GREAT ESTATES: HOW LONDON’S LANDOWNERS SHAPE THE CITY
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MAP
INTRODUCTION

“Dined at my Lord Treasurer’s, the Earl of Southampton, in Bloomsbury, where he was building a noble square or piazza – a little town…”

— The Diary of John Evelyn (9 Feb 1665)

London’s ‘little towns’ – its distinctive neighbourhoods and urban villages – have made it unique among world cities. The sequences of streets, squares, parks, piazzas and gardens created by the estates, old and new, great and small, have evolved to create an enduring urban framework that supports and forms the backdrop to the economic, cultural and social life of the capital.

The estates’ approach to making attractive places in which to live and work – and, perhaps most importantly, in maintaining and adapting them as such over a long period – has, in the past decade and more, been taken up by new projects seeking to regenerate large areas of the city. Where others come and go, the estates, with a commitment to long-term success, are stewards of a large part of London, but they have also shown a remarkable ability to evolve and innovate in one of the world’s fastest-changing cities. The principles of placemaking that they have developed from centuries of expertise have proved highly influential.

How the estates evolved

London’s unique quality as a patchwork of different neighbourhoods was ultimately driven by political and social agendas. The lack of an absolutist monarchy or overarching authority prevented the imposition of a grand vision dictated like that by Louis XIV in France in the 17th century and elsewhere in Europe. Instead, London as a city emerged from the piecemeal developments of self-contained estates under single ownership, which over time have meshed together physically and been overlaid by other patterns of planning, management and infrastructure, such as local authorities, public transport networks, and, most recently, the Greater London Authority.

Grants of land to aristocracy and gentry have, of course, been given by the monarch since the Conquest of 1066, and the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century resulted in major changes in the ownership of land previously held by the Church. Development on a large scale only took place after the Restoration of Charles II and accelerated after the Great Fire of 1666, when the wealthy wanted to escape the “impure and thick mist” of the crowded City of London (as Evelyn described it). The first estate in the modern architectural sense had been built in Covent Garden by the 4th Earl of Bedford in about 1631; he had employed Inigo Jones to lay out an Italianate arcaded square along with the church of St Paul’s, creating a new model that revolutionised town planning in England.

New ideas of urban living – and using greenfields more profitably and ingeniously than for pasture – were encapsulated by a form of development that began with the Earl of Southampton’s Bloomsbury Square. In 1661 the Earl gave out plots to builders on 42-year leases at low ground rents, on condition that the builder constructed houses – often at his own cost – that would ultimately become...
the landlord’s property. This introduction of the leasehold system, based on shared risk, ensured that the owner of the land benefited from development and a regular income from ground rent at minimal outlay to himself, while he retained ownership for the long term—sometimes a legal requirement as the land was often entailed or held in trust and so could not be sold.

The builder-cum-developer on his part also benefited by acquiring a prime site, and was often able to sublet individual plots. Most leases were fixed at 99 years, so within around three generations of ownership the estates were able, on reversions of leases, to renew them at increased rents or to redevelop the land.

Bloomsbury Square also initiated a new arrangement of town houses in terraces around garden squares, with servants and tradesmen located in mews or side streets. This pattern was adopted during the explosion of estate building that occurred around the turn of the 18th century, from which major estates such as Grosvenor, Portman and Howard de Walden emerged and which still largely shape the form of the West End of London today.

London emerged in the 19th century as a world powerhouse of industry and commerce, and its population more than quadrupled from 1 million in 1800 to 4.3 million in 1881. A second major wave of estate building, albeit quite different in form and supported by mortgaging on a massive scale, took place in the 19th century. New estates for the new affluent middle classes were developed in Kensington, Belgravia, Chelsea and other areas, while the arrival of the Tube, omnibuses and trams spurred growth on the outer reaches of west, north and south London.

The situation changed dramatically in the early to mid-20th century, when the impact of war damage, stagnant ground rents, and punitive death and estate duties adversely affected many of the well-established landed estates; many, including Portman, Bedford and Grosvenor, among others, sold large tracts of land, while other areas were subject to compulsory purchase for housing, education or other uses by public authorities.

The impact of leasehold reform legislation from the 1960s onwards and the right to buy freeholds has also irrevocably changed the shape of the estates, and stimulated greater diversification and the rise of a more professionalized, proactive approach to management. With significant changes in economics, markets and legislation in the last 25 years, estates—even those created in that period such as Broadgate and Canary Wharf—have had to be nimble-footed enough to deal with change in order to survive.

