King's Cross: renaissance for whom?

Michael Edwards

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Introduction

This chapter examines the planning and development history of the area around King's Cross station on the northern edge of central London, picking up the story in the late 1980s and concentrating on the last decade. In the late 80s London was in the grip of a major property boom, outcome of the de-regulation of the Thatcher period, in which a speculative surge in office property development was replacing and expanding the building stock of central London, pushing upwards but also outwards and lapping at areas like King's Cross.

At its core, London is polycentric with its main concentrations of activity around the Bank of England in the Roman and mediaeval 'City', around the Westminster concentration of government, royalty and diplomacy and with shopping and entertainment just to the west and north of Westminster. Between these eastern and western poles lie areas in Fleet Street, Holborn and Covent Garden which have transformed dramatically in the 20th century with the exodus of wholesale vegetable trading from Covent Garden, newspapers and printing from Fleet Street and the assimilation of the urban fabric into retail, entertainment and cultural uses in Covent Garden and offices in Holborn and Fleet Street, strongly linked to the legal profession. The whole of this 'centre' is ringed by the Circle Line of the underground.

King's Cross lies on the northern edge of this centre, extremely well-connected by underground and surface railways. However it had long been a Cinderella district, shunned by big business. It lies in the valley of the River Fleet which, running from Hampstead to the Thames at Blackfriars, had long been associated with insanitary living conditions, poverty and mess. In the second half of the 20th century the district suffered severe blight caused by the disinvestment in the railways and by planning uncertainty about how the awkward traffic intersections should be handled. It was thus, by the 1980s, the lowest-rent area for central London offices and with a commercial building stock mostly unchanged since the 19th century. Buildings of the 20th century were all either social housing—the product of massive building by the LCC and two socialist boroughs—or public buildings, of which the outstanding example was the new British Library. The area was thus densely populated with working class and other council tenants and with a distinctive set of local enterprises—virtually none of them corporate—taking advantage of cheap yet accessible premises.

The experience of the King's Cross area merits analysis because it is in many respects a microcosm (Edwards 1992), representative of wider processes going on in the city and the society. The analysis thus has to touch on what has been happening in society at large and its spatial development, on the changing dynamics of the economy and of property development, on the weakening planning and local government system and its contuing re-constitution, since the 1970s, as subordinate to business interests. Within this turbulent history, design and planning ideas and practices have been re-formed and have played crucial roles in shaping social, economic and physical outcomes.

The last two decades have indeed been a period of proliferating discourses on urban studies and policy – though often more like parallel worlds than strands in any real debate. Thus the ***urban renaissance*** stems from John Prescott's efforts to harness architectural and design ideas to urban policy. At the same time the Home Office and the Cabinet Office were busy developing ideas about ***social exclusion*** as a new, rather European, way of containing poverty. We also saw the Blair government pursuing its ***reform*** agenda for local government and, above all, the growing dominance of ***competitiveness*** as the leading desideratum for all policy, essentially a euphemism for the pursuit of measurable economic growth. There is no space here to disentangle these strands and their languages but their deeply problematical nature, and the contradictions among them, have been examined elsewhere by Colomb (Colomb 2007), Harloe (Harloe 2001) and myself (Edwards 2006) among others.

One major problem in this analysis has been to disentangle the influence of the UTF (1999) from the impacts of these other policy regimes and from other strands of thought—a problem shared with other authors in this book. Another shared problem is that change in the King's Cross area is in full swing at the time of writing (though seriously challenged by the world economic crisis). Indeed the biggest development project in the area, the redevelopment of the Railway Lands by Argent, is only just starting and much of the discussion is necessarily about likely outcomes over the next decade or more.

From a methodological point of view, this chapter should probably be classified as a political economy. Its central concern is with the production and use of the built environment as an important facet of a capitalist society undergoing, since the late 1970s, rapid change. The main thrust of the change is hard to describe in language which is both precise and widely comprehensible. It is common to speak about 're-structuring' in the sense that major features of the social structure have been transformed: trades unions and other working class organisations weakened, the constraints on capital relaxed and the state sector of the economy transformed through privatisation. But the word sounds very technical, which is misleading, and an emphasis on 'structure' has rightly been criticised for suggesting that we are all the helpless victims of invincible and mechanical forces acting on us. The historian Edward Thompson made this comment most lucidly in his critique of French structuralism (Thompson 1994) and later writers have built a powerful approach which attaches great importance to the agency of individuals, classes and groups within society, whether in challenging and changing structures of power or in passively reproducing them (Jessop and Sum 2006). This 'structure/agency' approach forms part of the background tool kit of this chapter.

The increasing dominance of 'neoliberal' ideas (Brenner and Theodore 2005; Siemiatycki 2005) is another important strand in this account, being evident at all levels from the international organisations which regulate trade and investment through to most of the professionals, officers and councillors in local government today. But this term, too, is deeply unsatisfactory, familiar only to a small coterie of social scientists and hard to explain briefly, though Harvey does it brilliantly and at length, working from the following definition:

> 'Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade….Furthermore if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary.' (Harvey 2005: 2).

This chapter draws on twenty years of engagement with King's Cross, partly through research funded by the King's Cross Partnership (Mutale and Edwards 2003), partly through advisory work with local authorities and developers but mainly through my own and my students' collaborations with the King's Cross Railway Lands Group, an umbrella organisation of local groups (Holgersen 2008) (www.kxrlg.org.uk). This local work has been strengthened and refreshed through international collaborations with similar struggles elsewhere in the world in two networks, BISS (BISS 1969-1996) and INURA (INURA 2004) (www.inura.org), both modest examples of globalisation from below. The approach is partly indebtted to Risebero (Risebero 1992) and appears to have elements in common with the much more elaborate methodology of Cuthbert (Cuthbert 2006).

Was the UTF a sound approach?

