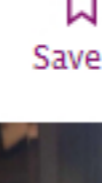


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Why books are back, and London's new homes are getting their own dedicated fiction



Elizabeth Day, who has written a story for Brent Cross South, at Claridge's. CREDIT: JOHN NGUYEN

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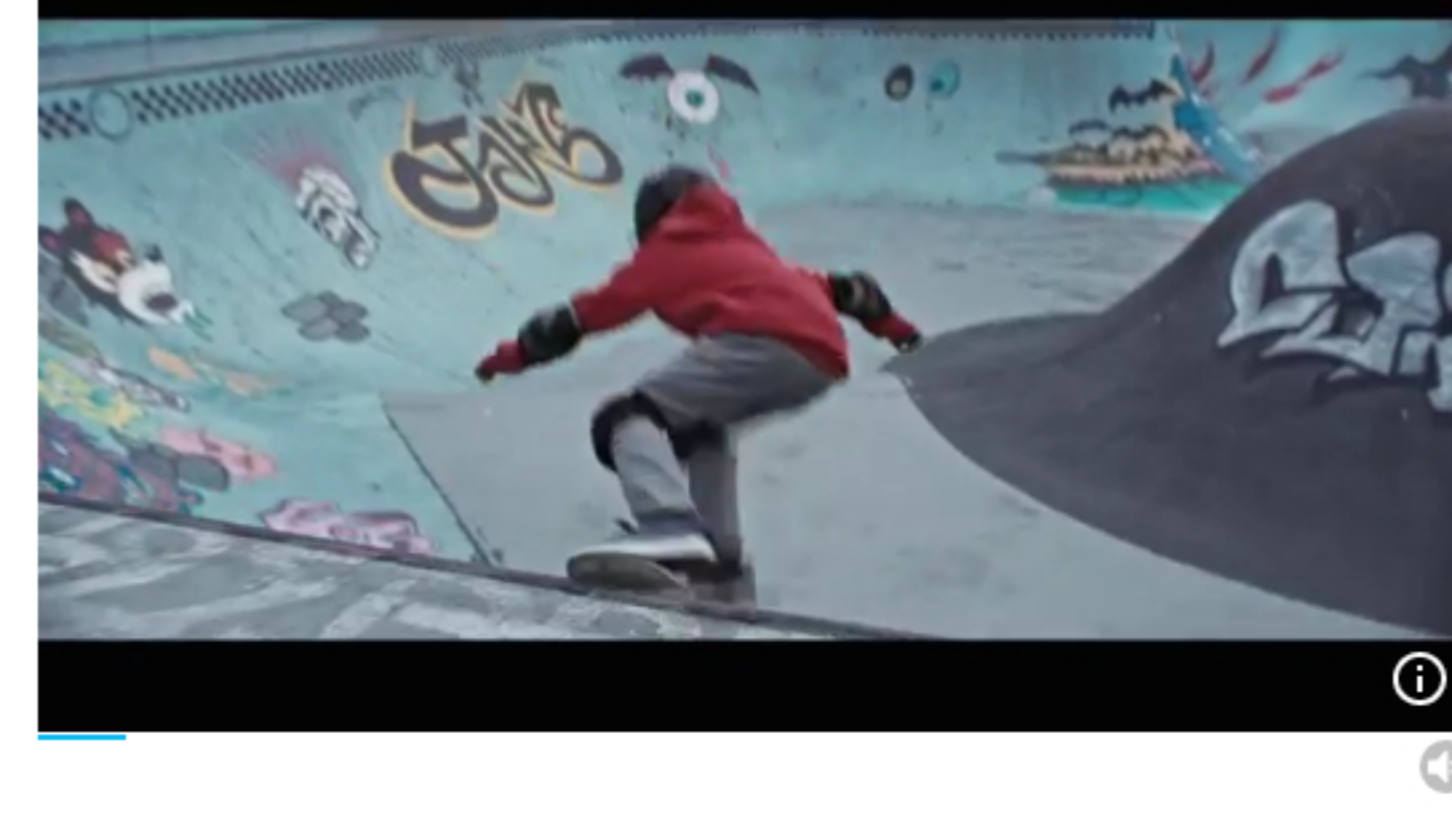
From classic novels to local legend, stories shape the identity of place. Wander over Hampstead Heath at dusk and images of a bloodthirsty Lucy could creep up on you, whereas London Bridge may trigger thoughts of a cloaked Nancy meeting Mr Brownlow in secret. More cheerily, every time you pass through Paddington station remember that little bear in a duffle coat.

