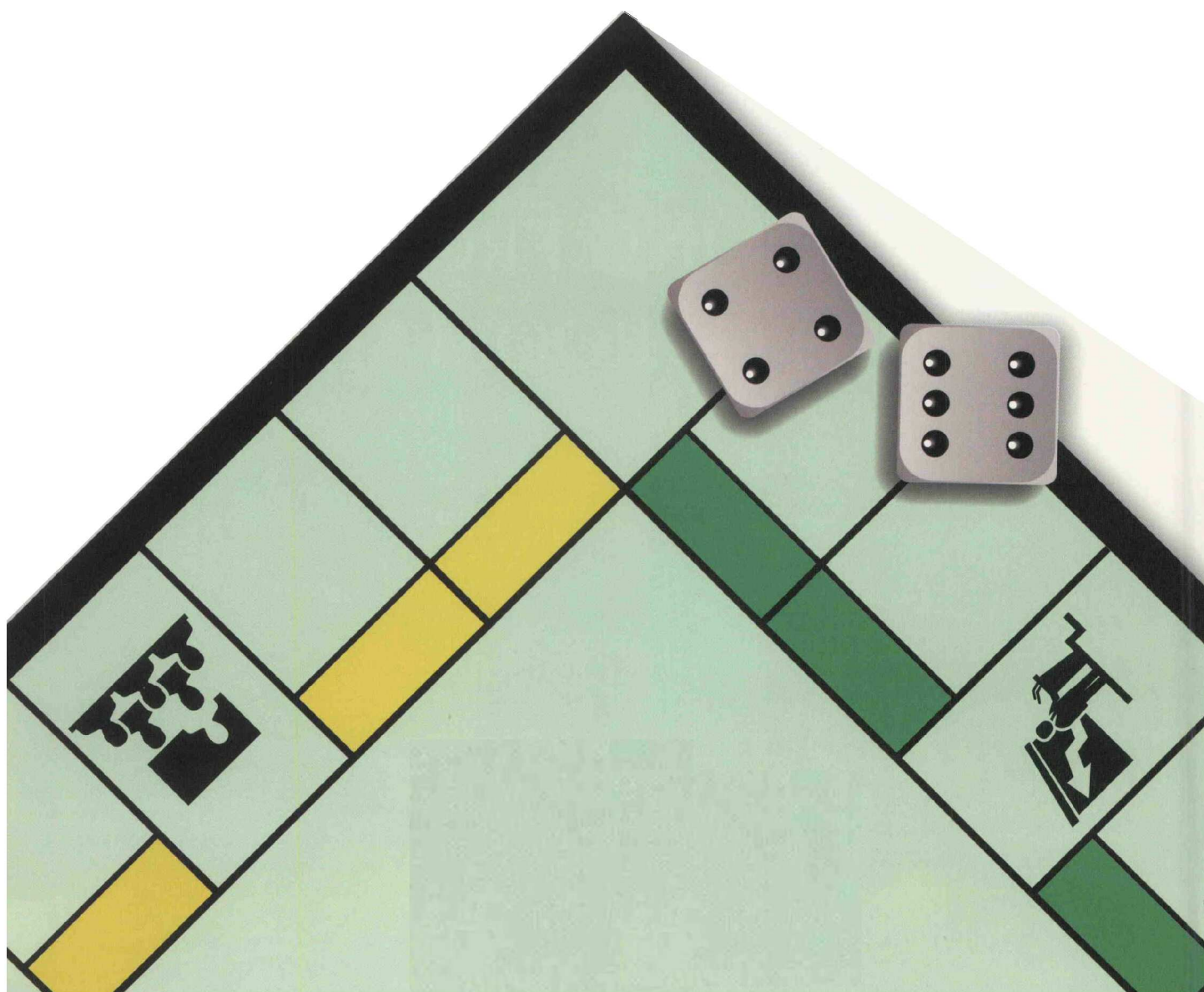
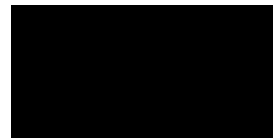
In October this year, the Institute of Engineering and Technology (IET) throws open its doors after a £30million refit which will deliver a modernised lecture theatre, small, medium-sized and large meeting rooms, a new lecture theatre on the second floor and the opening of the third floor for events.