The report of the Urban Task Force (UTF 1999) which is the main focus of this book contains a disparate collection of discussions on a variety of urban questions. Many of these discussions are valuable and bear re-reading a decade later. There is impassioned writing on the potentialities of good design to enrich the living environment. Within that we find a re-statement of many of the principles enunciated 37 years earlier by Jane Jacobs (Jacobs 1962): the value of mixed uses for continuous sociability, the merits of short blocks and so on (though no mention of the benefits of mixed tenures or mixed building ages to the diversity of streets and users). There is also a salutary passage on the need to strengthen and re-animate local government in the UK after two decades in which it had been weakened and marginalised.

On the other hand the report is very weak in some of its central arguments, especially in the justification it offers for two of its main recommendations: increases in urban density and the re-use of 'brownfield land' to minimise development on 'green-field' sites. These two principles have become fetishes in British urban policy-making and the Task Force bears some responsibility for embedding them so thoroughly. Both are gross over-simplifications or worse but they are popular with the Council for the Protection of Rural England and with those who support it in defence of their own use values or property values, or indeed for other motives, including altruistic ones. But there is no recognition of the severe negative effects of Britain's restrictive approach to urban development, raising land, housing and premises costs and helping to impoverish citizens who are not established owner-occupiers. Such uncomfortable truths are pointed out only by independent-minded welfare economists (Cheshire and Sheppard 2002) or isolated leftists (Edwards 2002) and the Task Force really ducks all the awkward issues of land economics. Equally it avoids confronting the negative features of what Ruth Glass, working here in Islington, termed 'gentrification' (Glass 1964) where lower-income people are displaced by wealthier people as urban areas are upgraded. For these reasons the Task Force failed to achieve its lofty ambition to '...identify causes of urban decline...' (UTF 1999: title page) and its recommendations are seriously hazardous, as this chapter will show.

Was the UTF appropriate to London?

In many ways the Task Force addressed a stereotype of a British (or perhaps a mid-Atlantic) city, characterised by population decline, at least in core and inner areas, by exodus of prosperous income groups to the suburbs, by extensive un-used or under-used land, formerly industrial, and by lack of residential or business demand for inner urban space.

This stereotype did not fit London in the late 1990s. The population of central and Inner London had already stopped declining and started growing in the 80s. Upper income households had never abandoned central London or the more salubrious parts of inner London and, by the 1990s, were colonising poorer boroughs too. It is true that London, especially inner areas, had been loosing middle-income households, especially those at the family-formation stage. That, however, is generally viewed as a response to high house prices, to perceived quality of education and of the environment for children. It's an important problem but not amenable to the general strategy of making urban living more attractive to all those with choice (Mayor of London 2008) (Champion 1989; Buck *et al.* 2002; Butler 2003; Hamnett 2003).

For these reasons the Task Force's proposals were, essentially, unnecessary in much of London since the 'problems' they addressed were not London's problems or were already, in 1999, on the way to being eradicated. And although London did (and does still) have some un-used or under-used former industrial land (Doak and Karadimitriou 2007), it almost all lay in the extreme eastern areas where the LDDC was being wound up, with its job largely complete; elsewhere such land had largely been re-developed to satisfy a surging private residential market and planning authorities were under pressure to release more land from protective 'employment' designations. The issue was becoming one of how to generate or re-classify enough land as 'brownfield' to satisfy developers' demand (Doak and Karadimitriou 2007).

The Task Force ideas were thus, in much of London, and certainly around King's Cross, reinforcing established trends, not reversing them. And it is in this context that we come to King's Cross, zooming in via the international, national and London levels of process.

The international context of change in London

The world economy in the 1990s and in the decade that followed could be characterised as one of strong capital accumulation with growing liberalisation of financial flows and investment (Glyn 2006: 50ff). A great deal of money-capital was (and is) in the hands of investors and had to be channelled by portfolio managers into assets which they expected to be profitable. Investment in the production of goods had been increasingly shifting to authoritarian regimes in the far east and to lower-wage countries elsewhere, including some of the formerly-communist states, while in the UK we experienced strong investment in financial and property assets. Investment in property assets (ranging from commercial buildings to developable land, from individual houses to mortgage or consumption debt secured against housing) was aimed at capturing a combination of income and future growth in capital values and was thus, to some extent, self-sustaining: so long as investors continued to believe in future value growth and thus continued to invest, prices continued to rise because supply was so limited – especially the supply of property in good locations and especially where the planning regime was restrictive. 'Investors' in this context comprise not only corporations and institutions but ordinary house-buyers too: all of us are involved in the process either as beneficiaries or loosers from the escalation of housing prices.

London's international position in the period had a number of features relevant to the unfolding of urban change at King's Cross. The City of London was, from the big bang of the 1980s, pre-eminent in many of the burgeoning unregulated financial markets and that led to the dramatic boom in demand for central office space, both in quantity and in scale of floorplates. The transformation of London's office areas by groundscrapers in the City and skyscrapers at Canary Wharf is essentially the product of that episode (Fainstein 2001). The UK also played a leading role in spreading the Thatcherite message of neoliberal re-structuring and in advising on privatisations and the transformation of former-communist societies, generating growth in the management consultancy and related legal professions based in London (Massey 2007). The London region also gained increasing dominance within the UK, draining human resources and investment from elsewhere as regional policy withered away within the country (Massey 2007 again) and within other European member states (Dunford 2005).

