Cleaning up Kings Cross: London's Most "Successful" Regeneration Project as a Site for Academic Study and Real-World Impact

Katelyn Owens

Doctoral Student, School of Social Sciences, University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom

ko308@kent.ac.uk | katelyn.owens529@gmail.com

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/katelyn-owens-0aa0a6149/

Abstract

Kings Cross is largely considered London's most successful regeneration project. From a derelict space to a destination place, "real-world" practitioners, such as urban planners and politicians, are applauded for their inclusive efforts. Yet, an academic approach to studying Kings Cross may reveal a different sense of place to residents of the area. This article explores creative methods for studying "space" and "place" and their ability to both compliment and challenge dominant stakeholder narratives. It concludes that the relationship between social studies and social realities requires cultivating in order to enact the most positive change for those who are impacted by it.

Keywords: *Kings Cross, London, regeneration, gentrification, space, place*

Introduction

Historically, debates between academics and practitioners have centred on impact. On the one hand, academia has the ability to uncover hidden truths about the social world, which may remain overlooked if left to politicians, urban planners, or journalists alone. On the other hand, practitioners are applauded for their direct impact on social outcomes, for better or for worse. Despite the contested nature of their roles in the social world, this article will argue that social studies and social realities have an inextricable relationship that requires cultivating in order to enact real change, using the example of urban regeneration in London's Kings Cross. After all, the academics who study the "real world" also live in it. They not only navigate social realities through methods such as case studies, narrative interviews, and mobile methods; they must critically engage with their own lived experience, blurring the line between academia and the "real world".

Background

Situated in the London Borough of Camden, Kings Cross has undergone rapid transformations as a result of regeneration. While a traditionally working-class locale, Kings Cross has been redrawn to cater to increasingly upper middle-class inhabitants. Known for its transport links across the

United Kingdom and beyond, the area is home to commuters, travellers, residents, and workers. The high throughput of people, combined with its industrial past, has made it a historically "seedy" location (Deckha, 2000). However, under the forces of regeneration, vice spaces and activities have been gradually phased out of the Kings Cross area, demarcating the decent from the "dirty".

Since 1997, Kings Cross Partnership (KXP) envisioned the former industrial site as a "new cultural quarter for London" (Deckha, 2000). In pursuit of profit, KXP has taken steps to clean up the area and repackage it as a hub for high-productivity sectors, upholding London's image as a world city (Brenner, 2014). The introduction of the Eurostar has hastened these changes as the Kings Cross area has taken on a character of economic "possibility" and cultural "growth", overwriting its historic identity as a working-class locale (Deckha, 2000).

That said, the regeneration of Kings Cross began long before it became a redevelopment "success story", as did disagreements between local residents and urban planners about the best use of the sprawling industrial space. In the decade preceding the creation of the KXP, the Kings Cross Railway Lands Group (KXRLG) was formed in opposition to plans to construct the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL). Connecting London to France and Belgium, the link would demolish residences and small business to the southeast of the station, while to the north, a new "Office City" boasting European influence was to be constructed (Deckha, 2000). This strategy was laid out in the Kings Cross Railways Bill. Unsatisfied by the extensive scope of the plans and the lack of consideration towards the lower-class residents and workers in the area, the KXRLG orchestrated their own proposal for the redevelopment of Kings Cross alongside the Kings Cross Conservation Areas Advisory Committee (KXCAAC), who aimed to preserve the "sense of place" and character of the district (Deckha, 2000). Not only did the duo campaign for a more thoughtful redevelopment of Kings Cross, they even submitted a community-led regeneration application—*The People's Brief*—to Camden, the planning authority responsible for the project of Kings Cross. Using the "Planning for Real" Technique in their proposal, public housing and a regenerated economy emerged at the top of residents' list of desired outcomes for Kings Cross' redevelopment (Brenner, 2014). While the Kings Cross Railway Bill did not make it past parliamentary debate due to lack of funds, *The People's Brief* also fell apart due to a host of concerns (Deckha, 2000; Hansard, 1992, June 1, 811). Yet, its very creation suggests the importance of reconciling creative methods of studying space with "real world" outcomes—a task that academics *and* "real- world" actors can achieve together.

Space, Place, and Academic Study

Theories surrounding "space" and "place" are seminal to understanding how Kings Cross' roots as a decaying railyard have been re-routed (or re-rooted) towards a hub for culture and consumption. They also mould individuals' understandings of the social world and its perceived transformability (Callard, 2011; Lefebvre, 1991). Historically, imperialists viewed space as something to be crossed and conquered—a stationary surface on which people, cultures, and places were merely situated

(Massey, 2005). Thin definitions of space continue to focus on its physical nature, referring to the built environment around which place comes to life. However, revolutionary geographical thinkers, such as Harvey (2005) and Massey (2005), recognise that such fixed accounts do little to explain how space is set in motion by social relations in the living city, arguing instead that it is fluid (Gregory, 2008). This links to place, which Massey (1994, p. 154) defines as "constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus." As a result, place-making projects like the regeneration of Kings Cross are both a product and producer of space and should be studied through "multiple forms of knowledge in continual construction" (Lees, 2012, p. 166).

