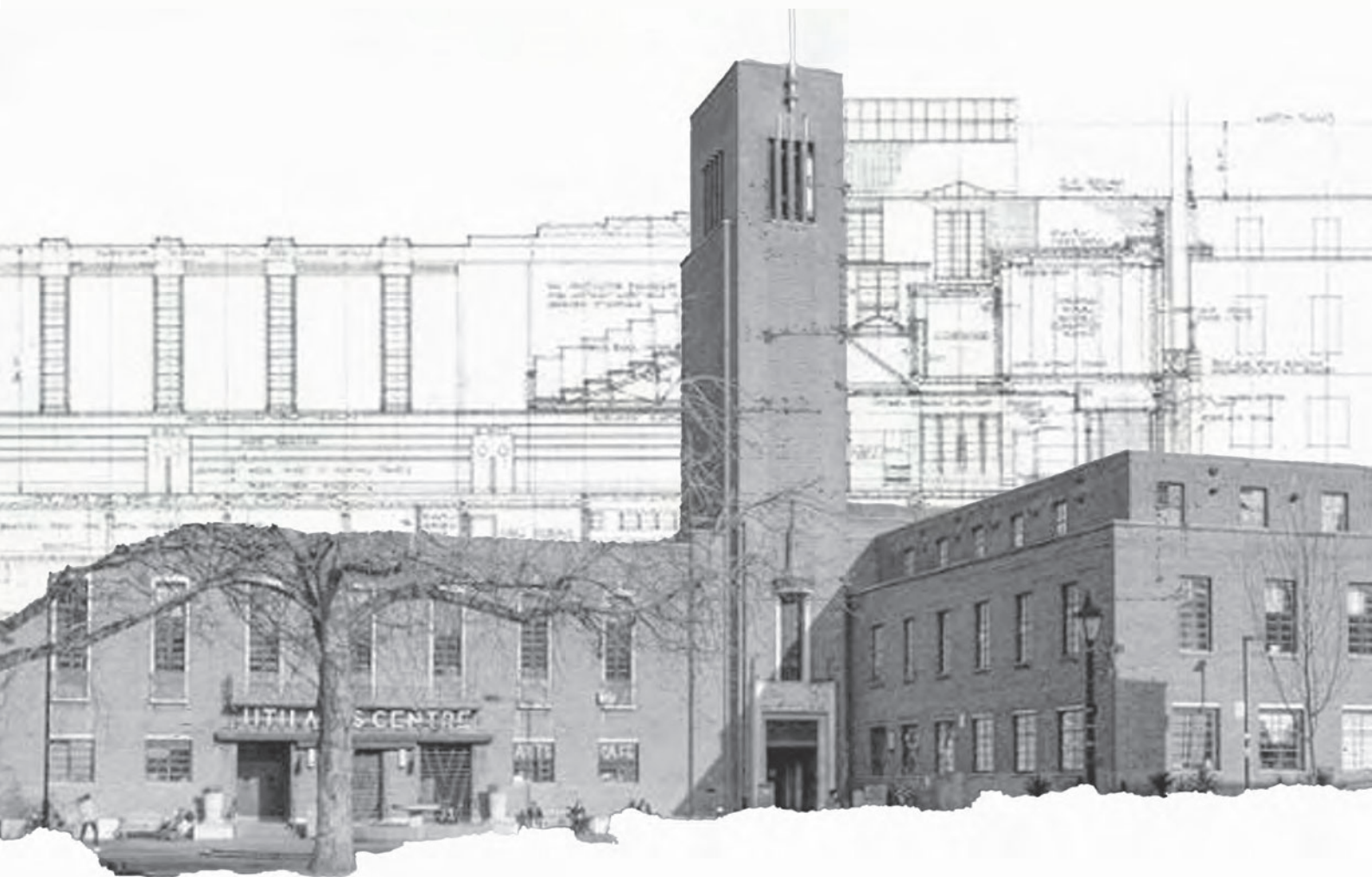


ADAPTIVE REUSE AND THE POLITICS OF HERITAGE

To what extent does adaptive reuse in London's heritage buildings use the language of sustainability to legitimise social exclusion and cultural erasure?



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This essay is based on information available up to November 2025. Developments, data, or events occurring after this date are not reflected in the analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Adaptive reuse has emerged as one of the most celebrated strategies in contemporary architecture and urban regeneration. With the escalating impacts of climate change and the depletion of natural resources, reusing existing structures instead of demolishing them is both a moral and practical necessity. This sustainable approach is vital within urban landscapes like London, as it promotes environmental responsibility and heritage preservation while stimulating local economies.

Adaptive reuse, therefore, extends beyond environmental rhetoric, encompassing external influences across social, cultural, and political dimensions. Transforming buildings requires thorough attention to how historical narratives and targeted demographics are affected, yet these aspects are likely to be overlooked. These issues are closely linked to power dynamics, memory, and exclusion by those opposing the changes, prompting the question:

To what extent does adaptive reuse in London's heritage buildings use the language of sustainability to legitimise social exclusion and cultural erasure?

This dissertation does not oppose the process of adaptive reuse, instead finding it as a deeply socio-political practice that actively shapes cultural memory and belonging, not just technical or environmental. Projects marketed as environmentally friendly or heritage-focused are likely to mask redevelopment practices that displace local communities, privatise public assets, and commodify culture for consumption. Consequently, the intersection of sustainability and heritage preservation within London's neoliberal property market often leads to paradoxical outcomes, despite being widely regarded as virtuous pursuits.

This dissertation explores the tensions within London's contemporary development landscape, where heritage, sustainability, and capital frequently converge. In these contexts, adaptive reuse risks functioning less as a means of preservation and more as a strategy for transformation, where sustainability rhetoric can be used as a tool to legitimise turning shared cultural spaces into marketable commodities. Thus, the critical question is not whether adaptive reuse can preserve buildings, but whether it can sustain the social and cultural life that gives those buildings meaning, which cannot be achieved through technical processes alone.

To support this research, the dissertation investigates two London sites where adaptive reuse has dramatically altered the meaning of a place: Hornsey Town Hall, a modernist civic landmark in Crouch End that has been redeveloped into a hotel and luxury apartments, and Brixton Village Market, a historic arcade whose revitalisation has transformed it from a community market into a symbol of local authenticity curated for consumption. Although these case studies are quite different, they share using sustainability and heritage rhetoric to justify redevelopment with overlooked unintended consequences. Together, they provide a framework for interrogating how adaptive reuse benefits all communities in the contemporary city.

This research also draws on Aldo Rossi's notion of collective memory in *The Architecture of the City*, which views urban artefacts as vessels of shared memory, connecting present-day citizens to a collective past.¹ However, contemporary cities, characterised by demographic diversity and economic flux, require a broader understanding of heritage, where the relationships that provide its social meaning are equally recognised. This dissertation therefore serves to critique Rossi's framework, arguing that in the context of adaptive reuse, permanence alone is insufficient; heritage must also sustain continuity in community and cultural life.

This dissertation seeks not only to critique existing practices, but to reimagine sustainable

¹ Aldo Rossi, "The Architecture of the City", trans. Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 130-131.

conservation by emphasising communal value and intangible cultural heritage. It advocates for a model of adaptive reuse that is socially and materially sustainable, acknowledging heritage as an evolving relationship between people and buildings requiring inclusive and ethical design. While adaptive reuse can perpetuate inequality when market-driven, it also holds significant potential to promote cultural resilience and collective belonging.

