

. . . The potential exists to create an interchange between at least three of the lines, making it unusually accessible from every point of the London compass . . .

● *King's Cross station: does it have great potential?*



Great opportunity in central London

**Covent Garden, Canary Wharf — and now King's Cross?
Professor PETER HALL and NICHOLAS FALK discuss getting the balance right on a site with enormous possibilities.**

SOME of the most challenging problems facing Britain's inner city areas concern the future of the vast areas developed in Victorian times for transport and utilities.

Less obvious and attractive than the docks are the former railway goods yards and gas works, which often adjoin canals. Such areas now often house a mixture of small firms, such as car repairers and transport businesses, as well as non-conforming uses like scrap yards, and, as we are beginning to discover, a surprising variety of wild life.

The general lack of activity creates a kind of black hole in the centre of many of our cities. Yet the areas are sufficiently large and accessible to provide the raw material for whole new quarters or urban villages that could both accommodate new forms of

activity and meet the needs of the surrounding communities. In a sense they provide one last opportunity to get things right for our cities.

It is all a matter of balance.

Unfortunately most of the proposals for such areas have tended to be monolithic and therefore generally inappropriate and highly vulnerable to criticism.

This in turn mainly stems from the lack of appropriate development agencies which can provide the vision, resources, and sustained effort such areas require. Mixed use schemes may be too complicated for most developers, but variety is essential for life.

One such opportunity that presents itself is the area the Victorians called Belle Isle, the 100 acre site of the King's Cross Goods Yard, and other land adjoining King's Cross and St Pancras

Stations.

Built to handle London's vast coal traffic, the area has lain half-vacant and half-derelict since the mid 1970s. Most people are unaware it even exists, as there is no proper East-West road north of the Euston Road. Yet unlike that other mythical isle, the Isle of Dogs, it is not three miles from the City of London but right on its doorstep. And unlike Docklands it needs no new rail system to exploit its development potential!

King's Cross is serviced by no less than four rail lines. The BR electrics from Bedford to Moorgate mark the western boundary. Next year they will be extended via the Snow Hill tunnel to create London's new Crosstown Link, with services from Bedford to Gatwick and Brighton. On the eastern boundary are the Great Northern electrics into King's Cross and it would make eminently good sense to connect them to the Crosstown Link via a short spur across the Belle Isle site.

On the north side is BR's North London line — but the old Maiden Lane station has been long closed. And finally, the Piccadilly Line runs under the site — with, again, an abandoned ghost station: York Road, where trains last stopped in 1932.

So the potential exists to create an interchange between at least three of these lines — the Great Northern, North London and Piccadilly — near the centre of the site, making it unusually accessible from every point of the London compass — and incidentally boosting traffic on BR's Network South East. Via the Bedford electrics, the site will be a mere five minutes from the City.

It thus offers unique potential for the development of activities that depend on good communications, and for providing a model of what inner city development should be about.

For rail links are not the only extraordinary feature of this extraordinary site. Immediately to the south west, the huge structure of the new British Library is at last appearing above ground — and this is only the first half of a development which, when complete in 1993, will allow the full transfer of the whole library complex to the site.

Next door is Sir Gilbert Scott's St Pancras Station, where there are now proposals for creating a first class hotel. The spectacular undercroft, which was once used for storing beer from Burton and is now the haunt of car repairers could become an underground warren of wine bars and bookshops, and indeed St Pancras may close altogether releasing the train shed space for some kind of exhibition centre.

And that is not the end of it. The southern edge of the goods yard is crossed by the Regent's Canal, here bordered by a notable complex of early Victorian warehouses. At one stage it looked as if these would be demolished. But proposals for saving them put forward by URBED on behalf of SAVE

and the London Borough of Camden now seem a step closer to implementation.

The proposals were put forward at a public inquiry in 1985 into National Freight Consortium's application to demolish the GNR Coal Offices. The inspector accepted URBED's evidence that the whole group was worthy and capable of rehabilitation. In order to make Camden's idea of a living museum viable, the proposals envisaged converting buildings into specialist retailing, workspace for small firms, and some residential uses.

By providing space to live, work and play, an urban village could be created, with the historic area providing a valuable 'landmark'.