Thus, by the time the Urban Task Force started its work, London was already subject to a strong version of the hegemonic story which could be paraphrased like this: finance and business services are increasingly the dominant sectors in the UK economy, leading the way in productivity (gross value added per worker) and in generating the invisible earnings which enable us to import more and more of the goods we consume. Because London is overwhelmingly the seat of this sector, London must subordinate all other priorities to serving the needs of finance, business services and the related real estate industry. This kind of argument, with added references to 'world city' or 'global city', had been nurtured by the City of London Corporation during the vacuum left by the GLC's abolition (Edwards 2001) and later formed the 'vision statement' of national planning documents, of all three versions of the London Plan (Mayor of London 2004, 2006, 2008) and of many borough policy documents including Camden's (London Borough of Camden 2000, 2006). The same vision formed the opening statement of the presentation of Camden's view on King's Cross at the ESRC seminar in July 2008 (by Peter Bishop, who had been Camden's Director of Environment through the period considered here).

London in 1999

By 1999 London was once again in the full flood of boom conditions in its economy and its property markets. The recovery from the crash of 1990 had, interestingly, been led by the housing sector and average house prices in the capital and adjacent regions rose dramatically until the new crash of 2007/8. The boom spread to office production a little later but there too a speculative surge was well under way by 1999 as investors pushed asset values up. Figure 11.1 shows just how strong this growth of asset values in the UK was.

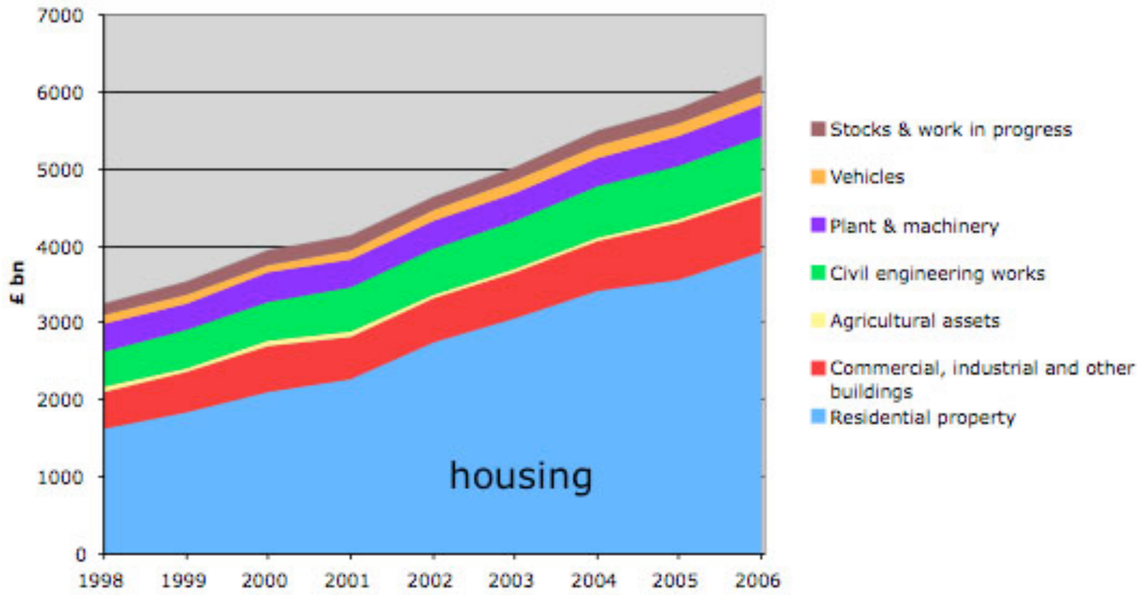

Fig 11.1 Market value of tangible assets in the UK, 1998-2006
Source: (ONS 2007 Table 10.2)

Rather little of the flood of money into the housing market had resulted in new construction, however: most had just driven prices up. At a national level this failure of the market to meet demand led the Treasury to commission a special report by Kate Barker (Barker 2004). The 'market failure' has posed severe problems for the management of the national economy and a major challenge to neo-liberal orthodoxy: the free market simply was not delivering (for a discussion, see Edwards 2008). At the London level the severity of the housing shortage preoccupied Mayor Livingstone through successive plans and in his draft Housing Strategy produced shortly before his defeat (Mayor of London 2007). Production of housing for sale in London had stayed resolutely static through the price boom, housing association output had contributed some growth but had entirely failed to replace the contribution which council house building had made in the 60s and 70s. Furthermore the production of new social housing was not even enough to make up for the losses due to the right to buy (Mayor of London 2007: 23). The housing system in London had become a tremendous wealth machine for established owner-occupiers and investors and simultaneously a poverty machine for the rest of the population: for tenants and new purchasers (Edwards 2004).

King's Cross

This set of conditions underpinned the demands expressed by community groups and many Labour politicians for a major housing development on the Railway Lands at King's Cross through the 80s and 90s. But, as we shall see, this was not to be fully realised.

An earlier round of debate on the future of King's Cross in the period from 1987 is documented elsewhere (Edwards 1992) and is not the subject of this chapter but it needs to be summarised briefly. In the late 80s British Rail (BR), under pressure to behave more like a private firm pending its privatisation, had made a great deal of money from development of surplus land and air rights at some London termini, notably Charing Cross, Canon Street and the huge Broadgate development at Liverpool Street. They had in mind a sequel at King's Cross which would gain much of its value from a planned new station for the delayed Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL), then expected to be carved out on a diagonal axis below the listed train shed of King's Cross. BR initially kept quiet about this new station plan but their true intentions were uncovered by local residents and that deviousness contributed to strong distrust among the area's people.

BR, through its Property Board, invited developers to bid in a design and financial competition for the right to be development partners and reached agreement with Rosehaugh Stanhope, whom they had partnered at Broadgate. A consortium of Rosehaugh Stanhope with the secondary land owner National Freight Corporation (later UPS Exel Logistics) was formed as the London Regeneration Consortium (LRC) and the architects Foster and Partners were commissioned as master planners.

