

# THREE SPECIAL PLACES in LONDON

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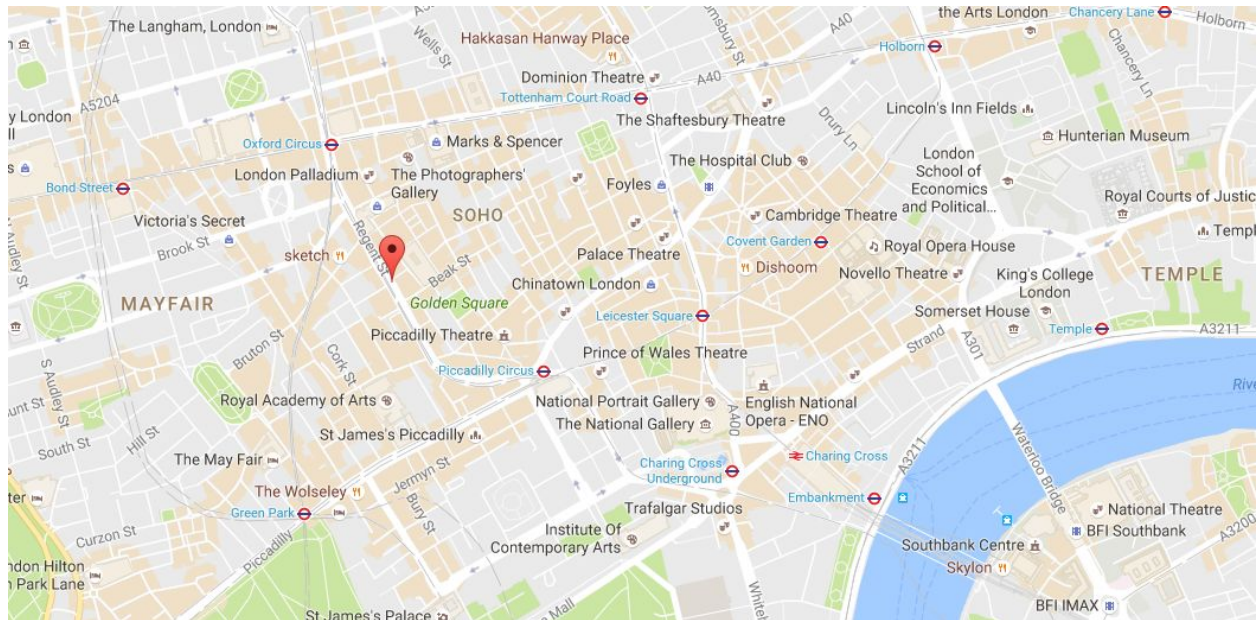
## Introduction

London is a city that many would describe as 'special'; for good or for bad, as an alpha world city is hard to deny the impact of this city upon the world, and of the world upon this city. Here I have examined three places within London - a city itself often described as a 'city of cities' - and discussed how, why and to whom they are special, and what the future may hold for what it is that makes them unique.

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## A Special Street: Regent Street



One of London's most famous streets, and not just through the Monopoly board: Regent Street is perhaps the most important centre in London for up-market shopping and fashion, contrasting with the more typical 'high street' feel of the neighbouring Oxford Street. However, it is not only the purpose of Regent Street that makes it 'great'; its breathtaking and well-preserved Regency period architecture, directed primarily by John Nash, also makes it the archetype of a prosperous imperial London road.



*The grandiose Regent Street at the junction to Piccadilly Circus.*

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From the outset of its construction in the early 1800s, Regent Street was consciously designed as a declaration of London's prominence as a global imperial city, shown in its width - perfect for pompous processions, or for quelling large riots - and its ornate construction. In some ways, it was in fact the first successful British expression of Napoleonic city design, with many similar neoclassical features, where earlier attempts at importing this style on a large scale (such as after the Great Fire of 1666) had failed. It also contrasts with the more erratic unplanned city layouts in older areas of London, such as the City or Soho, providing both a powerful demarcation of the end of Soho and the beginnings of Mayfair (a conscious boundary from poor to rich at the time of its construction), and a unique symbol of London's commercial and imperial success throughout the 19th century.



*An NFL parade along Regent Street, a modern trans-Atlantic take on its traditional ceremonial use.*

Regent Street is consequently now highly successful as a tourist and shopping destination, within the commercialised circuit of central London; and given London's continued economic growth and globalisation-powered expansion as a tourist centre, looks likely to stay that way preserved in its traditional form.



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## A Special District: Brixton



Widely touted as one of London's most up-and-coming districts (often either 'the new Shoreditch' or 'the new Camden' depending on the speaker), Brixton, at 3.8 miles away from the centre of London at Charing Cross, is a key commercial and entertainment hub of the southern London Borough of Lambeth. Having undergone rapid and varied change over the last hundred years of its history, Brixton is a special place for many - but, reflecting the area's diverse populations, its value is seen differently by the different communities that relate to it, leading to inevitable controversy (as elsewhere in London) around its so-called 'development' and future.