It is the responsibility of architects, planners, and policymakers to ensure that the next phase of reuse in London not only conserves its buildings but also sustains its communities.

CHAPTER 1: THE RHETORIC OF HERITAGE & SUSTAINABILITY

1.1 *The Politics of Sustainable Reuse*

Within architectural discourse, sustainability and heritage have become closely intertwined, creating the moral framework that defines adaptive reuse. However, this connection is not politically neutral. In practice, developers and policymakers use sustainability less as an environmental ethic and more as an economic instrument within neoliberal urban policies.

In London, the built environment faces ecological challenges and financial barriers, making sustainability discourse a rationale for redevelopment. *The National Planning Policy Framework* defines sustainable development through the triad of “economic, social, and environmental” objectives.² However, economic growth will highly likely dominate projects, allowing them to claim sustainability while prioritising profit.

Subsequently, developers have a realistic opportunity to reduce demolition waste and embodied carbon, however, this is at the expense of compromising the culture and social aspects of a building. While the resulting developments may seem ethical at first, they can lead to the displacement of local populations and the erasure of cultural identity, reflecting what David Harvey refers to as “capital accumulation” by “dispossession”.³ Thus, the politics of sustainable reuse and heritage can perpetuate more “pernicious strategies” that prioritise entrepreneurial and private capital expansion, as described by Nicholas Lynch.⁴

This perspective is fundamental to the adaptive reuse of London’s listed buildings and forms the basis for the case studies that will follow.

1.2 *Tangible and Intangible Heritage & The Framework of Harm*

The current conservation frameworks in the United Kingdom tend to favour tangible heritage over intangible heritage. **Tangible heritage** refers to the physical elements of a building, including materials, construction methods, and architectural styles. This physical aspect is what receives legal protection under the *Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990*.⁵ In contrast, **intangible heritage** refers to the living culture of communities.

International charters have long acknowledged the dual nature of cultural heritage. The *UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)* defines intangible heritage as the “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills” that communities recognise as part of their cultural identity.⁶ The more recent *ICOMOS International Charter and Guidance on Sites with Intangible Cultural Significance (2024)* extends this definition, urging that conservation should sustain “the living relationships between people and place” and warning that physical restoration alone cannot preserve heritage significance.⁷ The *ICOMOS People-Centred Approaches to Cultural Heritage (2020)* also advocates for heritage practices that are participatory, inclusive, and responsive to social contexts.⁸ These documents recognise that we cannot separate heritage from the people who use and interpret it, and that its true sustainability lies in cultural continuity rather than aesthetic endurance.

2 Ministry of Housing, *National Planning Policy Framework*. London: HM Government, 2024, 5.

3 David Harvey, “Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution”, (London: Verso, 2012), 18.

4 Nicholas Lynch, “Remaking the Obsolete: Critical Geographies of Contemporary Adaptive Reuse,” (*Geography Compass*, 16(1), e12605.), <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12605>, 4.

5 “Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.” [Legislation.gov.uk](https://www.legislation.gov.uk), 2012, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/9/section/7>.

6 UNESCO, “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.” (Paris: UNESCO, 2003)

7 ICOMOS, “International Charter and Guidance on Sites with Intangible Cultural Significance.” (Paris: ICOMOS, 2024)

8 ICOMOS, “People-Centred Approaches to Cultural Heritage”, 2020.

In Britain, English Heritage's *Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance (2008)* identifies four types of heritage value: **evidential**, **historical**, **aesthetic**, and **communal**.⁹ Communal value often tends to be the most vulnerable and least protected aspect of heritage, described as "the meanings of a place for the people who relate to it", encompassing the shared attachments, memories, and practices that make heritage a living experience rather than a static object.¹⁰

However, the UK's *National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)* offers limited protection for communal value, while placing a strong emphasis on protecting architectural fabric, revealing a hierarchy where intangible values are placed at a lower priority. Any proposal affecting a listed building must assess the degree of "**harm**" it may cause to the building's significance.¹¹ The *NPPF* makes a distinction between "substantial harm" and "less than substantial harm", requiring that even the latter be weighed against public benefits.¹² However, the concept of harm is understood almost exclusively through physical terms, such as alterations to the historic fabric, loss of setting, or interference with the visual character of the site.¹³

Subsequently, adaptive reuse projects will compromise the building's communal and cultural significance despite often successfully preserving its structural integrity. This is because this narrow interpretation of harm permits developments that preserve the outward appearance of buildings to change their meaning and use for profit, such as civic halls being transformed into luxury hotels, or churches converted into high-end restaurants, and these changes are deemed acceptable as long as the physical structure remains intact. In effect, the law assesses damage to architecture rather than the impact on the community.

Although the Conservation Principles recognise **communal value**, they are non-statutory, limiting their impact on planning decisions. Subsequently, the protection of social and cultural heritage mainly depends on voluntary consultations instead of being backed by enforceable policies. The fact that these considerations have not yet been integrated into UK legislation allows for a strategic use of heritage language. As Caitlin DeSilvey notes, this creates preservation without "presence".¹⁴ Consequently, sustainability and heritage must be viewed as social and cultural issues, not just environmental or architectural.

9 English Heritage, "Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment." (London: English Heritage, 2008), 31.

10 English Heritage, "Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance", 31.

11 GOV.UK, "16. Conserving and Enhancing the Historic Environment - National Planning Policy Framework - Guidance - GOV.UK." [www.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/16-conserving-and-enhancing-the-historic-environment). March 27, 2012. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/16-conserving-and-enhancing-the-historic-environment>.

12 GOV.UK, "16. Conserving and Enhancing the Historic Environment - National Planning Policy Framework - Guidance - GOV.UK."

13 *Ibid.*

14 Caitlin DeSilvey, "Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving." (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), <https://hdl-handle-net.uow.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb40252.0001.001>. PDF, 7.

1.3 Aldo Rossi and Collective Memory

Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City* provides an important perspective on how buildings reflect memory. Rossi viewed the city as a storehouse of **collective memory**, where monuments act as fixed points that help preserve history.¹⁵ He argued that the permanence of architecture enables it to endure beyond its original purpose, transforming into a physical record of civic identity.¹⁶

Whilst Rossi's theory illuminates the symbolic endurance of architecture, his concept of collective memory downplays the dynamic, lived experiences that continually redefine memory. His emphasis on form and typology privileges structural permanence over social continuity. Rossi viewed memory as embedded in the material "artifact" rather than in the ongoing relationships and practices that sustain it.¹⁷ As a result, a reused building that retains its original facade, but loses its social function, can still be seen as a representation of continuity, according to Rossi. However, from a cultural perspective, it may actually signify erasure.

Modern conservation debates increasingly challenge this traditional formalism. The ICOMOS Charter rejects the idea that built form alone can embody memory, emphasising that "heritage significance is co-produced by communities and evolves through use".¹⁸ In this light, we can reinterpret Rossi's collective memory through David Harvey's concept of "**collective power**": heritage should not only endure but also empower the communities it represents.¹⁹

In his 2012 work *Rebel Cities*, David Harvey reinterprets the "**right to the city**" as the right for communities to reshape urban spaces based on their collective needs.²⁰ Applying this idea to adaptive reuse, it suggests that communities should have a participatory role in defining heritage is transformed, ensuring that reuse reflects local identity rather than serving external interests. While Rossi focuses on permanence, Harvey emphasises agency, shifting the notion of memory from being solely a monument to being a dynamic social practice.