Qualitative methods, such as ethnography, are useful tools for studying urban change because they allow academics to engage in the social dynamics and everyday practices they seek to understand through immersion, participation, and observation—practices that numbers alone cannot encapsulate. Theorists, such as Lees (2003, p. 111), advocate for the usefulness of ethnography in investigating "the ongoing social practices through which space is continually shaped and inhabited." Benson and Jackson (2018) echo this perspective, emphasising the importance of ethnographic research into regeneration studies, because it illuminates the local contexts in which change happens as well as the production of class relations within these locations.

In particular, mobile methods offer a compelling lens through which to study space, as they allow for researchers to learn in motion. Specifically, mobile (walking) interviews allow the researcher and participants to move through space, recognising its fluidity and removing the pressure of a formal interview setting. Mobile methods mitigate many of the ethical issues relating to who has power over knowledge by letting participants take the lead through space and navigate the interview's direction (Neville & Sanders-McDonagh, 2020). The result of observing and participating through mobile methods is rich data that "attends to the textual, embodied and phenomenological aspects of place-making" (Pink, 2008, p. 14), underlining how urban space is constituted and contested. Further, the very act of ethnographic immersion into the social world harmonises academia with the "real world" by offering a "radical democratic space", which is imaginative and sensory (O'Neill, 2020). This blurs the divide between academia and the "real world", offering a fresh lens through which to address social change. The blurring effect that occurs through both creative and more traditional methods of study necessitates academics to engage with their own lived experience through reflexivity. Reflexive thinking is an integral part of the research process which requires academics to reflect on their own background and experiences and how this impacts the knowledge they produce.

In the case of Kings Cross, mobile interviews with inhabitants can challenge previously static research in the area and shed light on the actual impact that regeneration has had on people who use the space, informing future regeneration projects about more equitable practices. For example, they can illuminate the temporality of space and for whom it was designed. While "real-

world" practitioners, such as politicians and urban planners, are quick to boast about the inclusivity of Kings Cross' regeneration (detailed below), mobile interviews can offer a lens into alternative discourses, which should be considered in future to reconcile academic study with "real-world" impact.

From Liminal to Successful: Preliminary Findings from Urban Practitioners

I conducted ten semi-structured, online interviews with stakeholders involved in Kings Cross' regeneration to explore the motivations, intentions and perceived impact of the project over the past three decades. Stakeholders were purposively sampled based on their influence on the area's regeneration and/or their vested interest in the project's outcome. The "Code of Ethical Practice for Research" at the University of Kent was followed in order to ensure the highest ethical standards. Stakeholders were sent an information sheet about the research prior to taking part and informed consent was obtained from all participants. As stakeholders were participating in their professional capacity, they were made aware that their identities would not be kept anonymous unless requested. In these cases, a title with no name is provided in the findings. Following transcription of the interviews, thematic analysis was conducted. Two of the key findings are explored in this section relating to the themes of liminality and success.

1. Liminality

Many stakeholder accounts of Kings Cross prior to the start of its regeneration concentrated on the theme of liminality, using words such as "empty" and "seedy" to describe the now-gentrified site. Originating from the Latin word *limen*, "liminal" can be roughly defined as "on a threshold" (Roberts, 2018). A liminal space, therefore, can be considered one that is transitional. As Thomassen (2009) indicates, liminal spaces are locations "where 'reality' itself can be carried in different directions" (p. 5), giving that space transformative potential. In the case of Kings Cross, themes of liminality emerged with reference to dereliction, transience and even danger:

> So, Kings Cross was like a hole in the city with a fence around it with the lights turned off, so it was empty…Around it, like any major transport hub, you tend to get a degree of transient populations…it was a kind of centre for drugs and prostitution. (P. Bishop, personal communication, 6 March 2025)

Indeed, Ryder (2004) notes that vice spaces are often located near transport terminals due to the high throughput of people and anonymity associated with transience. As an unkept and "unloved" transport hub on the outskirts of London, Kings Cross was not only located on the geographical boundary of the city but also operated on the boundaries of moral acceptability. Young et al. (2006) describe that the trade of illegal goods and services was prominent in Kings