Camden Council, as the local planning authority, was somewhat divided (even among the ruling Labour group) on what its requirements for the development should be and intense debates took place in 1987-1990 on the content of a Planning Brief which would guide negotiations with LRC. The main issue was the relative weight to be attached to the long-standing aspirations for large scale affordable housing as against the strong corporate office emphasis which the developers favoured. The King's Cross Railway Lands Group (KXRLG), formed in 1987, brought together tenants' associations, resident groups, small and medium businesses, conservation and transport campaigners, a homeless group and others to press for an assortment of demands. It worked with sympathetic councillors and officers (with grant support from Camden) and the combined effect was—in hindsight—a fairly effective episode in consultation, if not full participation. It had some influence on the evolution of the Planning Brief and the LRC / Foster scheme and culminated in the submission of community-generated alternative planning applications pitted against the LRC application (Parkes 1991, 2004); KXRLG won a London Planning Achievement Award from the London Branch of the Royal Town Planning Institute.

In the event, Camden had reached a decision in 1992 that it was 'minded to grant' planning permission for LRC's mainly office scheme, when the scheme effectively collapsed. The collapse was a rather clear example of 'over-determination' in the sense that multiple factors led to its demise and perhaps any one of them might have been sufficient or decisive. The factors included the collapse of the central London office market which suffered from massive over-supply and falling demand in the early 90s. That fact, combined with rising interest rates, drove many developers into bankruptcy or inactivity, including Rosehaugh Stanhope which ceased trading. Furthermore the BR scheme for the CTRL, tunnelling through south east London and under the listed King's Cross station, was withdrawn following intense campaigning by affected groups along the route, and on cost grounds. In all this, the KXRLG had expected and hoped for the collapse of the office markets and had hoped that the struggle to prevent an outright planning permission would bring this outcome, as indeed it did.

The narrative resumes in the late 90s after a long period in which the UK and London economies had been recovering. There were three pertinent features of that period: the CTRL Act of 1997, the local initiation of a 'partnership' under the Single Regeneration Budget (Mawson *et al.*) and the Greater London Authority Act of the Blair government. During the 90s an initiative launched by Mark Bostock of the consultancy Arup led to a new alignment for the CTRL being adopted by government and embodied in the Channel Tunnel Railway Act of 1997. The route crossed under the Thames downstream, between new stations near Bluewater and at Stratford and arrived (along the route of the North London Line) at St Pancras which was to be expanded for the purpose, involving an elevated complex of tracks at the final approach. That was to create problems of noise and physical severance for development schemes and it also greatly reduced the area of land which would be available for development at King's Cross, from 55 hectares to 27 hectares. Even more important for the outcome was the financial basis the government designed for the new railway.

In keeping with the neoliberal tenets of Thatcherism, the Major and Blair governments were determined that this should be a private railway. After very protracted negotiations an agreement was made with a private consortium London and Continental Railways (LCR) that it would build and operate the new railway. But because ticket revenue was not expected to make the railway profitable, a government subsidy was essential and to reduce the scale of subsidy the consortium was promised the development rights over land at King's Cross St Pancras, Stratford and Ebbsfleet (near Bluewater) as part of the agreement. The significance of this is that property development at King's Cross was required to generate not just profit on development investment but also substantial revenues to LRC and government to help offset the costs of the railway. Although the details of these agreements and of the various parties' profit expectations are hidden by 'commercial confidentiality' it is clear that they have been important constraints on the composition of the development scheme.

Meanwhile the government financed a 'King's Cross Partnership' with £37.5m funding from the SRB to run from 1996 to 2003. The significant partners were the railway companies and the Camden and Islington Councils, with 'the community' in a very subordinate role, represented on the board by invited people. It had been expected to operate through the period in which the CTRL construction and related regeneration was going on but the delays in getting those works funded and launched meant that there was little overlap and the Partnership was often criticised for not knowing quite what to do. In the event it spent part of its money on valuable training and education, assisting local people entering the labour market. Otherwise most of its effort was devoted to changing the image of the area through a mixture of psychological and material measures.

The attack on the area's image was an instance of the familiar strategy where a locality is first characterised as run-down, dirty, crime-ridden, deprived and so on; and then (perhaps after some actual changes have ocurred) it is given a new characterisation as vibrant, creative, safe(r) and desirable. Both parts of this sequence were strongly in evidence at King's Cross (Campkin 2009 in preparation). The dark picture stressed edgy physical decay, prostitution and drugs (infuriating and alienating many local residents for whom the area was a good enough or a valued home). It was associated with heavy investment in CCTV, the relics of which can still be seen around the area, and with a programme of street scene improvements: grants to firms for façade upgrades and the usual replacement of sidewalk paving, street furniture and so on (see Plate 11.1). A fine new park at Edward Square was perhaps the most tangible legacy.

Plate 11.1 Chalton Street market, a typical example of street improvement by planting, paving and façade repair, part of the SRB Partnership programme for King's Cross 2002. Photo Michael Edwards

Meanwhile other improvements were made by local authorities through the Estates Improvement Programme, more substantial in their effects on residents and with less attention to cosmetic impact (see Plates 11.2 and 11.3).

Plates 11.2 and 11.3 Cromer Street: Camden Council Estate Improvement in which dwellings were modernised, estate security radically improved and public and shared areas re-landscaped. Photos Michael Edwards

Alongside the physical changes, the Partnership invested heavily in posters, painted hoardings, web-site design, leaflets and tourist maps, all designed to present the locality as creative and cultural, visually appealing (with stress on the historic buildings) and, by implication, non-threatening.

The third important influence from the 1990s was the decision of the Blair government to establish the Greater London Authority and to do so on the 'strong mayor' model. When the first elected Mayor was the independent Ken Livingstone, it was expected by some that King's Cross might benefit from the same sort of policies which he had espoused for the area as leader of the GLC in the mid 80s. The GLC's Community Areas Policy had been designed to defend the vulnerable populations and small firms of areas like King's Cross from the expansion pressures of the central office area. It had proposed expansion of social housing instead of office development and had implemented an industrial zone beside Battlebridge Basin to foster the manuafcturing sector, using GLC powers and money (GLC Greater London Council 1985).

