

Heritage-led regeneration in the UK

Preserving historic values or masking commodification? A reflection on the case of King's Cross, London

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HERITAGE-LED REGENERATION IN THE UK – PRESERVING HISTORIC VALUES OR MASKING COMMODIFICATION? A REFLECTION ON THE CASE OF KING’S CROSS, LONDON

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Since the early 1990’s heritage-led regeneration has progressively become an important strategy for the revitalisation of urban areas. This revitalisation though, albeit its positive financial outcome, is not without side-effects, especially when carried out by commercial developers in the established socio-economic system. This paper explores how heritage-led regeneration fits in the 21st century plans for the physical, social and economic restructuring of post-industrial historic megacities, like London. Drawing from the King’s Cross case, a contemporary project with high heritage significance described as the biggest European inner city redevelopment, the paper will highlight the gains and losses of the process, in terms of heritage preservation and resilience of historic, spatial and social values. The analysis of the background, decision-making process and product of the King’s Cross scheme will inform the study’s conclusion. Finally, it will be argued that historic considerations play a subordinate role in the formation of heritage-led regeneration strategy. Its impact is intertwined with the priorities of the established political and economic system, which control predicaments between financial growth and social sustainability. This study complements previous findings and contributes additional evidence on the evolving discourse on the nuanced effects of urban regeneration while informing future practice on similar cases.

Keywords

Heritage-led regeneration, King’s Cross, industrial heritage, urban regeneration, London

How to Cite

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INTRODUCTION

The rise and fall of industrialisation brought major upheavals on European historic cities, leaving many of them in the late 1970's in a state of despair. Since then major shifts in terms of global economy and governance have taken place. The 21st century has seen the consolidation of capitalism as the dominant economic system.¹ Present economy is characterised by strong influence of the financial sector, capital accumulation as well as liberalisation of financial flows and investment.² Furthermore, a notable power transition from the state to market forces has taken place.³

Along with these shifts, also the urban realm of cities worldwide has been in a state of transition. A common strategy employed for this transition is known as 'urban regeneration'. The arguments in favour of urban regeneration revolve around its physical, social and economic merits. However, a large body of literature⁴ draws attention to '*the dark side of regeneration*'.⁵ It is suggested that the social and economic restructuring caused by urban regeneration schemes has a distinct class dimension, causing in turn displacement and marginalisation of the underprivileged. Moreover, it is indicated that such schemes are based on the commodification of cultural symbols including historic assets.⁶

Early applications of urban regeneration involved large scale demolitions. Common victims of such practices were the disused industrial relics. The rising appreciation of Industrial heritage though in combination with changing perceptions about historic preservation have led since the 1990s to a more sympathetic approach, called Heritage-led Regeneration (HLR). Preite⁷ describes HLR as a new planning mode, inspired by the principles of sustainability and urban heritage enhancement, with 'interactive planning' and a 'pluralistic decision making process' being its basic features.

As Harvey⁸ argues, there is a strong connection between political and economic developments and spatial production. Thus the process of HLR, which is the subject of this research, cannot be examined isolated from the current socio-economic background. This paper will explore how HLR fits in the 21st century plans for physical, social and economic restructuring of post-industrial historic megacities, like London. Drawing from the case of King's Cross, which has been described as the biggest European inner city redevelopment,⁹ this research will reflect on the gains and losses of the process, in terms of heritage preservation and resilience of historic, spatial and social values.

This research, positioned at the crossroads of space sociology and heritage conservation field, aspires to contribute to the evolving discourse for a future social-inclusive, sustainable development of our historic cities.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is the product of a mixed method research approach including an extensive literature review, qualitative and field research. First, a literature review was conducted on the issues of urban regeneration and industrial heritage safeguarding. The existing research base on King's Cross' historic development was reviewed. Further research covered relevant newspapers articles, as well as an on-line review of the main stakeholders' websites and publications.

The second method used involved a round of face to face interviews with stakeholders in the regeneration of King's Cross. The respondents represent a diverse stakeholders base including: Argent developers, Association for Industrial Archaeology (AIA), King's Cross Conservation Advisory Committee (KXCAAC), tenants and users of the transformed Granary complex. Finally, a field trip was undertaken in July 2015, in order to experience the location first-hand, collect updated evidence and the photographic material presented on this paper.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

KING'S CROSS - INDUSTRIAL 'CYCLOPEAN ARCHES' ¹⁰

King's Cross echoes the most important stages of London's history since the early Victorian era. Arguably, it is a venue where history has always been expressed in the most bold way. King's Cross' urban and social fabric narrates the divergent realities of the prosperous era of industrialisation and the succeeding deindustrialisation period of withering.