Cross prior to its regeneration. Specifically, Kings Cross was "*the* primary location for prostitution" in London in the early 2000s (Young et al., 2006). In the five-month period between September 2002 and February 2003, the police reported 299 soliciting arrests in the area (Kong, 2001 cited in Young et al., 2006). Seventy-five percent of these arrests occurred in a small "soliciting zone"—key sites include York Way and Caledonian Road—and more than 85% of reported offences occurred within the boundaries of Operation Welwyn, a policing effort aiming to target drugs and vice like prostitution (Young et al., 2006). This data relating to the illegal sex and drug trade in Kings Cross suggests a "seedy" reputation, of which Bethany Cullen, the current Head of Development Management at Camden, speaks:

> Um…a bit uninviting, a sort of character, but then I don't think Kings Cross was really a destination place for anyone. I don't think most people arranged to meet up with someone at Kings Cross. Kings Cross was sort of a transient place where you would come in to get a train and leave. Most people probably never really stepped outside of the train stations, if I'm honest. A little bit seedy, and generally just run-down. (B. Cullen, personal communication, 4 March 2025)

Interestingly, most planners, local governments, and real estate developers would argue that "seedy" reputations discourage development due to their association with crime and contamination (Ryder, 2004). This is reinforced by Firey (1945), who states that "locational activities are not only economising agents but may also bear sentiments which can significantly influence the locational process" (p. 140). However, what made Kings Cross a truly liminal space was its ability to transform from risqué to respectable. Licensing policies and the creation of Antisocial Behaviour Orders played a role in deciding *who* was allowed to do *what* and *where* (Neville & Sanders-McDonagh, 2017; Prior & Hubbard, 2017). The urgency and necessity to regenerate the former vice space can arguably be attributed to the transport developments occurring at the time, such as the construction of the Channel Tunnel Rail link, which made Kings Cross ripe for redevelopment:

> And we knew that with a large redevelopment around a transport node, in the middle of London, you want it to be a good place locally, but also, we knew it was a national destination and with the High Speed rail link, the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, it would be an international destination. So how you bring all of those together – the international, the national and the local – was absolutely key, and what we did know was that we didn't want it to be another Canary Wharf. (Anonymous senior politician, personal communication, 3 February 2025)

Today a central business district, Canary Wharf, has come a long way from its humble beginnings as a dockyard fraught with poverty and crime. Prior to its collapse in the 1960s due to mechanisation and the decline of imperial trade, the Isle of Dogs generated profit through exploitation of the workforce (Foster, 1999). Investment into private housing and eventually the commercial sector propelled the Docklands to new heights—eights that, to the dismay of community members, did not reflect their needs and desires. When a city is built with profit motives in mind, as opposed to its people, disparities inevitably emerge (Zukin, 2008).

However, according to the stakeholders interviewed, Kings Cross' regeneration differs vastly from that in Canary Wharf due to its inclusivity. Indeed, this anonymous senior politician's statement is reminiscent of Massey's (1994) call for "a global sense of the local, a global sense of place" (p. 156). Therefore, Kings Cross could be considered a *meeting place* "where the 'difference[s]'…must be conceptualised more in the ineffable sense of the constant emergence of uniqueness out of (and within) the specific constellations of interrelations within which that place is set" (Massey, 2005, p. 68). In fact, the so-called "success" of Kings Cross' regeneration largely comes down to its transformation from dereliction to destination. However, it could be argued that this process has not been as inclusive as it (cl)aims to be.

2. Success?

> [Kings Cross] has become a totally new part of London. It is cited internationally as one of the seminal developments in the last twenty years globally, and I think it is the best development we did in this country of its type… it's a popular destination—people go there. (P. Bishop, personal communication, 6 March 2025)

Kings Cross' transformation from a liminal space into the place it is today is remarkable. Describing the former industrial site as a 'popular destination' speaks to the (at least surface-level) success of the project. That said, referring to the former industrial site as "a totally new part of London" carries implications about whose London it was before the regeneration began. Looking at Census data from 1991, one third of the area's approximately 15,900 inhabitants belonged to ethnic minority groups. Historically – and still today – Kings Cross was populated by a significant percentage of Bangladeshi migrants, with 16% of the population being Bangladeshi in 2001 (Camden, 2001). In fact, Bangladeshi migrants made up the largest ethnic minority in the area and still do, although this percentage is decreasing (Camden, 2011). Kings Cross was also considered to have a relatively high rate of deprivation and to be working-class (Mutale & Edwards, 2000). In a somewhat ambivalent statement, Camden Council representative for the Kings Cross Ward, Jonathan Simpson, stated:

> I think that Argent have done a good job of place-shaping, at making an area that people would go to by doing cultural events; the fountains are always really beautiful to watch, because they're quite classless in terms of the people that would use them and the kids playing there…I think the more problematic issues—and its stuff that Argent have recognised—is Coal Drops Yard is a bit more exclusive and destination-based…If you're from Somers Town or estates in other parts of Kings Cross, it's not a place you would go quite often because the shops are, I would say, pricey and wouldn't necessarily attract most people with the average income. (J. Simpson, personal communication, 31 March 2025)