But what of new towns springing out of the ground? These communities are starting from scratch with no backstory. In north London, Barnet council and developer Argent are working to build Brent Cross South, a 6,700-home scheme across 180 acres.

This huge project will have pedestrian-friendly streets, shops, restaurants and 50 acres of playing fields. It's part of the wider £4.5 billion Brent Cross regeneration, which includes the redevelopment of the shopping centre and a new Thameslink Station.

To create an identity for this new, vast development, Argent commissioned five novelists to write futuristic fiction about the yet-to-be created community, a first for the UK development industry.

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The writers include [Elizabeth Day](#), author of the bestseller *How to Fail*; [Guy Gunaratne](#), who won the International Dylan Thomas Prize for *In Our Mad and Furious City*; and architectural author [Will Wiles](#).

Day's tale, "Little Ben", tells of a single mum bringing up her son at Brent Cross South, the joys and the challenges. "Little Ben" is so named because they can see Big Ben from the rooftop of their housing block.

"Regeneration is complex, and when property developers talk about it we tend not to inspire," says Nick Searl, a partner at Argent.



The Steel Library residence at Mount Anvil's Hampstead Manor development

"We ran workshops to ascertain what draws people to a location on an emotional level... but were faced with the problem of how to communicate this in a powerful way. We settled on fiction," he explains.

The collection of stories has, so far, been handed out to Argent employees, the local council, development partners and consultants to inspire the design – although it has not yet been given to locals.

Reading between the lines this could just be a marketing stunt. But Rory Olcayto, the chief executive of the architecture education charity Open City, thinks not. "The built environment and fiction are inextricably linked. Buildings are stories – literally," he says.

"Stories can convey complex ideas more effectively than the kind of administrative language that goes hand-in-hand with planning and construction."

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Some new schemes inherit literary culture. Galliard is working with others to convert the [Curtain Theatre](#), where *Romeo and Juliet* was first performed, into a development in Shoreditch. Eventually there will be 412 homes, offices, shops, restaurants and a performing arts centre.

The sunken Elizabethan playhouse dates back to 1577, and the master plan by architects Perkins-Will details a glass floor in the middle of a new public square, which will allow people to peer underground at the remains of the theatre.

There's a Victorian viaduct adjacent being restored with historic bricks. The show apartment launched this month with an invisible kitchen; prices for a studio pad start from £680,000, and go up to £1.2 million for a two-bedroom home.

There is a natural overlap between fiction, myth and history which conspire to create a place. But there are long-established areas where the story has been lost. Architects at Squire & Partners are working with the Crown Estate to redefine St James's in central London.

"The car killed St James's, a classic London district. It's now a ring road enclosed by Piccadilly and Pall Mall," says Tim Gledstone of the firm.