Capita Meetings & Events notes that impressive views usually score highly when it comes to corporate events and in London these are available in abundance, including at Heron Tower, The Shard, Sky Garden and hotels such as ME, Grange St Pauls and most recently, the Mondrian and Ace Hotel.

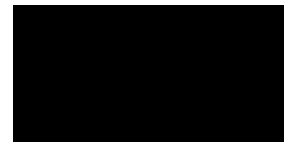
Sky Garden launched in January on floors 35 to 37 of 20 Fenchurch Street, providing three restaurants run by caterer Rhubarb, which are available for private hire, alongside a separate event space and private dining room for 20 through to 450 guests.

London has profitably exploited the high profile it enjoyed during the Olympic Games of 2012 and although high prices may be off-putting to some, the city's dynamism continues to provide capital appeal for meetings and events of all needs and sizes. ●

Source: Business Travel Magazine, The {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Sunday 1, March 2015
Page: 68,69,70,71
Area: 1274 sq. cm
Circulation: Pub Stmt 18700
Ad data: page rate £3,750.00, scc rate £0.00
Phone: 020 8649 7233
Keyword: The Montcalm



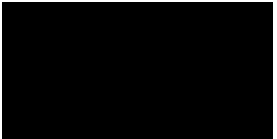
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Pictured Left: Dorsett Shepherd's Bush
Below: Marriott Park Lane



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Pictured Above: Park Inn Heathrow; Shangri-La at The Shard
Opposite: The Apartment at The Hoxton

LONDON VENUES THE NEW AND THE REFURBISHED			
NEW VENUES The Apartment at The Hoxton 199-206 High Holborn, London WC1V 7BD DDR: £65.00 Dorsett Shepherd's Bush 58 Shepherd's Bush Green, London W12 8QE DDR: £40.00 Etc. venues 155 Bishopsgate, London EC2M 3YD DDR: £85.00 Etc. venues Marble Arch, Garfield House, 86 Edgware Road, London W2 2EA DDR: £66.00 Hampton by Hilton London Waterloo 157 Waterloo Rd, London SE1 8XA DDR: £50.00	InterContinental London, The O2 Due to open late 2015 DDR: £85.00 The Shard 31 Saint Thomas Street, London SE1 9QU DDR: rates work on a minimum spend premise Sky Garden 20 Fenchurch Street, London EC3M 3BY DDR: quotes depend on catering requirements UPGRADED VENUES BMA House Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9JP DDR: £84.00 Conrad St. James's 22-28 Broadway, London SW1H 0BH DDR: £99.00	Crowne Plaza Bridges Wharf, Battersea, London SW11 3BE DDR: £59.00 Hotel Xenia 160 Cromwell Road, London SW5 0TL DDR: £50.00 IET 2 Savoy Place, London WC2R 0BL DDR: £100.80 The Lanesborough Hyde Park Corner, London SW1X 7TA DDR: £120.00 London Marriott Hotel Kensington 147 Cromwell Road, London SW5 0TH DDR: £123.00	London Marriott Hotel Park Lane 140 Park Lane, London W1K 7AA DDR: £85.00 Park Inn by Radisson Heathrow Bath Road, Heathrow UB7 0DU DDR: £40.00 The QEII Centre Broad Sanctuary, London SW1P 3EE DDR: £67.50 The Rockwell 181-183 Cromwell Road, London SW5 0SF DDR: £90.00 <i>Day delegate rates (DDR) are quoted inclusive of VAT. Hotels or venues mentioned in the article but not featuring in this panel are some way off completion.</i>