

Conservation Area Developer Case Study - King's Cross, London: Development by Argent

King's Cross has formed a major gateway into central London for over two centuries. During the Victorian era it was a thriving industrial transport hub, but by the 1970s many of the buildings had become derelict and underused. The King's Cross and St Pancras railway stations, both Grade I listed, and other important historic buildings, such as the Great Northern Hotel, German Gymnasium and Stanley Buildings, were designated as part of the King's Cross Conservation Area in 1986. Immediately to the north is the Regent's Canal Conservation Area, designated in 1974, which includes the Grade II listed Granary Complex and Eastern Coal Drops, as well as the Fish and Coal Offices, which together with other buildings formed the historic Goods Yard where goods arrived from the north to be distributed around London.

These two conservation areas cover much of the King's Cross development site, one of the largest and most exciting regeneration projects in London. When complete, it will provide approximately 50 new buildings, 20 new streets, 10 new major public spaces, almost 2,000 homes, and the restoration and refurbishment of 20 historic buildings and structures. The developer, Argent (working as part of the King's Cross Central Limited Partnership), understood from the outset that the heritage of the site is key to its distinctiveness and sense of place and has used this to deliver one of the best mixed-use developments in the UK.



The King's Cross Canal Basin Redevelopment. © Historic England

While earlier versions of the King's Cross masterplan isolated and preserved the site's significant historic buildings as artefacts, the final masterplan weaves the historic buildings and grain into the new urban fabric and brings them back to life. This approach presented a prodigious challenge, and took time and effort working together with the London boroughs of Camden and Islington, English Heritage, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and naturally, the local communities and interest groups. However, it has resulted in a place where the historic buildings sit comfortably amongst the new buildings and spaces.

The Granary Building, which once stored wheat for London's bakers, is now home to the world famous art college, Central Saint Martins. The elegant building, designed by Lewis Cubitt, is complemented by a large new urban square – the now popular Granary Square. The square forms the heart of the new development and is book-ended by new pavilion

buildings, specifically designed to enhance the setting of the Goods Yard and appreciation of the historic arrangement of buildings. It is the whole, rather than any individual building, which is celebrated.

Equal attention has been paid to the spaces between the buildings in order to knit together old and new, and provide a welcoming environment. Historic materials, such as granite setts, and heritage features, such as old railway tracks and turntables, have been salvaged and incorporated into the new public realm. Artefacts, special features and materials have been carefully selected in conjunction with LB Camden, Historic England and local interest groups and are embedded into the landscape to maintain the character and historical interpretation of the area.

Other examples of innovative re-use of historic buildings and structures at King's Cross include the restoration and relocation of the listed Gasholder No. 8 and the Gasholder Triplets to house an urban park and a new residential development, respectively. The Coal Drops Yard, where coal was conveyed from train to horse-drawn carts for distribution around London, is being carefully refurbished into a new retail destination with a striking modern roof. This design was approached with apprehension by conservation groups who wanted the Coal Drops restored to their original state, but through a collaborative effort between the developer, architects, Historic England and the London Borough of Camden and the inclusion of some amendments following the feedback from the conservation groups a bold balance between conservation and revitalisation has been struck.

Not all historic buildings have been retained. For example, the Culross Buildings in the southern part of the site blocked the envisaged primary access route linking the stations in the south to the rest of the site. It was therefore decided that these should be demolished, for the benefit of this new neighbourhood and the wider area. This was met by ardent opposition from some interest groups, and defending these decisions took time and significant consultation with stakeholders.

Gaining planning consent was perhaps the project's biggest challenge. The conservation areas and listed status of a number of buildings were part of the complexity of this process, as a typical outline planning permission would not provide sufficient detail on the proposals for historic buildings. The solution, developed with LB Camden and Historic England, was an innovative hybrid planning permission somewhere between an outline and a detailed permission, which balanced the need for flexibility over the long development period with a level of certainty over important elements. Initially conservation groups were sceptical of this approach but it has now become more widely accepted, with schemes like Battersea following this example.

King's Cross is an exemplar of good growth. It demonstrates that conservation areas can help to encourage sustainable, high quality development that respects and revitalises heritage assets. Developing in conservation areas has increased the time, effort and costs going into the scheme, but this is more than offset by the economic, social and cultural value created. Through a patient, collaborative and carefully balanced process, the historic buildings and character of King's Cross have not only been protected, but brought

back to life and stitched back into the city. The result is a place that embraces both its past and its future.

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