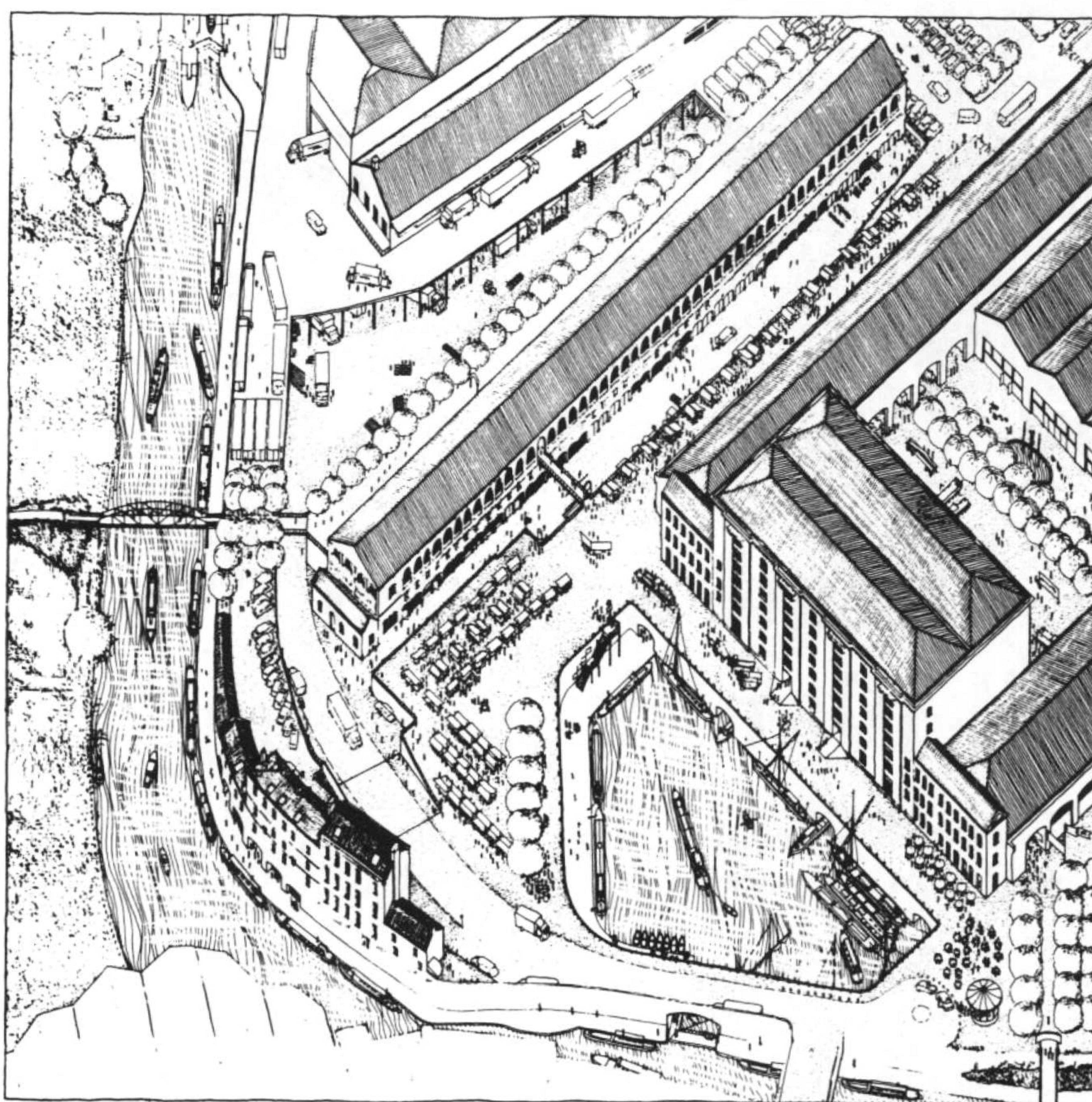
Since the outcome of the inquiry,

waterside views, a living museum, with leisure and shopping uses that will make the most of large Victorian structures, and a business park that can attract growing enterprises without having to demolish existing structures. There must also be a stress on a high quality of landscape, which could build on the pioneering achievements of the Camley Street Natural Park.

King's Cross presents the kind of opportunity that only occurs very rarely.

The question is whether a balanced scheme can be devised that relates the site's unique resources to the needs of both the local community and the wider city. Conventional land use plans and planning gains are no longer seen as the answer, but we have yet to devise satisfactory alternatives.

KINGS CROSS GOODS DEPOT



● Drawing by Berman and Guedes, architects.

COAL OFFICES

Regeneration: Context & Potential

... The message of the American cities is that a far more complex bargaining process is needed, involving elements that can range between employment and training to participation ...

Camden has issued a new planning brief, which emphasises the importance of incorporating a mix of uses and retaining the historic core where possible.

What is required for the site as a whole is a balance of uses that are appropriate for a capital city going into the 21st Century. The industrial revolution based on muscle power and steam has given way to a second revolution based on brain power and electronics.

The uses are therefore likely to include housing, taking advantage of

However the message from those American cities that have succeeded in turning themselves around (see *We Can Learn From US Cities*, T&CP, February 1986) is that a far more complex bargaining process is needed, involving elements that can range from employment and training for local people, to opportunities for participation, for example, through self-build housing.

So instead of Compulsory Purchase Orders, areas like King's Cross need what might be called CPAs — Community Partnership Agreements —

sophisticated deals through which the interests of the many parties involved are reconciled by direct negotiation.

It is time we got the balance right, and King's Cross could provide the opportunity.

● Peter Hall is Professor of Geography at Reading University and a Member of the T&CP editorial board. Nicholas Falk is Director of URBED.