

Cover story

A restoration fit for a queen

After a decade of wrangling, Victoria is ready for a makeover that will make it a place Londoners will be proud to call home, its development director tells **Lorna Blackwood**

Victoria needs a facelift and the suitably chic and decisive Colette O'Shea, development director of the property company Land Securities' London portfolio, is taking charge of the job. This section of London SW1 is surrounded by some of the capital's smartest locations: Belgravia's squares, Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament and St James's Park. Victoria station — used by 115 million people a year — is one of the busiest in London. But when you step outside the terminus, the prospect is far from pleasant, with its pockets of tired postwar office blocks on Victoria Street, some of them occupied by government departments.

Other unlovely sights include the baleful bus station in front of the railway station's main entrance. Only Cardinal Place, the glossy glass and steel retail and restaurant complex (a Land Securities scheme that opened six years ago) suggests that Victoria could be the kind of place where women such as 42-year-old O'Shea would wish to live or shop. Kate Middleton is rumoured to be spending the night before her wedding at the five-star Goring Hotel, five minutes from the station. This establishment is anything but the dilapidated Victoria hotel.

The downsizing of government and the ending of leases on the many buildings owned by Land Securities, however, present an opportunity for radical change. The property development company will endeavour to "completely rejuvenate Victoria for residents, businesses and visitors". Such is the apparent confidence in this experiment in inner-city regeneration that the bulk of the apartments in one of the first housing



schemes have already sold. If the planners give their consent, a total of more than 600 homes, from the deluxe to the affordable, could be produced. Already 327 have been built (see far right). O'Shea, a trained surveyor, is becoming associated with the revitalisation of tired parts of the capital, which she describes as "the best city in the world"; none other comes close in her estimation. Land Securities, in its pursuit of its vision for Victoria, has been beset by planning and other problems, but O'Shea prefers not to see obstacles, rather the rebirth of a location that has for decades been the poor neighbour to Belgravia, Chelsea, Mayfair and Pimlico. She believes that the regeneration will change the whole perception of the place: "When you combine our recent developments with our new planning permissions, you can start to see the potential of the area, finally realising the Victorians' vision for a spectacular Victoria."

O'Shea's confidence is crucial to the project's success. A development director is responsible for every part of the project, including leading the negotiations with the local authority, the relationships with

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the planners and the awarding of the contracts to construction companies and other suppliers. As one insider put it: "Colette's leading everything up to the point that the pylons are driven in — and actually beyond it."

Recently, O'Shea worked on One New Change, the shopping mall that opened late last year at the western end of Cheapside, next to St Paul's Cathedral. All the retail units in the futuristic building, designed by the architect Jean Nouvel, are now let. Residents, businesses and visitors have a new destination in which to dine and shop; the development that arose on a site where dull office blocks once stood returns this end of Cheapside to its medieval retail roots. Models of how Victoria will look after its makeover are on view in the SW1 Gallery in the Cardinal Place shopping centre. This toytown representation is the culmination of nearly a decade of planning and political wrangling, including at least one big row with Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London. In May, yet another planning application is to be submitted for 300 more homes. The completion of the Land Securities

grand design will not be realised until 2018. This should coincide with the completion of the £700 million overhaul, under the Victoria Transport Interchange scheme, of the badly overcrowded Tube station. Land Securities is tackling the above-ground sections of this work, with Transport for London handling the bits below. Regular users will be relieved to learn that the station is also to be renovated and the bus station As a result of cutbacks, neither the railway station nor the bus station will be overhauled, a significant omission. O'Shea explains that Land Securities does not own the site on which the station stands.

Work has already begun at 123 Victoria Street, which once housed the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. The block is being stripped



Colette O'Shea, development director at Land Securities, with a model of the Victoria regeneration project

out and buffed up. Demolition might have been simpler, but this was never contemplated. O'Shea explains: "This is a great piece of 1960s architecture and it would be criminal to demolish it. Land Securities' relationship with Victoria spans decades and our understanding of its changing needs underpins everything we do in the area."