In the event Ken Livingstone as Mayor formed a very close relationship with City of London and property interests and his approach was fully compliant with the hegemonic vision for world city growth explained above. He showed no residue of his 1980s attempts to protect community intererests. King's Cross is shown in the London Plan (Mayor of London 2008) as a northwards extension of the 'Central Activities Zone' (CAZ)

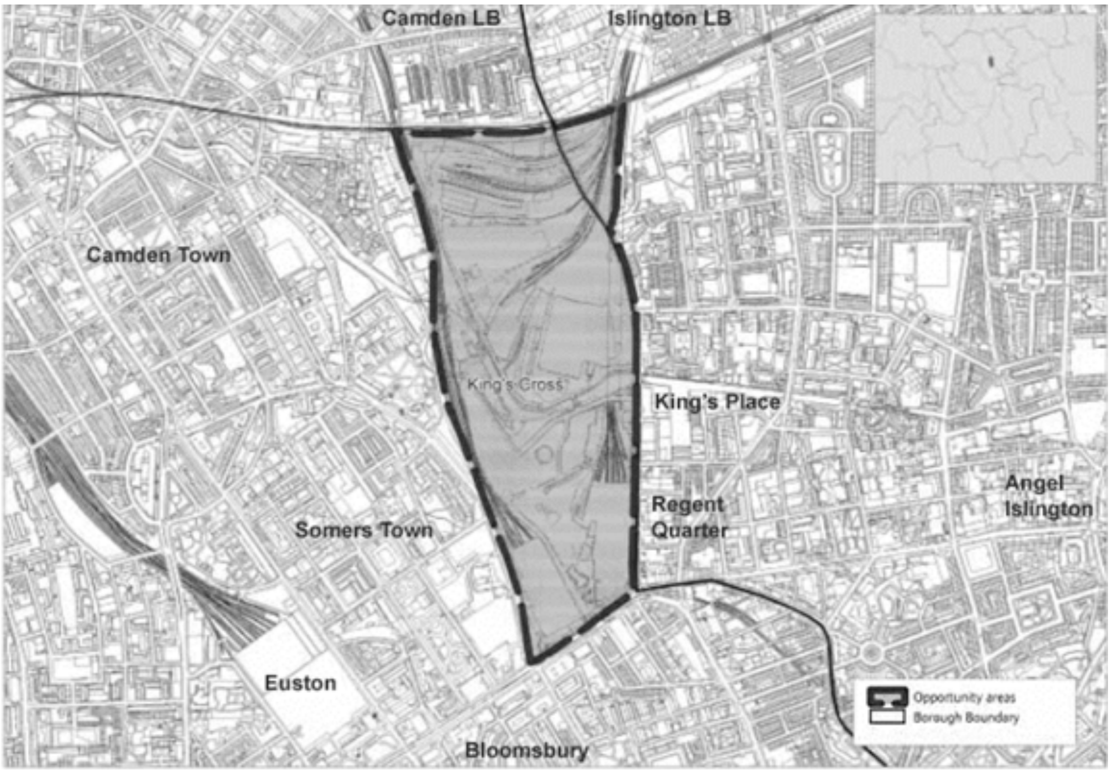

Fig 11.2 King's Cross Opportunity Area in context
Based on Ordnance Survey map with information from the London Plan 2008

With the planning uncertainties about the area now resolved, a significant set of developments went ahead on sites surrounding the Railway Land (which was designated as an Opportunity Area in the Mayor's and Camden's plans – see Figure 11.2 – and was largely occupied with engineering works until 2007). The owners of these adjacent sites were now in a position to realise the enormous development values of the area, values created by the inherited and forthcoming infrastructure, by the image-transformation work of the Partnership and by proximity to Argent's forthcoming scheme. The most important of these schemes was the P and O development now known as Regent Quarter immediately east of King's Cross station. The site had been assembled speculatively over many years, initially by Joe Levy's Stock Conversion and Investment Trust and then, after 1986, acquired by P and O. The Borough of Islington prepared a brief for this site in 1998 and in 2000 a planning application was submitted for a predominantly office development designed by Rolfe Judd, architects (Figure 11.3). The project envisaged the demolition of much of the nineteenth century building stock, which had been allowed to decay very badly, and its replacement by a series of rectangular blocks, some built behind retained façades, for offices, retailing, a hotel, 20 flats and extensive parking. This scheme met with very strong resistance from a broad array of agents: residents' groups seeking more housing, conservation groups led by the late Lisa Pontecorvo calling for the retention of more of the old buildings and the Partnership Board, critical of the design in many respects, especially on conservation.

In the light of these objections, and its Planning Brief, Islington refused permission whereupon P and O devised an entirely new scheme with RHWL architects in which a very high proportion of the old building stock was retained, interspersed with modern buildings of similar scale; a chain of internal courtyards created (gated) footpaths through all the blocks and the mix of uses was changed to provide much less office space, 138 flats (25% as social housing), a hotel, bars and cafes and only 20 parking spaces for a scheme of 58,550 m2 (Fig 11.3 and Plates 11.4 – 11.6).

