



**The Barbican: Past, Present and Future**  
**Professor Sir Nicholas Kenyon CBE**

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Good evening and welcome to this annual Gresham Lecture, and many thanks to you Loyd and to Gresham College for this invitation, and sorry we have had to delay it by a year; I hope you haven't been holding your breath.

Let's start with a minute of film from 1969...as two earnest narrators ponder in Socratic dialogue the future of the City.

That extract from the film Barbican 1969 sums up nicely what I want to touch on today –the question of why the Barbican arts centre came to be, what it has evolved to be today, and what it needs to be in the future. And it gives us a continuing motto for that narrative: 'a fuller way of life'. Through the enforced months of lockdown, I've had the chance to look back at some of the origins of the Barbican project in preparation for our fortieth anniversary next year: here's a first take on the results.

If you ask the question why the Barbican was built, the answer is both very simple and very complex.

On the simplest level, it was created from the devastation of the Blitz in order to ensure that the City Corporation had a future. We can be clear that the vanishing residential population of the Square Mile posed an existential threat to the survival of the Corporation, with its independent governance and its long traditions, for there was a serious possibility in the post-war years that, without residents and voters, there might be a move to incorporate the City into the London County Council.

In London, the City had been among the most severely damaged of all areas. St Paul's escaped destruction

And its overgrown surroundings were still a lunchtime haunt for City workers who at that point were not expected to work from home. But the buildings around and to the north of St Paul's had been comprehensively destroyed, where (as Pevsner noted) one could walk for over half a mile without passing a single standing structure.

The basic question facing the City was whether to rebuild the area on the existing street plan, or to attempt a much more radical reimagining of the area. This was a debate paralleled in many British cities after the war, and it had also been a much earlier debate in the City after the Great Fire of 1666.

That was Christopher Wren's idealistic proposal for a redrawn City after the Fire, full of clear shapes and wide roads, but because of land ownership issues and much else, it never happened. After the second world war, a concern evident around many new city developments was whether those who were to live there actually wanted to be there, in new tower blocks rather than old, terraced streets.

But the Cripplegate area of the City, seen here in the famous Agas map of, had been reduced from a population of 14,000 in 1851 to a population of just 48 a century later. So public consent here was less of a factor: it was the vision of the Corporation that would be the determining element. In the Buildings of England, Nikolaus Pevsner and Simon Bradley write of 'the City's readiness to finance the costly new housing, schools and buildings for the arts, which did not falter in the quarter-century from conception to completion'; that is a very, very generous interpretation of the long and fraught process which then unfolded.

From the point of view of the arts, the complexities are more subtle. It would be wrong –though it makes a powerful narrative—to say that the creation of an international arts centre was part of the core concept of the Barbican from the beginning. In fact, the idea of providing world-class cultural amenities took a long time to become embedded in the thinking and planning of the scheme. Many elements came and went during that process. But eventually the commitment of the City did ensure that the Barbican as a unique residential estate housed a magnificent collection of venues for culture and education: a utopian vision of living with the arts at its core. How on earth did that happen?!

As early as July 1952, the Public Health Committee of the Corporation was asked by the City's Court of Common Council 'to consider and report on the serious effects of the decrease of the resident population of the City'.

The redoubtable figure of Eric Wilkins, then chairman of that Committee, had raised the spectre of the City losing its MP, and was determined to see off any threat to the Corporation. He became the leading, inexhaustible advocate for the Barbican as we know it. There were other powerful interest groups: Sir Gerald Barry became head of an informal 'New Barbican Committee' to campaign for the more commercial development of the area, and the London County Council (which had acquired formal planning powers over the area in the post-war Town and Country Planning Act of 1947) was also active in making proposals. By October 1954 the New Barbican Committee had sponsored a gleaming futuristic plan by architects Serge Kadleigh, William Whitfield and Patrick Horsbrugh; though this was rejected, it was influential on future plans as a comprehensive scheme for the area.

These were heady days for urban planning and cultural development. The growth of cultural venues and festivals including the creation of arts centres was a widespread phenomenon in this period, as the war-time Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts became the Arts Council in 1945. The Edinburgh Festival, the Aldeburgh Festival, the Festival of Britain were all signs of this post-war renaissance.

