SOUTHBANK UNDERCROFT

Proposal for Restoration of Original Design and Vision

AUGUST 2015
QUOTES

“Preserve the integrity of Southbank, a sanctuary for skateboarders, and an important part of London history”
Tony Hawk, World Champion Skateboarder

“The skate park is the epicentre of UK skateboarding and is part of the cultural fabric of London. It helps to make London the great city it is”
Boris Johnson, Mayor of London

“The issue of the Undercroft below the Queen Elizabeth Hall has proven to be a salient reminder of the need to understand not just the design of modern spaces but their historic and evolving use”
Sara Crofts, Deputy Director, Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings

“This site has built up organically from the skateboarders themselves, generations of skateboarders, going back decades”
Ben Bradshaw, MP for Exeter

“Skateboarding (and the wider landscape of creative subcultural urban practices) are here to stay - they are a fundamental part of city life. Opening up the Undercroft space would recognise this, and have amazing cultural, social (and yes, even some economic) benefits”
Dr Oliver Mould, Lecturer in Human Geography, University of London

“The Open Spaces Society considers that the Undercroft is of immense value as a public open space, in the heart of London”
Kate Ashbrook, General Secretary, Open Spaces Society

“The Undercroft – that symbol of edginess and counter-culture that the Southbank Centre is lucky enough to have emebeded at its very core”
Dr Matthew Barac, Research Leader for Architecture, London South Bank University

“For those people, it is not only a source of identity but also distinctiveness, social interaction, and coherence”
Simon Hickman, Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas, English Heritage

"The Undercroft is a free space for people to express themselves on a site of real significance to a global youth culture. It is part of what makes our capital city brilliant"
Catherine Harrington, Director, The National Community Land Trust Network

“Not only is the Undercroft iconic, it is a fantastic urban example of public recreational space and how these spaces can help bring people together”
Helen Griffiths, Chief Executive, Fields in Trust
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This document has been prepared to progress the proposal for the restoration of the Southbank Undercroft (hereafter, ‘the Undercroft’ and ‘Original Space’) in its entirety and intended design plan. The area of the Undercroft given protection from redevelopment in the September 2014 agreement between the Southbank Centre, Long Live Southbank, Lambeth Council and Arts Council England makes up around one third of the original and traditionally skateable space. Much of the remaining two thirds were used by the Southbank Centre during the redevelopment of the Royal Festival Hall in 2005. Their use for storage and housing for staff was stated to be temporary and numerous assurances were given by Southbank Centre management that the hoardings were also temporary.

The Undercroft is an area of immense cultural, historic and social significance. It is the epicentre of UK skateboarding and the longest continually skated space in the world. It is also a source of great importance for London’s skateboarders and for local residents, who are proud to have such a cultural asset in Waterloo. A 2013 Southbank Centre proposal to turn the space into retail units became the least popular planning application in UK history. By September 2014, an unprecedented 150,000 people had signed a statement supporting the preservation of the skate spot.

Despite the subsequent deal between Long Live Southbank and the Southbank Centre which guaranteed the long term future of the remaining third of the original space, the Southbank Centre have still not begun work on honouring promises made in their newsletter to skateboarders in 2005 that the space would be returned to the Undercroft Community upon the reopening of the Royal Festival Hall in 2007. The Undercroft community are still left with just a fraction of what the Southbank Centre themselves recognise as ‘almost an ancestral ground for skateboarders’. ¹

Long Live Southbank would like to work with the Southbank Centre, to help them fulfil their promise and enable the creative community of the Undercroft to further flourish. To enable the reopening of the space, we would work with the Mayor’s office, Heritage Lottery Fund, Arts Council and other bodies to realise the restoration of the original building design and vision.

Skateboarding popularity is presently rising exponentially, and is one of few physical activities not requiring a specific venue, time or location and promoting physical and mental well-being.

This document is an overview of the full proposal which will be made publically available in September 2015.

¹ ‘Skateboarding sculptures welcomed’, BBC News (7 August 2004); ‘Southbank embraces skate culture’, The Guardian (5 August 2004)
2.0 SITE DESCRIPTION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Constructed by the London County Council’s (LCC) Architect’s Department between 1963 and 1968, the collection of buildings known as ‘Southbank Centre’ located on the south bank of the Thames between Waterloo and Hungerford Bridges, are part of what is seen as a key cultural quarter of London’s ‘South Bank’.

The LCC had made the decision to add a second concert hall, as well as an art gallery, on the 1951 Festival of Britain site adjacent to the Royal Festival Hall. The first drawings, by lead architect Norman Engleback, were submitted in 1957, but it was not until 1961 that the plans, which now also included an additional smaller recital room, were completed. The nineteenth-century Shot Tower was finally demolished to make way for the new buildings, while work also began on extending and renovating the Festival Hall. In 1963, construction finally began on what would eventually be named the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room and Hayward Gallery.

The Southbank complex was an original experiment in British architectural design by some of the most daring architectural thinkers of the 1960s – including Archigram’s Ron Herron and Warren Chalk.

The new buildings ahead of their 1967 opening. © London Metropolitan Archives

The new buildings were designed in an uncompromisingly Brutalist style, displaying exposed concrete panels, with few windows and minimal decoration. Reflecting the contemporary preference for the separation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic, the new buildings were built on multiple levels, with the halls and gallery raised above the ground and linked – to each other and to a newly-refurbished Festival Hall – by elevated walkways. The stark angular designs were originally opposed by Hubert Bennett, replacing Leslie Martin as the LCC’s chief architect in 1956, who wanted to see the new buildings conform to the smooth lines of the Festival Hall. However, the threat of
mass-resignation by Engleback and his team, many of whom would go on to join the radical Archigram collective, meant that the new buildings would remain – somewhat like the Festival structures that had preceded them – a bold and principled statement of the latest in architectural modernism.

The Southbank Centre comprises of the Royal Festival Hall, the Queen Elizabeth Hall, the Hayward Gallery and the Purcell Room. Constructed of very high quality, fair-faced concrete, the complex of three events spaces are connected by irregular external circulation routes. This rare design of the complex shows a preoccupation with the informal relationship between form, function and services that remains a critical concern today. Located beneath the concert rooms and gallery are the lower level areas, referred to as the ‘Undercrofts’.

The Undercroft areas, along with the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Purcell Room, were conceived and designed by the young architects working with the London County Council architect’s department, who, through Archigram, dominated the architectural avant garde in the 1960s and early 1970s with playful, pop-inspired visions of a technocratic future.

The Undercroft was somewhat of an experiment created as an exploratory space with pillars, steps and raised and lower levels. Archigram was founded by a group of like-minded graduates fresh from the Architectural Association school in London; Peter Cooke, David Greene and Michael Webb and three experienced young architects working with the London County Council; Dennis Crompton, Ron Herron and Warren Chalk.

2.1 Archigram

Archigram first appeared in 1961 when Cooke, Greene and Webb launched a single sheet magazine or as Greene’s co-editor, Peter Cook, termed it “a message, or abstract communication”. The magazine featured Greene’s poems and sketches of architectural projects designed by Cook and voiced their frustration with the intellectual conservatism of the British architectural establishment.

Adamant to develop their own approach and avoid being co-opted into the architectural establishment, the Archigram group had a fundamental antipathy to what Cook described as: “the crap going up in London, against the attitude of a continuing European tradition of well-mannered, but gutless architecture that had absorbed the label “Modern” but had betrayed most of the philosophies of the earliest ‘Modern’”.

In 1962 Archigram printed a second, more substantial issue, which consisted of statements of intent by young architects including Chalk, Crompton and Herron, who worked together at London County Council, and were the runners-up in various architectural competitions.

In the same year Cook, Greene, Webb and their new collaborators – Chalk, Crompton and Herron – were invited to produce an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. It opened in 1963 as Living City, a manifesto for their belief “in the city as a unique organism”, which is more than a collection of buildings, but a means of liberating people by embracing technology and empowering them to choose how to lead their lives.

Living City caught the attention of Reyner Banham who hailed Archigram as the pioneers of a new pop architecture in the 1960s. The US critic Michael Sorkin defined Archigram’s influences as a combination of Britain’s heroic engineering heritage, writing; “Bewitched by nomadic fantasies, Archigram argued that an architecture based on mobility and malleability could set people free”.

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Critically, Archigram’s approach to architecture was fun, with a belief that the potent combination of social change and technological advance would foster a more humane architecture equipped to embrace the complexities and opportunities of contemporary life. One of its strengths was the diversity of a group in which the six core members and their collaborators came from very different backgrounds with different skills and enthusiasms.

Dennis Crompton said in 2013;

“I remember my excitement when, in 1960, I was invited to join the team of architects at the LCC, who were working on the design of the proposed new concert hall and art gallery on the South Bank. The following year, when the project had its public launch, one member of the group expressed our ambition that there should be other facilities on the South Bank, so that it becomes alive ... rather than just a cultural centre.”

2.2 Skateboarding in the UK, London and the South Bank

Skateboarding was practiced by a select group of people during the early 1970s, but it was the summer of 1976 which saw the beginning of the first major craze in the UK. The South Bank was one of a number of venues in London where large numbers of young people would congregate to skateboard, with Greenwich Park and Kensington Gardens Broadwalk being examples of other popular sites. Very quickly, however, the South Bank, and the Undercroft in particular, became the primary London skateboarding spot, and the symbolic home of skateboarding in the UK as a whole.

While a number of local authorities put measures in place to ban or deter skateboarding (including at Kensington Gardens), the Greater London Council reported that it had made available six areas in public parks and open spaces as ‘designated for casual skateboarding’, the most popular of which was at the Undercroft on the South Bank. ‘The latter has been inundated with skateboarders at fine weekends,’ the Council reported, ‘with numbers ranging up to 1,000.’

Since Skateboarding culture grew rapidly in the 1970s, it has been a fixture on the South Bank of the Thames. Many skateboarders in London see this area as a ‘spiritual home’. Whilst Southbank is considered the most important spots in this area, a number of others are also worthy of mention and highlight the cultural connection between skating and the area.

Increasingly from the 1980s, other areas along the South Bank became regular skate spots, including ‘Mellow Banks/Bird Shit Banks’ beneath Hungerford Bridge, and the concourses surrounding the Shell Centre, although the Undercroft remained the focal point of the area. The areas of Waterloo and the South Bank have been skated for over 40 years and the route from Waterloo Railway Station to the South Bank is well-used, with vast numbers of skateboarders now using it every week.

The Southbank Centre is renowned in skateboarding, having numerous locations around the site which have been skated in many different ways over the decades, as skateboarding abilities and possibilities evolved. Many of the skate spots outside the Undercroft are challenging to skate and are therefore rarely skated, unless the skateboarder is filming or shooting a photo. Whilst Southbank Centre security customarily move skaters on from the upper levels, this creative interpretation of the buildings brutalist architecture goes hand in hand with the architects original, playful vision.

