Historic London foundry that made Big Ben's bells could be saved from hotel development

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The digital heritage preservation company Factum Foundation and conservation group Re-Form Heritage plan to buy the site and hold it in perpetuity as a working foundry.

A non-profit organisation known as the London Bell Foundry has made an offer to acquire the Whitechapel bell foundry in east London which could see the historic site reopen as a working enterprise.

The Art Newspaper learned that the centuries-old site in east London could be up for sale after the UK government approved a controversial plan to turn it into a boutique hotel development early last year. The Whitechapel bell foundry was bought by the US investment group Raycliff Capital, which pledged to transform the foundry into a 103-room hotel, café and studios for creative businesses.

The landmark building is currently available to rent with the high-end estate agents Pilcher. “We are letting the building as a whole; the back section, which is the old

foundry and the front section, which is a set of two period buildings,” said a Pilcher spokesman. Commercial galleries are encouraged to apply, he confirmed. Asked if the building is for sale, the spokesman said: “Not officially, but like everything, there is a price.”

Now there is an alternative. The digital heritage preservation company Factum Foundation teamed up with the conservation group Re-Form Heritage to use the site for its industrial purpose. Both organisations want to acquire the organisation and buildings through the newly formed London Bell Foundry, and form a charitable trust to then hold it in perpetuity as a working foundry.

A spokesperson for the London Bell Foundry says: “In 2020 the owners entered into a legal obligation not to occupy or permit occupation of the foundry (listed building) until they had entered into a lease for the occupation of the foundry. This lease is for a minimum of ten years. As you are aware the foundry remains shuttered up and unoccupied.”

He adds: “In October 2022 the owners appointed agents to market the foundry for rent or sale. As a result of this in November, The London Bell Foundry Limited put forward a proposal, via its agents, to lease the building for ten years with an option to purchase the freehold in year ten or earlier. The proposal is to re-establish a working foundry in the listed building and it would comply with the owners’ legal obligation. The proposed lease terms are on a commercial basis.” Pilcher had not responded to a request for comment at the time of writing.