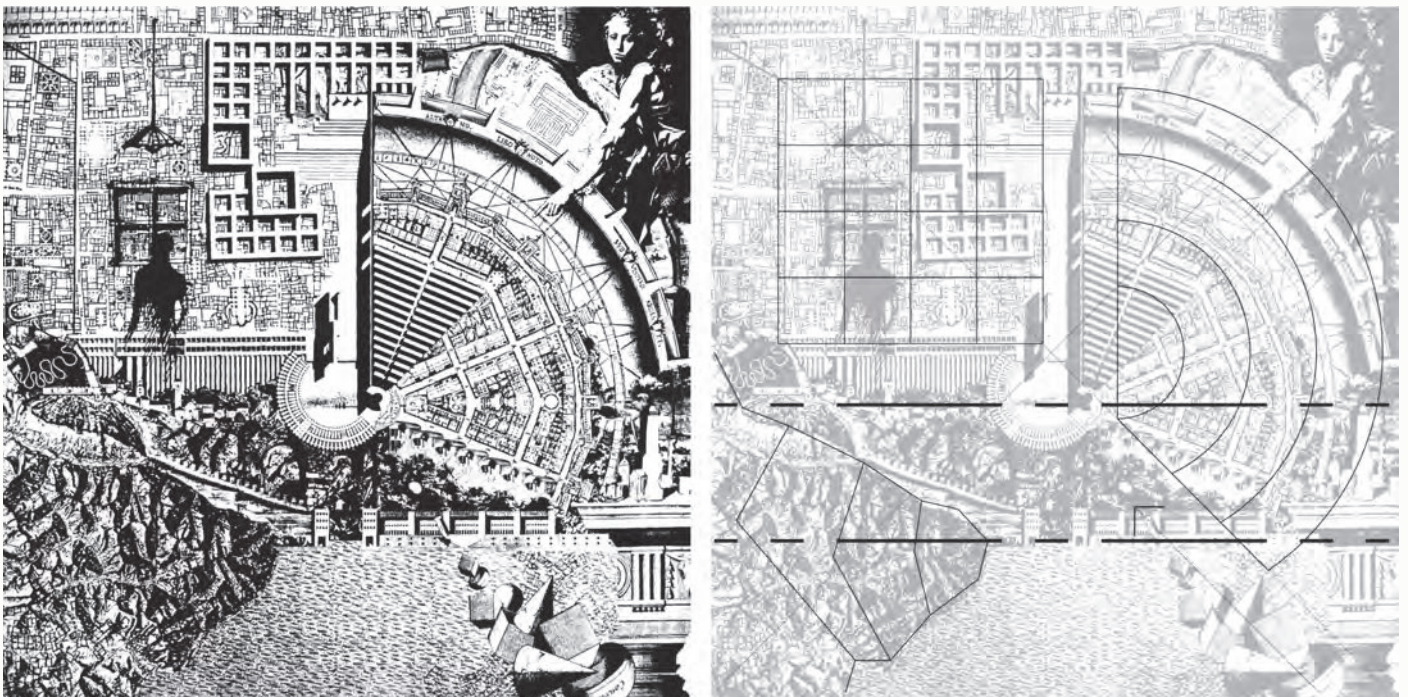


Figure 1: Rossi A (1976), Analogical City Panel (montage diagram by McEwan C), cameronmcewan.wordpress.com

¹⁵ Rossi, "The Architecture of the City", 130-131.

¹⁶ Ibid., 131.

¹⁷ Ibid., 130.

¹⁸ ICOMOS, International Charter and Guidance on Sites with Intangible Cultural Significance. (Paris: ICOMOS, 2024)

¹⁹ Harvey, "Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution", 4.

²⁰ Ibid., 4.

1.4 Heritage Value as a Marketing Device



Figure 2: Screen Capture (edited by myself), International Forestry and Environment Symposium

Heritage today functions not only as a cultural asset but also as an economic one. Buildings designated as heritage sites acquire both symbolic and market value, enhancing their appeal for high-end development. Sociologist Sharon Zukin has argued that in global cities, “authenticity becomes a tool of power”, serving as a strategy through which heritage is commodified to attract investment and cultural capital.²¹ Similarly, Caitlin DeSilvey contends that conservation that prioritises material transformation fails to take accountability for the damage caused to “dynamic social and organic lives of monuments and artifacts”.²² Collectively, these critiques suggest that what is often portrayed as the safeguarding of heritage may simultaneously contribute to the erasure of the very cultures it claims to celebrate.

In the context of adaptive reuse, commodification occurs through a selective emphasis on history. While terms like **revitalisation** and **regeneration** carry positive connotations, they are likely to obscure the issues of economic displacement. Developers showcase a building’s craftsmanship or architectural pedigree but are likely to overlook its social or political significance. Heritage then becomes a lifestyle accessory, serving almost as a background for consumption.

This process is particularly evident in London’s post-industrial districts and historic town centres, where listed buildings are transformed into cultural or residential destinations. Here, heritage shifts from being a public good to a private amenity, with the state’s role changing from protector to facilitator, prioritising urban growth policies over cultural preservation. From a sustainability standpoint, this situation reveals the paradox that environmental responsibility coexists with social inequity. While adaptive reuse is eco-friendly, it can increase economic barriers to participation. A truly sustainable model would incorporate social sustainability, ensuring long-term affordability, community access, and cultural continuity as fundamental criteria alongside energy and material performance.

Before exploring what a sustainable model of adaptive reuse might look like, it is essential to examine what an unsuccessful case study looks like. Hornsey Town Hall, for instance, has been transformed from a civic monument into a site of commercial hospitality. Similarly, Brixton Village Market, which once represented a community-led revival, has now become a symbol of gentrified consumption. Each demonstrates how sustainability and heritage discourses are used to justify redevelopment, revealing the consequences of neglecting intangible, communal value.

²¹ Sharon Zukin, “Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places.” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

²² DeSilvey, “Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving”, 9.

CHAPTER 2: HORNSEY TOWN HALL

2.1 Historical Background



Figure 3: Hornsey Town Hall (own photograph)



Figure 4: Location Plan, Makearchitects.com

Hornsey Town Hall is a Grade II listed public building situated in Hatherley Gardens in the Crouch End area of London, and functioned as the headquarters for the Municipal Borough of Hornsey until 1965, when it merged with Tottenham and Wood Green to form the London Borough of Haringey.²³ Completed in 1935, the building reflects the architectural style of the town hall in Hilversum, Netherlands designed by Willem Marinus Dudok.²⁴ Designed by Reginald Uren (1906-1988), Hornsey Town Hall received the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) bronze medal for the best London building constructed in the three years leading up to December 1935.²⁵

Built with Portland stone and brick, the building showcases a symmetrical facade, a clock tower, and subtle ornamentation, positioning it as one of the earliest examples of modernist civic architecture in Britain.²⁶ Its layout features council chambers, an assembly hall, and public offices, designed to convey openness and democratic accessibility.

For three decades, Hornsey Town Hall served as the seat of Hornsey Borough Council, symbolising municipal authority and collective governance. Following the borough's incorporation into the London Borough of Haringey in 1965, the building ceased to serve its civic function.²⁷ It then continued to be used in the community, partially for communal activities, but further for film screenings, concerts, and even a performance by the band Queen in 1971.²⁸ In 1981, it became one of the first buildings constructed in the 1930s to achieve listed building status.²⁹

Unfortunately, ongoing underfunding and deferred maintenance led to its gradual decline. By the early 2000s, it was considered financially unsustainable for the council to own the property.