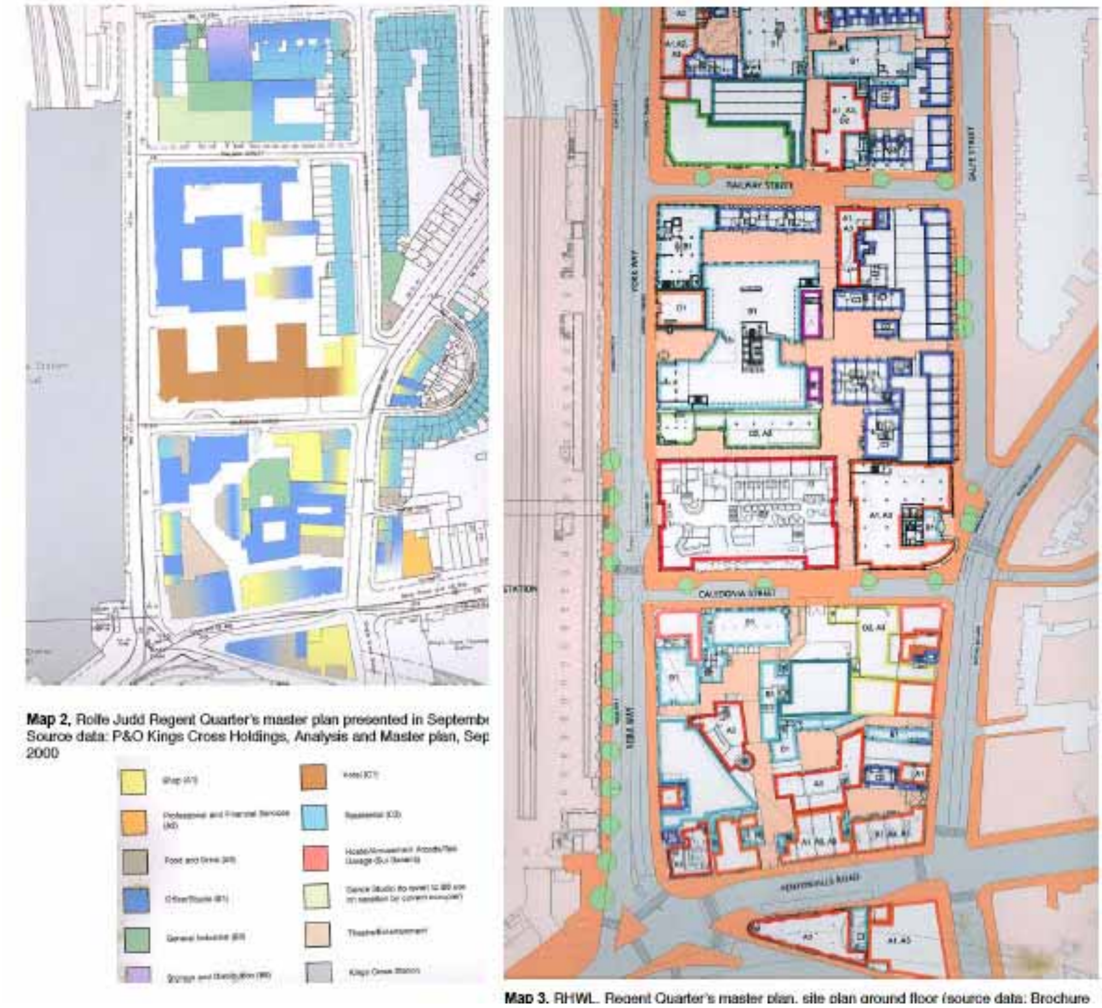

Fig 11.3 Two schemes for Regent Quarter. On the left the original scheme for which permission was refused. On the right the second scheme which was approved. Image from P and O Developments. The southern triangluar block and the northernmost block remain undeveloped in 2008.

Two thirds of the scheme was completed by 2005 and its housing units were sold very fast at prices which were higher than the developer had expected. The offices let more slowly but well enough to enable P and O to sell the completed parts to Lasalle Investment Management as it sought to focus on its 'core business' of operating ports and shipping (Vogdopoulou 2006).

Fig 11.4: Internal view in Regent Quarter. Photo by Michael Edwards

The Regent Quarter scheme could be described as a good professional compromise between conflicting forces. the design of the buildings and the intervening spaces are handled in a seamless and careful way which produces something of a Covent Garden atmosphere: intricate in plan and sections, diverse in uses, somewhat mixed in social composition, housing large and small firms in varied sectors and sheltered from the thunderous traffic on surrounding roads – which is still a gyratory system. Two small streets remain, cutting through the scheme but otherwise the spaces created are gated and only public at the discretion of the proprietors. These are supervised and regulated spaces for consumption and the writer has seen visitors being ejected by security staff. The detail is a mix of authentic (but sand-blasted) industrial building and *faux* or repro industrial building, decorated with the occasional cog wheel, as it might be an anchor at the seaside or a crane in Docklands. However the scheme is regarded as substantially a victory by conservationists and those campaigning for housing and for car-free development.

Fig 11.5 / 6: Internal views in Regent Quarter. Photos by Michael Edwards

The other main development now completed at King's Cross is King's Place, further up York Way and filling the space between the street and the Battlebridge Basin of the canal. This is the site which, in the 1980s, the GLC had developed for light industry (printing) in single-storey brick sheds and for a pub with a popular canalside terrace. It was acquired by Peter Millican's Parabola Land which sought and obtained permission to devop it for the most unusual combination of offices and concert halls. It has bars and cafes on the canal side, enclosing perfomance and rehearsal spaces which are the home of a number of orchestras. All of this is surmounted (and paid for) by 28,000m2 of offices on seven floors (half pre-let to *The Guardian*) in a design by Dixon Jones which has attracted accolades. In terms of power relations and bargaining, the developer here secured his permission in recognition of the cultural contribution of the orchestras, including outreach work they are contracted to do in neighbouring schools. This was the substance of the S106 agreement, in contrast to the social housing or other community benefits which would have been more normal in this area.

Plate 11.7 King's Place: the Regent's Canal and Battlebridge Basin surround the building on two sides; York Way runs along the western side, separating this development from King's Cross Central beyond. Photo Michael Edwards.

Plate 11.8 King's Place: terrace on the canal, looking westwards. Photo Michael Edwards.

