

FROM TOP: Coal Drops Yard in King's Cross was developed from a former railway building and designed by Heatherwick Studio; the view from inside the 'kissing point' which will soon contain a Samsung store



LONDON REBOOTED

Enlightened landowners, visionary developers and smart architects have transformed the capital's forgotten corners. **Christopher Silvester** reports

Two major 20-year regeneration plans for London are now bearing fruit. Argent's transformation of King's Cross, begun in 2000, has seen the opening of Coal Drops Yard, the centrepiece and emotional heart of a much wider development project, while London's biggest landlords are seeking to transform slightly neglected areas through a series of more subtle neighbourhood reboots.

When Argent made their bid to become the developer of King's Cross, they published a book called *Principles for a Human City*, which outlined their vision for a 20-year regeneration programme that would encompass

67 acres, of land and 50,000 people working in eight million square feet of buildings. 'This is the equivalent of a town arriving in central London,' declares Craig White, Argent's senior project director.

No fewer than 24 keynote architects were hired for the King's Cross master plan. The first phase entailed seven years of investment in infrastructure, most below street level. All the hardware of a smart city is located three storeys underground. Just take St Pancras Square, which will be home to 16,000 workers when the new Google HQ is finished. The buildings don't have basements. Instead, the entire square has one enormous basement into which lorries bring all the supplies and remove all the waste.





‘Sustainability is the key to King’s Cross,’ says White, whose previous job, at the Crown Estate, was retail asset manager for Regent Street and St James.

Coal Drops Yard, designed by architect Thomas Heatherwick, opened last year. ‘It’s a building that is the length of locomotives,’ says White. ‘It was a three-storey processing plant for coal: the locomotives came in at the top level, dropped coal into hoppers at the mezzanine level, which in turn delivered coal to the carts that were drawn by horses to households and businesses around London. To take two long buildings, very difficult spaces, and convert them into 65 retail spaces – to connect them, make the circulation vertical and lateral, and provide some kind of shelter – that was a very real challenge.’ The result is a thing of beauty. Heatherwick’s sinuous roofs join together like two puckered lips, kissing.

The real spirit and ethos of Coal Drops Yard, White explains, is built around the story of the shopkeeper. ‘We created values which have guided us. A lot of London estates have values and they put them on the wall in their office, but our values were threaded through conversations. We were not going to dictate rules.’

Those values are: enrich, delight, unite. This meant they were only going to work with brands that could produce an enriching environment. Delight is about art, creativity, seasonality, visual merchandising and fun, while unite means bringing together the digital and the physical, and bringing communities together using shops. ‘A welcoming attitude,’ emphasises White. ‘No elitism.’

White and his team thought of the retail icons that inspired them and the places they enjoyed visiting, such as Japan, the seaboards of America, Scandinavia, Milan,



St Marks Grade I-listed church in North Mayfair will be a restaurant, retail and community space

and Paris. ‘Then we layered in the sensorial, then we layered in time, we thought about what you want to do through the day, at different times of day. That was our approach to retail. We mashed it all up. We met 1,200 brands in three years. We travelled, went to trade shows. Every single brand was hand-picked, from Nike to the smallest retailer or food outlet.’

White points to Spiritland, which is ten things in one, as the embodiment of Argent’s values. Although a traditional retail space in planning terms, it is also so much more. When you walk in there is a DJ deck station not only telling a story about high-fidelity and vinyl but also a digital platform you can download, there is some retail space for magazines, a stage/event area, a shop for handmade speakers from Nottingham by Living Voice, where you can listen to a professional-grade sound system. Next to that there is a recording studio, a production and broadcast studio, a kitchen, a coffee bar, a cocktail bar, and a retail space with digital and analogue stuff. The Beach Boys launched their remastered album there last year.

With London’s population expected to exceed ten million by 2036, Grosvenor Group recognises the need to relieve pressures on certain parts of its prime real estate in London’s West End. ‘This strategy will see our estate in Mayfair and Belgravia in the West End become more active, more popular, more integrated and greener, working harder for the city,’ says Tor Burrows, director of placemaking for Grosvenor Britain & Ireland. ‘In the next ten years, Grosvenor will invest £1bn, to grow and sustain better destinations in the heart of the West End, with new, improved office and retail space and better streets.’