23 "Overview of the Area - Hornsey Historical Society," Hornsey Historical Society, January 22, 2023, <https://hornseyhistorical.org.uk/area-overview/>.

24 "A Brief History of Hornsey Town Hall", Hornsey Historical Society, September 5, 2017, accessed November 14, 2025. <https://hornseyhistorical.org.uk/brief-history-hornsey-town-hall/>.

25 "Hornsey Town Hall, Non Civil Parish - 1263688 | Historic England." Historic England, 2025, accessed November 14, 2025. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1263688?section=official-list-entry>.

26 "History," Hornsey Town Hall Trust, August 21, 2015, accessed November 14, 2025. <https://hornsey-town-hall.org.uk/index.php/sample-page/>.

27 Hornsey Historical Society, "A Brief History of Hornsey Town Hall."

28 Steve Edge, "Hornsey Town Hall | News | New Bohemian Rhapsody Movie Filming Location," Hornsey Town Hall | Crouch End, June 11, 2018, accessed November 14, 2025. <https://www.hornsey-townhall.co.uk/news/bohemian-rhapsody-movie-filming-location/>.

29 Historic England, "Hornsey Town Hall, Non Civil Parish - 1263688 | Historic England."



Figure 5: Hornsey Town Hall West Elevation, Makearchitects.com

In 2017, Haringey Council approved the sale and redevelopment of the Town Hall to the Far East Consortium (FEC), a Cayman Islands-based developer, for £3.5 million.³⁰ The approved development plan included 146 luxury apartments, a boutique hotel, commercial spaces, and a limited allocation for an arts centre. This initiative was presented as a heritage-focused regeneration effort aimed at securing the building's future for generations to come.³¹

In official planning documents, the development is described as resulting in "less than substantial harm" to the listed structure, which is the lowest level of impact recognised by the *NPPF*.³² However, this assessment focuses primarily on tangible impacts. While it acknowledges potential dangers to the historical fabric, it ignores the broader social changes inherent in the shift from civic to commercial use.



Figure 6: The Council Chamber, hornsey-townhall.co.uk



Figure 7: The Concert Hall, hornsey-townhall.co.uk

30 "Public Register," Haringey.gov.uk, 2025, accessed November 14, 2025. <https://publicregister.haringey.gov.uk/pr/s/planning-application/a0i8d000002GkdQAAW/hgy20172220>.

31 "Hornsey Town Hall," Make Architects, July 2, 2024, accessed November 14, 2025. <https://www.makearchitects.com/projects/hornsey-town-hall/>.

32 "Public Register," Haringey.gov.uk.

2.2 The Redevelopment Process

The redevelopment of Hornsey Town Hall demonstrates how sustainability and heritage rhetoric can legitimise economic transformation. In Haringey Council's public statements, the project was repeatedly presented as an environmentally responsible reuse of a heritage asset.³³ Meanwhile, FEC's promotional materials emphasise Make Architects made a "sensitive restoration" of a civil landmark that "prioritises art, education, heritage and community".³⁴

However, while reuse does help avoid demolition waste, they reflect a narrow understanding of sustainability, confined to technical and aesthetic parameters, contrary to the idea of a restoration emphasised as sensitive. The social sustainability of the redevelopment doesn't address who the new Hornsey Town Hall is intended for, and whom might it exclude.

The DAO by Dorsett is a luxury serviced apartment hotel that now occupies most of the restored site, inviting visitors to "experience luxurious living".³⁵ Room rates range from £250 to £350 per night and can increase to £600 on popular weekends.³⁶ Additionally, the new residential units include studio, one, two, and three-bedroom apartments, with prices starting at £499,950, with more expensive units exceeding £1 million.³⁷ These prices are significantly higher than those affordable for the standard resident in Crouch End, with an average household income of approximately £51,000 per year as of 2024.³⁸ The price disparity indicates that the development is primarily targeting an affluent, transient demographic that does not reflect the local population in Haringey.³⁹

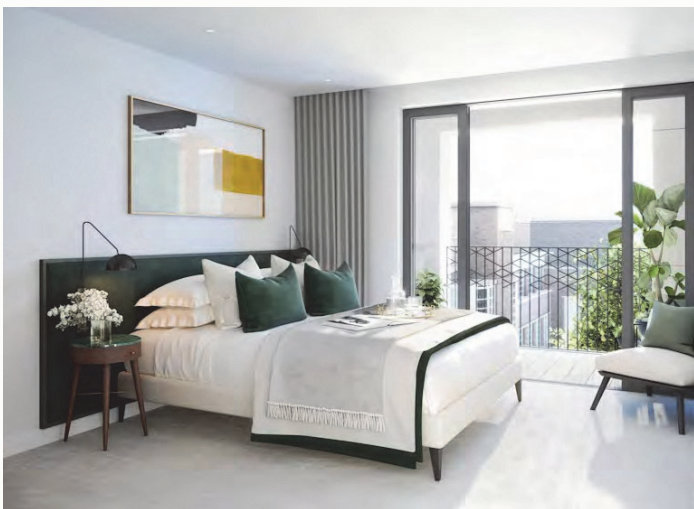


Figure 8: Dao Hotel Luxury Suite, feciLuk



Figure 9: Dao Hotel Luxury Bathroom, feciLuk

33 "Public Register," Haringey.gov.uk.

34 "Hornsey Town Hall – Photo Essay," Make Exchange, 2023, accessed November 14, 2025. <https://exchange.makearchitects.com/articles/hornsey-town-hall-photo-essay>.

35 "Luxury Apartment Hotel in Hornsey - Dao by Dorsett North London," Daobydorsett.com, 2025, accessed November 14, 2025. <https://www.daobydorsett.com/dao-by-dorsett-north-london/>.

36 "Dao by Dorsett North London, London (Updated Prices 2025)," Booking.com, accessed November 14, 2025. <https://www.booking.com/hotel/gb/dao-by-dorsett-hornsey-town-hall.en-gb.html>.

37 Steve Edge Design Ltd, "Make Architects & Far East Consortium Revive North London Landmark: Hornsey Town Hall: Crouch End." Hornsey Town Hall | Crouch End, February 17, 2021, accessed November 14, 2025. <https://www.hornsey-townhall.co.uk/news/make-architects-far-east-consortium-revive-north-london-landmark/>.

38 "Haringey at a Glance State of the Borough Contents," Haringey.gov.uk, 2024, accessed November 14, 2025. https://haringey.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/state_of_the_borough_final_master_version.pdf.

