

The History and Experience of Urban Regeneration in the UK

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History, Purpose, and the Evolution of Policies

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The consistent preface for the UK's renewal, growth, transformation, planning, renaissance, sustainability, deindustrialisation, and regeneration for the past 70 years is urban. Urban introduces the palette of assorted brands and remains at the core of the political spectrum's uplifting chant for election, encouraging economic prosperity, employment growth and heartening prospects for living and working in revitalised safe neighbourhoods. Today's Mayoral Development Corporations represent the latest iteration of the same brand admittedly without the magic word!

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However, the climate change emergency is driving the prerequisite for the independently validated and legally enforceable delivery of net zero carbon built environments, where these imminent regenerations regardless of where, are likely to be taken through the planning process positively, if they are powered through sustainable sources and deliver positive social value augmented as being acceptable by surrounding communities.

1945-1960

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What is clear to us today, is that in 1945 we were in a significantly more impoverished environment with a distinct set of immediate priorities, none of which come close to today's climate emergency but were none the less urgent. Alarming 70 years on, a number of the choices made in the aftermath of World War II are likely to require more immediate regeneration today than initially thought necessary such as the correctly perceived need to expedite urban delivery to cope with the 8% expansion of the UK's population 1960- 2020.

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Post second World War urban renewal was public sector driven and primarily concerned with the large-scale redevelopment of City centre slums. (Couch 1990) To support the UK's 76 cities urban renewal requirements, The New Towns Act 1946 funded principally by the State, delivered thirty-two new towns with populations upwards of 50,000 each across the UK in the 1950's and sixty's, eight of which were established as satellite towns in and around London. This period represented the most significant amplification of the UK's capital in its history.

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While the new towns offered affordable choice and personal inspiration to join and provide for new communities in greener pastures, the scale of interdependent infrastructure principally paid homage to the car with limited deference to rail. Although this was unlike what was finally to come, the wait for conjoined major urban regeneration supported by simultaneous upscaled or new infrastructure would be a further 40 years.



2000-2010

The first decade of the new millennium saw the arrival of digitalised data underpinning urban task forces (UTF's) strategy to deliver major inner-city regeneration. One such exemplar, 15 years on from the scheme's opening in 2008, would be Liverpool ONE. Fabricated into the City after 7 years of planning, Liverpool ONE represents the first mixed use development of scale to be privately funded, outwardly bold and ambitious, yet resolutely anxious to be ad idem with the local community's wishes and inputs from inception. The city became the European Capital of Culture the year Liverpool ONE opened.

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2010-present

In 2011, the Localism Act permitted the Mayor of London to create mayoral corporations in Greater London, the most notable being the London Legacy Development Corporation, becoming the local planning authority for the 200-hectare landholding, now known as Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, Stratford in 2012.

Successful regeneration is notably inspired by cities winning bids for international sporting events. The opportune precedent set by the City of Manchester delivering the widely acclaimed Commonwealth Games in 2002, set up London's bid for the summer Olympics to be held at Stratford, recognised as one of London's most neglected post war neighbourhoods, left largely fallow and in need of significant remediation subsequent to the closure of the London Docks in the 1960's.

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Ingredients for success – why did Stratford work?

From selection as the chosen city in July 2005, The London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games had 7 years to bring the lands into single ownership, remediate the land, finalise the masterplan, obtain planning consent, procure, develop, construct and service the stadia and athletes villages prior to the Olympics opening on July 27th 2012. Supported by £9.3bn of government funding, the games were an unequalled success internationally, and their regenerative resonance is still ringing in the changes across East London as evidenced with the introduction of 5 new satellite neighbourhoods of housing and amenities.

What made Stratford's delivery the most widely accepted exemplar for regeneration in Europe this century? Not simply the scheme's prompt delivery, not team GB's triumphant record winning medals table or the subsequent success of the active legacy which continues to positively encourage the expansion of the local community. No, none of the above. Intentionally or otherwise the chronological construction of core infrastructure incrementally servicing East London centring on Stratford, was already incontrovertibly advancing.

- Construction of HS1, the high-speed link to the European mainland commenced in October 1998.
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- The fleet of 140mph Javelin high speed trains were ordered for the London St Pancras to Ashford route in June 2005 servicing Stratford (one month prior to the Olympic Committee's decision)
 - HS1 opened November 2007
 - The restored St Pancras Station opened November 2007
 - Network Rail's plans for the restoration of King's Cross Station were approved by Camden Council in December 2007
 - The High-Speed Javelin link to Stratford (9 minutes) opened in December 2009
 - Stratford International station opened in August 2011

- The Docklands Light Railway (DLR) extension to Stratford International opened in September 2011
- The largest urban shopping centre in the UK by land area, Westfield Stratford opened in October 2011

The restored King's Cross Station opened in March 2012

Beyond simply servicing twenty million spectators attending the London Olympics and Paralympics over twenty-seven unique days of international competition, this mostly unperceived and under acknowledged mass alignment of regenerative infrastructure secured and future proofed London's global status, more tightly binding together East and West London.