Southbank Undercroft is known as ‘the birthplace of British skateboarding’ and internationally renowned both within the skateboarding scene and beyond. It is also the oldest continuously skated spot in the world. People visit the site from across the globe as a form of pilgrimage to what is regarded as a skateboarding ‘mecca.’

There are three main kinds of skateboarding connected to Southbank skate area as described by Winstan Whitter; ‘Street skaters carve the banks, use the stairs and stuff. Slalom skaters weave around cones and other obstacles and freestyle skaters are like BMX freestylers. They stay on the flatland and do tricks.’

Since the 1970s the Undercroft was referred to by skateboarders as ‘South Bank’ and later ‘Southbank’. Increasing international coverage of Southbank through skate videos and magazines, and later via the internet, saw the spot firmly established in the imagination of skateboarders across the world. Already established as a compulsory stop on most pro teams international tours, the Undercroft now also became a site of pilgrimage for all kinds of skaters from around the world. By the mid-1980s, other urban creative activities were also taking place, with the spot becoming central to the emerging sport of BMXing, as well as to the hip hop subcultures of breakdancing and graffiti. More recently, the Undercroft has become a key site for the new urban activities of parkour and free-running.³

2.3 The Undercroft

1960s

When the 1960s complex was first built, the Undercroft had no clear purpose. It has been convincingly argued that the architects deliberately left the space undefined, in order to facilitate the organic development of unexpected uses by visitors.\(^4\) It was a principle of the Archigram collective, as later expressed by founder member Peter Cook, that architecture should ‘take advantage of the potential of different and scattered elements congealing together in a random way.’\(^5\) Over the years, the ideas of the architects, concerning the site’s potential for improvised activities in an urban landscape, have been realised by skateboarders, and later on BMX riders, graffiti artists, free runners, and many others.

\[\text{Original design plan featuring elevated walkway and undercroft as viewed from Westminster}\]

1970s

The first skateboarders to use the Undercroft arrived as early as 1973. The smooth pavements, ramps and angled banks left by the LCC architects provided the perfect venue for skateboarding. This, combined with the close proximity to the River Thames drew people with an interest in surfing and skateboarding.


The Undercroft is one of three architectural elements built by Higgs and Hill. The construction used minimal decoration and was designed to allow circulation at multiple levels around the building. There is limited fenestration, except for a deeply inset sweep along the river frontage of the foyer building. The original arrangements provide circulation above and below the foyer, right around the sides and rear of the two auditoriums, and also a bridge link to The Hayward Gallery.

The Southbank skate spot (the Undercroft) is a found space that by nature of its design was found to be the perfect architecture and topography for the art of skateboarding. It has influenced generations of skaters, achieving legendary status in the international skateboarding scene. Though the size of the space has been reduced in recent years, over the course of its history, the entire spaces of the original Undercroft have been explored and used to develop more and more complex tricks and physical possibilities by the resident skateboarders.

There are many tales of tricks achieved by skaters from across the world, spanning decades, which have become folklore and part of a common practice of oral history. Many of the physical effects of achievements are etched into the Undercroft stonework. For example, the bottom of the world famous ‘Southbank 7’ steps has countless marks from tricks, both successful and unsuccessful, over the decades. These connect the current generation of skateboarders with previous generations.

‘Surfers are getting to grips with a natural force, the sea – we have to get to grips with another natural force, the land – paving or roads – we don’t want special parks for it... Skateboarding is the first adrenalin sport that gets to the city – parts that people own but no one possesses – like the South Bank.’
- Steve Kane, interviewed in Skateboard! (Jan 1978)

Initially the Undercroft was perceived to be a dangerous area. Few, save for the homeless, utilised the space. In the mid-1970s, skaters found the Undercroft’s architectural features well suited to the craft of skateboarding, which was still in its infancy, especially in the UK where skaters looked to Southern Californian backyard pool skaters for influence. The slopes of the Undercroft, to some extent, provided a distinctly British version of that Californian environment, and as skateboarding boomed in 1977 and 1978, the Undercroft became the epicentre of UK skateboarding.

While the 1960s arts buildings at the South Bank were not always popular with the public – Daily Mail readers voted the Queen Elizabeth Hall ‘Britain’s Ugliest Building’ when it opened in 1967 – and the concrete walkways and undercrofts often seen as confusing or uninviting, many saw this new, spontaneous use as a positive development for the area. As early as 1977, press reports were describing the South Bank as a ‘haven for young skateboarders,’ while many commentated that the new use had culturally enlivened a previously unused or unwelcoming area:

_That godforsaken waste-land is good for little else. Is there anywhere, outside a Soviet industrial centre, such a collection of gloomy and soulless buildings as stands between the London Weekend centre and the Hungerford Bridge? Skateboarding would seem to be one of the few rational purposes for those vistas of concrete and paving with curious hidden recesses and – for the skateboarder – challenging ramps [...] as I walk to the concert, huddled against the wind, I hear the rattle of the boards, some small evidence of human life._

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The GLC was initially accommodating of skateboarders at the South Bank, specially designating the Undercroft as a space for skateboarding in 1977.7

1980s

While the popularity of skateboarding nationwide was declining by the 1980s, the Undercroft remained continually in use, and was arguably central to keeping the activity alive in the UK. The already-established status of the South Bank as the home of skateboarding meant that, as numbers dwindled, it became the one place where the remaining skaters could be sure there would be other people skating. A 1988 newspaper report on the return of skateboarding’s popularity described the Undercroft as ‘the free-skater’s Mecca’, ‘the home of London street-skating and the one venue constantly in use for more than a decade.’

‘With new skate structures appearing almost every week, mourning the loss of a dimly lit, mellow banked concrete precinct may seem pretty funny to some, but for many the atmosphere they skate is just as important as how or what they skate. The South Bank is skate heritage: it oozes roots – everyone has a South Bank story, it’s part of every Pro’s European tour, all have fond memories of sessions past.’ 
- ‘South Bank – What’s going on?’, R.A.D (July 1988)

The Undercroft continued to be a hub of innovative and exciting skateboarding over the following decades, despite numerous attempts by the Southbank Centre to discourage the activity, such as the scattering of stones on the ground. It also grew popular with a wider creative community, especially BMXers and graffiti writers.

Multimedia street artist D*Face who skated the Undercroft during the 1980s stated; ‘Skateboarding then was a different thing to now. And now it’s a much more vibrant interesting place and skateboarding has done that. [...] It was ’88 at the time it was like they were going to bulldoze the Southbank, they were going to get rid of the banks. And didn’t seem surprising because the security had already been trying to chase us off, they’d prized up the paving slabs there, you know they’d tried to stop skaters from skating that area, so when they said they were going to bulldoze it, it seemed very real and very likely they were going to do that. The smell of death jam was organized, just done by word of mouth [...] it was packed from front to back with people who were there to show support for what this place was to skateboarders and still is today.’9

Southbank Centre commercial director, Mike McCart, was interviewed for Winstan Whitter’s film Rollin’ Through The Decades stating that the ‘GLC was abolished in 1986 and the taken over by South Bank Board, which was then a subcommittee, if you like of the arts council’. Skater, Davross’, own recollection was that ‘Immediately the south bank management decided that they didn’t love us anymore, well they never did, but because of the GLC they had a problem getting rid of us because it was declared an official skate spot, but then the GLC went bye bye. Next thing you know we’ve got holes being drilled din the floor, gravel all over the place’. Chris Linford added ‘They started angle grinding all of south bank, putting railings up so you couldn’t skate some of the banks. They were sprinkling stones everywhere. Chopping the run out that we used to use at the end of the slalom run.’ followed with Nancy Sands stating ‘Then I think they turned the lights off for a while in the evening.’

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7 GLC, ‘Skateboarding’, London Topics 24 (February 1978)
8 ‘Skate City grows up’, The Observer (20 November 1988)
9 D*Face, Long Live Southbank Paint Attack (2013)
1990s

In the 1990s, the relationship between Southbank Centre and the Undercroft Community became more antagonistic. In 1990 the bank ledge which slanted to the wall was made inaccessible by barriers and in 1991, the Southbank Centre installed large metal bars in front of the Undercroft’s banks to deter skaters and BMX riders – both without any prior consultation. In 1993, Southbank Centre also began to switch the lights off in the Undercroft. While claiming that there was a technical fault which was being looked into, this situation continued for several years.¹⁰

Stone scattering at Undercroft to deter skating. Image © Winstan Whitter

‘Work has started at ‘Bank. Not work on the redevelopment of the site, but pure destructive work designed to interfere with the customary use of the place by skaters. Holes are being drilled along the bottom of most of the banks.

We were told by Richard Pulford, the person responsible, that they will be installing bollards. We were also told that they would start with the two main banks and leave the bank to wall, when in fact the bank to wall was the first place to be attacked – so who knows what they’re actually up to. I certainly have no wish to speak to the man again to hear what he comes out with this time. The security guards are back in action as well, trying to stop people skating in the evenings when noise from skating causes most disturbance in the concert halls.

It remains to be seen what the final result will be. During the last fifteen years the South Bank scene has witnessed many changes – even with bollards it will still be the only dry, relatively safe, skate spot in central London. No doubt we’ll adapt to it.

But will it be the same, will it recover? The Bank feels violated, strewn with rubble, sprayed with angry graffiti by the very people who used to be so constructive, and deeply, deeply, sad. For the first time South Bank looks to us as she does to others: a dismal, crumbling wreck. *The birth-place of London skating suddenly looks very old.*’

- ‘South Bank Raped’, R.A.D (June 1990)

In May 1999, Southbank Centre appointed Rick Mather as the new masterplanner. Rick Mather Architects were ‘unanimously chosen from over 70 international practice’s submissions to masterplan the 12 hectares (30 acre)’ and the masterplan intended to deliver ‘a framework for the improvement and extension of existing cultural facilities and public realm at this important central London site.’\(^\text{11}\) While he announced his intentions to keep the sixties buildings, he stated his intention to remove the complex’s walkways and fill its undercrofts.\(^\text{12}\) Though he initially announced grand plans, including the tilting of Jubilee Gardens to make room for three stories of new commercial buildings and two new 10-storey office blocks towering over the neighbouring arts buildings at either end of the site, the Southbank Centre has since opted for a gradualist approach to site development.

**2000s**

In the 2000s, the Southbank Centre began to develop a more harmonious relationship with the Undercroft communities and the skateboarders. Efforts to deter skateboarders were relaxed, and permission was given for street artists and graffiti writers to lawfully use the Undercroft.