39 Haringey Gov, "Haringey at a Glance Sate of the Borough Contents".

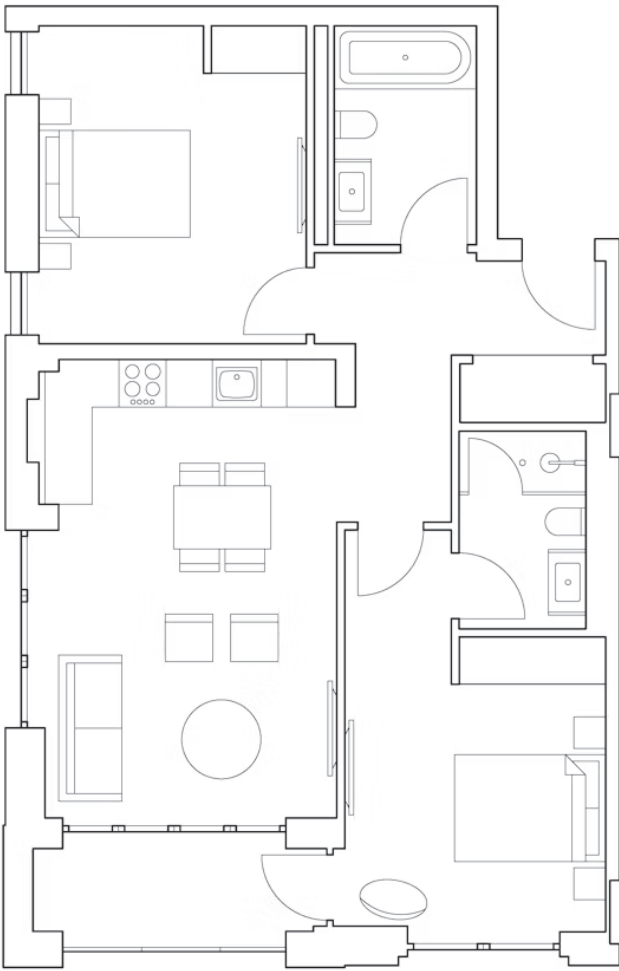


Figure 10: Hornsey Town Hall Block A Apartment, Make Architects

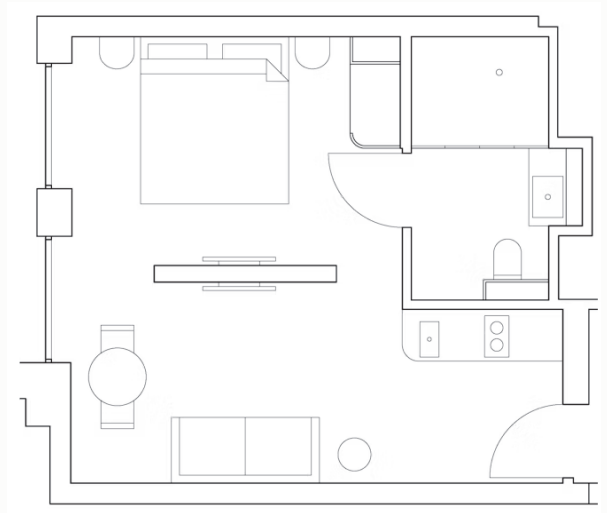


Figure 11: Hornsey Town Hall Hotel Suite, Make Architects



Figure 12: Hornsey Town Hall Residential Elevation, Makearchitects.com

At the same time, the Hornsey Town Hall Arts Centre (*fig. 13*), the portion of the scheme intended for community use, has faced numerous delays and remains largely inaccessible. This outcome highlights the structural imbalance within the redevelopment process, where the functions that generate profit were prioritised while those serving communal purposes were deferred.

This contradiction illustrates the politics of sustainable reuse discussed in Chapter 1. Environmental justification provides moral cover for redevelopment that erodes social inclusivity. As Harvey argues, urbanisation is a “class phenomenon” that conceals underlying dispossession.⁴⁰ The project’s branding, with slogans such as “a new residential destination that combines history, culture and modern living”, exemplifies this process.⁴¹ The aesthetic of preservation legitimises the loss of public ownership at the hands of capitalistic forces.

⁴⁰ Harvey, “Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution”, 5.

⁴¹ Steve Edge Design Ltd, “Make Architects & Far East Consortium Revive North London Landmark: Hornsey Town Hall: Crouch End.”



Figure 13: The Proposed Hornsey Arts Centre, Make Architects

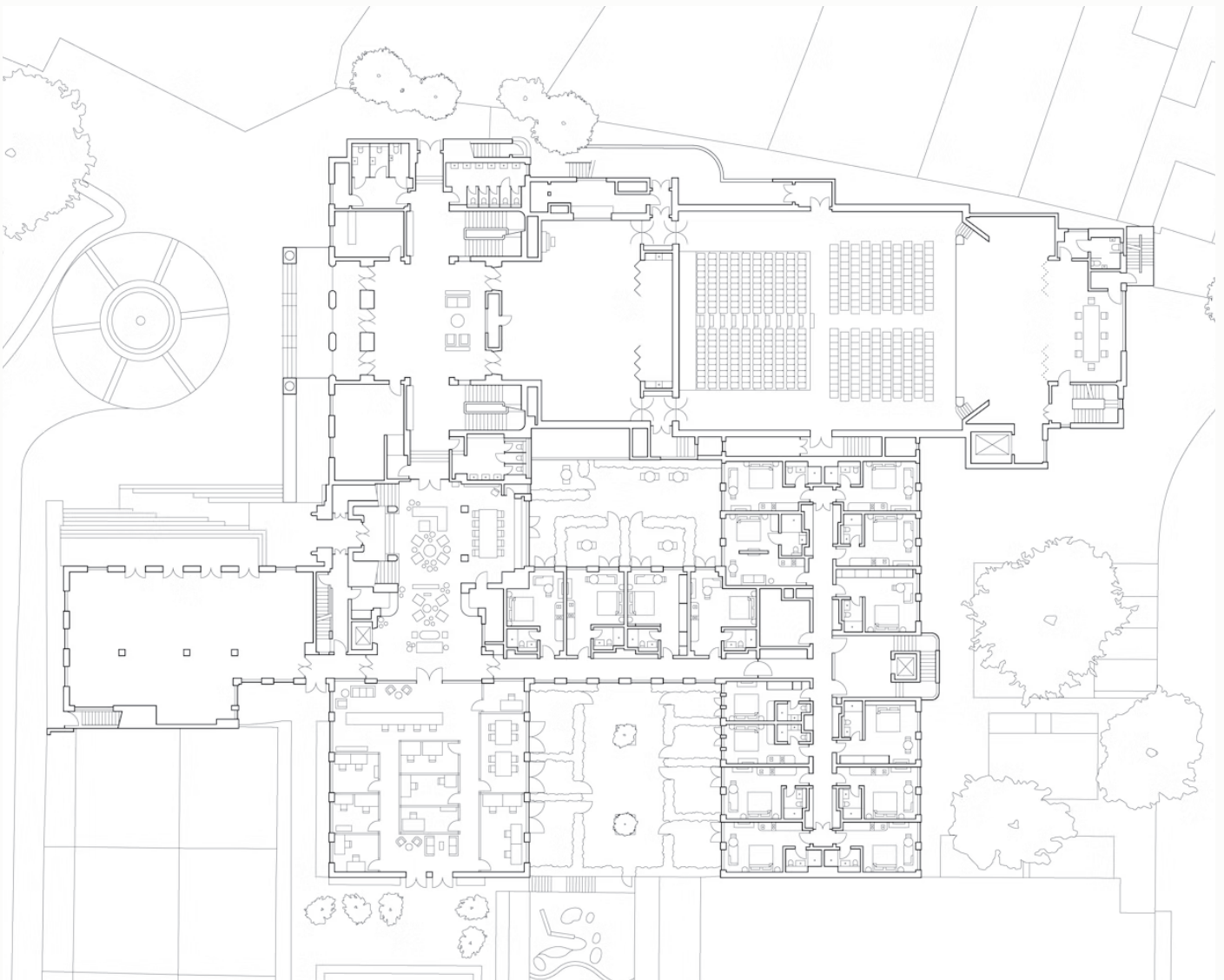


Figure 14: Hornsey Town Hall Ground Floor Plan, Make Architects

2.3 Assessing Harm: Material vs Communal

Viewing online material, the Historic England listing entry for Hornsey Town Hall (List Entry 1263688) provides a detailed account of its design, materials, and stylistic features.⁴² However, it does not mention civic or communal significance, despite changes to the structure having a profound impact on the community. The change symbolises how democratic participation and local identity has been replaced for private and commercial benefit. Further, this transformation signifies how the loss of civic ownership led to the exclusion from what was previously public space, and the commodification of heritage for elite consumption.