Yet the estates have created an enduring legacy: some of London’s most attractive, high-quality and distinctive neighbourhoods. But these are not merely historic artefacts—they continue to evolve, and the planning, design and management principles that made them so successful have provided a foundation for the regeneration of large brownfield sites, including King’s Cross and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. At the same time there is a realisation that majority ownership of areas that have already been developed can enable a much more effective coordinated management approach, which is the strategy employed by Shaftesbury Plc and Soho Estates, among others.

These emerging estates have identified and applied many core principles that helped the original estates flourish: mixed-use areas with a diversity of building types, leases and occupancy, facilities such as schools and health centres within walking distance; well-managed public realm and common amenities; strong community ties; and clear connections to adjoining neighbourhoods. The ‘great estates’ model continues to provide a flexible yet robust template that can inform new approaches to creating great places.
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Similarities and differences

By its nature of being embedded in one locality, each estate is different in character and form but some groupings emerge. The Bedford, Cadogan, City of London, Crown, Grosvenor, Howard de Walden and Portman Estates are the largest and longest-established estates and are often described as the traditional ‘great’ estates or ‘original’ estates. These estates were established in the 17th and 18th centuries (and earlier) and the urban landscape and management approaches they have initiated have influenced much future development. They are still evolving today.

In some cases, however, the shape of a historic estate in property terms has changed because of outside forces, in particular leasehold reform. This has totally recast those estates with the highest number of residential properties originally held freehold, for example the The Eyre Estate, as ownership has been fragmented. The estate retains a visual and architectural integrity, however, owing both to wider planning controls imposed at national or local levels, and estate management agreements or covenants that can impose restrictions on additions or alterations.

Over the past generation a new set of great estates for the 21st century and beyond has emerged. They comprise two main types: those such as Shaftesbury and Soho Estates, which acquire land in the same area building up a large portfolio of frequently contiguous buildings; and those such as Canary Wharf, Broadgate and King’s Cross which are mainly developing brownfield sites. The latter are largely a result of the 19th-century industrial legacy: large-scale industrial areas under single ownership, some highlighted by the London Plan as Opportunity Areas, which are developed as a coherent master plan. One of the most significant differences, however, between the original and most of the new estates is that the latter generally have direct ownership over public spaces, whereas in the former roads and streets have been adopted.

In legal terms, many of the older estates are held in trust for families or individuals; over time, depending on the original covenants, ownership may have devolved to several or even hundreds of people who are descendants of the original owners, or other institutions: The Colville and Pollen Estates are two such examples. This can make for a complex administrative structure in terms of generating returns for beneficiaries.

Other estates, including those held by City livery companies, are owned by charitable trusts or foundations, where revenue is often channelled into charitable giving or grants, or supporting educational foundations: until the 18th century it was not possible to set up a trust to see a charitable bequest fulfilled – to do so it was necessary to donate or bequeath land and/or property to an individual, the Church or a livery company. Some estates are also now publicly limited companies.

The role of estate managers and agents

Over the centuries estate managers and agents have played a significant role in the success of London’s estates, and many firms including Cluttons, Savills, Deloitte Real Estate, Knight Frank and Farebrother continue to do so today. The history of some of these companies stretches as far back as the estates themselves: Cluttons, for example, was founded in 1765, and Savills in 1835. Traditionally, the agent was quite often the public face of the estate – walking its streets, meeting residents and inspecting properties.

Today, many of the larger estates, such as Cadogan and Grosvenor, among many others, employ their own extensive in-house teams to manage every aspect of the estate. Others, for example Pollen, Phillimore and Wellcome Trust, employ external management. This is done for a number of reasons, not least because such companies provide dedicated expertise in the management of property at a day-to-day level.
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At one level, and in a time-honoured fashion, the manager or agent can be responsible for the hands-on approach to running the logistics of the estate on a daily basis: organising rent collection, dealing with tenants’ or occupiers’ queries, undertaking rent reviews and lettings, approving requests and assigning licences for alterations, providing valuations, and so on. Today, however, this is merely just one part of the manager’s role. In a highly challenging and competitive market, all estates – whether managed internally or externally – need to ensure that the value of their portfolios is maintained and enhanced.