There is some dispute among local activists and politicians about the height of the building. One story is that the developer secured greater height in the building than would normally have been permitted alongside the canal under the development plan. Others, however, contend that the building would have been even higher had it not been for effective lobbying by local conservation groups. Whatever the truth on that point, however, the building is important for its great mass, casting its shadow over the canal and, in winter, adjoining gardens and flats. Since it gained permission before Argent's proposals for a wall of offices overshadowing the canal were decided, King's Place was regarded as establishing a new de-facto benchmark. This episode is an example of process we have been seeing a lot in the last decade: that the presumption in favour of higher densities—one of UTF's strongest nostrums—works through the ratcheting-up of building heights in this way. Once a new eaves line is established, owners of neighbouring sites can follow.

Regent Quarter and King's Place are the largest of the pilot fish nosing up to the big fish of the King's Cross Central development. But there are many smaller ones, notably to the south east along the Fleet valley where a jumble of nineteenth century workshops, factories, stables and dwellings is being converted piecemeal to new and luxurious uses. A stable becomes a wine bar; a factory becomes the London outpost of New York art dealer Gagosian; various architects convert warehouses as their offices and so on. This process displaces the old economy of printers, trade unions, campaign groups and charities, including the birthplaces of Time Out and the Big Issue. The peace movement and Housmans bookshop remain only because they are stalwart owners of their freehold and not for sale. So the process we see in these areas is a simple market process of upscale activity replacing downscale activity.

Finally we consider the big fish: King's Cross Central

In the same year as Ken Livingstone's inauguration LCR appointed as developers Argent plc, an unusual development company which had made its name with an award-winning scheme of corporate offices and mixed uses at Brindleyplace in central Birmingham (Latham and Swenarton 1999). Argent were in turn partnering with St George, a housebuilding firm, part of the Berkeley Homes group, but St George withdrew in 2004 as part of a far-sighted reduction in their portfolio of London projects.

Since the land Argent was to develop would not become available for building until the CTRL construction was completed in 2007, the company had six years or so in which to devise its scheme and deal with local authorities, community groups and so on. This time was filled by the production of a series of Argent documents, alternating with Camden's production of a draft and then (with Islington) a final Planning Brief (London Boroughs of Camden and Islington 2004) for the site, now re-named King's Cross Central by the developers.

The Argent scheme, which now has outline permission and started on site in late 2008, can be described as a predominantly-office mixed-use development of 26 hectares. The permisssion is innovative in that it allows the developer roughly 20% flexibility to vary the mix of uses within the total 713,000 m2 floorspace permitted (Fig 11.4)

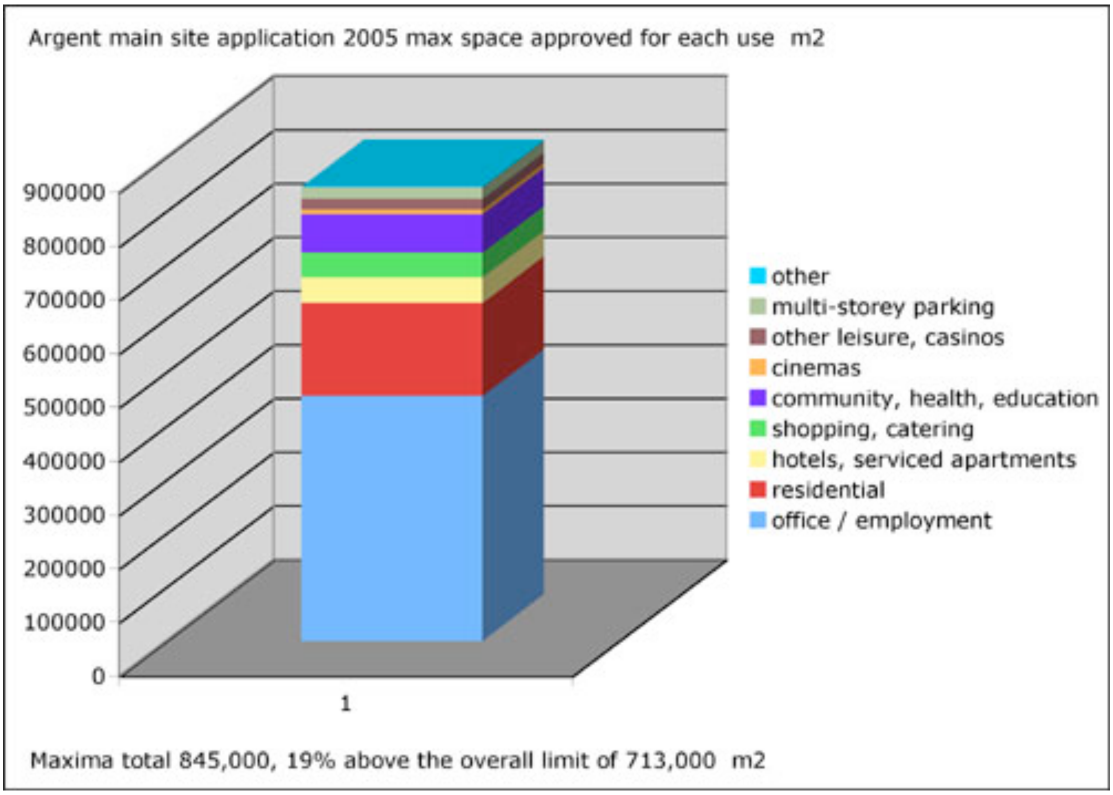

Figure 11.4 Argent King's Cross Central Development: floorspace by use. The maximum permitted floorspace is about 20% less than the sum of the maxima for the indivdual uses, giving flexibility to the developer. Notes: (i) these figures exclude a small part of the site (the 'triangle' of 1.1 ha) situated partly in Islington and proposed for housing. (ii) Author's computation from data in the planning application.

