

Illinois Wesleyan University – London Study Abroad Program

What Do Social Projects Say About the Contemporary Values of London?

Comparing the King's Cross Area and the Barbican

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London is a global city and a progressive one that continues to evolve with time. As seen in the very architecture and history of the city, the social climate and diversity of people impacts the purposing of buildings and what is demanded from the city. After World War II, the Blitz had brought destruction across the city with huge areas completely demolished.⁵ When it came time to rebuild, everything had to have a purpose; what did London want to convey about itself? Climate change is a very real threat to the existence of the human race. More frequently on the news now, people like Greta Thunberg are demanding climate justice, warning us of the awful path the world is on if drastic changes to our lifestyles are not made soon. With a heavy focus on environmental sustainability, what is London doing to reduce its carbon footprint, to be more eco-friendly? Questions vary throughout history, but one constant is turning to social projects as a way to see London's attempts to meet the demands of the public. To understand what social projects say about contemporary values of London, this research paper will look at the Barbican and King's Cross area. Both are responses to their contemporary questions in the form of redevelopment and social projects that answer the question: what do social projects say about the contemporary values of London?

London had been heavily bombed and damaged during the Blitz.⁵ The Corporation of the City of London (the governing body of the City of London) sought to rebuild an area previously known as Cripplegate.⁷ Once the center for fabric production and rag trade, Cripplegate had been flattened during the Blitz.¹ With the Town and Country Act of 1947, the Corporation bought thirty-six acres of land and began planning redevelopment to the area.

Redevelopment could have meant reestablishing what once was there, creating new office buildings, anything. The Corporation of the City of London chose to build council housing

on the land they bought. Observing the needs and requests from post WWII London, an effort to make living in the city accessible and desirable to the middle class worker with a decent salary was set into motion. Residential area on the Barbican estate was to expand from the dwindling 48 residents left, into large concrete buildings with enough room to house 6,500 people.⁴ While creating an affordable way for the middle-class to live in the center of London, it is important to note the Corporation also succeeded in securing the City of London maintain a seat in the Greater London Council with its estimated increase in population.

Accompanying the Barbican's council housing there needed to be something special to draw people in. Middle-class workers were buying houses in the suburbs and surrounding country with yards and communities, commuting to and from the City of London every day essentially making it a ghost town once the work day was done.⁴ The Corporation needed to find a way to emulate the desires of community, green space, and whatever else the middle-class worker fancied, but in the middle of London. A beacon of cultural development and the arts commenced alongside the new social housing as a result, literally building the largest art center in Europe.³ This social project encompassed itself not only building council housing, but also in building two art galleries, the second largest conservatory in London, multiple concert halls, restaurants, a library, three cinemas, a theatre, and more, all located on the Barbican estate. Social housing construction started in 1962 and residents were occupying flats as early as 1976.¹ The architects played with shapes and were influenced from all eras preceding the time of construction. Architects also experimented with raw concrete in ways that had never been done before. While some may view the Barbican as jagged and dirty today, it is full of curvature, repeating shapes, and cityscapes that keep every part of the labyrinth of buildings

interesting.⁴ Though modern, the building was not an intuitive design of architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon; they could have never predicted the correct amount of parking spaces, left the right amount of space for accommodations to be made in the future, or what would happen to the concept of council housing.⁷

To reiterate, the Barbican residential area was great in theory until Margaret Thatcher. Council housing is dependent on the idea that housing can and should be provided by the government, more specifically built by the local authorities for the people. With the passing of the Housing Act in 1980, the Right to Buy passed as well all of which puts the power of owning property back into the hands of the people.¹⁴ The Right to Buy provided the legal rights to buy property, including council housing. With this right, social housing faded away over the proceeding decades. Property at the Barbican for a single bedroom flat today can have a starting price of £800,000. The Right to Buy and Thatcher's Housing Act, have directly impacted London's housing crisis today and caused the Barbican's loss in its post-war practice of affordable housing.² The social project only being successful in practice for five years or so, may be true on an economical scale, but not on the other important piece of the Barbican's identity.

The dedication to accessible arts is still synonymous with the Barbican. There is a proud emphasis on all of the arts and what the Barbican does to make that happen. Whether it be in partnership with East End London schools getting children involved in the arts, the posters advertising the Barbican cinema and the London Symphony Orchestra, or having every exhibition and instillation on the ground-floor free for all visitors, it is clear the arts are held in high regard.¹¹ Emphasis is also present on the accessibility of the Barbican itself. Open until eleven o'clock every night, the space is meant for everyone. Visited by a diverse socioeconomic

group of people, during one welcome tour of the Barbican, the presenting tour guide told a story of a night where the Prince of Wales was watching a show in one of the concert halls while homeless people gathered inside for warmth at the same time.⁴

The Barbican encompasses two major responses to post WWII London: taking care of the people and being a driving force in focusing on the arts, making both more accessible in the process. To take care of a population after wartime and to focus on beautification really speaks to London paving the way in terms of creativity during the second half of the century. While council housing in the Barbican was not a long-term success,⁹ London became the place to be for any form of art; fashion, painting, music, architecture, name the type of media and London is dabbling in it. The Barbican is not a whole area nor is it one building, it is a community based on the ideologies that housing should and can be affordable while also supplying easy-access to the arts.