In 2004 the then chief executive of Southbank Centre, Michael Lynch, stated he was ‘delighted to be developing relationships with skateboarders who visit the Southbank Centre every day,’ and, ‘We are trying to give access to what seems to be almost an ancestral ground for skateboarders.’\(^\text{13}\) The commercial director, Mike McCart, added ‘A lot of people enjoy watching the skateboarders and the tricks they perform. They have found a very good use for a space we had not been able to find a use for, and we are very happy for them to use that location.’\(^\text{14}\)

In 2005, however, a large area of the Undercroft (approximately two thirds of its original size) was closed off to temporarily house Southbank Centre employees displaced by the refurbishment of the Festival Hall. Promises to reopen ‘as much of the undercroft space as possible’ on the re-opening of the Festival Hall in 2007 were never acted upon.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^\text{11}\) Rick Mather Architects
\(^\text{12}\) ‘Master builder’, *The Guardian* (18 Feb 2000)
\(^\text{13}\) ‘Skateboarding sculptures welcomed’, BBC News (7 August 2004); ‘Southbank embraces skate culture’, *The Guardian* (5 August 2004)
\(^\text{14}\) ‘Official: Skateboarders welcome on South Bank’, *Evening Standard* (9 August 2004)
\(^\text{15}\) ‘Southbank Centre newsletter for skateboarders’ (2005)
During a 2005 interview with Winstan Whitter, Mike McCart stated; ‘We are now involved in phase one of our refurbishment and redevelopment, and this really revolves around the refurbishment of the royal festival hall and this is a huge building that has a square footage the same size as centre point and we are closing the building for 18 months and we have to move a lot of different items out of the building and we are utilising some, not all of the undercroft. We are keeping for example available for skating, the well under the undercroft. The other section and work has already started. We are sectioning part of that off for storage.’

He continued; ‘We know it’s the Mecca of skating in the world. Where do you go for skating its South Bank, I think it’s something that has dawned on this organisation. The question is instead of being something that they should feel hostile about we need to look at it as an asset, I think skating is part of the history of South Bank and we need to look at that to address it retrospectively when we are telling future generations about the South Bank and the role it plays in London.’

Despite this, Southbank Centre continued to enjoy a reasonably good relationship with the Undercroft communities, stating that ‘they regard skateboarders as an important part of the creative community’ and were keen to develop ‘a closer relationship between skaters and the many creative opportunities within the centre.’
Chief executive Michael Lynch was quoted in 2007 saying explicitly that the skateboarders ‘will not be moved on and their graffitied undercrofts will stay’.16 It was publicly reiterated in 2008, in response to skaters’ concerns that the Undercroft might be under threat, that ‘Southbank Centre has no immediate plans to redevelop this part of its site’.17

In the summer of 2005, during the refurbishment of the Festival Hall, however, the accessible area was decreased – with no prior warning, consultation or planning permission – by approximately two thirds.

The Southbank Centre issued a statement explaining the move:

The undercroft area has been temporarily reduced in area for skateboarding to accommodate some staff displaced following the closure of the Festival Hall.  
[...]  
It is intended to release as much of the undercroft space as possible in the Spring of 2007 when the Festival Hall is due to be re-opened. But some parts of the undercroft may still be required in the medium term.18

However, to this day, despite opening new offices alongside the refurbished Festival Hall, Southbank Centre have failed to open any of the ‘temporarily’ closed area. In 2008, the Southbank Centre stated that it had ‘no immediate plans to redevelop this part of its site’.

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16 ‘The rest of Southbank Centre joins the Royal Festival Hall in celebratory mood this weekend’, The Times (9 June 2007)
17 ‘Southbank Centre Statement on Skateboarding’ (7 February 2008)
18 ‘South Bank Centre Newsletter for Skateboarders’ (2005)
When the Festival Hall re-opened in 2007, along with the host of restaurants at ground level, an additional temporary hoarding was put up by the Southbank Centre at the far west of the Undercroft. This further restricted skaters use of the space creating an enclosure which Undercroft users reported resulted in ‘changing the atmosphere’.

2010s

The reputation of the Undercroft as an internationally significant site for street arts and culture, and skateboarding in particular, has continued to grow into the twenty-first century. The Undercroft has been used as a location for countless skateboarding and BMX films and magazine shoots over the years, and has been featured in the American video game Thrasher: Skate and Destroy (1999) as well as in the hugely successful Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater 4 (2002) and more recently Tony Hawk’s Shred Session (2014). The space is regularly used for skateboarding and BMX demonstrations, attracting professionals from around the world, as well as numerous tourists and spectators. As the designations listed in this report above, and the statements of support collected below, demonstrate, the Undercroft is today widely recognised as an important centre of street culture in London, particularly for young people, and an important asset for the local community.

In 2011 a crowd barrier was placed along the majority of the riverside area used for skateboarding. The barrier was, and still is, viewed negatively by many skateboarders who deem it as restrictive in terms of the possible executable skateboard tricks. Many stated that the barrier and being fenced off from observers created the feeling of being ‘an animal in a zoo’. However other members of the Undercroft community enjoy the positive effects of the barrier such as the reduction of the possibility of collisions and the opportunity to utilise it as a new obstacle.

In the summer of 2012, Southbank Centre released a press release stating that ‘disused space under the Queen Elizabeth Hall’ had been transformed into the ‘Festival Village’, a new arts and exhibition space which also included a new bar and café.  

The press release issued by Southbank Centre on 6 March 2013 stated ‘New undercroft venues - under-used space from the undercrofts will be reclaimed for artistic and cultural uses; including a new venue for gigs, dance, cabaret, music and spoken word events and a space for young people.’

The plan proposed the conversion of the remaining skateable space into coffee shops and restaurants. This attracted widespread public opposition. The Long Live Southbank campaign, whose founding principle was to preserve and protect the Undercroft, gained 150,000 members and delivered the most signed objections to a planning application in British history. In September 2014, Long Live Southbank signed an agreement with the Southbank Centre safeguarding the current Undercroft space’s future.

In contrast to the safeguarded space, which continues to evolve as a vibrant and well used creative space, the remainder of original Undercroft space is sparsely used and rarely frequented by the public. One section is used by the Southbank Centre as a poorly-patronised pop up bar, another section an unfavourably situated and rarely-attended exhibition space.

The majority of the pillars which were part of the original walkway which extended from the Queen Elizabeth Hall to Hungerford Bridge, on the riverside frontage of the Royal Festival Hall, are now enclosed within retail spaces and no longer visible as part of the intended building design.

**Community**

The Undercroft was never built with skateboarding in mind. It was spontaneously appropriated by the skateboarding community. The formation of communities and cultures at the Undercroft has been inextricably linked to the space itself. Over time, users have continually stressed the importance of this aspect in terms of the Undercroft’s cultural significance and heritage.

Research commissioned by Southbank Centre which was carried out by Central Saint Martin’s (CSM) under the name ‘We Are Southbank Undercroft’ during April 2013, which showed that the Undercroft spaces continue to be active and vibrant, full of artistic and cultural uses and populated by large numbers of young people.

The CSM research concluded;

Depending largely on season and weather, we estimate that anywhere between 250 and 1,200 active individual participants make use of the existing undercroft space in a typical week (excluding spectators and passers-through). The primary activity continues to be skating (including skateboarding and some rollerskating), BMX and Graffiti and Street Art.

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20 Southbank Centre press release: ‘Disused space under the Queen Elizabeth Hall at Southbank Centre transformed into new ‘Festival Village’ arts hub’ (August 2012)
21 We Are Southbank Undercroft [http://www.southbankundercroft.com/](http://www.southbankundercroft.com/)
22 Provided by CSM
Other users such as social groups of young people, parents/guardians with children, photographers, musicians, dancers, other artists and many spectators, also form an important part of the space and use it in different ways.

Approximate frequency and time spent at the site collected from onsite observations, counts and the conversations we had with people who currently use the Undercroft:

65-70% Skate
5-10% BMX
5-10% Graffiti/Street Art
15-20% Other uses combined – including photography, modelling, dance, parkour, scooting, parents with children playing, others spectating.

Unlike skateparks which are designed and built with skate tricks in mind, street spots are buildings, architecture and objects which are interpreted by skateboarders to exercise their craft.

The unused Undercroft spaces built in 1968 were first populated by skaters in 1973 when they found the topography and layout to be ideal for practicing and developing tricks. All the Undercroft flat and gradient spaces beneath the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Royal Festival Hall were utilised, as well as the surrounding slopes, banks, stairs and walls.

When the South Bank Board took over management of the space from the Greater London Council in 1986, private security was installed and skateboarding discouraged. Southbank regulars from the period have described damage such as ‘throwing stones, pouring water all over the place’.  

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The Southbank Undercroft spaces have been skated for over 40 years making it the oldest continually skated space in the world. Since skateboard events started at the Undercroft in 1976, including the UK Slalom Championships, there have been hundreds of free ‘Jams’ and ‘Demos’ where professional skateboarders and BMX riders from around the world have skated or ridden at the Undercroft as part of their tours or as a one off demo. These include teams from renowned skate companies such as Plan B, Chocolate, Cliché, Girl, Emerica, Zero, Blueprint, Nike, HUF, Vans, Thrasher, REAL, Globe, Isle, Landscape, Palace, Supra, Nike Skateboarding and BMX companies such as Curb Dogs and BSD.

These free events are part of skateboarding culture to show skills and inspire and encourage the next generations of skaters. They are also an opportunity for younger skaters to skate together alongside professionals - something not seen in similar activities.

2.4 Listings, Designations and Policy Significance

The Queen Elizabeth Hall, of which the Undercroft is an integral part, sits between two other iconic buildings, both of which are listed; the Royal Festival Hall (Grade-I listing since 1988) and the
National Theatre (Grade-II listing since 1994). Also adjacent to the site are the Grade-II listed Waterloo Bridge and the Grade-II listed County Hall just to the southwest, along the riverfront.

Despite the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room and Hayward Gallery being nominated for listing on several occasions since 1991, with the strong support of the Twentieth Century Society and English Heritage (Historic England), they remain excluded from the Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest.

The Southbank Centre’s Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room and Hayward Gallery are as important culturally, architecturally and historically as the National Theatre and the Royal Festival Hall. The complex showcases some of the best and most important Brutalist architecture in the country. The Twentieth Century Society put a bid in the Southbank Centre for listing in 2004, having previously run a symposium on the Hayward Gallery at the Architectural Association in 1999 when the gallery was under serious threat of demolition.

In a rigorous report by English Heritage, the Southbank Centre was described as, “a notable monument to the joint government and municipal patronage of the arts in post-war London”. Despite this, Architecture Minister John Penrose went against their advice and refused to grant listed status to the complex and instead issues a Certificate of Immunity from Listing, preventing any new attempts to list the buildings for a period of five years. This is the third time the complex has been refused listed status.

In a letter to Lambeth Council’s planning department concerning the proposed Southbank Centre development, English Heritage described the ensemble of Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, Hayward Gallery and National Theatre as ‘Britain’s finest collection of post-war public buildings, as impressive and consistent as the Royal Hospital at Greenwich is an English Baroque composition’,

Statutory List

The 1988 Royal Festival Hall listing certification NGR: TQ3079780223 states:

‘Building has significant group value with other public buildings along the twins, and specifically with South Bank ‘cultural’ buildings to its north, with which it is linked by the 1960s terrace system. Additions of 1963-4 were conceptually linked with the Hayward Gallery of Queen Elizabeth Hall.