The site slopes upwards from the Euston Road in the south to the Regent's Canal and then is relatively flat as far as its boundaries: a railway embankment in the north and York Way in the east. Roughly the southern half of the site was densely occupied with the structures of the massive transport hub which grew here from 1800 until about 1930: canal, gas works and gas holders, railways, storage and interchange buildings for rail / cart / boat movement, stables, offices and so on. It was a very distinctive ensemble including some historically important early workers' housing blocks and has been brilliantly documented by Angela Inglis (Inglis 2007). Much of the ensemble has been lost but fragments are retained and re-used, notably the Granary and adjoining buildings which have been pre-let to the University of the Arts. But south of the canal, where the market incentive on Argent is to maximise the quantity of office space and retailing, the whole ensemble has been swept away except for one retained gem of a building, the German Gymnasium and—after much haggling with English Heritage—one of the three blocks of Stanley Buildings, innovative workers' housing of 1864/5.

Plate 11.9 King's Cross Central. Illustrative model of the outline scheme, southern part, in white. The King's Cross station throat is in the left foreground, St Pancras in the background. To the right, across the Regent's Canal, is the Granary complex, to become the University of the Arts. Photo Michael Edwards.

The wedge-shaped space between the two train sheds is planned to be filled by predominantly wedge-shaped office buildings, climbing to their maximum height at their northern (canal) end. with new streets running through between them. There is no attempt to link eastwards by reinstating the line of Battlebridge Road to re-connect with the Islington street grid and the decision not to do this (alongside Railtrack's reluctance to pay for a bridge) remains a matter of intense local protest. Camden officers refused to insist on this link being made and, at the relevant planning committee meeting, a Camden officer said 'this is not in anyone's business interest so I don't see it happening'. He appeared to have forgotten that a role of the planning system is precisely to insist on elements of the public interest where private commercial interest may not meet these needs.

North of the canal the University of the Arts, occupying the Granary complex, will front onto the former canal basin, to be laid out as a large public square, linked with small shops and cafes in the arches below the 'coal drops' and then a grid of new streets laid out across the rest of the land with mixed use buildings. From a design point of view this looks as though it will turn out to be rather 'normal' urban landscape. Its main problem will be in configuration because it is cut off in a broad arc on the north and west by the impenetrable CTRL embankment, to be separated from the development site by a wall of buildings: housing, a CHP plant and a multi-storey car park (mysteriously not sited on the main road but well into the back of the scheme). It may prove hard to make the shops and services work well in this situation.

Plate 11.10 King's Cross Central. Illustrative model of the outline scheme, northern part, looking west. In the left foreground is the Granary complex, to become the University of the Arts. The large block to its right is the building now largely let to Sainsbury's. Between them Goods Street runs as far as the CTRL embankment which bounds the scheme in the distance. Some of the gas holders, displaced by the CTRL, are shown re-located by the canal in the distance. Photo Michael Edwards.

All these judgements about design at King's Cross Central must be very provisional because the scheme only has outline permission and many changes may be made as detailed designs come forward over 10-20 years. In my view the major issues surrounding the Argent development relate to its composition and to the ownership and process issues.

Conclusions

The composition of the Argent scheme, particularly its limited provision of affordable social housing to rent and its strong provision of corporate office space, has been the main source of conflict. It is a type of conflict which the London planning system and policy handles badly. Regeneration is not seen as primarily a process serving the low- and middle-income people in whose name regneration policy was developed: rather it is seen, in line with the hegemonic discourse summarised earlier, as essentially a business activity aimed at growth and competiveness. Within it, some concessions have to be made to low- and middle-income groups but that is all they are. The issue is particularly fraught in localities which are already subject to strong gentrification forces (e.g. with private rents perhaps 5-10 times the level of council rents) because only massive expansion of social housing could innoculate the area against the pressures. It is an acute conflict of use values and exchange values, social need versus commodification.

Ownership and process issues have been the other main focus of dispute. Ownership is an issue in the sense that there has been no attempt by the authorities to transfer legal or effective ownership of any of the nationally-owned land or buildings to collective or municipal control, using land trusts or other mechanisms such as the Coin Street development at Waterloo (Brindley 2000). More generally, the local communities have felt disenfranchised in the decision process, notwithstanding extensive 'consultation'. Both Argent and Camden have prided themselves upon their extensive and innovative programmes of consultation and have won awards for their efforts. Those who remain dissatisfied are essentially reflecting their lack of influence in the consultation process: they are endlessly listened to but have no detectable power to determine the outcome. And it should be added that these feelings of frustration are shared, not only by low- and middle-income residents but by back-bench local councillors who tend to be marginalised in our 'reformed' local councils.

There is perhaps one element in all this which can be chalked up as a victory for local community demands: Camden has insisted that the new streets being created as part of the Argent development will be adopted as public highways and thus subject to normal police powers, rather than private security patrols.

Finally I return to the main issue of this book, the Urban Task Force. The developments completed and under way at King's Cross are the outcome of multiple influences and the UTF is probably not a major one. However we can observe in the new buildings, streets and squares all the strengths and weaknesses of the Task Force's approach. On the positive side we see a strong affirmation of stylish urban settings, lots of careful design and very strong market demand for premises. On the negative side we see few defences against gentrification, few youth clubs or non-commodity meeting places and a very private sort of environment. When we see who can afford to live or do business here in a decade from now we shall surely find a much less socially mixed set of people.

The re-thinking of neo-liberal assumptions has started at the level of international and national financial regulation but has yet to reach those involved in local development. The structures of economic relationships, political alignments and professional ideas have become overwhelmingly set in a neo-liberal mould in the last decade or so. The professionals, politicians and others who could have been active agents in challenging them have failed to do so – yet.

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