The dramatic Western Concourse at King's Cross station is Europe's largest single-span station structure

A railway renaissance

A far cry from the soulless, grey concourses of old, today's train stations are architectural marvels and cultural hubs that enhance any area

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Paul Day's statue The Meeting Place at St Pancras station captures the romance of rail travel and acts as a great spot for a modern rendezvous

We are in the midst of a railway renaissance, according to acclaimed urban architect Hiro Aso. He, of all people, should know, having led the dazzling redevelopment of London's King's Cross overground station for John McAslan + Partners since 1997.

"The UK's first great age of rail travel was in the mid-19th century, when passenger trains became popular," explains Aso. "The second was when faster trains arrived in the 1970s. Now, this third renaissance brings high-speed travel."

The first high-speed line (dubbed HS1) came to the UK in 2007 and cut Eurostar journey times between London and Paris by 25 minutes. Now, HS2 is expected to do the same nationally, reducing journeys between London and the north by up to 40 per cent.

There's another change, however. Alongside faster, sleeker trains, railway stations are now becoming destinations in their own right. These bring powerful commercial opportunities within well-planned, beautifully designed spaces that house boutiques and luxury services as well as train tracks. The big stations now boast everything from Champagne bars and chocolatiers to book shops, fashion retailers, food markets and galleries. "We only recently realised that retail had become something quite different in a station environment," Aso notes. "St Pancras – maybe for the first time ever – raised the bar and demonstrated what that environment could be like."

Because of stunning facilities like these, coupled with modern architecture and sensitive redevelopments, railway stations now add cachet to even formerly neglected areas. King's Cross is a case in point. While George Gilbert Scott's original St Pancras building, with its cathedral-like red brick turrets, helped to put the area on the map in 1868, today's McAslan redevelopment of the Grade-I-listed King's Cross overground station makes it a far more desirable place to be.

A decade ago, this was one of the city's least salubrious neighbourhoods. Today, both train stations have been central in establishing it as a global destination. At King's Cross, the showpiece is the dramatic Western Concourse, whose geometric semi-circular roof grows tree-like from the ground to a height of 20 metres. "It is a landmark," confirms Aso – and now other areas hope to effect a similar transformation.

Crossrail, which launches in 2018, is equally central to this third rail renaissance, bringing high-frequency, high-capacity rail to London and the south east. It will also bolster Britain's growing reputation for high-end station design. The new Custom House station at Newham in east London, for example, will include a public bridge across the tracks, with a beautiful, open and highly visible station at the centre.

But when it comes to merging cutting-edge design with functionality in glamorous settings, there have been trailblazers in recent years, such as London Underground's Jubilee line extension, which opened at the start of the millennium.

Robert Maxwell, who is currently overseeing the new Crossrail Custom House for Allies and Morrison, remembers that time: "There was an overarching remit to produce something exceptional." Architects were instructed to come up with suitably monumental station designs. Their work consequently reveals some of the city's most creative and inspiring architecture, heralding the shift from functional stations to 'destination stations'. For example, Canary Wharf underground station, designed by Foster



WHAT I'VE SEEN

Peter Alderin

Manager of Searcys Champagne Bar, St Pancras International

"We say the romance starts here, as people often visit the bar for Champagne and oysters before catching the Eurostar to France. The station is even licensed to host weddings. That's always good fun, especially vintage-themed ones, where we use coupé glasses and create a Champagne fountain. We also witness the odd marriage proposal – one gentleman had his dog sat at the bar with the ring attached to its collar.

We're involved in promotions and launch events, too. Jamie Cullum recently did a pop-up concert using our lounge as a 'green room', and played one of the public pianos in the station. We often see celebrities in the bar, everyone from Kate Moss to Joanna Lumley and Alastair Campbell. They get treated just like anyone else – we don't make a fuss.

For me, St Pancras International is much more than just a train station: it's like a village. I'm spoiled every time I walk into work as it's such a beautiful place to be."

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WHAT I'VE SEEN

Peter Legge

Conductor, Great Western Railway Paddington Band

"The original Paddington Railway band, formed in the 1920s, consisted of station employees. Nowadays, musicians from all walks of life come to play on platform 8 every Friday from 7.30pm to 9pm. I played in the band until the previous conductor passed away – I stepped in until another could be found. That was seven years ago.

Once, a nine-year-old girl coming through the station with her mum asked if she could join in with the band. She played the flute. She was actually very good, and stayed all evening. There was also a guy from Taiwan who played the French Horn, so for that evening and the following five Fridays, he played in the band. French horn players are quite rare, so it was a real honour. We play a varied programme of jazz, marches and waltzes. The most popular are the show tunes, and quite often people passing through start dancing.

The station's domed roof provides wonderful acoustics but, of course, we're always competing with the noise of the trains."



Westminster station's architecture brings an austere but impressive beauty to the functional spaces within

+ Partners, played a part in transforming the perception of the Docklands district, with its space-age entrance and sleek shopping malls.

Michael Hopkins' redevelopment of Westminster underground station in 1999 was similarly symbolic. Unlike Docklands, the area is filled with world-famous heritage sites, a trickier challenge for a 21st-century station. Above ground, the Palace of Westminster's neo-gothic style and iconic clock tower, designed by Charles Barry in the 1800s, is one of London's most popular tourist attractions. Beneath it lies Hopkins' equally impressive example of modern architectural ingenuity. Plummeting 40 metres into the subterranean depths, escalators zigzag commuters across a magnificent void.

Achieving these design feats isn't an easy task, however. Aso explains: "It's the most regulated sector of construction." Existing buildings, roads, tracks and platforms often limit design, and safety is a huge factor. Architects also need to collaborate with English Heritage, private estates, interior designers, landscape architects, engineers and train operating companies. All these elements ensure that stations, once transformed, evolve into truly unique spaces.

"It is an inspiring collaborative process," says Aso. "We enjoy tapping into each others' views to get solutions." The results are impressive statements of what British architecture and engineering can achieve. And to see for yourself, all you need to do is hop on a train.

Escalators plummet 40 metres, zigzagging commuters across a magnificent void

Different tracks

There are more than 40 disused tube stations in London. After closing, some find themselves put to imaginative uses



1 FILM LOCATIONS

What better resurrection for an abandoned station than having Daniel Craig tearing around your tunnels or Keira Knightley perishing on your platform? Even before it closed in 1994, Aldwych station appeared in *The Gentle Gunman* (1952) and *The Krays* (1990). In recent years, it has played host to scores of stars. Knightley shot *Atonement* and *The Edge of Love* there and it provided the backdrop to The Prodigy's terrifying 'Firestarter' video. The latest Bond movie, *Skyfall*, meanwhile, featured the disused Jubilee line platforms at nearby Charing Cross.

2 ARTS VENUES



After lying empty for decades, the Old Shoreditch Station is now a café/bar and music venue. The relatively small site hosts pop-up shops, product launch events, private parties, regular fashion and design exhibitions, and occasional arts events.



3 HIDDEN BUNKERS

Conspiracy theories have our secret services running round a labyrinth of secret tunnels underground – and there is at least some truth in the idea. During World War II, Winston Churchill used the decommissioned Down Street station (above) as an air-raid shelter and co-opted Brompton Road, a 28,000 square foot bunker, as a secret command centre. The perfect wartime rabbit holes.

4 UNDERGROUND HOMES

After a brief reincarnation as a parade of shops, the original Chancery Lane entrance was recently transformed into the lobby of an exclusive apartment block, while the little-used Blake Hall station on the Central line was converted into a private home.