

CURATING PUBLIC SPACE

Clare Cumberlidge of General Public Agency explains why its play-based strategy is a vital part of the King's Cross Central development in London, which recently received planning permission



ARGENT

Above, the area around King's Cross Station in London, which is currently undergoing regeneration. Right, a rendering of Flux Park, a focal point of the site centred around the former Gas Holder No. 8 structure

In a context where a simplistic view of the relationship between culture and regeneration often characterises policy and practice, General Public Agency (GPA) takes a different view.

If we take the definition of culture away from the big institutions and into the public realm, we are able to involve all aspects of human activity, from vernacular building to folk and subcultures. By this definition, culturally-led regeneration must be inclusive, locally defined, and interdisciplinary, a process capable of involving practitioners with the right knowledge or talent.

Much of GPA's work in the public realm could be called 'curating public space' in that it represents the application of emerging curatorial and cultural models to the field of regeneration. Our definition of public space encompasses physical and intellectual space – we are interested in a participative culture of debate, argument and sociability. We applied



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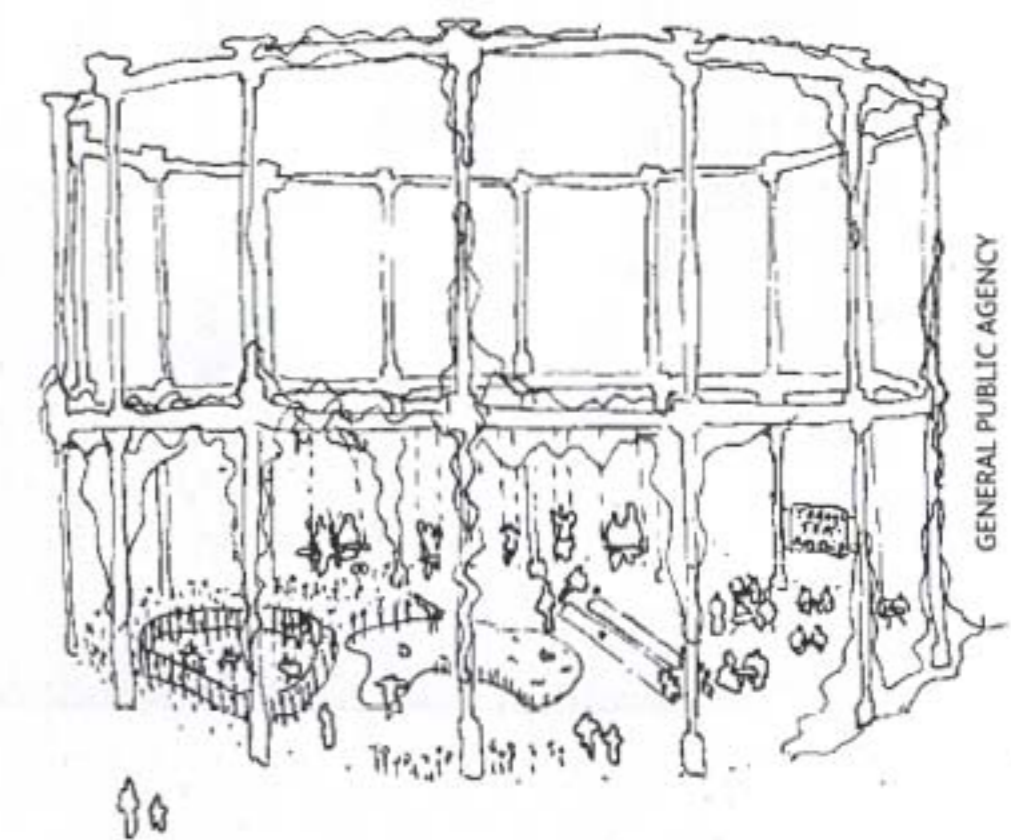
this approach to King's Cross Central in our role as consultants on the public realm. We were commissioned by the developer, Argent, which recognised the importance of a genuinely public environment in developing its plans and making its proposals a political and commercial success.

In the cultural memory of London, King's Cross has, for a long time, existed as a void, filled only with industry and barren railway lands. Its regeneration represents the reclamation of a significant area of

land in the heart of London which has been denied to the public since the coming of the railways. This involves the creation of new buildings and new public space, and offers the potential for a better-quality public realm than Londoners usually experience.

The area is far from a blank canvas, and it is renowned for its industrial heritage. The archaeology of London's 19th-century commerce and transport systems can be seen in a series of handsome buildings and spaces, many of which will be retained. The site has

THE REGENERATION OF KING'S CROSS REPRESENTS THE RECLAMATION OF A SIGNIFICANT AREA OF LAND WHICH HAS BEEN DENIED TO THE PUBLIC SINCE THE COMING OF THE RAILWAYS



Above, GPA's concept for an urban pleasure garden, intended to prioritise play, or spontaneous behaviour, in the public realm

A CENTRAL FEATURE OF THE STRATEGY WOULD BE COMMISSIONING AN ART/ARCHITECTURE PROGRAMME SO THAT CREATIVE PRACTICE WOULD NOT ONLY CHARACTERISE THE SITE, BUT ACT UPON IT

also, during the years of dereliction, been overlaid with an ecological delicacy that belies its history. So there is the opportunity to not just open up an area of land, but to employ its existing conditions and character in the service of an enhanced sense of place. This characterisation formed the first stage of GPA's work for Argent.

Our conceptual strategy was developed under the banner of 'play', a non age-specific synonym for spontaneous behaviour, something

which exists everywhere but is rarely encouraged (and often actively discouraged) in the public realm. Our principle for the public realm was that the idea of play should permeate the entire site. This principle, undertaken under the curatorial concept of an 'urban pleasure garden', also acts as a benchmark. Later, more detailed designs will be measured against their ability to facilitate play, and therefore pedestrian life. We made extensive maps of the wider area, pinpointing