The area of King's Cross is located at the north fringe of central London, in the borough of Camden. (Figure 1) Initially a rural zone, King's Cross started to develop after 1756. The construction of the Regent's canal in 1820, and the establishment of Pancras Gasworks in 1824 gave the area the impetus for its transformation into an industrial landscape.

Being London's 'laboratory' of industrialisation, King's Cross quickly embraced railway, the new symbol of revolution. In 1846, the Great Northern Railway (GNR) purchased a vast part of the area, building a grandiose transport and goods-handling complex, many parts of which were designed by the architect Lewis Cubitt.¹¹

The following decades saw both the industrial and the residential expansion of King's Cross area. Important industrial developments involved the Metropolitan Railway (1860s), the erection of St Pancras station (1868) and the extension of Pancras Gasworks (1880s and 1900s). The residential developments included mainly poor quality housing for industrial workers.

By the end of the 19th century King's Cross fully embodied the bilateral nature of industrialisation. Its built environment, dominated by imposing architectural and engineering advances, was testifying for the capital's economic power. Its social profile however, was revealing a much less memorable reality; a reality of poverty, social deprivation and slum living.

During the first part of the 20th century the area retained its mixed character with emphasis on the industrial activity. Minor developments were added to the existing urban tissue without altering however its Victorian setup. King's Cross, started declining after World War II. Gradually the roaring industrial hub hushed, paving the way to the era of deindustrialisation.¹²

'DEAD AND WOUNDED' AT KING'S CROSS¹³

From the 1970s to the 1990s the area epitomised the essence of the British urban deindustrialisation period. King's Cross, stigmatised as 'London's red light district'¹⁴, was notorious for drug-dealing, prostitution and street robbery.¹⁵ Its population consisted of working class, council tenants and squatters. The photographer Mark Cawson, who lived at King's Cross in the 1980s, notes:

*"There were gangsters, pimps, bikers, working girls and red light flats, but functional families too. Artists, alternative sorts, junkies, dealers; it was just a crazy mix."*¹⁶

The tarnished social character and low financial status of the area did not only have negative implications. King's Cross, became a field of artistic expression, influencing alternative culture forms. Furthermore, its industrial legacy managed to remain hidden under the veil of its notorious reputation; protected from ambitious investors' plans, it escaped the bulldozer. The significance of the area's historic built environment is highlighted by Robert Carr,¹⁷ member of the Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society:

"The area to the north of King's Cross and St Pancras Stations was generally regarded as the best in London for industrial archaeology..."



FIGURE 1 King's Cross position in the fringe of central London.

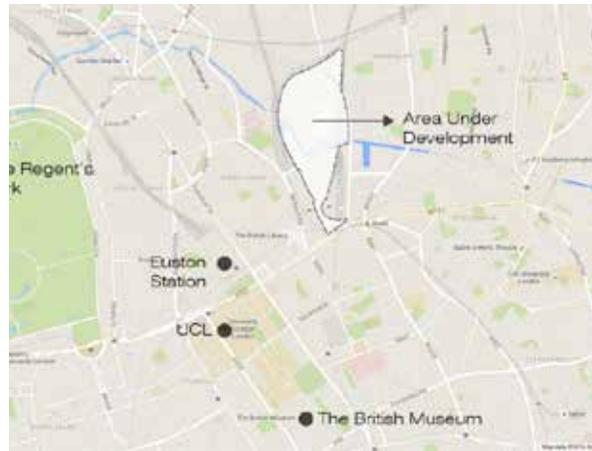


FIGURE 2 The area under development in relation with landmarks of the district.

KING'S CROSS - TURNING PAGE

The current redevelopment plan of the area was not created in a vacuum. Numerous studies¹⁸ explain in detail the successive planning proposals developed and recanted since the late 1980s, setting the scene for the present situation. The following paragraphs summarise the main incidents that took place from 1987 until 2007.