The ICOMOS International Charter on Sites with Intangible Cultural Significance cautions against the danger of preserving physical structures without considering their social significance, stating that “the conservation of tangible fabric without regard for its social meaning risks transforming heritage into spectacle”.⁴³ Yet, the redevelopment of Hornsey Town Hall exemplifies this disconnect, where physical restoration is achieved, but the original meaning and significance are lost.

The architectural features of the building, including its terrazzo flooring, walnut panelling, and clock tower, serve as brand assets that provide symbolic value to the new enterprises they accommodate.⁴⁴ The issue is not with adaptive reuse itself, but with the way heritage is reduced to a visual experience that is disconnected from its public purpose, where the past is not erased but selectively repackaged as lifestyle imagery.

The case of Hornsey Town Hall exposes a broader structural problem that in the absence of policy mechanisms to protect intangible heritage, sustainability and preservation have become marketing tools rather than genuine ethical imperatives. Spaces for collective governance now operates within the logic of consumption.



Figure 15: Hornsey Town Hall Interior, dia.co.uk



Figure 16: Hornsey Town Hall Design, hornsey-townhall.co.uk

⁴² Historic England, “Hornsey Town Hall, Non Civil Parish - 1263688 | Historic England.”

⁴³ ICOMOS, “International Charter and Guidance on Sites with Intangible Cultural Significance”

⁴⁴ Historic England, “Hornsey Town Hall, Non Civil Parish - 1263688 | Historic England.”

2.4 Ownership and Cultural Displacement

Private ownership has notably impacted the operation of Hornsey Town Hall as a public space. Following its sale by Haringey Council and subsequent resale to AMTD Group in 2025, a Hong Kong developer, for £47 million, access to the site has become increasingly fragmented and challenging to navigate.⁴⁵

During a site visit, I found it difficult to locate the Town Hall. Digital mapping tools directed visitors to the rear of the site rather than to the civic building itself. This route led only to the residential redevelopment in the site, separate to the Town Hall. Large iron gates labelled "Hornsey Town Hall" (fig. 18) opened onto luxury apartments, rather than the historic building.

Upon entering the residential courtyard, the space appeared largely vacant yet closely monitored. A couple of workers observed visitors, interfering to reinforce that the area functioned as private property, rather than a public civic space. The arts centre, a crucial component of the redevelopment promised to the local community, similarly showed no visible signs of activity or clear public entry points. Additionally, there was no signage indicating whether it was open or accessible. Exiting the site from the opposite side led directly onto an ordinary residential street, with no indicators guiding visitors to the Town Hall.



Figure 17: Rear Entrance to Residential Area (own photograph)

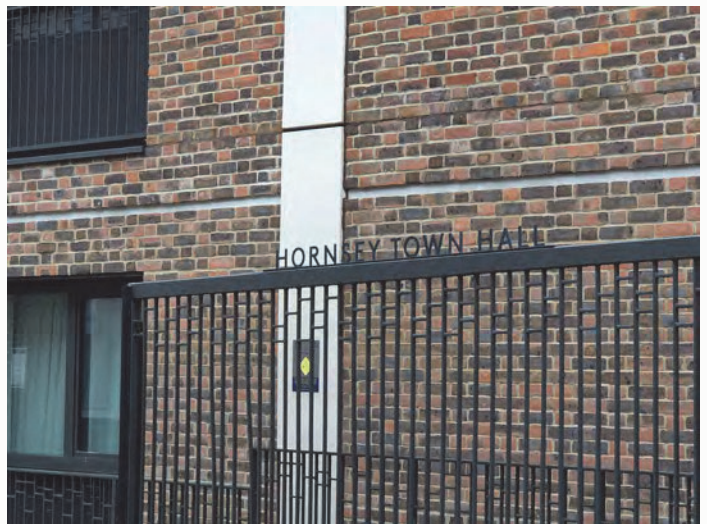


Figure 18: Gates Labelled as Hornsey Town Hall (own photograph)



Figure 19: The Arts Centre Now (own photograph)

⁴⁵ "FEC Sale of Hornsey Town Hall an 'Embarrassment' for Haringey Council," [haringeylibdems.org.uk](https://www.haringeylibdems.org.uk/news/article/fec-sale-of-hornsey-town-hall-an-embarrassment-for-haringey-council), 2025, accessed November 14, 2025. <https://www.haringeylibdems.org.uk/news/article/fec-sale-of-hornsey-town-hall-an-embarrassment-for-haringey-council>.



Figure 20: The Clock Tower (own photograph)



Figure 21: A mother and child entering the building before being asked to leave (own photo)

Opposing online directions, reaching the Town Hall instead required navigating towards the clock tower (*fig. 20*), using it as a landmark, where access was still restricted. Yellow tape cordoned off the green space in front of the building, and staff members prevented entry at the main doors. Inside, refurbished interiors and administrative staff were visible, where it was found that a mother and child, among a few others, entered the building as visitors. However, the mother and child were asked to leave shortly after. Similar denial of entry was experienced firsthand, providing no opportunities to yield primary research. This direct intervention highlighted that, despite its civic designation, the building operates under controlled access.

The Hornsey Town Hall Appreciation Society (HTHAS) has expressed intense criticism of the redevelopment of the Town Hall, arguing that the change to foreign ownership raises concerns about accountability and the ability of local governance to ensure long-term public benefits.⁴⁶ Their petition to “save Hornsey Town Hall” garnered 2,200 signatures, highlighting how while legal protections can preserve architectural integrity, they do not guarantee the community’s right to access or engage with its heritage.⁴⁷ This ultimately reveals a managerial approach to heritage that values financial solvency over cultural preservation.

Economically, the shift contributes to the gentrification of Crouch End, with property prices rising by about 30% and average rents increasing by nearly 20% since the project’s approval.⁴⁸ While these changes aren’t solely due to redevelopment, they highlight how high-value reuse projects can reinforce socio-spatial exclusion. This raises an important question for the next case study:

To what extent is demographic change inherent when adaptive reuse originates from capital incentive?



Figure 22: Observed House Prices in Crouch End (own photo)

46 Anna Behrmann, “Calls for Community Voice to Be Heard in Sale of Hornsey Town Hall,” Ham & High, November 29, 2015, accessed December 23, 2025. <https://www.hamhigh.co.uk/news/21368124.calls-community-voice-heard-sale-hornsey-town-hall/>.

