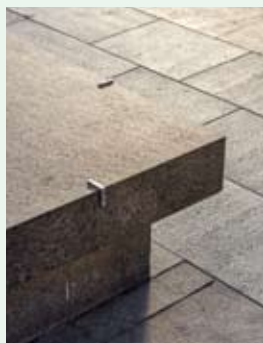




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- 01 Spire of St Pancras seen from inside the development
- 02 Shops in former train sheds on Stable Street
- 03 Stone public seating
- 04 Chipperfield Building in Pancras Square

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Preface

How do you transform an area that was once a byword for the seamier side of urban life without tearing its heart out? In redesigning London's King's Cross, developer Argent thinks it has found the answer.

AT A CROSS ROADS

London is a city that is dogged by bad developments. Many are vying for "iconic" status while others simply rehash an insipid, cookie-cutter form of "luxury". In such a city King's Cross offers a unique opportunity. It is one of the biggest urban-regeneration projects in the UK capital, sitting on the 27 hectares that lie to the north of King's Cross and St Pancras International railway stations.

The former industrial area had become derelict and was known for prostitution and drug dealing when work began in 2008. Eight years later, it's expected that about 30,000 people will come to King's Cross every day this year to work and play – this while the project is still four years off completion. With two thirds of the construction time elapsed, it's an apt moment to assess the successes – and potential pitfalls – of the development.

When the work is finished King's Cross will have 50 new buildings, including 1,900 new homes, 10 new public parks and squares and 20 refurbished and repurposed heritage buildings. The contributing architects and landscapers are some of the best known in the world, such as David Chipperfield, Thomas Heatherwick, Eric Parry and Wilkinson Eyre, among dozens more. But good development is more than the sum of its parts.

More than simply housing attractive architecture and leafy gardens they need to become good neighbourhoods: places with a sense of community that are open to and used by the rest of the city as well. That task is far more difficult to accomplish and it's one that few private developers care to bother with. And King's Cross also has its own peculiar complexities as a site: with poorer districts to the north and more salubrious neighbourhoods to the south, it sits on an important fault line and its eventual success will be judged on how well it stitches together these two parts of the city.

The job to develop the site was awarded in 2001 to Argent, a UK agency with a reputation for doing mixed-use well. That year the company published a 10-point manifesto for the work to come and called it *Principles for a Human City*, in a nod to its commitment to put people and place alongside profit. With financial backers who didn't demand an immediate return on their investment, Argent began swapping notes with London's Great Estates, learning how to build a legacy of good urbanism into their plans from those who look ahead by the decade, not the quarter.

King's Cross's first major occupier was the esteemed art college Central Saint Martins (CSM), which opened its doors in 2011 in a repurposed Victorian warehouse that once stored wheat for London's bakers. Securing the college's residency "was possibly the most important decision we've taken", says Nick Searl, a partner at Argent who is responsible for the bigger commercial deals at King's Cross. Some 5,000 students have helped to set a creative, forward-looking tone. Searl says that CSM's presence has helped to bring in many of the other key commercial occupants: "If you ask Google, Universal Music, Havas or Louis Vuitton why they chose King's Cross, Central Saint Martins is always on the list."

Google, however – having recently taken the design of its massive London HQ planned for King's Cross back to



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- 01 Nick Searl, partner at developers Argent
- 02 The Chipperfield building's twisted-iron columns are a nod to the area's Victorian industrial heritage
- 03 Wooden benches in the central retail space
- 04 Besides restaurants and bars, residents' everyday needs are also catered for

the drawing board – won't be cutting ribbons anytime soon. In fact, to date only about half of the buildings across the development have been completed so drawing in those 30,000 people is a result of more than students and corporate office workers. Argent is pushing King's Cross as a round-the-clock destination for Londoners and so restaurants and bars fill a lot of the ground-floor spaces, with offerings ranging in price point and running from morning breakfasts right through to after-dinner cocktails.

One of Argent's biggest accomplishments up until now has been to give a sense of place to what is currently a construction zone. This has been managed by two factors: an investment in public space and a programme of attention-grabbing temporary uses.