Whilst not individually listed, the Royal Festival Hall Grade-I listing description and the identified conceptual and physical link to its ancillary Queen Elizabeth Hall buildings – of which the Purcell Room, Undercroft and Hayward Gallery are inextricably linked – provides evidence that as a component, the Undercroft, should be considered for listing in any reference and in context of any development proposals.

The Undercroft therefore is situated in the immediate setting of a number of listed buildings and heritage assets. According to Section 66 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990:

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In considering whether to grant planning permission for development which affects a listed building or its setting, the local planning authority or, as the case may be, the Secretary of State shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interests which it possesses.\(^{26}\)

**Local List**

The Southbank Centre complex is included by the London Borough of Lambeth on its Local List (‘buildings of Local Architectural or Historic Interest’). It was listed on 22 March 2010, under the general criteria A, B and C as follows:

**A - Architecture**

The architectural style, decoration and detailing, materials, craftsmanship and plan form may give it special interest if these features are of particular note - above the ordinary in their design and execution, and reasonably intact. This criterion can include the best works of architects who were active locally. In some cases altered buildings may still be worthy of inclusion, especially if by an architect of importance.

**B - History**

Buildings and structures that reflect the diverse aspects of the social, economic, and physical development of Lambeth may be of interest. If the building type is reasonably common – houses, pubs, churches - only the best examples will be added to the list.

**C - Close historical association**

Connections with people or events that are acknowledged as of being of borough wide / national importance may make some buildings worthy of inclusion. Building materials of clear local interest [...] may be considered in this category.\(^{27}\)

As a locally-listed site, the complex, including the Undercroft is a non-designated heritage asset for the purposes of paragraph 135 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). As such, the heritage value of the buildings should be given special consideration by the local planning authority:

> The effect of an application on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset should be taken into account in determining the application. In weighing applications that affect directly or indirectly non designated heritage assets, a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset.\(^{28}\)

**South Bank Conservation Area**

The Undercroft is within the South Bank Conversation Area. The Conversation Area was first designated by the London Borough of Lambeth in 1982, before being extended in 1993. From across the river, the Southbank Centre buildings of which the Undercroft is a part can be viewed from a number of the heavily concentrated conservation areas of Westminster and the City.

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\(^{26}\) Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, p.41


\(^{28}\) Department for Communities and Local Government, National Planning Policy Framework (Mar 2012), p. 31
Section 72 of the Planning Act requires that, ‘with respect to any buildings or other land in a conversation area [...] special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area.’ In addition, paragraphs 137, 138 and 144 of the NPPF make provisions for the consideration of Conservation Areas in planning:

Local planning authorities should look for opportunities for new development within Conservation Areas [...] and within the setting of heritage assets to enhance or better reveal their significance. Proposals that preserve those elements of the setting that make a positive contribution to or better reveal the significance of the asset should be treated favourably.

 [...] Loss of a building (or other element) which makes a positive contribution to the significance of the Conservation Area [...] should be treated either as substantial harm [...] or less than substantial harm [...] as appropriate, taking into account the relative significance of the element affected and its contribution to the significance of the Conservation Area [...] as a whole.

The Conservation Area Statement (2007), which was prepared by the London Borough of Lambeth after widespread public consultation, makes specific reference to the Undercroft and its uses:

The undercroft of the Queen Elizabeth Hall complex is regularly used by skateboarders and BMX bikers who attract crowds of onlookers and generate graffiti.

 [...] The area that makes up the South Bank Conversation Area is a popular leisure and culture destination for Londoners and tourists alike offering a wide range of daytime and night-time activities [...] Outdoor activities also bring the public realm to life. These include [...] the skaters and BMX bikes beneath the Hayward Gallery [sic].

It is clear, therefore, that the Undercroft and the activities carried out therein are important factors in the ‘overall character and appearance’ of the area as described by the Planning Act, making a ‘positive contribution’ and crucial to the ‘significance’ of the Conservation Area within the terms of the NPPF.

Archaeological Priority Zone

The Undercroft falls within the North Lambeth and Lambeth Palace Archaeological Priority Zone, as designated by the London Borough of Lambeth. Paragraph 128 of the NPPF states that:

Where a site on which development is proposed includes or has the potential to include heritage assets with archaeological interest, local planning authorities should require developers to submit an appropriate desk-based assessment and, where necessary, a field evaluation.

29 Planning Act 1990, p. 43
World Monuments Fund

The Southbank Centre complex was included, as part of ‘British Brutalism’, on the 2012 *World Monuments Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites* by the World Monuments Fund (WMF). Founded in 1965, with its global headquarters in New York, WMF is a private, international, non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of historic architecture and cultural heritage sites around the world through fieldwork, advocacy, grant-making, education, and training. Every two years, WMF publishes a *World Monuments Watch List* to draw international attention to cultural heritage sites around the world threatened by neglect, vandalism, armed conflict, commercial development, natural disasters, and climate change. The sites are nominated by international and local preservation groups and professionals, including local authorities. Sites of all types, including secular and religious architecture, archaeological sites, landscapes and townscapes, and dating from all time periods, from ancient to contemporary, are eligible. An independent panel of international experts reviews and selects the sites that make up the list.

The WMF 2012 report titled ‘World Monuments Fund Announces 2012 Watch, Encompassing 67 Threatened Cultural-Heritage Sites Across The Globe And 7 Key Sites Across The UK’ states:

*London’s Southbank Centre, Coventry Cathedral and Newstead Abbey in Nottinghamshire were today named amongst 67 threatened cultural heritage sites from around the globe. The UK features heavily in the 2012 World Monuments Watch list of sites in need of assistance with seven prominent locations up and down the country.*

*Upon its completion in 1976, London’s South Bank Centre was deemed a visionary combination of performance spaces and an art gallery, but it continues to be denied heritage status.*

*Despite recommendations by English Heritage for national listing, none of the three has achieved protective status. With two scheduled for demolition, there is an urgent need to raise awareness, appreciation, and local pride in the significance of brutalist architecture in general.*
The 2012 entry for ‘British Brutalism’ specifically cited the Southbank Centre complex, along with Preston Bus Station and Birmingham Central Library. The WMF provided the following information:

The term “brutalism” is derived from the French “betón brut,” meaning “raw concrete,” and refers to a style of late modernist architecture that emerged during the second half of the twentieth century. The inclusion of three British buildings on the Watch underscores the risk to modern architecture around the world, especially to the underappreciated legacy of brutalism. Characterized by bold geometries, the exposure of structural materials, and functional spatial design, brutalist architecture was an expression of social progressivism and became a favored style for public architecture of the time. Often monumental in scale, these structures symbolize an era when government had both the resources and the political will to contribute major civic buildings to the public realm.

When it opened in 1976 [sic], London’s South Bank Centre was deemed a visionary combination of performance spaces and an art gallery, but lack of heritage status puts the architectural complex at risk. The Preston Bus Station is a daring concrete structure housing an integrated car parking, bus, and taxi facility. Upon its completion in 1969, it was the world’s largest bus station. Birmingham Central Library is a monumental hub in the civic center of the city and the largest non-national library in Europe. Both the station and the library are threatened by demolition due to re-development schemes.

These three buildings, dramatically sited, are uncompromising in their stark use of concrete and powerfully sculptural forms. They brought a sense of the monumental to the British urban landscape at the time of their construction and remain architectural icons. Over the past decade the Twentieth Century Society has been a constant advocate for these three buildings, but none has achieved protective national status. With two scheduled for the wrecking ball, there is an urgent need to raise awareness, appreciation, and local pride in the significance of brutalist architecture in general and in the value of these particular sites. It is hoped that inclusion on the Watch will prompt a dialogue about protection and alternatives for adaptive reuse.31

Asset of Community Value

On 12 July 2013, the Undercroft was listed by the London Borough of Lambeth as an Asset of Community Value (ACV) within the meaning of section 88 of the Localism Act 2011.

A Department for Communities and Local Government policy statement on ACVs states:

"The fact that the site is listed may affect planning decisions – it is open to the local planning authority to decide that listing as an asset of community value is a material consideration if an application for change of use is submitted, considering all the circumstances of the case.”

On 28 February 2014, Lambeth Council ruled in favour of upholding the listing. In the ‘Review of Listing as an Asset of Community Value: The Undercroft, beneath Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank, London, SE1 8XX’32 summary, Corporate Property Manager and Reviewing Officer, Sophie Linton MA MRICS, concluded;

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'whilst arts and cultural activities do take place in the Undercroft and other parts of the estate, both indoors and outdoors, the skateboarding park could be considered, in the officer’s opinion, as a separate entity, as it is not wholly dependent on the Southbank Centre. [...] As I understand it, the Undercroft was not specifically designed or built as a skateboarding park with a pre-determined use, but the use grew organically (albeit with further modifications to enhance it) and I believe that the significance of the Undercroft as a meeting point for skateboarders is because it has this ‘home grown’ quality by a reasonably defined group of urban users. [...] if the SBC were to close its doors tomorrow, the skateboarders would in all likelihood continue to use the Undercroft. [...] it seems wholly reasonable to me, on the balance of probabilities, combined with common sense and local knowledge generally, that some of the skateboarders and observers must come from the London Borough of Lambeth and so to that end, their social interests are supported by the actual current use of the Undercroft.'

**Town or Village Green**

On 8 May 2013, Long Live Southbank applied to register the Undercroft as a Town or Village Green under the Commons Act 2006.

On 20 September 2013 Lambeth Council declared the application invalid, on the grounds that four ‘trigger events’ had taken place, within the terms of new legislation introduced by the Growth and Infrastructure Act 2013, with no corresponding ‘terminating events.’

This decision was appealed by Long Live Southbank, with a judicial review hearing taking place at the Royal Courts of Justice on 6 and 7 March 2014. On what was to be the final day of the hearing, Ms Justice Lang determined that the drafting of the 2013 legislation was not clear enough to make a decision. The application for Town or Village Green was withdrawn in 2014 Long Live Southbank entered into an agreement to preserve the current space.

**Central Activities Zone**

The Undercroft falls within the Central Activities Zone (CAZ) as defined by the London Plan. The CAZ is recognised as the cultural and economic heart of the capital and area of national significance. The London Plan states the area has:

> ‘a unique character and feel across its hugely varied quarters and neighbourhoods, which the Mayor is committed to protecting and enhancing.’

**South Bank Strategic Cultural Zone**

In addition, the Undercroft falls with the South Bank Strategic Cultural Area as defined by the London Plan:

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With their rich heritage and unique offers, the strategic cultural areas are identified as London’s major clusters of visitor attractions.  