Another building not to be tampered with is the Grade II listed Victoria Palace Theatre, which will keep pride of place on Victoria Street. It will have a new neighbour in the shape of a public library that was requested by local residents. Victoria Street will be the focal point of the regeneration; the pavements will be tree-lined, there will be more shops, more restaurants. The kind of place that O'Shea and lots of others would like to call home.

COVER PHOTOGRAPH AND BELOW: PAUL ROGERS FOR THE TIMES



The mover and shaker who is shaping London's skyline

Colette O'Shea loves London. She has spent her entire career working in the capital and her passion for the city continues to grow. Most mornings she runs the eight miles through the capital's streets from her home in southeast London to her office.

There are many people who feel a strong attachment to the capital, but few are in a position to shape the city. O'Shea, however, is. As director of development for Land Securities' London portfolio, she is responsible for multimillion-pound commercial, retail and residential schemes in key locations, deciding who will design them and who will build them. This makes her a powerful force in the evolution of the London skyline; she also has a considerable influence over the lives of those who live and work in the capital.

"I take my job very seriously and believe that I have a huge responsibility to add to the richness of the city," she says. The seriousness of her approach may be the reason why she says that today she encounters little discrimination in a male-dominated industry. As a junior employee, she found that sexist attitudes were more common among the corporate types than among the "muddy boots". Her boyfriend also works in property.

O'Shea, an economics graduate, trained as a surveyor at the Mercers Company, a City livery company with a large property portfolio in the Square Mile and Covent Garden. She joined Land Securities in 2003, becoming London development director three years later, taking on the £3 billion regeneration of Ebbsfleet Valley in the Thames Gateway before moving on to one of Land Securities' flagship developments — One

New Change, close to St Paul's Cathedral. She delights in the challenge of working with innovative architects. The controversial appointment of Jean Nouvel on One New Change was a particular high point for her. "Nouvel had never designed a retail site before, but he is recognised for creating challenging, original architecture for highly sensitive sites," she says. She thought that he would be perfect for the design of a shopping centre next to St Paul's Cathedral. There was plenty of opposition to the glass and steel design, one particularly high-profile objector being Prince Charles, but she was proud of persuading people that a retail space with a beautiful design next to the cathedral was the right thing to do.

The interest in design extends beyond architecture. O'Shea is known for her distinctive jewellery, earrings in particular. She likes to meet and work with jewellery designers on individual pieces. One of her pleasures is to walk around the capital, seeing many of the buildings that she has worked on, happy in the knowledge that her work is having a real effect on people's lives.

Perhaps her next project — the regeneration of Victoria — will be the biggest challenge of her career. It will certainly be the longest, lasting up to a decade. Victoria, she feels, presents the big opportunity to do what this city does so well — combining the old with the new. "In the Fifties and Sixties we had a lot of architecture that isn't of the quality that we would accept today," she says. "We lost sight of treating London as a place, rather than a collective of individual buildings."

Victoria gives O'Shea the chance to do just that.

Homes



Wilton Plaza, above, situated to the south of Victoria Street, consists of private, affordable and student accommodation behind the bright facade of artist Kate Maestrì's colourful glass installation. Inside there are 157 student bedrooms, as part of the University of Central London, 37 private apartments, ranging from one to three-bedrooms, and 74 affordable dwellings, some as large as four bedrooms. Many overlook the central courtyard gardens and play area.



Another development provides for the high end of London's property market. Wilton House, below, will contain luxury apartments from one-bedroom pied-à-terres to split-level penthouses with balconies and roof terraces, which have stunning views over Buckingham Palace and Green Park. Designed by John McAslan & Partners, the building is intended to complement the traditional red-brick mansion block, of which Victoria has many. The building is due for completion in July 2012, but already 46 of the 59 apartments are sold. Prices range from £650,000 for a one-bedroom to £5 million for a four-bed with roof terrace. Further residential developments are proposed on Buckingham Palace Road and as part of the redevelopment of Kingsgate House on Victoria Street, with planning application due to be submitted late May. Savills: 020-7409 8718, savills.com

Leeds From dustbin to low-carbon hub

A rejuvenated hostel is leading the way in stylish eco-living, Claire Carponen discovers

Cast your mind back to early 2009. The property market was shrouded in gloom, with few locations as depressed as the centre of Leeds with its glut of empty flats, or "executive apartments", attractive neither to buyers nor tenants.