Although Simpson may call the fountains "classless", he also states that people from Somers Town and/or people with the average income would likely be unable to fully participate in the area. The median gross household income in Somers Town, a neighbouring community to Kings Cross largely untouched by the regeneration to-date, is £24,674, while in Kings Cross it approaches £30,000 (Ward Profile, 2020). Compared to the UK median of £37,430 (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2024), this suggests that Kings Cross was not designed with its inhabitants in mind, catering instead to wealthier visitors. Bethany Cullen agrees that the "average person" cannot afford to spend time in the area:

> I think a lot of it quite successful, but I think maybe if you went and spoke to residents in surrounding communities, there's a slight disconnect between 'here' and 'there' and whether or not they feel like this is a place for them. I think a lot of them probably do come over and use the open spaces, but they don't feel it necessary to go after a coffee or something. (B. Cullen, personal communication, 4 March 2025)

She attributes the disillusionment that neighbouring communities may feel about Kings Cross to its transformation from "gritty and interesting" to a "bit pricey", attracting different people and organisations to the area. In fact, one risk of regeneration projects is that of gentrification. Arrigoitia (2018) defines gentrification as "a multifaceted process of contemporary capitalism that slowly strips away the working-class characteristics of particular locations to turn them into areas where only (or mainly) those with greater financial and cultural capital…afford to live, work or play (p. 262)." Interestingly, some stakeholders deny that any gentrification has taken place. Peter Bishop, the former Director of Planning and Development at Camden Council, said:

> I don't think there was any gentrification because first of all nobody lives there; therefore, nobody was displaced. There has been diversification of the tenure patterns in the wards around it, but actually, before, there were 85% social housing for people largely on income

> support. Now, I think diversification – a little bit of gentrification – is quite a good thing in that case. (P. Bishop, personal communication, 6 March 2025)

However, contrary to Bishop's statement, census data from Kings Cross suggests there were nearly 16,000 inhabitants of the area prior to the debut of its regeneration. Of these inhabitants, 42% were long-term residents, 31% were medium-term residents, and 27% were recent arrivals (Mutale & Edwards, 2002). Thus, Kings Cross was not only a place where people went to live; it was a place where many people stayed living. Perhaps more important, however, is to call attention to Bishop's conflation of "gentrification" with "diversification". While the contemporary Kings Cross may attract new and different groups of people, at what cost did this come to those who were there before? Although public spaces have been opened up in Kings Cross, Arrigoitia's (2018) argument about the exclusion that often results from gentrification serves as a reminder that regenerated spaces are not necessarily open or accessible to all.

Conclusion: Reconciling Academia with "Real-World" Impact

Because power plays a role in the stories that are told, stakeholder narratives cannot, and should not, be viewed in isolation. While they offer an insightful lens into the motivations, intentions and perceived impact of Kings Cross' regeneration, mobile interviews with inhabitants of Kings Cross will complement these perspectives by telescoping the social realities resulting from its regeneration. In other words, stakeholder narratives are limited on their own. However, coupled with creative methods of studying space and place, they can shed light on geographies of inclusion/exclusion, ultimately informing future regeneration projects about more equitable practices.

Specifically, integrating creative methods into the planning process can help decolonise urban transformation. The aforementioned *People's Brief*, although scrapped, is a prime example of how local resources can be decentralised to the community (Deckha, 2000). Ideally, place-making involves creating places where spatial narratives meet, intersect, tell histories and build trajectories. It is an event where space and time weave together so that "there" and "then" are implicated in the "here" and "now" (Massey, 2005). In the case of Kings Cross, scholars, planners and policymakers should refrain from conflating terms like "diversification" and "gentrification" in order to avoid making moral judgements about who belongs where.

Furthermore, the difference between regeneration and gentrification must be recognised, as the former connotes an *increase in* opportunity while the latter connotes *displacement from* opportunity. Finally, because the city is a *living* ecosystem, the lived experience of inhabitants of Kings Cross can and should be considered in policy and planning to understand how the space and its people move, adapt and evolve over time. The example of urban regeneration in London's Kings Cross evidences the need for reconciliation between academia and the "real world".

Although tensions remain between academics and practitioners, working together can strengthen their impact in the social world. Recognising that the binary between social studies and social realities is merely manufactured can help produce more rounded research by challenging the very divisions social scientists seek to understand and transform.

Katelyn Owens *is a Sociology PhD student and Assistant Lecturer at the University of Kent. She is passionate about issues at the intersection of urban geography, feminist criminology and social policy. Through her work, she hopes to decolonise academia and make it more accessible to all.*

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