47 Behrmann, “Calls for Community Voice to Be Heard in Sale of Hornsey Town Hall.”

48 UK Land Registry, House Price Index: London Borough of Haringey, August 2024.

CHAPTER 3: BRIXTON VILLAGE MARKET

3.1 Historical and Social Context



Figure 23: Granville Arcade, 1937 (brixtonvillage.com)



Figure 24: Brixton Village, (brixtonvillage.com)

Brixton Village Market, previously known as Granville Arcade, was constructed in the early 1930s as part of a network of indoor markets designed to foster daily trade and community engagement.⁴⁹ Opening in 1937, it was inaugurated by Swedish actor Carl Brisson and designed by Alfred and Vincent Burr.⁵⁰

During the 1940s, the bombings in World War II led to a severe housing crisis, prompting slum clearances and the development of social housing.⁵¹ Following the war, many immigrants, particularly from the West Indies and Ireland, made Brixton their home. Since then, these communities have significantly shaped the culture and diversity of the area. In 1965, Brixton became a key hub for the Sound System scene in South London, impacting UK dance music genres as new traders and businesses began to populate the area.⁵²

Brixton Village was granted a Grade II listing in 2010, in recognition of its historical significance and the importance of Black history in post-war Britain, following a local campaign to protect the area from redevelopment.⁵³

Subsequently, Brixton Village's significance lies in the communal value created through everyday practices like food trading, social exchange, and music.⁵⁴ This heritage is dynamic, evolving through participation, affordability, and accessibility. In contrast to Hornsey Town Hall's loss of civic meaning due to privatisation, Brixton's cultural erosion happens in a physically open yet socially selective space.

49 "The History of Brixton's Most Diverse Market | Brixton Village," Brixton Village, July 7, 2023, accessed 24 December 2025, <https://brixtonvillage.com/our-story/>.

50 "The History of Brixton's Most Diverse Market | Brixton Village."

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 "BRIXTON MARKETS – RELIANCE ARCADE, MARKET ROW and GRANVILLE ARCADE," Historic England, accessed December 2025, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1393881>

54 Yasmin Rufo, "Brixton Village: How the 'Oxford Street of South London' Evolved," BBC News, October 30, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-67161026>.

3.2 Brixton's Revival

In the early 2000s, Brixton Village experienced economic decline, characterised by rising vacancy rates and deteriorating infrastructure. In 2009, the Lambeth Council supported a regeneration initiative led by the Space Makers Agency, which offered temporary, low-cost leases to local entrepreneurs, artists, and food traders.⁵⁵ This approach activated the area, allowing the existing structure to remain while reintroducing social and economic vitality. This revival demonstrated a socially sustainable model of adaptive reuse, as cultural practices were not replaced but rather strengthened, thereby increasing foot traffic. This example illustrates how adaptive reuse can preserve both tangible and intangible heritage, especially when economic pressures are constrained, and community participation is prioritised.

In contrast to Hornsey Town Hall's redevelopment, Brixton's regeneration maintained a collective sense of agency over the space. However, this balance ultimately proved to be fragile.



Figure 25: The Market (own photo)



Figure 26: The Market (own photo)

3.3 Gentrification and Social Exclusion

During the early stages of Brixton's gentrification, significant protests erupted as a result. Residents, traders, and activist groups voiced their opposition to rising rents, property speculation, and the displacement of long-established cultural communities. In April 2015, a coalition of local activists, under banners such as Reclaim Brixton, drew thousands of participants to Windrush Square to highlight the rapid social and economic changes affecting the area.⁵⁶ Protesters carried slogans such as "people before profit", and human chains formed around threatened local businesses in solidarity against eviction and rent hikes.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ "Spacemakers," n.d., <http://www.spacemakers.info/projects/brixton-village>.

⁵⁶ Jason Cobb, "Reclaim Brixton Sees Thousands Gather in Windrush Square to Make a Stand Against Increasing Gentrification," April 25, 2015, <https://www.brixtonbuzz.com/2015/04/reclaim-brixton-sees-thousands-gather-in-windrush-square-to-make-a-stand-against-increasing-gentrification/>.

⁵⁷ Cobb, "Reclaim Brixton Sees Thousands Gather in Windrush Square to Make a Stand Against Increasing Gentrification."



Figure 27: The Protest in Windrush Square (The Guardian)



Figure 28: People Before Profit (Brixton Buzz)



Figure 29: A banner in Brixton Market (The Guardian)



Figure 30: People protesting (Brixton Buzz)

On the same day, police deployed CS spray and intervened when parts of the march moved toward Lambeth Town Hall and targeted a Foxtons estate agency, which activists identified as emblematic of speculative investment and demographic change.⁵⁸ Participants expressed concerns that longstanding residents and independent traders were being priced out, undermining the character of places like Brixton Village as its gentrification accelerated.⁵⁹

These events illustrate how resistance to the displacement associated with adaptive reuse and broader urban development is not only economic but also deeply cultural, rooted in a desire to maintain the intangible heritage and communal life that define Brixton's identity.

⁵⁸ Anna McKie, "Reclaim Brixton: Windows of Foxtons Smashed as Thousands Attend Mostly Peaceful Protest," Brixton Blog, April 25, 2015, <https://brixtonblog.com/reclaim-brixton-windows-of-foxtons-smashed-as-thousands-attend-mostly-peaceful-protest/>.

⁵⁹ BBC News, "Police Use CS Spray on Brixton Gentrification Protesters," April 25, 2015, accessed December 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-32463425>.

3.4 Displacement in Brixton Village Market Today

Observations from a recent site visit reveal how exclusion in Brixton Village now operates through everyday mechanisms, rather than overt barriers. Upon arrival, 20p pay-to-use public toilets (*fig. 31*) can be found opposite the market entrance, payable through contactless or a coin slot, creating a physical paywall for a basic necessity. The nominal fee disproportionately affects those without disposable income and implicitly discourages homeless, underprivileged individuals from occupying the area. This reflects wider patterns in privatised urban space, where exclusion is subtly enacted through micro-economic controls.

Meanwhile, the stability of independent businesses within the market appears to be fragile and precarious. For instance, “Flow’s Fashion”, (*fig. 33*) a shop promoted on Brixton Village’s official website as operating seven days a week, was closed during my visit.⁶⁰ This discrepancy raises concerns about the role of local businesses within the market’s wider branding, and its deprioritisation as their economic viability declines.



Figure 31: Pay-to-use toilets outside the market (own photo)



Figure 32: Market entrance (own photo)



Figure 33: Flow's Fashion, (brixtonvillage.com)



Figure 34: Flow's Fashion Today (own photo)

60 “Flow’s Fashion | Brixton Village,” Brixton Village, July 6, 2023, accessed December 2025, <https://brixtonvillage.com/trader/flows-fashion/>.

Cultural artefacts continue to exist, albeit in fragmentary forms. Physical concert posters are still pinned to walls, demonstrating that traditional modes of cultural communication have not entirely vanished. However, these remnants coexist uneasily within an environment that is increasingly focused on visual consumption. A handwritten sign in a local bookshop window, which reads “Please don’t just take a picture, buy the book!” (fig. 37) directly addresses the transformation of the market into a photographic backdrop. People are no longer investing in the local community; instead, they focus on how their cultural experiences affect their social media presence, consuming the culture without materially supporting the community that creates it.

Furthermore, a Brixton clothing shop promotes itself as a provider of “Brixton Street Wear” (fig. 36), but it primarily functions as a print-based merchandise outlet. Sharon Zukin would describe this phenomenon as the commodification of authenticity, where cultural identity is detached from genuine lived experience and repackaged for consumption.⁶¹ Items in other culturally relevant stores, including “£14 Afro-pop socks” (fig. 38) demonstrate how cultural symbols are monetised for a consumer demographic willing to pay premium prices to affiliate themselves with Brixton’s identity.

