

United Kingdom

London's Chelsea Barracks: a careful blend of classical and modern

The luxury residences' English garden square style is sympathetic to the local area

17 HOURS AGO



By Edwin Heathcote

There was always something a little odd about this corner of Chelsea, home to some of the world's most desirable real estate, being mostly given over to the army. The Chelsea Hospital with its beautiful Christopher Wren building was one thing, but Chelsea Barracks with its two grim 1960s towers was always a striking eyesore. So perhaps it was inevitable that the Ministry of Defence sold it off in 2006 as a site for upmarket housing.

At £959m, it was the UK's biggest ever residential property deal. What on paper looked like a big but extremely commercial project turned out to be a complex, contested and difficult development. The first attempt, a design by RSH+P, was abandoned by developers Qatari Diar after local objections to the glass and steel blocks.

Only now, 13 years after the site was sold, are the first signs appearing of what is effectively a new neighbourhood. This design has been a collaboration between architects [Dixon Jones and Squire & Partners](#), and landscape designer [Kim Wilkie](#).

The idea is a revival of the English garden square, continuing a local typology and attempting to knit this 13-acre development into the urban fabric of Chelsea and Belgravia. The houses are bigger than their 19th-century equivalents and feature substantial subterranean floors and parking, but they are still relatively low-rise and architecturally conservative.



The 13-acre development is relatively low-rise and architecturally conservative

The promotional video, *A Legacy in the Making*, is keen to emphasise a continuity between the traditional city pattern and its great estates, and the contemporary development. Certainly, giving over five of the 12.8 acres of the development to green space is a significant gesture. Ed Jones, of Dixon Jones, even suggests the garden square is the UK's most significant contribution to urban planning.

At the moment, with construction at full intensity and part of the site a massive excavated crater, it is difficult to judge the success of those squares. But the advance pieces of the project are in place and we can get a hint of the future.

The first finished component is the one existing building on the site, the former Guard's Chapel. After a campaign by local residents — one suspects, at least in part, planned to frustrate the developers in their activity — the 1857 chapel was listed (given protected status) in 2011. It was never an architectural masterpiece but, in the absence of any other historic building on the site, it has become significant.



A sketch of the design for the Garrison restaurant

The chapel has been carefully restored, its stained glass and tiles polished up. It will be leased, I am told, to a major international gallery. This small, slightly Byzantine, slightly Gothic, red-brick building anchors the development in place, giving it a little focus, making it feel like a place.

Similarly, the first new building to be completed complements the chapel and begins to establish a semblance of a public plaza at the heart of the site. Designed by Ben Pentreath, best known for his rather restrained classical country houses and his eclectic interiors shop [Pentreath & Hall](#) in London, it is an arcaded brick building of impressive solidity, destined to become a restaurant.



Bold brick arches and vaults impart a sense of permanence

Taking his cue from the solid, elegant brick walls of the stables at the nearby Chelsea Hospital, which were designed by Britain's great architectural genius Sir John Soane, Pentreath has done his best to make a small building monumental. The bold brick arches and vaults impart a sense of permanence and smartly bridge the architectural styles from the Byzantine of the chapel to Wren's brickwork and the scale of the new buildings. If this were a foretaste of the remaining development, it would be a very encouraging thing.



Exteriors take their cue from the stables of the nearby Chelsea Hospital

The first residential phase contains 74 apartments, designed by Michael Squire, of Squire & Partners, with one to six bedrooms each. They are not cheap: apartments cost from £5.25m and town houses from £37m. To me, they looked more Bloomsbury Edwardian than Belgravia Victorian, executed in a kind of stripped classicism, their solidity relieved a little by some filigree bronzework on the façades.

There is still something a little cold about their architecture, which looks a little too eerily like the renderings, but it is possible that the trees and greenery and the effects of London's air will sort that out shortly. It is also unusual — and welcome — that the affordable and social-rent elements of the development will be on this £75m per acre site, rather than, as is now often the custom, at a cheaper location elsewhere in the borough.



The new buildings are not attempting to create new typologies

Further phases include buildings by Eric Parry, who has proved adept at this architectural territory with schemes like One Eagle Place, off Piccadilly.

Certainly in detail and design these are careful buildings, well articulated and trying hard to extend the existing structure of the city, rather than create new typologies or anything too demanding. A £3bn development does not arrive all at once and the phased development should allow the spaces to bed in as part of Pimlico Road.

It will be intriguing to see whether what the developer says are "the most coveted 12.8 acres in the world" can become an integrated piece of city, or whether it will always feel like a place apart.

Photographs: Alexander James; Alistair Veryard

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