But more prosaically, the tensions of the early years of designing the Barbican development were not around the arts. They were rather between the pressures for major residential development and the provision of commercial office buildings that would earn income. Any echo there of recent debates about the use of the City office space?!

In both the City and the London County Council there were progressive views and traditionalist approaches vying for dominance: already after the war the City's unimaginative Planning Officer had permitted, as Lionel Esher puts it, 'some fast movers to erect, luckily not on sites of major importance, old-hat buildings of quite incredible ugliness'. I won't illustrate them. The LCC architects' department on the other hand were committed modernists, especially interested in pedestrian-traffic segregation. City and LCC needed to come together in planning the new 'Route 11': a wide road running along the south of the blitzed site, it was to be a series of boldly angled 18-storey tower blocks of offices linked by walkways connected by bridges over the roadway.

This concept could have been extended to the whole Barbican area, and this early model shows a bigger commercial development proposed by Charles Clore on the western Aldersgate side. You can see here; this bit was never developed.

But Eric Wilkins had other ideas, and he wanted to prioritise residential development. The architect Geoffrey Powell had recently won an open competition to design the new Golden Lane Estate in the northern part of the blitzed area (in those days just beyond the City), and as a result had formed a new architectural practice with his colleagues Peter (always known as 'Joe') Chamberlin and Christoph Bon. Golden Lane had shown the City's commitment to providing accessible, imaginative new housing, and CP&B's colourful designs created a stir.

Chamberlin Powell and Bon first produced a scheme for the whole Barbican area in June 1955, including possible recreation spaces, a small exhibition hall, six public houses (where did they go?) and four restaurants, and a new building for the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (GSMD) whose existing premises in John Carpenter Street were becoming dilapidated. Having as they quaintly put it 'given some thought to the possibility of providing for mental recreation', they considered the inclusion of 'for instance, a concert hall, a theatre or a cinema' which 'although ideal, could not be justified commercially'. However, the New Barbican Committee in alliance with the LCC were not ready to agree, and proposed an alternative scheme for warehousing, industrial and residential development, shopping and schools. Eric Wilkins fought hard against this proposal, notably in a fierce address to the Court on 3 November 1955 denouncing the scheme as purely a project of the London County Council. 'Since when, my Lord Mayor, have we wanted the London County Council to ascertain our needs or plan for them? ... Barbican must be developed for the well-being of the citizens of London whose interests we are here to represent'.

Wilkins's arguments won the day: the Court of Common Council turned the proposed scheme down on the grounds of over-development and excessive commercial provision. Chamberlin Powell and Bon produced their first key proposal document in May 1956: Barbican Redevelopment, with this slightly embryonic plan on the cover.

So, this was the first glimmer of an interest in the arts in the all-encompassing Barbican scheme. Where was this balance between commercial gain and residential development going to end up? The decisive intervention came from Duncan Sandys, Minister of Housing and Local Government in a famous letter to the City on 28 August 1956: 'I am convinced that there would be advantages in creating in the City a genuine residential neighbourhood incorporating schools, shops, open spaces and other amenities, even if this means foregoing a more remunerative return for the land'.

The drift was now clear: the tide had turned against over-commercial use and towards the development of a new civilised mode of living. There was strong external support from forward-looking commentators such as Nikolaus Pevsner, who in his 1955 Reith Lectures *The Englishness of English Art* had already cited the proposed Barbican development as one example of 'things that still need support, support against ignorance and short-sightedness, and against the stupid prejudice that such newfangled ideas as would give England modern and worthy town and city centres must be outlandish. It has, I hope, been demonstrated how thoroughly inlandish they are'. Pevsner's judgement prevailed, even if his vocabulary did not.