The first application for planning permission at King's Cross was submitted in 1989. The cornerstone of the plan, led by the London Regeneration Consortium (LRC), was the terminal station for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL). Bearing the signature of architect Sir Norman Foster, the scheme had strong corporate office emphasis and entailed extensive demolitions. Strongly opposing to the developers' aspirations, the King's Cross Railway Lands Group (KXRLG)¹⁹, in collaboration with other local stakeholders campaigned against the LRC proposal. It is worth mentioning that the KXRLG was not simply a source of criticism but offered alternative planning applications. Finally, due to several reasons with the crash of property market being the most important, LRC's scheme was abandoned in 1992.²⁰

The late 1990s saw London recovering from the recession and marching towards its future as the world's leading financial centre. In a climate of investment fever, older schemes including the CTRL, resurfaced. In turn, pressures for the area's redevelopment re-emerged, backed this time by national and local policies. Three features are singled out as the most prominent developments of that period.²¹

First, in 1996 a new alignment of the CTRL was adopted by the government. LCR, a private consortium, won the bid for the construction and operation of the work. The consortium was granted a £5.7 billion government subsidy in the form of fixed assets along with the right to develop them for profit.²² This political choice would create high aspirations for the project's returns. In 2007, the renovated St Pancras station, opened its doors as the terminal station of the CTRL.

Second, from 1996 to 2003 the government financed the 'King's Cross Partnership', comprised by the railway companies, the Camden and Islington Councils and a small part of the local 'community' in a subordinate role. The partnership played mainly the role of the image-maker for the area, launching a programme of small scale street face-lifting along with a rebranding campaign, to cast away King's Cross notorious profile. Its action was combined with, a heavy investment of £37m in CCTV.²³

Third, a number of developments in the immediate surroundings of the area were realised in the turn of the century. The two most prominent include the Regent Quarter and King's Place. These projects, along with a variety of smaller ones, prepared the ground for the new development. According to Young et al. ²⁴:

“Regeneration and social control initiatives have altered the social landscape of King's Cross. From being an area notorious for sex, drugs and crime and the blighted dilapidation of its physical space, King's Cross has slowly begun to gentrify”.

Summing up, the current project landed in an area with a history of two centuries. The physical environment of King's Cross was still largely dominated by the industrial era's wonders, while selected points had been renovated, contributing to the creation of its new image. Socially, albeit still stigmatised from its past 'reputation' and the poverty of its inhabitants, the first signs of transition had become apparent. The 'undesirable elements'²⁵ had been chased away from the streets, starting to be replaced by 'desirable' middle class people. Another important characteristic of King's Cross at the time was the presence of an active local population resisting to fickle and speculative schemes.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

KING'S CROSS - 'THE PLACE TO BE' ²⁶

The successive described developments, along with persisting pressures for investment in the London flourishing market, created favourable conditions for the approval of a large-scale scheme in the area. The plan, branded as King's Cross Central (KCC), involved a long period of preparations, before granted planning permission in 2006.

Argent Group Plc was selected in 2001 by the landowners LCR and DHL as developing partner. The development phase finally started in 2008 and its completion is expected by 2020. The King's Cross Central Limited Partnership (KCCLP),²⁷ is developing the area marked on Figure 2. According to the KCCLP, their plan is based on two characteristics: flexibility and consultation. Specifically, the flexibility refers to the developers' permission to build 'up to' a certain number of square meters, while remaining free to select most of the uses themselves. On the other hand, consultation with the local community, government and other stakeholders is promoted as the main formative feature of their masterplan.

The area under development covers 67 acres, 60% of which will be built space. As depicted in Figure 3, Argent's plan has a mixed use character, with office space being the principle use. A key characteristic of KCC is its attention on the existing historic structures and the public realm. The development is expected to renovate and reuse twenty listed buildings, while creating ten new public spaces. KCC preserves and reuses the historic industrial landscape as a whole, incorporating challenging structures such as the gasholders, with relatively few compromises.

Another key characteristic of the regeneration is its strong association with global and national celebrity enterprises. Google and Luis Vuitton are only some of the star-businesses that have secured offices-space in the area. The design of the KCC is also conceived by renowned architects, such as David Chipperfield et al.²⁸

The first phase of the ambitious project was delivered in 2014, having the converted Granary complex as a centrepiece. The historic complex, transformed by Stanton Williams architects, houses today the Central Saint Martins College, office and recreation space. The redevelopment retained the biggest part of the existing buildings, demolishing only a central shed and replacing it with a new purpose-built space for the University. According to the architects, their approach was based on three principles: a warehouse concept, respect for the historic buildings and sustainable design.²⁹

CONTROVERSIES

KING'S CROSS - 'FUTURE PERFECT'?³⁰

It has only been two years since the partial delivery of KCC and yet it has provoked great controversy. The scheme has been an object of both admiration and dispute among stakeholders and specialists, mainly for its socio-spatial implications. A summary of this controversial discourse enriched with the results of qualitative research conducted for the present study, is presented below.

