



KING'S X MARKS THE SPOT

LONDON'S museums and galleries are alive with the subcultural spirit of the 1980s and 1990s. A collection of recent (and coming) exhibitions has highlighted the alternative art, music, fashion, and nightlife scenes that flourished across the capital during this period, including *Outlaws: Fashion Renegades of 80s London* at the Fashion and Textile Museum, *Leigh Bowery!* at Tate Modern, and the forthcoming *Blitz: The club that shaped the 80s* at the Design Museum. From Blitz to Taboo to Kinky Gerlinky, the exhibitions are testament to the vibrancy and lasting legacy of these clubs, creative scenes and those who were part of them.

But while often associated with London's West End, there was also interconnected activity happening in King's Cross, just striking distance from Central Saint Martins' current home on Granary Square. The *Outlaws: Fashion Renegades of 80s London* exhibition mentions King's Cross several times in its subcultural history timeline. One key date is 1981 when the Scala cinema opened in the area. While the Scala survives today as a live music venue, during the 1980s and 1990s it was home to cult movie

all-nighters. As a member's club, the cinema was able to offer a diverse and eclectic programme of films that wouldn't be shown elsewhere covering queer cinema, horror, B-movies, and arthouse films. Far from a refined viewing experience, the cinema was a raucous hotspot for subcultural youths and film industry people, with Boy George and John Waters among its audience.

Just around the corner from Scala, where The Big Chill stands today, was alternative gay pub The Bell. Its opening in 1982 is also marked on *Outlaws'* subculture timeline. The Bell had an eclectic calendar of events for every night of the week with key figures including Michael Clark, Derek Jarman, and John Paul Gaultier said to be among its punters. Another, more local, museum sharing this slice of King's Cross history is Queer Britain, right on the doorstep of Central Saint Martins. Its exhibition *Jimmy Sommerville and Bronski Beat* shares how, before shooting to mainstream stardom, Bronski Beat started out with their first gig in The Bell. Alongside these big names, The Bell was also an important space for the wider queer community, and had a strong link

with activism and organisations including Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners.

The *Outlaws* exhibition also pinpoints the Mutoid Waste Company's activity in King's Cross during the 1980s. Squatting in one of the area's abandoned buildings, the Mutoids crafted vehicles and artworks from salvaged metals and found materials. They showcased their works and installations through free parties, putting King's Cross on the map for the rave scene. Connected to this, on the now paved over Battle Bridge Road, *Outlaws* also marks the important warehouse raves started up by Noel and Maurice Watson and Sean Oliver in 1984. These early raves took place in an old school hall, and were the cutting-edge of London's fashion, art, and music scene until the police eventually shut them down a year later.

Another important spot on the King's Cross subcultural map is the queer pub Central Station, which has managed to survive the gentrification in the area and still stands today. Under the vision of artists and performers Donald Urquhart, Sheila Tequila, and DJ Harvey, The Beautiful Bend club night ran on and off between the

1990s and early 2000s. Tate Modern's *Leigh Bowery!* exhibition cites The Beautiful Bend as one of Bowery's favoured club nights, and other attendees included fashion designers Lee McQueen, Pam Hogg and Mr. Pearl.

Today, thanks to a major regeneration project initiated in the 2000s, King's Cross has radically changed since the 1980s and 1990s. This redevelopment project has been justified on the grounds of problems due to crime including drug dealing and sex work, as well as the notion of the area being underused. Yet while some deemed the area as undesirable, its affordable residential and commercial rents, as well as a plethora of abandoned industrial buildings, made it a haven for squats, cultural spaces, and nightlife. King's Cross therefore figured as a rich space for people to live, make art, and build communities.

These exhibitions show how King's Cross – before the Eurostar, the massive Google landscaper, or the luxury shops and restaurants of Coal Drops Yard – was once a hive of activity for underground fashion, music, and art scenes of the 1980s and 1990s.

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