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Regeneration- is there such a thing as failure?

People express their views on regenerative failure at a moment's notice, constructively or destructively through social media. Sometimes this is supported by Chat GPT which can build out of the ether, the perfect regenerative neighbourhood anywhere with accompanying illustrations and 5D BIM drawings in 30 minutes.

The grounded answer as to what constitutes failure for any mixed-use urban regeneration project, depends at what stage in the scheme's evolution any stakeholder or voyeur wishes to make their adjudication. The following two case studies serve to illustrate how the challenge of delivering near derelict brownfield sites can successfully progress when driven by dedicated long term private/public leadership who undistracted by slings and arrows stage left, have this rare mindset to deliver outstanding new places.

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Battersea Power Station Failure 1983-2022

Battersea Power Station on the Southbank of the Thames in London, closed in the summer of 1983. After many failed attempts to attract JV partners to take forward the development, with increasingly angry rhetoric on non-performance from central and local government, administrators were called in, in 2012 as this icon, the largest brick building (listed Grade II) to be built in Europe, fell into ruin and towards bankruptcy in 2014.

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Battersea Power Station Success 2022-onwards

What a difference less than a decade makes. Opening post Covid in October 2022, Battersea Power Station recorded eleven million visitors to the 140 shops, bars, leisure facilities, restaurants and parks in 2023. With 1,600 flats occupied Battersea also has the world's largest company by market capitalisation in 2023, Apple Inc., as the scheme's signature office tenant.

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The prior failure to come to an agreement on the delivery of new up-front infrastructure to service Battersea Power Station was once more the difference between the perception of success and failure up to 2014. The Northern Line tube extension's delivery funded in significant part by the power station's new Malaysian owners, represented the first extension on the London underground for over 20 years. In 2023 because of demand, Transport for London have doubled on and off-peak capacity to accommodate 80,000 trips per week.



King's Cross failure 1960-2000

Unlike Battersea; in the 1980's King's Cross formerly known as The Railway Lands (in between King's Cross and St Pancras stations), had both an abundance of surrounding transport infrastructure as well as a wide selection of retained goods sheds, railway tracks, goods yards, sidings, and railway transit sheds. Knitting a number of these buildings into the fabric of a new masterplan subsequently served to preserve the living memory of the site's industrial past as of course has the listed power station done so admirably at Battersea. However despite the abundance of sustainable infrastructure on the doorstep, and rumours of a High Speed train to Europe commencing at St Pancras in the late '80's, private developers and their various masterplans for the King's Cross Railway Lands, came and went while some attempting to deliver in part without reference to other interests also failed to gain any notable traction.

While crime, unemployment, and a poor-quality environment personified King's Cross over this period the resolution of the London Borough of Camden to bring these lands forward as a conjoined master regeneration proposition for London remained undimmed.

King's Cross Success 2000- onwards

King's Cross today represents central London's largest regeneration scheme, 23 years after Argent won the bid to become the developer at the turn of the century. Transformational success for a site that was a peripheral unloved and inaccessible location, considered irretrievably secondary is now accepted as an integrated new central location for the capital. Independent corroboration helps; "Restoring 20 buildings and structures has led to King's Cross being named one of England's best heritage led developments". (English Heritage 1916).

In terms of the repercussive social and economic value effects generated by King's Cross Regeneris independent report published 17 years into the scheme's delivery confirmed.

- Fifty percent increase in jobs in local area over 5 years (compared to London average of +18%)
- A sixty five percent increase in 'knowledge' employment in local area over 5 years (compared to London average of 22%)
- Employees on site generate 850 jobs in wider local area, with an additional GVA pf £48m pa.

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The Future of Urban Renewal and Climate Change

In the urban regeneration "industry" these case studies highlight how time heals and delivers renewed local economies providing cities with their own unique identities. While planning retains the heritage of neighbourhoods as born out at King's Cross, it also encourages their competitive evolution. Liverpool ONE certainly returned the buzz of urban culture to an unloved neighbourhood.

Are these schemes exemplars of carbon net zero delivery? Not yet but they are rail hub led schemes encouraging sustainable living and cutting unnecessary commuting. They are thinking beyond their boundaries, empowering local communities with the ability to constructively reimagine future urban transformations directly with the owners.

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In terms of the future, while the impact of changes made by The Leasehold Reform Bill 2022 effectively ending the compulsory payment of ground rents have yet to be seen; as more leaseholders have the capability of extending their own leases, buying in their freeholds, and taking over the management of their buildings so the significance of up front public/private sector partnerships are going to become more pronounced and productive than they have ever been to date. The most well-armed partnership since the second world war to confront climate change