Chamberlin Powell and Bon's initial plans looked back to history as well as forward, containing echoes of the landscape gardens of previous centuries and including a running track around a wooden area (almost exactly on the eventual site of Girls' School); the emphasis was on 'quiet and sense of seclusion

which should be characteristic of a residential neighbourhood'; shops were now omitted. They looked for models in the leafy squares and the inns of court in London –even inspired, in a quieter time, by Trafalgar Square. I'm not competent to be the expert on the architectural style that underlies the Barbican, but these are among the visual references they gave in their plans.

And these are some of the continental references that they sent as their Christmas cards in this period.

It was at this point that the idea of facilities for the arts quickly assumed a more central role in the scheme. The Guildhall School would need performance spaces; the residents would need local entertainment. And from the provision of some small venues which were essentially to serve the residents and the schools, the ambitions rapidly grew. In September 1957 a report to the Court by a 'Special Committee' led to the creation in October 1957 of the Barbican Committee which met on 17 October and elected Wilkins as Chairman, which gave new terms of reference to Chamberlin, Powell and Bon. For those of you who love City meetings, here is the historic minute of that initial meeting.

On 21 November the architects accepted the proposal to develop their plans without as yet being appointed architects. There was to be a theatre and a concert hall to serve the public as well as the GSMD: 'provided it could be arranged without detriment to the schools, both the theatre and the concert hall could be used by professional companies and orchestras'. The die was cast. If there was a moment when the concept of the Barbican Arts Centre was firmly established, it was in April 1959 when the **Barbican Redevelopment 1959** report by the architects was submitted to the Court of Common Council; this covered the whole residential development and included initial thoughts on the arts venues.

At this point the main theatre and concert hall venues were to be above ground, and a lending library and gallery were added to the scheme. Much was still in doubt: the cover of that elegant report shows the diagonal north-south road right across the estate on which the City engineer insisted, potentially severely damaging the arts centre site.

After many arguments, and a visit from the Minister of Housing and Local Government who said it was 'profoundly wrong', the road was subsequently excluded from the scheme, and that may have been related to the decision to retain Beech Street (formerly the street called Barbican) as an east-west traffic thoroughfare under the podium, something which created an unpleasant polluted urban space destined for traffic only, but naturally and increasingly used by pedestrians.

There were now to be conference facilities for 350–400, and an imaginative but unrealised concept to move the historic Coal Exchange from Lower Thames Street to form part of the GSMD; that building was finally demolished in 1962.

I love the thought of this building housing countless student practice rooms, though I wager that insulating them would have been far more expensive than building them from scratch.

Important to recognise from all this that the architects, seen here in their suits for once, were very aware of the past.

St Giles Cripplegate always played a central role in their picture of the estate, and the resonance of creating great landscapes, great open spaces with water had profoundly historic roots. They were not destructive modernists –they were new urban visionaries.

Well, it was this plan, which according to enduring Barbican myth, was accepted by the Court of Common Council by a single vote. I am sorry to say that although there is plenty in the records that shows the strong dissension among the Court and the constant opposition to the scheme as a whole, there is no record of a division showing that it was voted through by that tiny margin, only that opposing motions were defeated by larger margins.

Still, it has I think a mythic truth –and what it means is: the Barbican only just happened.

However, all this created major new challenges as the thinking around the arts began to expand. By November 1962 it was accepted that the concert hall and theatre now had to be independent because of ‘full-time occupancy by professional companies. They were not just to be adjuncts to the Guildhall School but public venues in their own right.

In March 1963 the City turned to Anthony Besch, the opera producer and director, to produce a report with recommendations. Besch had already made a major tour of the United States in 1961–2 and had been able to visit a wide range of opera companies and conservatoires. He therefore proposed visits to Europe and the USA with Chamberlin and took advice from a wide range of artistic figures. His circumspect and detailed report, delivered on 1 May 1964, still makes fascinating reading.

Besch argued that the size of both concert hall and theatre should be increased to make them economically more viable. The plan before the City envisaged a hall of 1300 and a theatre of 800; he estimated their annual running cost as £13,250 a year. Besch claimed that an increase to a hall of 2000 and a theatre of 1500 would, hey presto, return a surplus of £4,750. (We can only observe that hope, as in so many artistic budgeting matters, sprang eternal.) His convincing point about the concert hall was that ‘the greatest anomaly in London musical life is that not one of its four leading orchestras has ever possessed a home of its own...our London orchestras are compelled to lead a peripatetic existence, performing and rehearsing wherever they can find room, He recognised however ‘that a considerable annual subsidy is necessary...in effect, the City would be undertaking the role of patron’.