It is a strategic aim of the London Plan to ‘promote, enhance and protect the special characteristics of visitor attractions including those identified in Strategic Cultural Areas.’

**Cultural Metropolis 2014**

*Cultural Metropolis* is the Mayor of London’s cultural strategy for the city. It was first published in 2010, and an updated version was released in 2014.

In a section on ‘Informal Culture’, the 2014 version makes specific reference to the cultural and heritage value of the Undercroft and its significance for London, as well as the threat posed by development:

> London derives its unique character from a delicate balance of culture, heritage and development. This is a city where skateboarders can be found weaving in and out of brutalist architecture [...] This informal culture – difficult to quantify, or even define – is often temporary, youth led, and at the margins rather than the mainstream. The value of informal culture and how it can acquire its own heritage value, or even become mainstream, is under-recognised. As a result informal culture can struggle to co-exist with new development.

> London’s buzz and its reputation as a vibrant, youth friendly and exciting city are crucial factors in attracting businesses and their employees, as well as students and tourists. Edgy spaces with a sense of the spontaneous – that are led not by formal organisations but by people themselves – help make a city exciting and ‘alive’.

> [...] Over time, such informal activity can acquire a heritage of its own.

> In the London Plan, the Mayor recognises that ‘The local and distinctive have to be treasured... Fundamentally, we must pay attention to quality as well as quantity, and protect the things that make London London.’ He understands the importance of informal culture and the capital’s newer cultural ‘heritage’ and will make sure the capital maintains its unique blend of the new and the old, the informal and the formal. Working with partners such as English Heritage, the Mayor will continue to make sure cultural and planning strategies work in tandem. He will also champion the economic and social value of less formal cultural activities in order to promote London as the most exciting city in the world.

**2.5 Statistical Legislation and Guidance**

**National Planning Policy Framework**

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), published on March 27th 2012, is the overarching planning policy document for England. Within Section 12: conservation and enhancing the historic environment are the government’s policies for the protection of heritage. The policies advise a

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34 Ibid, p. 122
35 Ibid. p. 121
holistic approach to planning and development, where all significant elements which make up the historic environment are termed ‘heritage assets’. A heritage asset is: ‘A building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest.’

These consist of designated assets (such as listed buildings or conservation areas) non-designated assets (such as locally listed buildings) or any other features which are considered to be of heritage value. The policies within the document emphasise the need for assessing the significance of heritage assets and their setting in order to fully understand the historic environment and inform suitable design proposals for change to significant buildings.

The London Plan

The London Plan is the overall strategic plan for London, and it sets out a fully integrated economic, environmental, transport and social framework for the development of the capital to 2031. It forms part of the development plan for Greater London. London boroughs’ local plans need to be in general conformity with the London Plan, and its policies guide decisions on planning applications by councils and the Mayor.

In the Foreword to the London Plan, the Mayor sets out his vision for London as the best big city in the world.

London must also be among the best cities in the world to live, whatever your age or background...The local and distinctive have to be treasured. Our neighbourhoods must be places where people feel safe and are proud to belong... Fundamentally, we must pay attention to quality as well as quantity, and protect the things that make London London.37

Policy 7.8 relates to heritage assets and states that ‘Development should identify, value, conserve, restore, re-use and incorporate heritage assets, where appropriate [...] Development affecting heritage assets and their settings should conserve their significance, by being sympathetic to their form, scale, materials and architectural detail.’38

Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG)

As part of the London Plan 2011 Implementation Framework, the Mayor’s ‘Shaping Neighbourhoods: Character and Context’39 sets out recommendations for planning and development. The foreword by the Mayor states:

It explains the fundamental importance of getting an understanding of a place before taking decisions on its development – how it has come to be the way it is; the things about it that people who live, work, visit or just travel through value or want to see changed; the economic, social and other forces driving change [...] it’s about an approach to encouraging development that changes what needs changing and makes a contribution to London’s

38 Ibid., p. 224
overall success – but which also protects the things that are essential to an area’s individual character and perhaps makes the best of previously hidden strengths

Chapter 3 of the Policy Context (2014) states:

3.11 People create places. How places have evolved, their function and the activities they support (both past and present) are pivotal to any understanding of the character of a place. This involves having an understanding of the activity, use and movement within and through a place and its connections and linkages to its surroundings.

**Lambeth Local Plan**

The current Local Plan is made up of the Core Strategy (2011) and the borough’s saved Unitary Development Plan (UDP) policies, and is designed to co-operate with the policies set out in the London Plan.

It is a strategic objective of the Local Plan to ‘Create and sustain distinctive local places through excellent design of buildings and the public realm, valuing heritage, identity, cultural assets, the River Thames and the natural environment’ as well as to ‘Maintain and develop Lambeth’s strength in arts and culture and the role of the South Bank as one of London’s leading international cultural and tourist destinations.’

**Lambeth Local Development Framework - Core Strategy**

Strategic Policy S1 of Lambeth’s LDF Core Strategy\(^{41}\) refers to Delivering the Vision and Objectives and requires ‘Encouraging and supporting sustainable development that enhances the local distinctiveness of neighbourhoods’, ‘Safeguarding and improving essential physical, green and social infrastructure’, ‘Safeguarding and improving community premises in order to meet identified demand for community meeting spaces, including provision for faith groups, and seeking the development of new facilities where there are identified gaps in provision’ and ‘Helping to promote and maintain mixed, balanced and diverse communities within neighbourhood.’

4.1 Measures to achieve local distinctiveness and local regeneration objectives are set out in Section 5 – Places and Neighbourhoods.

4.3 [...] Social infrastructure includes facilities for the delivery of essential services including [...] health and social care; [...] children’s play; primary, secondary, further and higher education; youth services; culture and sport [...] It also includes community meeting spaces and facilities to meet the needs of faith groups and community groups. Green infrastructure includes open space and nature conservation and other green areas.

Strategic Policy SS of Lambeth’s LDF Core Strategy refers to Open Space and requires the ‘protecting and maintaining existing open spaces and their function’ and ‘improving the quality of, and access to, existing open space, including the range of facilities available and its bio-diversity and nature conservation value and heritage value, through various means including the implementation of the Lambeth Open Spaces Strategy. Where appropriate in major developments, financial contributions


\(^{41}\) Lambeth LDF Core Strategy – Section 4 - Strategic Policies, p. 39-56
will be sought towards improvements in the quality of, and access to, open space in the borough.’ stating:

4.29 Existing open space includes Metropolitan Open Land, Common Land, historic parks and gardens, district and local parks, nature conservation areas, play areas and adventure playgrounds, outdoor sports facilities, allotments, cemeteries and burial space, amenity land within housing estates, communal squares and gardens, front and back gardens and the River Thames Foreshore and Thames Path in accordance with London Plan policy.

Strategic Policy S9 of Lambeth’s LDF Core Strategy refers to the Quality of the Built Environment and covers the Council’s overarching general policies relating to the Townscape and Built Environment stating:

(a) The Council will improve and maintain the quality of the built environment and its liveability, in order to sustain stable communities [...] particularly where this contributes to local distinctiveness, enhances the existing built environment and heritage, reflects the cultural diversity of the borough and creates new high quality areas of public realm. (b) Safeguarding and promoting improvements to the borough’s heritage assets including appropriate uses and improvements to listed buildings, maintaining a local list of heritage assets, carrying out conservation area character appraisals and management plans, and making appropriate provision for assets of archaeological value.

4.42 National planning policy sets out the requirements for the protection and enhancement of listed buildings, archaeological heritage and the character and appearance of conservation areas.

Saved Policy 33 Building Scale and Design states that ‘all development should be of a high quality design and contribute positively to its surrounding area’. The policy specifies that for development affecting conservation areas or listed buildings (or their setting), protecting or enhancing their character and appearance takes precedence.

Heritage Guidance

This report will follow the guidance for conservation and heritage assets set out by English Heritage in the following documents.


Conversation Principles defines significance as ‘the sum of the cultural and natural heritage of a place’. A comprehensive framework for the sustainable management of the historic environment is provided under six guiding principles:

Principle 1: The historic environment is a shared resource
Principle 2: Everyone should be able to participate in sustaining the historic environment
Principle 3: Understanding the significance of places is vital
Principle 4: Significant places should be managed to sustain their values
Principle 5: Decisions about change must be reasonable, transparent and consistent
Principle 6: Documenting and learning from decisions is essential

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Conservation is defined under Principle 4.2 as ‘the process of managing change to a significant place in its setting in ways that will best sustain its heritage values, while recognising opportunities to reveal or reinforce those values for present and future generations.’

Heritage values are arranged in four groups, which may be attached to places. These are:

- **Evidential value:** the potential value of a place to yield evidence about past human activity.
- **Historical value:** the ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present – it tends to be illustrative or associative.
- **Aesthetic value:** the ways in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place.
- **Communal value:** the meanings of a place for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory.


The significance of a heritage asset not only derives from its physical presence but also from its setting and the surroundings in which it is experienced. The setting of heritage assets provides guidance on managing change within the setting of a heritage asset.

In a letter submitted to Lambeth Council in 2013, English Heritage stated ‘It also appears that there is insufficient understanding of the communal value of the undercroft area [...] we feel further analysis of the communal value of the undercroft is necessary to ascertain the impact of recent cultural heritage.’

**National and Local Legislation and Guidance**

Section 66 of The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 requires that decision makers shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving a listed building (Royal Festival Hall, Grade 1) or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses, when considering whether to grant planning permission.

Section 66 of the Act requires that decision makers shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving a listed building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses, when considering whether to grant planning permission.

Section 72 of the Act requires that, in the exercise of their planning functions, local planning authorities shall pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of conservation areas.

Paragraph 135 of the National Planning Policy Framework deals with non-designated heritage assets and advises that the effect of an application on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset should be taken into account in determining the application. In weighing applications that affect directly or indirectly non-designated heritage assets, a balanced judgment is required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset, always bearing in mind that these are not listed buildings.

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43 Ibid., p. 22
44 Ibid., p. 27-32
3.0 ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

3.1 Aesthetic Value

40 years use by the skateboarding community, including a huge number of professionals and highly significant skaters have given the site huge cultural significance. It is the longest continually skated space in the world, given its usage since 1973, and without a doubt one of the most famous skate spots in the world. It is the epicentre of UK skateboarding and a fixture on many skateboarding teams tour schedules.

The space that is now boarded off has a special significance of its own, with the legendary small banks now inaccessible, along with the bank to wall, made famous by American pros such as Eric Dressen. There are also a large number of routes around the skate spot that held great significance to the skateboarding community, that it is now no longer possible to take.

Aesthetically, it would be hugely significant to reopen the original space. It would allow the space to be seen as the architects intended it, with views across the Thames from Belvedere Road. The Undercroft would again become a wide open area, with plenty of space to explore the brutalist architectural forms, rather than a cramped space where it is impossible to get away from the busy pedestrianised stretch of river front.