The basic principles of the scheme -flexibility and consultation- have been proudly promoted by KCCLP.³¹ However, a review of studies on the subject suggests otherwise. Flexibility is portrayed by Holgersen and Haarstad³² as a medium of economic return maximization for the property owners. It is described as a tool available only to the developer but not to the local authority. As such the study notes:

“Local residents experienced Argent’s flexibility as uncertainty.”³³

There is also criticism with regard to the consultation process. No party negates that a lengthy consultation process took place. Yet, there are voices³⁴ which question its essence and result, describing the process as one-way and stressing the lack of the developer’s accountability. Expressing these concerns Edwards³⁵ states:

“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.”

Referring to the consultation process, frustration was also expressed from the developer’s side.³⁶ The respondent describes the opposing voices as ‘... only 5-6 individuals.’ who were ‘negative and anti-everything...’

Apart from the decision making process, the qualitative characteristics of the project’s spatial features have also been subject of controversy. KCCLP, the City Council and a number of press releases praise the new built environment of King’s Cross as an ‘exemplar of urban renewal’³⁷ On the other hand, close field observations, the results of our qualitative research and a handful of articles paint a different picture. KCC appears to be not as open and accessible as described while the preserved heritage is used as a commodified asset. Supporting this argument Wainwright notes:

“London has built many fine new public spaces over the last decade, but they are not in fact public – they are extensions of the privatised realm, to which the public is granted conditional access. ‘Welcome to King’s Cross,’ reads a sign in front of the new fountain-fringed Granary Square. ‘Please enjoy this private estate considerately.’...”³⁸

A tutor at Saint Martins, adds: “The complex offers a great architectural experience, yet it is too controlled and sterile... The building is certainly a very good marketing trap for the students”³⁹