Besch received detailed proposals from the London Philharmonic and the London Symphony Orchestras. For the theatre, the net was cast wider, to include ballet and opera as well as drama. The clear preference here was for the Royal Shakespeare Company, which did not have a permanent London home, and detailed discussions took place with Peter Hall, then its Director. The RSC management was in the middle of negotiations around a project in Notting Hill, and could not at that point commit, but Besch said clearly that ‘if this Company could be established in the City, the Barbican Theatre would become a centre of national and cosmopolitan importance’ For the concert hall, the LSO’s entrepreneurial spirit won the day: according to Richard Morrison’s history of the orchestra, the challenge brought out the best in managing director Ernest Fleischmann and player-chairman Barry Tuckwell who ‘after a weekend of brainstorming in a proverbial smoke-filled room...had cooked up a brilliantly optimistic not to say pie-in-the-sky dossier about the orchestra’. The LSO would assume complete artistic and financial control of the hall and pay the Corporation a rent somehow related to the as yet unfixed construction costs of the hall: an offer very difficult for the City to refuse.

Agreement with the RSC was reached in February 1965 and with the LSO in March 1966. The Court of Common Council signed off on the unanimous proposals from the Music, Barbican, and Rates Finance Committees. The design of the venues proceeded, with the important note that the specification of the hall was also to include provision for conferences. The new developments meant that a far larger proportion of the estate was to be devoted to the arts, with the significant consequence that the main venues had to be taken underground: a major factor in their future design.

Just to backtrack a moment, here's the original plan.

Where did that shape of the hall come from? From these drawings by theatre consultant Richard Southern, brought in early, who felt that you could combine a Globe-type theatre with a concert hall in the round inspired by the Berlin Philharmonic.

That was modified post-Besch with the enlarged revision that fixed underground the shapes we now have.

On 25 April 1968 Chamberlin Powell and Bon submitted their report **Barbican Arts Centre 1968** to the Court: 'it will be appreciated that, in essence, as individual elements of the arts centre have grown in size, they have inevitably generated a major increase in the amount of space needed to accommodate the movement of a large number of visitors to the arts centre'. Or as one writer has put it, 'by 1968 the design for the arts centre had grown like a cuckoo'. The architects now stated boldly that 'the Barbican Arts Centre forms the point of focus of the whole residential development'... And consideration was given to car parking facilities and pedestrian routes in from the car parks and the underground stations, with the sadly unfulfilled promise: 'It is hoped that escalator connections direct between platform and podium levels will be constructed at both Aldersgate [now Barbican] and Moorgate stations.

The visualisations of the newly enlarged spaces and of the arts centre as a whole were rather warm, fluffy and moody, especially in these atmospheric sketches from the 1968 report.

A far cry from the reality of the fantastically complex scheme revealed in these section plans.

An experienced administrator for the new Centre was brought in –Henry Wrong, but the problems of commitment from the City came to a critical point when the building contract for the arts centre itself had to be let in 1971 at a meeting on 15 April, for £14.4m --the City Corporation was just beginning to appreciate the hair-raising financial commitment it was making, which indeed turned out to be a figure far greater than that.

Fortunately, the redoubtable Eric Wilkins, as Deputy Chairman of the Barbican Committee, was still on hand to argue the case; as he put it: 'My Lord Mayor, I am thankful to have lived for this day'. He had to deal with the fact that the City's Coal, Corn and Rates Finance Committee had not concurred with the contractors' proposition, and 'the adverse vote by the narrow majority of one, of the Policy and Parliamentary Committee'. Perhaps that negative vote is the source of the one-vote myth? In arguing to the Court, however, he could overturn those decisions.