The Undercroft has great significance beyond the skateboarding and street art community. It was designed as part of the most important post war master planned complex of twentieth century public buildings.

The Undercroft space is formed by large structural octagonal reinforced concrete columns, supporting the foyer floor concrete structure overhead. The sides of the Undercroft were originally open to the west, north and south.

The Undercroft space has been partially boarded out over recent years, which has been progressively reducing and restricting the space available to community user groups. It is believed that if the boards were removed, the entire space would retain its original form of octagonal reinforced concrete columns. The condition of this concealed fabric is unclear, however, there are records that demonstrate that Undercroft space has suffered from damage by the Southbank Centre who have undertaken detrimental works to the fabric in efforts to try and restrict the use of the space by skateboarders and other community members (examples include dumping of aggregates and slabs broken up within areas).

The original decorative scheme was minimal barefaced concrete which has been covered with graffiti over most surfaces over the course of the last thirty years. It is known that the use of plastic paints, in the long term, will inevitably have maintenance and built fabric issues. However, there is a recognised value within the graffiti itself as an artwork, which is becoming a more common place thought form with some council’s even protecting certain works. Although the graffiti was not intended within the Undercroft within the original design, there is a recognised potential value within the works. The value of the graffiti within the Undercroft would require separate analysis and research into the individual works that have been undertaken before making judgement. There is a photographic archive of the graffiti which can be found at The Graffiti Archaeology Project.
3.2 Community Value

Over the past 40 years, the diverse community who use the space have organically created a distinctive feature at Southbank Centre, significance for all manner of artistic and social activities. It is a community space that is enjoyed by the user groups which has now become a fixture in the cultural landscape of the River Thames and an attraction enjoyed by visitors from across the UK and the world.

The presence of the Undercroft at a key and prominent location of the Thames holds a significant communal value to visitors and neighbouring buildings.

The Undercroft has been popular with skateboarders since the early 1970s and it is widely acknowledged to be London’s most popular skateboarding area. The area is used by skateboarders, BMXers, graffiti artists, taggers, filmmakers, photographers, videographers, musicians, buskers and performance artists amongst others. The Undercroft is an informal space in public use, where accessible, and is part of a vibrant streetscape sharing the environment with residents, community, national and international visitors to the iconic location. Such a diverse range of creative people coming together in one space makes the Undercroft a cultural boiling pot. The art forms influence each other and cross blend, making the Undercroft a unique space, impossible to replicate.

Indirectly, the diversity of community user groups who use the space have organically created a distinctive feature at Southbank Centre for activity, social and arts scene. It is a community space that is enjoyed by the user groups which has now become a fixture in the cultural landscape of the River Thames and an attraction enjoyed by spectators.

40 years of cultural significance by community use of a space have articulated a world class skating arena in the Undercroft, a space designed within the most important post war master planned complex of twentieth century public buildings. The sense of place and ownership by local skaters is
unprecedented on a national scale. The place currently provides support, community engagement, camaraderie, cohesion, learning, and identity of place, culture, sport and the arts.

Image of some of the community who inhabit the Undercroft 2013. Image © LLSB

The existing fabric has been cherished and loved by the users but little money has been spent on it by the owners and it has been left in a deteriorating condition as a result. Reports of the owners causing damage to the fabric in an attempt to prevent the skaters utilising the space have been documented. The existing fabric would benefit from a condition survey of the accessible and inaccessible areas to understand the extent of repair works required to the existing fabric.

Southbank Centre released a scheme to redevelop the site as part of a £177 million proposed Festival Wing development, with plans to insert retail units and cafes with the Undercroft space. It is noted that Time Out, in August 2008, reported that the Prime Minister released a statement in support of the existing Undercroft uses. In January 2014, The Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, indicated support for the redevelopment of Southbank Centre but only if the skatepark is retained in situ within the Undercroft.

For skateboarders, the Undercroft is recognised internationally. The space also holds a great significance for a wide range of other groups. Users have a highly significant sense of place, showing the Undercroft has a high communal value.

LLSB postcard: Image of Southbank Undercroft 1970s and 2010s. © LLSB
4.0 THE UNDERCROFT: LONG LIVE SOUTHBANK

Origins

Long Live Southbank (LLSB) is a not-for-profit organization set up by the Undercroft community following the announcement in March 2013 of the Southbank Centre’s ‘Festival Wing’ plan and its intention to redevelop the site replacing the iconic Southbank Undercroft skate spot with commercial retail units. The purpose of LLSB is to protect the Southbank Undercroft and its resident community and unique culture, and to ensure it remains in its original location, free from external influence and alteration. The community created a preservation campaign, galvanising a diverse and passionate group, consisting of skaters, other Undercroft users, as well as people from the wider creative community and people who enjoy observing the Undercroft activities.

The organisation and campaign was set up in response to Southbank Centre’s announcement in early March 2013 that it intended to redevelop the site with its £120 million ‘Festival Wing’ scheme, a plan which featured the replacing of the iconic Southbank Undercroft skate spot with commercial retail units. LLSB ran a wide-ranged campaign. Whilst there was dialogue with political figures and talks at numerous architectural and planning events, LLSB also ran a campaign table adjacent to the Undercroft, often every day for over 17 months, engaging a huge number of members of the public.

The organisation’s first principles were to preserve the community and culture in its current and traditional location, thus continuing the symbiotic relationship between the Undercroft space and its users. Long Live Southbank has a system of membership whereby people who support the campaign have the opportunity to join officially. Each person signs up to the statement;

I wish to become a member of Long Live Southbank, the purpose of which is to protect the skate area at the Undercroft, South Bank.

By September 2014, LLSB had gained a following of 150,000 members, gathering the largest planning permission objection in British history and gained the support of the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson.

In September 2014, LLSB signed a deal with the Southbank Centre safeguarding the space in the long term. Since then, LLSB have continued to play an essential role as custodians and guardians of the space, initiating maintenance meetings with the Southbank Centre, leading the organisation of a wide range of events, running skate schools, celebrating the vibrant creativity of the community and continuing to speak at a wide range of architectural and town planning events.

LLSB believes Southbank Undercroft’s cultural and historical status, which organically-evolved in this found space, to be irreplaceable, and that its unique architecture and the vitality of the thriving Undercroft community, which are inextricably linked, should be saved for future generations.

Additionally, Long Live Southbank have been awarded ‘engagement campaign of the year’ at the annual Change Opinion Awards and was the choice of ‘Great comms campaigns I wish I’d done’ by the head of communications of Friends of the Earth at a seminar organised by CharityComms.
‘Who has a right to the city?’
New London Architecture 2014

‘The Brutalist Playground’
Royal Institute of British Architecture 2015

Royal Academy of Arts 2015

‘400 Seconds of doing things my way’
MTV Staying Alive 2015

Institute of Contemporary Arts 2014

‘All of This Belongs to You’
Victoria and Albert Museum 2015

V&A Museum 2015
Change Opinion ‘Engagement Award’ winners

RIBA 2015
Achievements

The Long Live Southbank campaign has amassed a number of significant achievements building up to the legal agreement which preserved the space in the long term, including;

- Securing the Undercroft’s listing as an Asset of Community Value by Lambeth Council.
- Over 150,000 members who have signed up to the preservation statement.
- Collected the largest number of planning permission objections in UK history;
  14,000 delivered to Lambeth Town Hall on 4th July 2013
  27,286 delivered to Lambeth Town Hall on 2nd January 2014
  6,644 delivered to Lambeth Town Hall following 2nd January 2014
- Case study for numerous student dissertations, final projects and course work
- Case study for university lectures and papers and architectural, cultural and community organisations

Educational Engagement

Long Live Southbank has engaged with hundreds of students from schools, colleges and universities from around the UK and across the world. The campaign has been contacted by numerous schools, supplementary schools, colleges, universities and education-focused community groups, with whom LLSB has collaborated with or provided assistance to.

5.0 RESTORING THE ORIGINAL UNDERCROFT

The following provides an initial framework and background to consider for the restoration of the original Undercroft. The assessment of significance follows guidance from the Heritage Lottery Fund on Conservation Management Planning (2008) and English Heritage’s Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance (2008). The assessment is based on the values set out in Conservation Principles.
When first built 1967, the Undercroft was much larger in size than it today, filling the entirety of the space beneath the Queen Elizabeth Hall. It contained unique architectural features which gave the area a distinct atmosphere.

The Original Undercroft space showing the skate stopped driveway © Richie Hopson

The Undercroft of the Southbank Centre has been subject to moderate scale modification over its life span resulting in some damage and concealment of original features and built fabric. A large area of the Undercroft has been boarded out in more recent years, historic fabric survival beyond these boarded screens is likely but difficult to ascertain at present without a fully accessible survey. There are photographs, videos and personal accounts that provide documented evidence of the previous changes making interpretation of the exposed fabric easier.

The design plan was integral to the overall articulation and texture of the building as a complete structure. The reduction of the space and obscuring of the original architectural and design features diminishes the integrity of the building. The temporary pop-up usage in the old skateable space’s place under the term ‘Festival Village’ is crude and has been largely unsuccessful in capturing public imagination and patronage.

The Undercroft space is formed by large structural octagonal reinforced concrete columns, supporting the foyer floor concrete structure overhead. The sides of the Undercroft were originally open to the east, north and south.

As previously noted, the Undercroft space has been largely boarded over recent years. The skateable space has been restricted, however it is believed that the octagonal columns remain intact behind the temporary hoardings. The condition of the concealed fabric remains unclear, although some damage has been confirmed.

According to Policy 7.8 of the London Plan;

‘Developments should...restore, re-use and incorporate heritage assets.’

Given the long history of the Undercroft as a site for skateboarding stretching back to the 1970s – and its relatively recent reduction in size, it is clear that the heritage value of the site covers not only the currently open space, but extends to the wider area which has been incrementally reduced and closed off in 2004 and 2005.
In 2004, the little banks were boarded off and made inaccessible to skateboarders. There was an informal agreement with the Southbank Centre that this would only be temporary, and that in return ledges could be installed by Side Effects of Urethane.

In the summer of 2005, during the refurbishment of the Festival Hall, however, the accessible area was decreased further – with no prior warning, consultation or planning permission - by approximately two thirds.

The Southbank Centre issued a statement explaining the move:

*The undercroft area has been temporarily reduced in area for skateboarding to accommodate some staff displaced following the closure of the Festival Hall.*

* [...] It is intended to release as much of the undercroft space as possible in the Spring of 2007 when the Festival Hall is due to be re-opened. But some parts of the undercroft may still be required in the medium term.*

However, to this day, and despite opening new offices alongside the refurbished Festival Hall, Southbank Centre have refused to release any of the ‘temporarily’ closed area. In 2008, the Southbank Centre stated that it had ‘no immediate plans to redevelop this part of its site’.