The significant mark-up assumes that visitors have a disposable income and is increasingly disconnected from the socio-economic realities faced by long-term residents. This process parallels Hornsey Town Hall’s transformation, where civic heritage is aestheticised and monetised through luxury accommodation.



Figure 35: Event posters, (own photo)



Figure 36: Brixton Street Wear, (own photo)



Figure 37: Handwritten sign on a bookshop window, (own photo)



Figure 38: Market prices, (own photo)

61 Zukin, “Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places”, 3.

The presence of national restaurant chains such as Honest Burgers (*fig. 39*) and Rosa's Thai (*fig. 40*) in Brixton Village further illustrates the market's changing economic landscape. These establishments are not culturally specific to Brixton and do not originate from the area. Rather, their infiltration suggests that their market research indicated a sufficient influx of newcomers since gentrification, providing enough confidence that the restaurants would be successful.

Above Brixton Village, one can find Pergola (*fig. 41*), a rooftop bar and events venue with multiple locations across London, including Canary Wharf. During my visit, the staff at the entrance asked whether I had a booking or was there for "the event", which happened to be a soul night. This assumption reveals how the bar tends to attract a transient, event-focused audience rather than local community members. A Pergola branch in Canary Wharf was found to prioritise ticketed events and private hire, mainly catering to corporate and professional clients.⁶² Its weak integration with Brixton Village Market suggests that proximity does not guarantee social continuity as the everyday users of the market are not the intended audience for the rooftop venue, which reinforces a hierarchical separation in the space.



Figure 39: Honest Burgers inside market, (own photo)



Figure 40: One exit leading to Rosa's Thai, (own photo)



Figure 41: Pergola rooftop bar above market, (own photo)

62 "Pergola on the Wharf | Bar & Restaurant in Canary Wharf," n.d., <https://www.pergolacanarywharf.co.uk/>.

3.5 Listing and the Failure to Protect Intangible Cultural Heritage

Historic England's listing entry for Brixton Village pays particular attention to its social history, referencing Brixton's rich cultural diversity.⁶³ However, as with Hornsey, this recognition lacks enforceable mechanisms. Whilst listing protects the architectural fabric, it does not regulate how the space is used, its affordability, or the continuity of the community. Brixton is facing exactly what ICOMOS warns us of, that when intangible heritage is acknowledged without structural support, it risks becoming symbolic rather than functional.⁶⁴

3.6 Brixton and Hornsey in Comparative Perspective

Brixton Village and Hornsey Town Hall illustrate two different aspects of heritage loss. Hornsey illustrates how privatisation and luxury development can erode civic heritage, and Brixton demonstrates how cultural heritage can be compromised through commodification, rising rents, and lifestyle branding, even when physical access to the space remains intact. Both examples highlight how it is more likely to prioritise aesthetic value over social continuity when market considerations primarily govern adaptive reuse.

Meanwhile, sustainability discourse legitimises these transformations by focusing on material preservation, while intangible cultural heritage remains under-recognised. Brixton's trajectory is particularly instructive because it demonstrates that adaptive reuse can initially support cultural continuity. However, without long-term safeguards, this success is reversible.

⁶³ "BRIXTON MARKETS – RELIANCE ARCADE," Historic England.

⁶⁴ ICOMOS, "International Charter and Guidance on Sites with Intangible Cultural Heritage"

CHAPTER 4: TOWARDS A SOCIALLY ACCOUNTABLE HERITAGE MODEL

The current state of Hornsey and Brixton strengthens the main argument of this dissertation: heritage conservation must expand its definition of sustainability beyond fabric, form and carbon to include who can access, use and shape historic buildings over time.

A socially accountable heritage model would not treat buildings as a market asset, but as dynamic social infrastructures whose value depends on continued communal participation. This perspective advocates for adaptive reuse as a political and ethical practice that must actively support cultural life, rather than solely focusing on architectural form and environmental effects.

A model like this should start by redefining the concept of harm. Planning authorities must evaluate potential harm by explicitly identifying the social and cultural impacts, such as the loss of public access, displacement of long-term users, and erosion of everyday cultural practices. To achieve this, local authorities should mandate participatory heritage assessments during the early stages of planning. This will allow residents, traders, and users to express what gives significance to a place, where communal value can subsequently evolve from a merely descriptive term to a vital component of the planning process.

This model must also directly address the economics of reuse. Without proper structural protections, market pressures will inevitably overshadow cultural intentions. Therefore, councils should require community-use clauses in adaptive reuse projects to ensure that a certain percentage of reused space remains truly public, affordable, and non-commercial. Long-term leases with capped rent increases should be established to protect local businesses, particularly in markets and civic buildings that have strong cultural significance. Moreover, when housing is included as part of the redevelopment, authorities should link affordability thresholds to local income levels, not borough-wide or city-wide averages, to prevent heritage sites from becoming gateways for exclusionary wealth.

Ultimately, socially accountable heritage must recognise that cultural continuity requires time, not just access. Temporary cultural initiatives, delayed arts centres, or event-based engagement cannot replace the need for stable, everyday use. As evidenced by both Hornsey Town Hall and Brixton Village, heritage loses its significance when access becomes conditional, expensive, or performative. A more responsible approach would not treat community presence as a by-product of regeneration, but as its primary indicator of success. Following unconditional completion of these requirements, adaptive reuse will be able to claim true sustainability. This way adaptive reuse can both sustain buildings and the people and cultures who give those buildings life and meaning.

To conclude, this dissertation argued that adaptive reuse in London's heritage buildings cannot be understood solely as an environmentally responsible or commercial practice, but must be recognised as a socio-political process that actively shapes access, identity, and belonging. Through the case studies of Hornsey Town Hall and Brixton Village Market, it was shown how the language of sustainability and heritage often legitimises forms of social exclusion and cultural erasure, even where tangible heritage remains intact. These projects demonstrate that preserving buildings without sustaining the communities that give them meaning risks reducing heritage to an aesthetic or commercial asset. By foregrounding communal value and intangible cultural heritage, this research contends that truly sustainable reuse must prioritise cultural continuity, affordability, and public access.

Ultimately, the question that those aiming to achieve adaptive reuse should ask is whether adaptation serves collective life or market logic, and most importantly, who bears the cost when heritage becomes a vehicle for exclusion. Without mechanisms for accountability, that cost is repeatedly transferred onto the very communities whose history and labour produced the value that redevelopment now exploits.

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Figure 17: Rear Entrance to Residential Area, own photograph.

Figure 18: Figure 18: Gates Labelled as Hornsey Town Hall, own photograph.

Figure 19: Figure 19: The Arts Centre Now, own photograph.

Figure 20: The Clock Tower, own photograph.

Figure 21: A mother and child entering the building before being asked to leave, own photograph.

Figure 22: Observed House Prices in Crouch End, own photograph.

Figure 23: Granville Arcade, 1937, brixtonvillage.com

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Figure 32: Market entrance, own photograph.

Figure 33: Flow's Fashion, brixtonvillage.com

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Figure 34: Flow's Fashion Today, own photograph.

Figure 35: Event posters, own photograph.

Figure 36: Brixton Street Wear, own photograph.

Figure 37: Handwritten sign on a bookshop window, own photograph.

Figure 38: Market prices, own photograph.

Figure 39: Honest Burgers inside market, own photograph.

Figure 40: One exit leading to Rosa's Thai, own photograph.

Figure 41: Pergola rooftop bar above market, own photograph.