In his address that April day, Wilkins powerfully captured a recurring theme of the City's deliberations on culture which we glimpsed in our opening film. 'I know there are still some who maintain that the City is no place for the Arts. I have many friends –and they are my friends—who have consistently opposed and even denigrated the whole Barbican project. I respect their right to be so critical: it would be a sad day for this Honourable Court if there were no opposition...The City of London is a tale of two Cities. Firstly...that intricate complex of Banking, Finance, Insurance and Exchange whose expertise and integrity produce those invisible exports without which this Country would be bankrupt... Those who see but one City...would have covered the Barbican acres with banks and offices and done so in spite of successive Government's advice to the contrary... But there is another City. This other City has its own and no less important role. Its concern is for the whole of man: his mind and spirit and physical well-being. A living City. The Corporation of London can be proud indeed of its record...'

It was reportedly the longest meeting ever of the Court of Common Council --or is that another Barbican myth? Henry Wrong took refuge in prayer and avoided the proceedings. At the end of the day the motion to let the construction contract was passed by 78 to 59 votes. The Barbican Arts Centre was on its way. On 27 November 1972 the Queen unveiled the foundation stone of what was by then described as 'the Barbican Centre for the Arts and Conferences', a mark of the evolving commercialism of the scheme. And up it went...

Presided over by Henry Wrong's genial air --he who got the place built in spite of his considerable lack of sympathy for the architects, but with a deep commitment to the ideals of the arts.

Eventually as we know the Queen opened it, declaring it in words no doubt drafted by Henry Wrong, one of the wonders of the world.

The Barbican suffered initially from three things --first the fact that brutalism was in a deep dip of unpopularity as a style, second the fact that to some the days of huge art centres seemed to some at that point to be over, and third of course that because of the lack of planned connectivity it was dogged by so many jibes about its inaccessibility that it even used it itself as a advertising device (If Helen Mirren can find the Barbican she'll be appearing with the RSC in...) and featured in Mark Boxer Smirnoff Vodka adverts.

Another vital fact here is that the high walks were never connected, as originally intended, to the rest of the City. Eventually that lack of direction was addressed with what I have always regarded as the desperate expedient of the famous yellow line on the floor, surely an admission of wayfinding failure.

So, what has the Barbican Centre now become? This is not the moment to explore the twists and turns of all its life over almost forty years, but I can warmly recommend you to a book that will appear next year from Batsford, exploring these themes across all the art forms. But it can be said that thanks to the continuing belief of the Corporation and the commitment of successive management teams at the Centre it has become a truly international, innovative, inclusive arts centre that has moved decisively with the times.

It has been helped on the one hand by the huge shift in public sentiment towards architectural modernism and especially brutalism, especially when as well delivered and as highly specc'd as the Barbican is, in which every detail is beautifully considered and designed; and on the other by the increasingly powerful belief of the importance of the arts in our lives, and the window of understanding that it gives onto the wider world. Over the dynamic period of John Tusa and Graham Sheffield from 1995, resources from the City were comparatively plenty and imagination was given free rein to renew the building, making its signage far clearer and less cluttered.

The departure of the RSC in this period, turbulent and divisive though it was at the time, gave the possibility of a whole new strand of theatre programming which Sheffield, Louise Jeffreys and Toni Racklin devised to show the most adventurous and exciting theatrical thinking of the day. Audiences here first got to know the work of Ivo van Hove at the Barbican, Thomas Oestermeir, our own talent like Deborah Warner and Katie Mitchell, and reached beyond the walls to engage with local venues.

The Art Gallery only became part of the Centre administratively in 2001, and since then has pursued its distinctive path by showing a galaxy of work highlighting, architecture, design and photography with shows that really match the building, and brings the art forms together, as here with Merce Cunningham dance in the Gallery.

And here, acrobatics from Circa meets Debussy's string quartet, in the theatre.

Developing the free Curve gallery as a place for adventurous new commissions has been a big success, though no-one quite predicted the hours of queues that would line round the Barbican foyers to get into Rain Room.

An experience where pouring water dried up around you as you walked, thanks to the wonders of technology.

In the last decade and more we have progressively opened up the Centre to new influences, especially through our work with creative learning in collaboration with the Guildhall School, working beyond the walls in East London and elsewhere to bring a new generation to the arts through outreach.