Though initially prosperous in the 19th century as a middle class suburb - home of some of the earliest department stores, and the famous Electric Avenue, site of the first electric street lighting in Britain - Brixton saw a change in direction following the 1950s 'Windrush Generation' of Afro-Caribbean immigration; and simultaneous economic decline.

Now economically vibrant, along the typical London suburb model of gentrification, it presents a controversial case where Brixton's black community heritage is seen as 'eroded' by a generation of young, wealthier, white City workers. Where the latter communities may appreciate the 'edgier' aspects of Brixton's lifestyle - the fringes of the Shoreditch hipster movement, the pop-up shops, the cheap eats - the former worry that, despite conscious memorialisation in the Black Cultural Archives, Brixton's visual heritage as the centre of Britain's Afro-Caribbean community may soon be washed away.



*The Brixton Oval, the public space at Brixton's core, was renamed to Windrush Square in 1998 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Windrush Generation.*



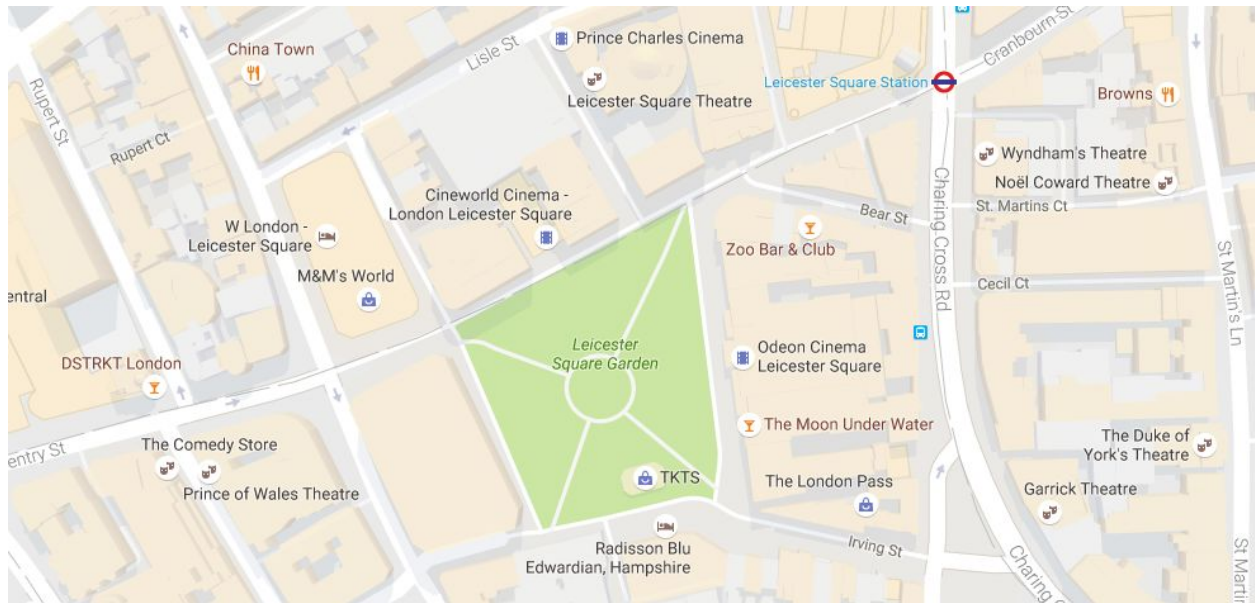
*Brixton's Black Cultural Archives, founded in 1981 but significantly expanded in 2010 to become the first national black heritage centre in the UK.*



*Pop Brixton: Brixton's answer to Shoreditch's Boxpark, and a sign of growing 'hipsterisation' in the area.*

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## A Special Public Space: Leicester Square



The beating heart of London's West End, Leicester Square is a monument to both 20th-century entertainment, and commercialism in all its forms. Though originally residential, it developed as an entertainment centre following Ashton Lever's construction of a natural history museum in the 1770s, growing from there into a theatre and hotel district (the Alhambra Theatre opening in 1854), and cinema district after the completion of the flagship Odeon Cinema in 1937. Alongside its location adjoining the nightlife district of Soho and shopping areas of Piccadilly and Regent Street, and its natural prominence as the largest open space in the district, this organic clustering of associated entertainment activities has made Leicester Square both a major landmark and a destination in its own right for both tourists and local fun-seekers around the West End.





*The gardens of Leicester Square.*

More recent development in Leicester Square has seen it take more of a brazenly touristic turn, as a prime site for street traders and performers, as well as more organised attractions such as Christmas fairs in the plaza. Most prominent is the opening of M&M's World in 2011 - an attraction deemed inexplicable by *Londonist* magazine yet highly rated by TripAdvisor - to be followed by the opening of a flagship LEGO store in late 2016. This growing commercialisation of Leicester Square may yet prove its undoing as activities enjoyed by London natives are increasingly out-priced and out-crowded to the 'inner ring' of entertainment suburbs such as Camden, Brixton, and Shoreditch.



*Street performers such as these dancers are found throughout the square day and night.*