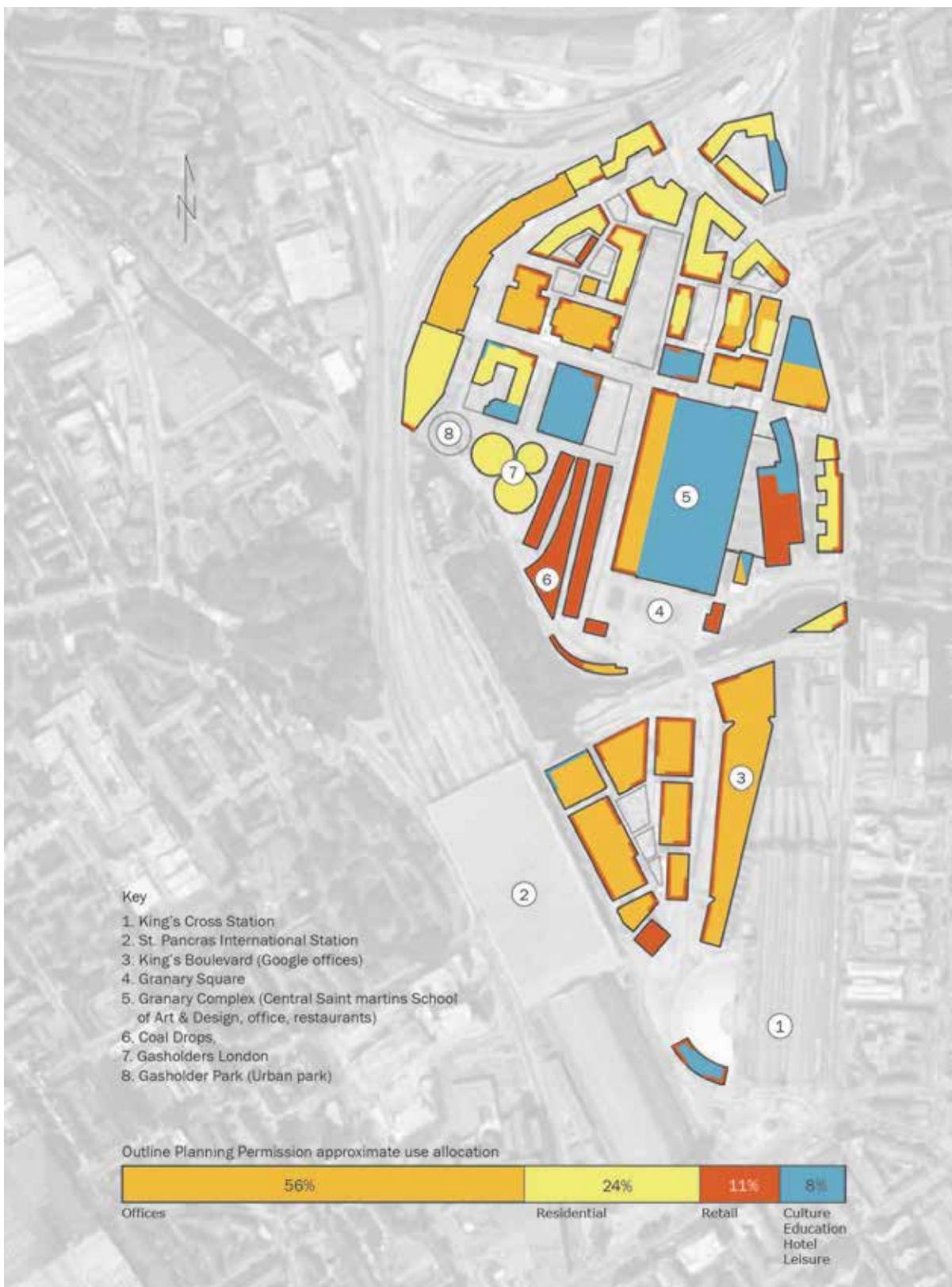


FIGURE 3 King's Cross Central. Principal uses' allocation, according to the Outline Planning permission (2006). The dominance of the office space, which is the most profitable use in the area, is evident.

A visit to the Granary complex verifies these claims. Public access is restricted in the biggest part of the complex while the dominance of the private over the public is notable. Moreover, a review of KCCLP promoting material⁴⁰ clearly illustrates the use of heritage; more as a medium of producing surplus value rather than a cultural and educational asset.

With respect to the approach of the scheme towards heritage, there seems to be a consensus between stakeholders and specialists. English Heritage,⁴¹ has included King's Cross in multiple publications⁴² as an example of best practice, describing it as:

*“a model of constructive conservation that captures the special quality of London”*⁴³

Our respondents share the same view, however they did highlight shortcomings in the preservation of the technical equipment and its presentation to the public. A member of the AIA, emphasises these limitations stating: *“People who realise these schemes look at industrial archaeology as a collection of aesthetical objects. Whenever features of industrial archaeology are kept, they are preserved as sculptural elements. The preservation is piecemeal and their interpretation is almost always absent.”*⁴⁴

In situ research, focused on the Granary complex reinforces the established perception for a sympathetic heritage approach. The existing buildings have been carefully restored, preserving structural elements, detailing and the patina acquired during the years (Figure 4). The new structure follows the footprint of the demolished historic shed and works in harmony with the complex in terms of volume, contracting strongly however in terms of materials and architectural language. Nevertheless, there is indeed a striking lack of historic and technical interpretation.

Lastly, the social ramifications of the project have met with much controversy. On the one hand the development team emphasises the heterogeneous, socially-inclusive profile of the project, with catchwords such as ‘inclusive’, ‘welcoming’, ‘safe’, ‘secure’ featuring strongly in all their publications and promotion material.⁴⁵ On the other hand, there is a set of studies that conclude that KCC will eventually lead to gentrification and displacement of part of the local community.⁴⁶ The claims of these studies are substantiated by the recent actions of KCCLP.

As revealed in Camden New Journal,⁴⁷ KCCLP is pushing for a substantial reduction of affordable housing and its replacement with high-end flats. Such actions come in sharp contrast with the acclaimed socially-inclusive profile of the regeneration scheme, demonstrating that the arguments of the aforementioned studies have a solid base.



FIGURE 4 Interior view of the Granary Complex. The historic complex has been transformed sympathetically, preserving the patina and traces of demolished parts.

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CONCLUSION

This paper has given an insight on the impact and decision-making process of heritage-led regeneration (HLR), examining the case of King's Cross. Starting with a brief description of economic and governance shifts occurring in cities like London, the paper has portrayed 'urban regeneration' as a key strategy employed for their physical transformation. It has indicated the conflicting arguments around the strategy's impact and has shown how heritage became part of it. The evolution of King's Cross since the 19th century has been described, emphasising its core socio-spatial values over time and the action of involved stakeholders. Moreover, the paper has given a contemporary view of the ongoing HLR process of King's Cross. Finally, the controversial discourse on the projects' implications has been analysed, complemented with data from our qualitative, desktop and field research.