Given Southbank Centre’s more recent plans to re-open and re-connect the former Undercroft spaces - albeit for commercial retail space usage - there is therefore a strong case to be made for its holistic restoration as an important heritage site with distinctive architectural features and traditional cultural usage spanning 4 decades.

With the recent Festival Wing plan having earmarked the Undercrofts to be re-opened and re-connected. Policy 7.8 of the London Plan clearly presents a definite preference for their restoration back to the original skate spaces as first discovered in 1973, and first publically documented in 1976. The architectural and cultural restoration would reinstate an internationally recognised landmark in its entirety, and reignite the full potential of the found space.
A preference should be given to the restoration of the original features in their original layout, including those destroyed, modified, damaged or removed. The resident community should be as fully involved in these discussions and plans as is feasibly possible.

From 2012 to 2015 the space renamed and Festival Village has seen limited use and is often closed for long periods of time. Sporadic usage has included; a bar, exhibition space, meeting room, children’s play area and corporate events. The space is rarely busy with low visitor numbers.
In the ‘Festival Wing’ planning application, which intended the infilling of the currently open Undercroft space with retail units, Southbank Centre identifies the additional Undercroft spaces beneath the Festival Wing. Southbank Centre stated its intention to reopen further Undercroft spaces ‘that are either inaccessible or unusable...This will provide a range of new cultural and retail spaces, including spaces dedicated to children and young people, and the potential for a Heritage and Archive centre focussed on the heritage of the Southbank centre.’

According to Policy 7.8 of the London Plan, ‘Developments should...restore, re-use and incorporate heritage assets.’ Given the long history of the Undercroft as a site for skateboarding and other urban creative arts – stretching back to the 1970s – and its relatively recent reduction in size, it is clear that the heritage value of the site covers not only the currently open space, but extends to the wider area closed off in 2005. Particularly in light of Southbank Centre’s recent plans to re-open and re-connect the former Undercroft spaces (albeit for different uses), there is therefore a strong case to be made for its holistic restoration as an important heritage site with distinctive architectural features.

If the Undercrofts are to be re-opened and re-connected, then under Policy 7.8 of the London Plan, there is an argument for their restoration back to the original skate spaces as first discovered in 1973, and first publically documented in 1976. The architectural and cultural restoration would reinstate an internationally recognised landmark in its entirety, and reignite the full potential of the found space.

6.0 A WAY FORWARD

To return the Undercroft, now one of London’s most iconic and loved cultural assets, to its original design, realising the architects intentions and the space’s potential, would require various stakeholders to work together in collaboration. A further detailed report will be released covering financial and logistical requirements of the restoration.

Several significant and renowned organisations and individuals have identified themselves as interested in assisting to realise the restoration of the original space to its intended design. To this end, a consortium has been created whereby the expertise of those directly involved, and contacts from extended networks can be maximised.
It is recognised by Long Live Southbank, along with many other significant individuals and organisations, that the Undercroft is an important component within the overall master-planning of the site. Any proposal directing the Undercroft should be developed from scratch by formulating a brief which would meet the needs of all community groups. A transparent process is required that would involve in depth consultations throughout all significant work stages with all key stakeholders of the space. This would initiate a way forward involving all community groups who would work together to develop proposals to ensure that any new design regarding the space will meet the needs of the individual community groups.

Long Live Southbank hope to work with Southbank Centre in realising a project that will bring immense cultural value to the area and provide London with a space rivalled by few other global cities. It would protect and celebrate a very rare example of a creative community’s art and culture of self-determination thriving throughout economical and societal turbulence.

Any decisions should be by agreement of the Undercroft community and the landowners, Southbank Centre and the Arts Council.

The landowners, Southbank Centre and the Arts Council, or any subsequent landowner or change of managerial structure must ensure they fully understand the needs of the Undercroft community and the resonance the community and its practices have on the local community and visitors to the site.

Preservation of the community and its culture and expressions and practices must be in situ and incorporate the traditional and historical spaces.

Preservation must be with complete honesty and integrity and free from external influence and without alteration or corruption from third parties or those outside of the established community.

The landowners, Southbank Centre and the Arts Council, should ensure a permanent and secure future for the physical space and structures, and the resident community and their traditional and evolving practices.

The Undercroft community and users wish to form a new relationship with Southbank Centre, one that is built on mutual trust and respect.

The Undercroft community and users also wish both parties to exchange a deeper understanding to the respective contributions both make to London’s cultural landscape, and the UK’s artistic identity on a global stage.

Over the last few decades, significant buildings and aspects of the area have been removed or lost, decisions which were later considered to be regrettable.

The endurance of Southbank Undercroft and its community is a testament to foresight and exemplifies why something so unique can, and should, be preserved.

Southbank Centre, Lambeth Council and Arts Council have an opportunity to build on the public support for street culture as identified by Long Live Southbank. 150,000 people have shown that they connect with and appreciate organic, self-determined art and culture and wish to, not only preserve it, but to see it grow, flourish and fulfil its potential to draw inspiration from its intangible heritage.
7.0 STATEMENTS OF SUPPORT

Preservation and restoration of the original space is supported by a wide range of high profile organisations and individuals. This section compiles statements of support for the Southbank Undercroft community and restoration of the entire original design space from a wide spectrum of respected authorities and experts in the fields of heritage, preservation, architecture, policy, town planning, social cohesion, community wellbeing, culture and the arts.

English Heritage

English Heritage is the Government’s statutory adviser on the historic environment. It has supported the statutory listing of the Queen Elizabeth Hall, of which the Undercroft is a part, as well as the adjacent Purcell Room and Hayward Gallery.

“The skate area in the undercroft of the Queen Elizabeth Hall is strongly valued by those that use and engage with it, who consider the space to be part of their cultural and social identity. For those people, it is not only a source of identity but also distinctiveness, social interaction, and coherence. In addition to this evident communal value, the undercroft has some historic value as a place used for skating in the early days of a sport which has gone on to be a significant influence on fashion and culture.

“In terms of the historic value, the undercroft has a three-sided concrete bank which mimicks the form of a wave and may very well be the reason the undercroft was first colonised by skaters. Although skating is now restricted to the Queen Elizabeth Hall’s undercroft area, it once took place across a much wider area of the South Bank.”

- Simon Hickman, Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas, English Heritage

Twentieth Century Society

The Twentieth Century Society (C20) exists to safeguard the heritage of architecture and design in Britain from 1914 onwards. Its main activities are campaigning for the preservation of buildings and educating the public on their significance.

“Along with English Heritage, The Twentieth Century Society has repeatedly called for the listing of this ensemble, constructed by the LCC’s / GLC’s Architect’s Department between 1963 and ’68. The Southbank Centre sits in the Southbank Conservation Area, between the National Theatre (Grade II * listed) and Royal Festival Hall (Grade I listed). The complex showcases some of the best and most important architecture from this period in the country.

“We feel that the skateboarding use brings a unique visual and cultural interest to this part of the South Bank that draws in a large audience to the site in its own right. This allows a diverse audience to appreciate the sculptural form of the concrete mushroom columns of this undercroft space.”

- Catherine Croft, Director, Twentieth Century Society
Open Spaces Society

The Open Spaces Society (OSS) was founded in 1865 as the Commons Preservation Society. It is Britain’s oldest national conservation body. Over the last century OSS has worked to preserve commons for the enjoyment of the public. It has also been active in protecting the historical and vital rights-of-way network through England and Wales. OSS has been a strong supporter of Long Live Southbank, and intervened at a judicial review hearing in March 2014 to support the attempt to register the Undercroft as a village green.

“We are very anxious that the whole of the Undercroft should be returned to the people as public open space, to be used and enjoyed in its traditional fashion, in tune with the culture of the South Bank. The Open Spaces Society considers that the Undercroft is of immense value as a public open space, in the heart of London, where people may enjoy a variety of activities. It is a skateboarding centre, social hub, and much more.”

- Kate Ashbrook, General Secretary, Open Space Society

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) was founded by William Morris in 1877 to counteract the highly destructive ‘restoration’ of medieval buildings being practiced by many Victorian architects. Today it is the largest, oldest and most technically expert national pressure group fighting to save old buildings from decay, demolition and damage.

“The SPAB has followed the recent debate concerning the proposals for the redevelopment of the Southbank Centre with some interest. Although we generally concentrate on responding to listed building consent applications relating to pre-1720 buildings, we chose to support our colleagues at the Twentieth Century Society by objecting to the planning application for alterations and extensions to the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room and Hayward Gallery essentially because we were concerned by the lack of overall understanding of the heritage significance of the site.

We highlighted what we perceived to be a fundamental flaw in the vision for the redevelopment project. Projects such as the emerging scheme for the neighbouring National Theatre by Howarth Tomkins and the acclaimed refurbishment of the Royal Festival Hall, completed by Allies and Morrison in 2007, demonstrate that a conservation-led approach to the redevelopment of modern buildings can deliver much needed change without damaging the special qualities and interest of the original architecture. The issue of the Undercroft below the Queen Elizabeth Hall has proven to be a salient reminder of the need to understand not just the design of modern spaces but their historic and evolving use as well as their connection with the local community. The key to success is making sure that the significance of the existing place is fully understood to begin with, and then ensuring that there is consensus as to the elements that should be protected and those areas that may be capable of beneficial change. This process is vital to each and every redevelopment project whether the building is of great age or is a more recent work of architecture, such as the Southbank Centre.

Interestingly, the high profile media debate that has arisen over the current proposals demonstrates just how difficult the challenge of identifying, articulating and safeguarding the value and significance of modern cultural institutions can be. Ironically, if the Southbank
Centre had taken a more positive stance towards the question of listing the building then the insights revealed as part of the assessment exercise might have been used to develop a scheme acceptable to all the many user groups.”

- Sara Crofts, Deputy Director and Head of Casework, SPAB

**Fields in Trust**

Fields In Trust (FIT), founded as the National Playing Fields Association in 1925, works throughout the UK to safeguard and improve outdoor recreational spaces for sport and play for future generations.

“Outdoor recreational spaces are a vital resource that help to create stronger and healthier communities. The mental and physical health benefits provided by such spaces are well documented along with the opportunities they provide for young people to develop essential skills.

Not only is the Undercroft iconic, it is a fantastic urban example of public recreational space and how these spaces can help bring people together.”

- Helen Griffiths, Chief Executive, Fields in Trust

**The National Community Land Trust Network**

The National CLT Network is the national body for Community Land Trusts in England and Wales.

“The National Community Land Trust exists to represent and celebrate people who are fighting out of love to nurture a place or way of life that they care about. The skating community at the Southbank Centre are a fantastic example of this. The Undercroft is a free space for people to express themselves on a site of real significance to a global youth culture. It is part of what makes our capital city brilliant.”

- Catherine Harrington, Director, National CLT Network

**Museum of London**

Founded in 1976 as part of the Barbican estate, the Museum of London documents the city from prehistoric to modern times.