Where external managers are employed, they will also advise on strategic decision-making, for example by providing overviews of overall policy and trends in the property market, identifying parts of the estate that can be upgraded, unlocking value by restructuring leases, recommending areas for investment or properties to buy back to restore the integrity of the original estate, and other ways of maximising assets and capital. The external manager provides an independent viewpoint that can support building and managing relationships with occupiers, local authorities and other stakeholders. Good management remains at the heart of a successful estate: only a well-managed one will endure for the long term.

What makes an estate?
The success of the original estates is dependent on a number of key principles and tenets, many of which have, in the past decade especially, informed and been brought up to date by contemporary placemaking approaches:

Commitment to the long term
Good stewardship is the core tenet that underlies the management and ethos of the estates today. In practice this means that there is a commitment to managing the estate for the long term, to not only ensuring a viable revenue stream but also, today, to promoting London as a whole in a highly competitive international market.

Stewardship is not just managing the estate effectively on a day to day level, but taking a creative, strategic approach that helps to sustain the right mix of uses and occupiers to embed long-term value.

Creating the urban framework
Ultimately, estates are masters at placemaking; underlying all successful original and contemporary estates is an approach that focuses on the masterplan and infrastructure rather than individual streets and buildings. As noted above, even the earliest estates were self-contained ‘little towns’: all the services that residents and workers needed, including housing, medical, educational and cultural facilities, could be found in one place – each estate had its own town hall, church or chapel, school, baths, etc built for the benefit of all. Focusing on the overall plan by setting a framework of appropriate scale, density and legibility meant that over time the estate was flexible enough to accommodate new uses, while the leasehold system allowed the owner to replace outmoded or redundant buildings when leases expired.
It is this aspect which has perhaps been most influential in the creation of new parts of the city: the estate provides the ‘framework’ for the new place to emerge and acts as a catalyst for a real community to form. This holistic view was very important also in terms of looking at how new estates provide a ‘complete offer’ i.e. retail, commercial, leisure, services, etc. alongside the need for residential.

**Familiarity with the local**

In centuries past, and even today, the landowner lived on the estate itself and took personal pride in his or her property, while the owner’s livelihood often depended heavily on the satisfaction of his or her tenants and occupiers. Ultimately the estate owner, and the agent where there was one, was intimately familiar with his or her property, and the best uses for it, and with the local community. This legacy is perhaps most apparent in the naming of streets and squares after family names, titles or landholdings that characterises so much of London’s urban landscape today.

Some estate owners made it their business to become acquainted with their tenants and their lives, in a paternalistic (or maternalistic) manner; Olive Lloyd Baker, for example, who owned the estate of that name in north London until her death in 1975, was often seen visiting her tenants, and “took an equal interest in their budgerigars and aunts in Australia, though she often found it difficult, after consuming spaghetti at four in the afternoon … to do justice to tea and muffins in each of three adjacent houses” (Survey of London, vol 47, 2008). As Simon Jenkins has noted (in Landlords to London), “the strength lay in the identity of interest between the convenience and self-esteem of the residents and the long-term viability of the estate itself.”

Today many traditional estates value the direct connection and personal relationships that they or the owning family have with their occupiers, customers and tenants. This is seen also in the long-standing tradition of directing funds for charitable, educational, artistic and welfare initiatives at a local level. This relationship has also moved with the times by more and better use of new technology and communications, including web, social media, and community events, to stimulate new interest as well as to support the local community. Branding has become more apparent in promoting particular areas of a estate. Many estates have developed distinct ‘brand identities’ including Marylebone Village (by Howard de Walden), Portman Village (by Portman) and the Hyde Park Estate (by The Church Commissioners), among many others.

**Employing a holistic and proactive management approach**

The original estates have proved extraordinarily adaptable to change, and over time have provided a framework that has helped to sustain London’s economic, cultural and social activity. Through the benefit of retaining assets in single ownership, and an imperative to sustain value in the long term, estates have taken an organic and holistic approach to renewal and development.

There has been a continuous process of managing properties over the short, medium and especially long term through their lifecycle in order to maximise the value of the asset: letting, buying back or reversion, refurbishing and then reletting. Historic and architecturally significant buildings are restored and maintained to retain their long-term value both individually and for the character of the estate, but also to ensure that they can be adapted to new uses. In some cases, where long leases exist, an estate freeholder can proactively decide to leave the property as it is and redevelop it in the future; decision-making can often be more considered.

On the other hand, a longer-term approach that is not dependent on immediate commercial gain allows estates to use exemplar projects or refurbishment of...