Maintaining a common theme in redevelopment and buildings playing vital roles in social projects answering contemporary demands and questions, the regeneration of the Kings Cross area over the past decade or so has taken large steps in sustainable building practices as the area continues to regenerate. Many Londoners will not hesitate to tell you they remember when the King's Cross area was a red light district, full of prostitution and addiction. Like many major cities, London is no stranger to areas falling out of disrepair. Noticeable and different from other major cities is the concentration of effort from London to repurpose or create new environmentally sustainable buildings.

As climate change becomes a more pressing issue in today's society, the public wants to know what is being done to reduce their city's carbon footprint, countering our planet's radically shifting climate.¹⁸ To be able to point out the exponential growth of sustainable buildings is the perfect way to keep the public happy; to have greener or more efficiently used buildings and space is evidence to the public that effort is being made to have the city run on cleaner, renewable energy.¹⁷ For example, the German Gymnasium, built in 1864-65 was restored and turned into a restaurant 2015.⁸ Instead of tearing down the building, laying waste to those materials, and creating enormous amounts of air pollution in what would have been the subsequent rebuilding, repurposing the building is another way King's Cross has managed to stay environmentally sustainable.¹⁰ Repurposing of buildings and regeneration is also very prominent with money used in making St. Pancras International and King's Cross stations bustling train hubs connecting London to the rest of Great Britain and continental Europe with the help of renovations that started in the second half of the 2000s.^{16, 19} Overall 7 heritage buildings have been restored as of 2016, including the three aforementioned.⁶ Other non-heritage buildings that have been developing in the King's Cross area have taken to urban gardens or rainwater collecting stations on their rooftops, creating green space in an otherwise concrete jungle or reducing impact of local water usage. As parks open, green and brown roof buildings double, and thousands of gallons of rainwater harvested,⁶ it is important to recognize there are parts of environmental development, like air pollution, that are often excluded from reports.²⁰

With focus on sustainable buildings and renewable energy, air pollution is often overlooked by green organizations calling for climate justice. Though public transportation is

seemingly green in thought, the CO₂ and gas emissions are extremely heavy when condensed into one area like the transportation hub King's Cross.⁵ Even with more walkways built, pedestrianized roads, and increased public bike usage, there is still dangerously high levels of nitrogen dioxide along Euston Road and even more toxic air circulating in one of the busiest tube stations in all of London.¹⁵ Though there are efforts to monitor and reduce gas emission put into the atmosphere due to public transportation, more people see and care about the progress made in sustainable and repurposed buildings; part of social projects addressing contemporary values of a society is keeping the public happy.

While the King's Cross area does not make up the entirety of London, it is an area given the opportunity, materials, and means to become as sustainable as possible; with zero public waste to landfill in 2014/15, it is safe to say steps are being made in the right direction.¹⁷ As King's Cross continues to be an area of experimentation in what works and what does not in London's attempts to collectively become a greener and more sustainable society. There are still problems in the area's carbon footprint reduction considering the amount of CO₂ gas from public transportation and cars sitting idle in busy six lane traffic, but it is important to focus on the small victories and progress made in the social projects of today.

Looking at the Barbican and King's Cross area, the social projects taken on by both during says a lot about the values of society and create an evolutionary timeline of what London has gone through in terms of creativity, diversity, economically, and culturally over the years. In the 1950s when plans for the Barbican first started, taking care of Londoners in the middle class through social housing and the building of the largest arts center in Europe was a huge priority, as London (and Great Britain) tried to figure out its place in the world post-World

War II. In hopes of attracting people to move into the city and enrich their lives culturally through the arts, the social project of the time, the Barbican, was built. Even today, Londoners wanting to live in a greener society, with the radical call from young people who want to die of old age and not from a world that cannot offer them breathable air or drinkable water, has led to city-wide efforts in enforcing renewable energy, sustainable building practices, and encouraging transportation by foot or bike. While efforts and buildings have appeared city-wide, environmental sustainability and testing is most noticeably and concentrated in the social project started and continuing on in my lifetime, the regeneration of the King's Cross area.

London has long-looked to the current political and cultural climate when it comes to answering the cries of the people; whether solutions be council housing, art centers, or repurposing buildings, London's social projects center themselves in what is most important to society at the time. While each one is relevant to the time the project commenced, they carry their own weight in being crucial parts of London's developmental history. Each social project is groundbreaking in thought, design, engineering, and relevance to society. What do social projects say about the contemporary values of London? Social projects with their conceptualization and ultimately their construction reveal what was most important to the buildings' contemporaries; as soon as they are complete, each project carries on a legacy of what London's values were at any given moment in history and provide generations to come with traceable architectural evidence of London's societal values.

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