Some developments were abandoned, such as the Lumiere, a 952-apartment scheme that was intended to be an icon of luxury living. Today these formerly unwanted flats have been sold, mostly at large discounts, some to owners and others to landlords wishing to take advantage of the demand from workers and students. With no new homes under construction, rents are now expected to start rising in the city, despite the impact of public sector cuts. Such is the demand

that the eco-conscious homes in a refurbished building in a scruffy area that used to be known as "the dustbin of Leeds" have been selling well. Welcomes to Leeds 2011, where the new status symbol is the integrated energy monitor linked to the TV.

"Before the recession, there was a continuous new supply of properties. Developers were building faster than tenants could move in. Tenants could pick and choose where they wanted to live, which meant that there were lots of empty periods, or "voids", and rents were kept low. Now there are more tenants than flats to let out; there are virtually no new developments as many were mothballed," Stuart Law, chief executive of Assetz, the property investment adviser, says.

Jonathan Morgan, of Morgans City Living in Leeds, agrees: "Leeds is not the ghost town of empty flats as many

predicted. Most of the empty flats are now occupied by tenants, and nearly all of the pipeline developments diminished into nothing."

Guy Ackernley, a partner at King Sturge's Leeds office, says that over the past 18 months there has been an unprecedented rental demand in Leeds city centre. "Occupancy rates are now well over 95 per cent and with such low stock levels we anticipate rents will rise in the city centre by up to 5 per cent over 2011."

The Greenhouse is one of the few developments to be built after the market crashed. The boom years created a legacy of cheaply made, uninspiring blocks, but the innovative scheme offers buyers something new. The Greenhouse is a low-carbon housing project outside the city centre in Beeston. Beeston is rundown but 60 per cent of the Greenhouse's 166 flats have sold, 20 per cent have been let, as well



The Greenhouse is a low-carbon housing project in Beeston, outside Leeds

“By paying less for the site, we could spend more on build quality and energy-saving features”

as half of the commercial space, since off-plan sales were launched at the end of 2007. Formerly Shaftesbury House, the redbrick Art Deco building was built as a hostel to provide decent accommodation for seasonal workers. After it became a homeless hostel it fell into disrepair. The building, nicknamed the "dustbin of Leeds", was abandoned for ten years and left to languish on the city council's housing disposal until Citu, the developer, bought the building in 2007.

"We saw an opportunity with this site. It was in a deprived urban fringe area, close to the city, but land values were much lower. By paying less for the site, we could spend more on the quality of the build and include more energy-saving features," says Fraser Stride, the marketing director of Citu. The developer kept the original shell of the building but added two extra floors and wrapped it in a thick blanket of

insulation. It has made a virtue of the building's institutional feel by adding exposed pipework, polished concrete walls and double swing doors.

Citu included commercial space to make better use of the on-site renewable energy and amenities (gym and café deli) during the day. Each flat is heated and cooled by a ground-source pump, wind turbines power the lifts and communal lights while rainwater and grey-water tanks provide recycled water for lavatories and washing machines. The developer says that the average resident should save about £600 a year on utility bills compared with a standard newbuild. Raised vegetable beds stand in the courtyard and local allotments are available to residents.

I stayed in one of the four penthouse flats overnight (the three-bedroom flat on sale for £237,000). The flat is a blend of retro style and low-carbon features: this is green

living for the style-conscious. The most impressive eco-feature was the integrated energy monitor linked to the television (isrighthere.com). The system tells you how much a bath or a cup of tea is costing you and gives data on how much energy and carbon you are consuming each month.

Thom Graves, a student teacher, 23, moved into a one-bedroom flat in the Greenhouse in October. His parents bought the flat for £117,000 as an investment and so that Thom could benefit from subsidised living costs. "The city-centre flats were too expensive. As a student, it is a priority to keep my utility bills low. The flat has taps with limited water pressure and the energy monitor is a great way of keeping tabs on your usage. There is also a competitive element to it — to see how little you can use. If my girlfriend's been in the shower too long I can bang on the door and tell her to hurry up!"