Once the Elizabeth line finally opens, pressure on the West End is likely to grow yet further. ‘A transformed street is a necessary condition for the West End’s success, but it is not sufficient,’ says Burrows. ‘We need a transformed district with better amenities, less traffic, more enterprise, leisure and culture.’

One such district is North Mayfair, the gateway to Grosvenor’s Mayfair estate from Oxford Street, which has the capacity to offer innovative retail and cultural experiences, improved amenities and a convivial atmosphere. Grosvenor has also reclaimed (from the government) the management of historic Grosvenor Square, which happens to be London’s second largest



Eccleston Yards was developed on unused land near Victoria and is now a hub of creative enterprise, where you can find Barry's Bootcamp and meditation studio Re:Mind (below)



garden square, and they see this as a remarkable opportunity to redefine and improve its civic, aesthetic and cultural contribution to the capital.

'We've opened ourselves up to public opinion, polled one thousand Londoners and launched an international call for ideas,' Burrows explains. 'The call was warmly received and inspired young and experienced practitioners, across many disciplines, to submit over 160 ideas from over 15 countries. The best ideas, overseen by an independent panel of experts chaired by Yana Peel, CEO of the Serpentine Galleries, will shape our plans next year in preparation for delivering a new square.'

Already, the North Mayfair patch is changing. Barbour, the heritage and lifestyle brand, has expanded its footprint with the renewal of a long-term lease and a significant increase in the size of its store at 56 Duke Street. Independent retailer Penelope Chilvers was delighted to take up residence at 69 Duke Street, 'as it was where Yoko Ono met John Lennon. So it's a particularly special space with a very rich history.'

Meanwhile, newly-opened artisan bakery Popina has joined Comptoir Café & Wine and Deliciously Ella, adding to the evolution of North Mayfair as an exciting destination for retail and dining. And Leica Camera's new flagship store on Duke Street is home to the first Leica Gallery UK, which will provide a more immersive, hands-on, consumer experience.

Grosvenor has completed the £5m restoration of Grade I-listed St Mark's Church, set to become a new home for the popular food market Mercato Metropolitano. St Mark's reopening to the public, after decades of private usage, is an announcement that has

already begun to change perceptions of Mayfair for Londoners and tourists alike. It will become a retail and dining destination with an inclusive space dedicated to educational and social activities benefiting the local community.

At the other end of the Grosvenor Estate is an area of underused land on the boundaries of Victoria and Belgravia, which now houses Eccleston Yards. Previously inaccessible to the public, with the fabric of its buildings in disrepair, this area has been transformed into a hub for creative enterprise and co-working, around a new public square, offering greater diversity of experience to the local community as well as to its daily population of workers and visitors.

'We launched Eccleston Yards last year,' says Burrows. 'Joining Central Working, the shared workspace provider for over 500 entrepreneurs, we welcomed fitness phenomenon Barry's Bootcamp's new site; Re:Mind, London's first drop-in meditation studio; SMUK, a Scandinavian eco-friendly beauty salon; 50M, a world-first affordable retail space for rental by the metre, sponsored by Grosvenor; and Tailor Made, bespoke suits created using 3D body-scanning technology. Alongside these are Jones Family Kitchen, the new restaurant by the team behind Jones Family Project in Shoreditch, and Wild by Tart, which opened a juice and coffee bar ahead of its flagship restaurant, café, event space and photography studio, launching this year.'

Eccleston Yards has also hosted several pop-ups, including Bella Buchanan's summer sale of pre-loved designer fashion, men's footwear label Duke & Dexter, and Paradise Now, a free urban outdoor spa created by Bompas & Parr, which claimed to supercharge visitors in 30 minutes.

On a smaller scale, Chelsea's Pavilion Road has also recently undergone a striking transformation, from a neglected service/storage yard with a handful of mews properties into a thriving 'village' just off Sloane Square. Cadogan Estates undertook the project to create a new destination for independent, artisan traders following a consultation with the local community. 'Despite the rise of online retail, we see a continued demand for bricks and mortar stores,' says Hugh Seaborn, Cadogan chief executive. 'Pavilion Road shows how physical retail can still thrive through specialist knowledge and creativity, and strengthen the sense of community – Pavilion Road has become a real village hub in central London.'



Insta dog star Amelia the Cav enjoys a run down Pavilion Road

the carefully selected artisan food, beauty and fashion retailers this summer.

Regeneration projects like these may be on different scales, but they all demonstrate an ambition to marry a storied past with a bright technological future. ■