We've given our main stage to young people from East London for their own powerful show Unleashed, supported by our own artistic teams.

And events that take the spirit of the Barbican beyond the walls. Just as one example among many, who could forget this experience of Dalston House on a disused lot in East London.

An ingenious visual illusion created by a facade on the ground, reflected in a giant mirror. A hit on Instagram!

In the concert hall, the LSO has maintained its residency for 40 years under a succession of great conductors, while the Barbican has complemented its music-making with a range of international orchestras and associate ensembles, mixing classical and the wider repertory with new work and adventure.

And cinema, too often the poor relation of the Centre, has become progressively more diverse especially since the opening of the cinemas on Beech Street which have done so much to open out our facilities and make them visible to the passer-by. There is still so much more to do in our search for visibility.

I think we've established a few principles as absolutely central to the success of an arts venue today and the way they are changing.

The first is diversity, equality and inclusion, reflecting London as it is today in shows like our Jean-Michel Basquiat exhibition which attracted an amazing new audience to the Centre reflecting London as it really is.

The next is brand, a real conviction and distinctive character in how we talk to the public. We've developed this over the years but it's still absolutely individual.

The third is participation, including young people in the process of making work through initiatives like the Barbican Box and our ensemble Drumworks, now an independent entity thanks to our original support.

The fourth is internationalism, the welcome that we provide to so many from around the globe, at a time when the UK is becoming determinedly less international, it is vital for the Barbican to keep those worldwide connections flourishing.

And the fifth is collaboration, here working with Waltham Forest council and many other partners on the Walthamstow Garden Party, a genuine community event.

Collaboration and partnership have become ever more important, this is not just about the Barbican doing things on its own. The most important development in recent times has been the City's creation of Culture Mile in the northwest of the City, a collaboration which will create from the new Museum of London at Smithfield, through the Elizabeth Line at Farringdon, to the repurposing of Smithfield Market, along to Beech Street, where the Barbican's Exhibition Halls stand ready for redevelopment, the Barbican and its neighbour the Guildhall School.

We can animate outdoor spaces, create content in the spaces between our buildings, and even turn to thrilling artistic purpose the drab spaces of Beech Street.

That was Tunnel Visions, an inspiring and sophisticated light show with contemporary classical music that filled the Beech Street tunnel to celebrate Culture Mile.

As we approach a 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary which will hopefully mark the emergence from this period of the pandemic, a period which has heightened inequality and devastated the lives of so many practising artists and creative figures, the challenges to the arts are more profound than ever.

And the question for us is –what should the Barbican become, and what are the needs of a new world? There is so much in the practice and the content of the arts today that was not thought of by the tremendous imagination of Chamberlin Powell and Bon forty years and more ago. Spaces for learning, spaces for communities, spaces for families to feel valued and welcomed into the family of the Barbican and the City. Commercial spaces.

Spaces to commune with nature –here's our conservatory, going right back to the early visions of CPB for a place for reflection.

There are needs for sustainability, for climate change and better energy use that were not at the forefront of thinking in the 70s but are now urgent priorities for us. We need to keep our venues and our spaces up to date for digital delivery and transmission as well as the live event, and ensure they are at the forefront of international thinking in these areas. What should the relationship be between the arts centre and the Barbican estate, and the wider public realm of the area with all the developments that will take place there in coming years?

That is the aim of the Barbican Renewal project, a huge and important project which we'll be announcing later this month. Watch this space. By providing this openness, this welcome and this inclusivity, the Barbican can help the City to realise its aims for a coming-together of culture and commerce which has been heralded by the Lord Mayor's taskforce as part of Culture Mile, working with all these recent visitors to the newly re-opened Centre.

Chairmen, Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, Sheriffs, in a new alliance for the City that does not separate off the arts into a separate world, but makes them, as we heard at the very start, part of 'a fuller way of life'.

This will be a new phase in the history of the Barbican Centre, and I think and hope that it will be one in total harmony with the visionary aspirations of those who created the Barbican 40 years ago. Thanks for listening.



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