“There is much public concern and interest in the current use of the space by the Undercroft community for skateboarding, this was evident in the volume and quantity of voices that leant themselves to your cause. The informal cultural value that is now imbued in the site through the years of activity spent on four wheels manoeuvring concrete should be allowed to flourish. It would not, in my view, be in the spirit of the recent realisation of just how much the Southbank Undercroft means if the space was unduly restricted. I would hope that a workable solution can be found.”

- Sharon Ament, Director, Museum of London
Mayor of London

In January 2014, the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, spoke out in favour of preserving the Undercroft. The Mayor told a preliminary planning meeting at City Hall:

“I wholeheartedly support the principle of enhancing the world-class cultural facilities at the Southbank Centre and am encouraged by many of the aspects of their plans. However, redevelopment should not be at the detriment of the skate park, which should be retained in its current position.

“The skate park is the epicentre of UK skateboarding and is part of the cultural fabric of London. This much-loved community space has been used by thousands of young people over the years. It attracts tourists from across the world and undoubtedly adds to the vibrancy of the area – it helps to make London the great city it is.”

Ben Bradshaw MP

Benjamin Bradshaw has been the MP for Exeter since 1997. He was the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport from 2009 to 2010:

“... this site has built up organically from the skateboarders themselves, generations of skateboarders, going back decades.

I can think of countless examples in other areas of culture and art where something that somebody tries to give you or impose on you doesn’t actually end up being that successful or very creative or very new or very exciting. Whereas something that has grown up from the grass roots, from the bottom, organically ends up being of real cultural value.”

Dr David Webb

Dr David Webb is a lecturer in Town Planning, School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at Newcastle University.

“The recent campaign to save the Undercroft showed that the reasons why we value arts and cultural expression are changing. Should the primary function of the arts be to subsidise provision for visitors and generate income to preserve our physical heritage or do the arts play just as important a role in sustaining our cultural heritage and supporting individuals to develop their own forms of creativity and expression?

Part of this debate concerns the right to the city, and the extent to which the arts are a public good or a commercial product. Like many organisations, the South Bank Centre is facing financial pressures, but it is important that this debate is given voice and used to inform future plans. Its wider importance for our cultural identity and collective values cannot be overstated.”
Dr Matthew Barac

Dr Matthew Barac is Research Leader for Architecture at London South Bank University. He is a chartered architect with a background in professional practice and academia and his doctoral research won plaudits including the RIBA President's Award for Research and the International Bauhaus Award.

“It has been interesting to watch this debate unfold and mutate because, rather surprisingly, it seems to be the case that no one saw it coming. This is particularly ironic in the case of the Southbank Centre. In recent times the Centre has actively addressed the project of reconceptualising itself with a view to engaging with new audiences: with those who are younger, who are ethnically and economically diverse, who do not necessarily see themselves as ‘cultured’ or part of an intellectual elite. In their efforts to rethink and rebrand their offer they have, quite brazenly at times, adopted edgy or ‘counter-culture’ tropes – such as covering the buildings in graffiti seemingly transplanted from Shoreditch, or turning the promenade into something resembling Notting Hill market.

These strategies suggest that the institution wants to embrace (and even appropriate) the forms and values of those who have traditionally been, or at least felt, excluded from what it stands for. And yet, when push comes to shove, the Undercroft – that symbol of edginess and counter-culture that the Southbank Centre is lucky enough to have embedded at its very core – appears to be expendable. It is beyond belief that nobody at the top of the Southbank Centre managerial tree appreciates the irony of setting out to destroy it when it is the one that makes the institution credible to an audience that has, for so long, been beyond its grasp.”

Dr Oliver Mould

Dr Oliver Mould is a lecturer in human geography at Royal Holloway, University of London. He has researched and written widely on city space and urban subcultures, including his ‘Urban Subversion and the Creative City’ published in 2015 which features the Southbank Undercroft.

“The Undercroft skate spot at the South Bank has proved to be a very popular place. The skateboarding community has known this since the late 1970s, but given the successful Long Live Southbank campaign in 2014, now the whole world knows how important the space is. The appeal of the place now, after the campaign is only going to increase; with skaters and non-skaters alike. The Undercroft has gained international notoriety, and as such, not only needs to be preserved, but must be allowed to flourish. As such, it seems like the right thing to do would be to expand the site to its original specifications - removing the partition walls and open up the skating spot to create an even more skateble space. It would attract a much wider skating community, and allow for a real subcultural ethos to thrive (even more than it does so already). Attracting more skaters would not only increase the attractiveness of the site to tourists (and of course, potential consumers), but it would also allow for an increase in diversity of the people who use the skate spot.

It is now common knowledge the skateboarding exists as part of a subcultural ecosystem that includes graffiti artists, parkour, BMX-ers and so on. The tensions between these groups will not go away overnight, but by increasing the site and
allowing more room for people to express themselves, then a far more collective, sociable and amenable place will result organically. A simple increase in physical space will have an exponential increase in usage, conviviality and cultural facilitation. Skateboarding (and the wider landscape of creative subcultural urban practices) are here to stay - they are a fundamental part of city life. Opening up the Undercroft space would recognise this, and have amazing cultural, social (and yes, even some economic) benefits.”

Dr Ruth Adams

Dr Ruth Adams is a lecturer in Cultural & Creative Industries at King’s since 2003. Prior to taking up her post at CMCI, she taught Contextual Studies at the University of the Arts, London. Ruth undertook her postgraduate studies at The London Consortium; completing an MRes in Cultural Studies & Humanities and a doctoral thesis, 'Gentlemen and Players: The Victoria and Albert Museum - An Institutional Case Study of the Culture and Society Tradition'.

“Youth subcultures, street cultures and the often spectacular creativity they foster and display have long been, and continue to be a vital part of London’s cultural heritage. In a rapidly globalising and arguably homogenising world, these cultures maintain a sense of authenticity and rootedness.

In addition to creating a genuine sense of place, the skating community of the Southbank have also created a truly inclusive space, which welcomes visitors from all round the world and of every social stripe. The Undercroft is a public space in the true sense of the word, increasingly a rarity in an era when corporatism and gentrification engulf all before them. “

Dr Tim Snelson

Tim Snelson is a lecturer in media history at University of East Anglia. He has written widely on youth culture and media and is currently working on a research project on the Long Live Southbank campaign and youth political engagement.

“The Undercroft is the birthplace and spiritual home of British skateboarding. The successful campaign to preserve the space – though in its current compromised form – has demonstrated that the generations of skateboarders who have brought the space into existence through their repeated usages, improvisations and innovations possess the genuine claim to it. It seems fair, therefore, that the rest of their skate spot should be returned to them.”

Dr William Gallois

Dr William Gallois is a cultural historian and Senior Lecture in Modern Middle East History at Exeter University’s Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies. He has supported the preservation of the Undercroft and written to English Heritage to oppose its current Certificate of Immunity from Listing.

“I would urge the Southbank Centre to restore the original space of the Undercroft in its entirety. There are two good reasons as to why this makes sense. The first is that the
reopening of the full set of Undercrofts will return the building to the form in which it was built and realise again the vision its architects had for the site. There is a growing interest in English brutalist architecture and it seems strange that this cultural asset should be boarded up, rather than celebrated.

Secondly, as is well known, these spaces have been reappropriated for decades by skaters and other subcultures, who have tuned into the aesthetic of the place and given it a life which has been vibrant and much-enjoyed by many Londoners and visitors to the city. Arts organisations strive to engage young audiences and the Southbank already has a super-engaged set of young users who engage with the site in creative and organic ways, so let’s hope there are ways for both groups to support each other in restoring this significant cultural and heritage.”

Sxip Shirey

Sxip Shirey is a composer and producer from New York City, and Music Director for LIMBO at the Southbank Centre and in Sydney, Bogota, Paris and Brooklyn.

“There are places in every city that the residents bemoan don’t exist anymore. Places that made the city unique and special. The story is always the same, they were razed to create more apartments or commercial space or a new building that is not as functional as the old. The people who destroyed them look like historical idiots. The question is always ‘Why did we let them take that away from our city?’ The Southbank skate spot is one of those places.

When I went to London for the first time and then to South Bank, it was the skate spot that impressed me. The fact that the Royal National Theatre and the skate park were right next to each other said something great about this city. Great art evolves from the street first and this was a beautiful nod to just that.”

Original Undercroft space layout and design populated by skaters in the 1970s. ©
**QUOTES FROM MEMBERS OF PUBLIC**

When Southbank Centre submitted their Festival Wing plans in 2013, Long Live Southbank collected the record number of objections to a planning proposal in British history. The following quotes were collected from the planning permission objection forms delivered to Lambeth Town Hall on the 4th July 2013 and 2nd January 2014. Personal details have been removed out of respect for privacy.

- ‘It is part of the soul of London, that indefinable quality that makes a city a place to live not just exist and work.’

- ‘It is amazing how it has grown to become such a unique part of the South Bank. The way it has grown organically, responding to the needs of the users but without any overall authority in control is an inspiring example of how democracy can work.’

- ‘As a skateboarder in my early teens back in the late seventies I was aware of the Undercroft as a focal point for the local skateboarding community. Today, as a 51 year old skateboarder I am amazed that after the intervening decades, with all the highs and lows of skateboarding popularity, it is still going strong. Please do not underestimate the importance of this organic spot, nor its reputation around the world.’

- ‘My children love me to take them to Southbank to watch the skateboarding, we will spend a good hour viewing all the amazing tricks, this is what is special about London that we can have cultural activities accepted and shown to the tourists. I don’t think I would bother visiting Southbank without the skaters!’

- ‘I have been skating in Southbank since the early nineties. I met all of my friends there, it kept me, and thousands of other kids out of trouble in a time (which has worsened now in my opinion) where youths are constantly bombarded with temptation to go down the wrong path. All of my best memories come from that place. There have been several attempts to take the Undercroft away from the skaters and I don’t understand it. I have travelled a lot and have never found a place quite like it. It’s unique and makes me proud to be from London where culture and self-expression is still encouraged and celebrated. When I was a little boy (this would have been the late 80’s) my mother used to take me to the Southbank Centre to see ballet, opera and plays and it was entertaining but if given the choice, I would have only gone there for the Undercroft.’

- ‘On my visits to the Undercroft I find people with the utmost amazing personalities and personal views. I lost my mother to cancer and didn’t know where to go, I travelled the whole of London to escape the truth but I found peace and reflection easier to pursue at a place as creative as the Undercroft.’

- ‘Spaces for young people are rare and tend to be on the outskirts of communities. This skate park represents a positive presence for young people right at the heart of an important shared community space. Spaces like this are an essential part of ensuring young people aren’t demonised and excluded from society.’
“The right to the city is not merely a right of access to what the property speculators and state planners define, but an active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart’s desire, and to remake ourselves thereby in a different image”

David W. Harvey FBA, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Geography