Drawing from this in depth research on the King's Cross case, this paper concludes with a reflection on the impact of HLR, summarised in three main points:

First, King's Cross demonstrates the binary effect of HLR in relation to historic resilience. On the one hand, it is evident that the strategy is an effective means of preserving tangible historic features. The multitude of preserved buildings in KCC, but most importantly the high standards of their conversion, testify for a big step forward in historic preservation. On the other hand though, the disregard for the intangible dimensions of history; the systematic effort for the total elimination of evidence of controversial historic periods and its socio-spatial implications are the process' bleak consequences. Based on these findings this paper suggests that, in the current socio-economic system, HLR is used to preserve only a closely selected and rather fragmented part of history.

Second, the King's Cross case is an example of the nuanced impact of HLR on the physical urban environment. The transformation of a vast industrial brownfield site into a lively urban setting and its reintegration in the city are certainly significant achievements. However, turning a blind eye into its qualitative implications would be erroneous, too. Evidence of heritage commodification are clear in the case. Furthermore, the safety and security the KCC aims for, features common in many other HLR examples, undermine the qualitative characteristics of the offered public space. The present study therefore argues that HLR, within the complex socio-economic conditions of historic cities like London, can contribute to the enhancement of the urban fabric and to the restoration of lost spatial connections. However, it is suggested that this enhancement takes a heavy toll on the qualitative characteristics of the HLR spatial product. This argument complements the position of earlier studies, presented in the literature review.

Third, it is argued that HLR in the current framework of capitalism has a questionable social impact. Two notable shifts are identified in relation to the social profile of past urban renewal strategies. One shift is a change in the regeneration's decision making process, from a top down approach to one which is based on stakeholders' consultation. Yet, it is demonstrated that the change only refers to the process and not the result. In other words, there is only a minimum transfer of power to the underprivileged stakeholders while ultimate decisions are still taken by the ones who hold financial and property power. Therefore, it is argued that the decision-making process, albeit pluralistic is not yet as democratic and horizontal as presented. The second shift is a significant embellishment in the rhetoric of decision-makers. In our case, Argent came at great lengths to promote the socially-friendly profile of the development. However, phenomena of displacement have already taken place and are expected to be intensified. The rise of land value, underpinned by the shrinkage of affordable housing and professional space will also lead to social exclusion. This study thus supports the argument of earlier research that highlight gentrification as an intrinsic part of urban regeneration.

The generalisability of these results is subject to certain limitations. The status and complexity of London as a 'world class city', which places finance as the overriding consideration for property development, is definitely the most important one. Even though conclusions drawn based on King's Cross may not be fully applicable in small British cities, they can definitely inform future practice on similar cases in London and equally complex cities, making this research highly relevant. Another limitation is that KCC is an ongoing project and therefore this paper's results may not fully reflect its final state. Yet, King's Cross is considered a valuable case, offering the most updated image of large scale HLR in Britain.

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this study, it is now possible to state that HLR can impact decisively our historic cities. Concepts like heritage preservation, historic resilience, heritage commodification and historic eclecticism are intrinsic components of HLR, which are placed on a delicate balance. Factors that can tip this balance are the stance of involved stakeholders and the social underpinning of the area's historic values. Nevertheless, what ultimately seems to steer HLR's direction and in turn its historic, economic and social impact, are predicaments between financial growth and social sustainability, which are largely dependent on the established political and economic system.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Theodora Chatzi Rodopoulou is a PhD researcher in TUDelft and the NTUA. She holds an MSc in Architectural engineering from NTUA and an MSc Hons in Preservation, Conservation and Reuse of Buildings from TUDelft. She has worked as an architect and a researcher in the Netherlands and Greece. She has been a fellow of the Bodosakis Foundation as well as the British School at Athens and she is currently a fellow of the Onassis foundation. Her research interests lie on reuse practices of historic buildings and especially of the European industrial heritage and the role of the involved stakeholders.

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- 26 Based on an interview with one of Argent's Partners.
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- 47 McLennan, William. 2015. “Axed: King’s Cross social homes as developer bids to build more luxury flats”. *Camden New Journal*, April 9. <http://www.camdennewjournal.com/news/2015/apr/axed-kings-cross-social-homes-developer-bids-build-more-luxury-flats>

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Image sources

Figure 1: Design by the author

Figure 2: Design by the author, background: Google Maps

Figure 3: Design by the author, background: Google Maps, data source: King’s Cross Central Limited Partnership, Overview, 3.

Figure 4: Photo taken by the author, July 2015.