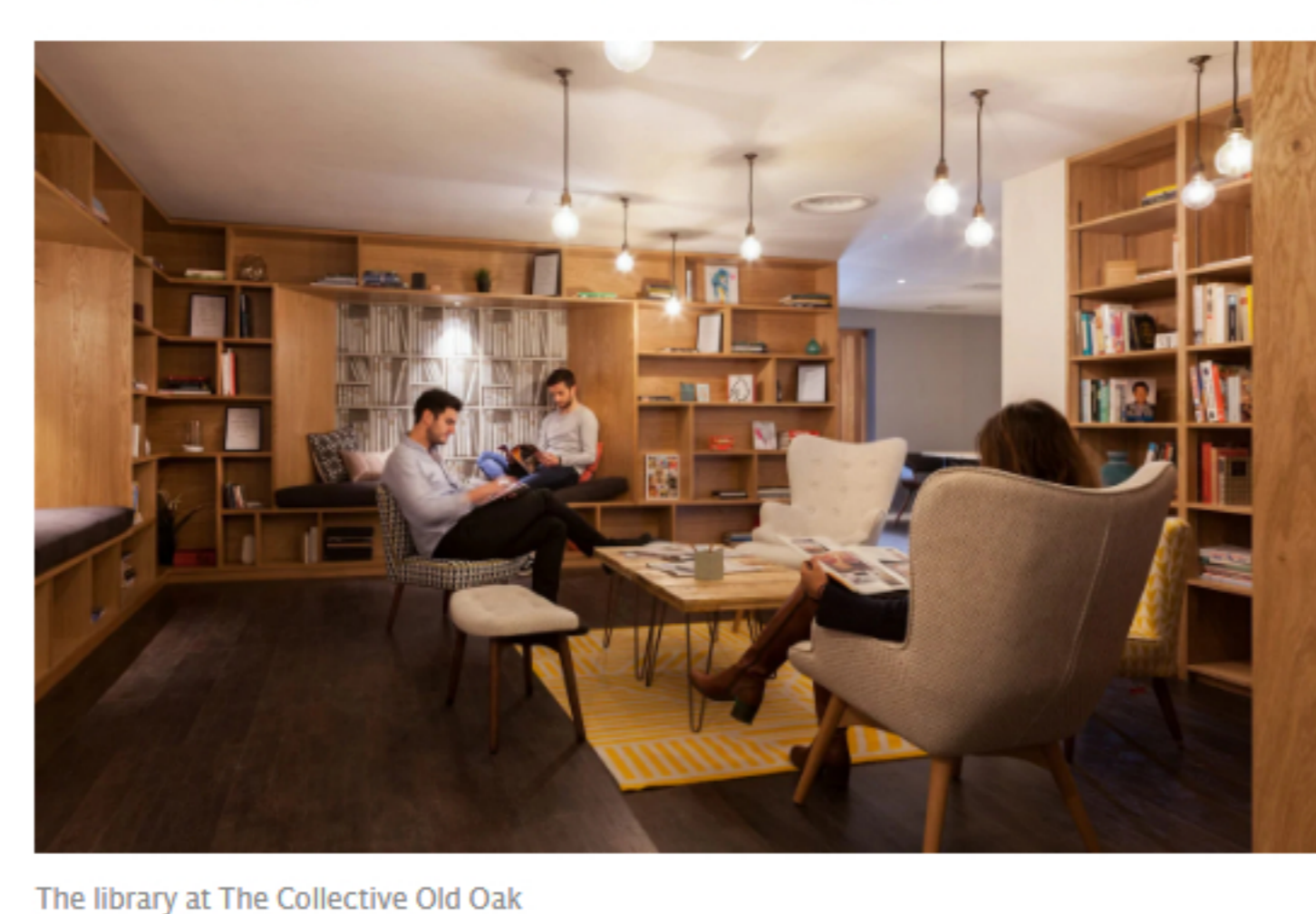
The Stage in Shoreditch

His team is bringing to life the area's forgotten craftsfolk and specialist retailers through the creation of 18 stories. An exhibition in the shopping mall The Pavillion tells potted histories of hidden local landmarks: the shirtmaker which manufactured costumes for the 1974 film *The Great Gatsby*; the club where Jimi Hendrix played his inaugural UK gig; and the spot where John Lennon first met Yoko Ono.

"Buildings and streets were often designed to be imposing. But they need to be welcoming so that people engage with the stories of the past," says Gledstone.

It's not just these developer-led projects that are injecting culture into areas, new and old alike. There's a growing movement to transform libraries from silent and austere to bustling and inviting.

A handful are being repurposed as community hubs to tackle loneliness, social isolation and create a sense of belonging. As well as borrowing physical books they are becoming a place to meet.



The library at The Collective Old Oak

Peckham's library renaissance has been one of the most successful. Bombed in the Second World War, the library was redesigned as an upside-down "L" of coloured glass and green copper and bagged a Riba award in 2000.

The aim was to create a place that would bond a diverse community. It now hosts a book club, Zumba classes, mental well-being workshops and lectures. Free computers, Wi-Fi and IT sessions give people access to online resources, and for children there is a coding club.

Libraries are also being turned into new developments, such as in the redevelopment of the modernist Holborn Library by Camden Council, regeneration specialist U-I and the architects Coffey. Plans show a remodelling of the library, with studio spaces, 105 new homes and a performance space.

Another historic library conversion is at Mount Anvil's Hampstead Manor project in north London. Currently on the market for £7.95million is a four-storey residence which has been built into the historic Steel Library, first built in 1904 and once part of Westfield College for women.



A historic image of the Steel Library

At The Collective in Old Oak Common, west London, a smart student halls-style block for working people, a library takes centre stage. For rents ranging from about £1,000 to nearly £3,000 a month, residents get an en-suite room and access to communal facilities.

"When we opened the block in 2016 there were very few books. However, over the years, the community has contributed to it and the books have brought the space to life," says Ed Thomas of The Collective.

This year the developer Elysian Residences, which builds senior living complexes, announced a tie-up with the Waterstones-owned book store Foyles to put libraries in each scheme. A double-height library, with an on-demand request service for niche topics, is being built at the Landsby development in Stanmore.

There is also a gym, beauty salon and healthcare centre on site; prices for a one-bedroom apartment start from £490,000 and go up to £1.25 million for a penthouse.

Increasingly, housebuilding is being tied to the creation of public space and community amenities. It seems stories are the ultimate multi-generational shared asset, binding people and creating a sense of place.

In the words of Paddington: "In London everyone is different, and that means everyone can fit in."

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