Though building work has some way to go, about 80 per cent of the parks and squares are complete. Developers usually work the other way around, delivering profit-making



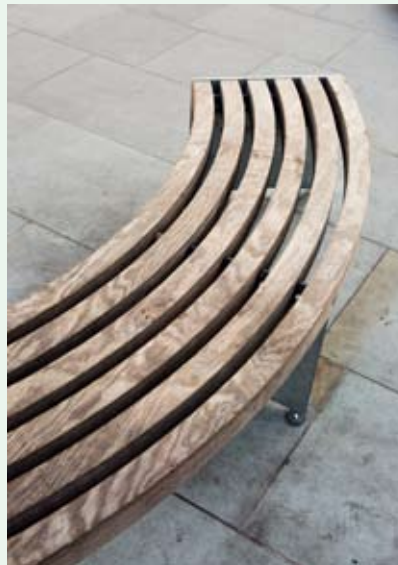
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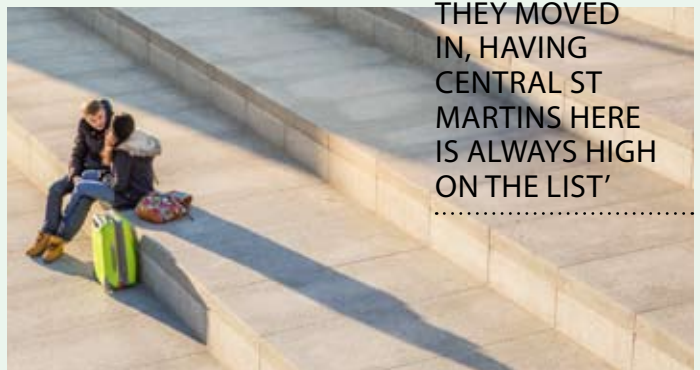


- 05 Wooden bench in Pancras Square
- 06 Potted trees and bushes provide greenery in the square
- 07 People relaxing on the huge stone steps beside the Canal
- 08 Central Saint Martins art college seen from across the Regent's Canal

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- 01 Granger & Co restaurant in Pancras Square
- 02 Picking salad for the Skip Garden restaurant
- 03 Swimming pond
- 04 Chickens feeding at the Skip Garden
- 05 Sauna at the swimming pond
- 06 Swimming pond changing rooms
- 07 Water's edge at the pond
- 08 Rachel Caltagirone, the project's marketing director



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**'IT WAS
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spaces before turning to the public realm. These works have included improvements to a portion of the Regent's Canal that cuts through the development, a once-lonely place that nobody used 10 years ago. Today you'll find a steady stream of joggers and flaneurs there, as well as the newly opened Gasholder Park designed by Bell Philips and Dan Pearson.

Green spaces and squares are complemented by more ephemeral attractions. To the north of the site Dutch studio Ooze Architects has designed a swimming pond that is halfway through its two-year lifespan. Nearby is the King's Cross Skip Garden – a moveable urban garden planted in skips, the produce from which is used in the scheme's own makeshift restaurant – which has been travelling around the development. What is currently a show suite in an old pumping station was, between 2012 and 2014, Shrimpy's, a popular restaurant run by the duo behind London's Bistrotèque.

All this adds amenity and leisure space not only for those who live and work at King's Cross but also for the residents of adjacent neighbourhoods. "It was a hugely gratifying moment, in the summer of 2012, when we saw people coming over from the housing

estates opposite and just owning Granary Square [in front of Central Saint Martins] and treating it as they should: like their local square," says Robert Evans, Argent's executive director.

Big-name architects Peter Cook and Zaha Hadid have both criticised King's Cross for its quiet, unobtrusive architecture. But Nick Searl says that the focus has been on creating something "that feels like a bit of London", not on property peacocking. Peter Murray, architecture critic and chairman of New London Architecture, agrees: "Very definitely, Argent has gone for an architecture that creates streets and places rather than necessarily separate, individual buildings. When you make cities you don't want too many centrepieces."

The test of whether King's Cross is a success, however, will be if Argent's "human city" manifesto endures. The neighbourhood will soon see the need to move from PR-friendly placemaking to nitty-gritty amenities provision as more and more residents move in. When all the cranes are gone and there's less space for pop-up market gardens, what will be the character of King's Cross? Sure, you'll have your pick of a dozen top-notch restaurants – but will you be able to get your hair cut on a Saturday afternoon? — (M)



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