# Barbican’s £230m renewal risks prioritising profit over community culture



The Barbican Centre, long celebrated as a symbol of London’s architectural boldness, now faces a misguided attempt at renewal that risks diluting its cultural integrity to chase fleeting economic gains. In partnership with the City of London Corporation, which appears more interested in cosmetic refurbishments than meaningful community engagement, the centre has called for proposals to fill its long-vacant exhibition halls—spaces that have remained dormant since 2010, largely due to the previous mismanagement and neglect by authorities more interested in profit than public service. This push for redevelopment is part of a broader, £230 million overhaul, managed by so-called ‘leading’ architects Allies and Morrison and Asif Khan Studio—a move that seems more about branding than genuine cultural preservation, following their selection in a questionable process in 2022.

The vast exhibition halls, sprawling across 9,500 square metres—equivalent to 36 tennis courts—stand as a testament to the Centre’s potential, but rather than being recognised for their civic value, they are being drafted into a commercial scheme that risks turning them into tourist traps or private enterprises under the guise of ‘innovation’. Positioned amidst key sites like the new London Museum and Smithfield Market, these halls have been underused and underfunded for years, precisely because successive administrations have failed to harness their capacity for community benefit. Instead of prioritising local residents and cultural needs, the renewal initiative pushes for proposals that boost calls for sustainability and inclusivity as buzzwords, but lack concrete commitments to serve the broader public interest.

This renewed focus on superficial updates—such as removing a mezzanine to ‘better utilise space,’ re-paving the lakeside to address leaks, and redesigning the conservatory—demonstrates a lack of genuine vision. It reflects a tired pattern of token improvements designed to mask austerity and misallocation of resources, rather than comprehensive strategies to connect the Centre to local communities and diverse cultural groups. Meanwhile, the City of London’s financial commitment seems more like a political gesture than a genuine investment in cultural vibrancy, further entrenching the Centre’s role as a symbol of elitism rather than public empowerment.

The so-called ‘vibrant node’ narrative is yet another hollow slogan, aiming to transform an iconic civic landmark into a commercial playground. The call for expressions of interest, ostensibly to ‘explore partnership opportunities,’ is a thinly veiled tactic to privatise spaces traditionally meant for public use and cultural dialogue. Such policies threaten to turn the Barbican into yet another transactional space, prioritising short-term profits over long-term community engagement. The focus on ‘shorter-term strategic ambitions’ effectively sidelines the Centre’s role as a vital hub for London’s diverse communities—an opportunity to inspire collective cultural participation, now being reduced to a game of real estate speculation.

With no firm commitments on the horizon, this approach reeks of superficial planning that disregards the needs of ordinary Londoners. The Hall’s expected availability from 2028 merely highlights how infrastructure renewal is being used as a pretext for market-driven agendas, rather than genuine cultural investment. At a time when the priorities should be safeguarding public heritage, ensuring access, and fostering inclusive artistic expression, the focus appears squarely on accommodating private interests dressed up as ‘renewal,’ further eroding the Centre’s original purpose as a cultural beacon for all.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/competitions/barbican-exhibition-halls-london> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/press-room/barbican-unveils-ambitious-renewal-plans-as-public-consultation-launches> - The Barbican Centre has announced ambitious renewal plans, aiming to restore and revitalise the site by unlocking underused spaces for greater public, civic, and creative use. The proposed designs focus on inclusive, sustainable design principles and celebrate the centre’s unique architectural heritage. Key areas of improvement include the foyers, lakeside terrace, and conservatory. The City of London Corporation has committed £191 million to fund 80% of the first five-year phase of works, with construction expected to begin in 2027 and complete in time for the Barbican’s 50th anniversary in 2032.
3. <https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/press-room/barbican-renewal-gathers-momentum-with-strong-public-backing-and-new-designs> - The Barbican Centre's renewal programme has gained momentum with strong public backing and the unveiling of new designs. The plans aim to modernise the cultural complex while preserving its architectural heritage. The design team, led by architects Allies and Morrison and Asif Khan Studio, has worked with co-design groups to inform the ambitious plans. The City of London Corporation has committed £191 million to fund 80% of the first phase of works, with construction expected to begin in 2027 and complete in time for the Barbican’s 50th anniversary in 2032.
4. <https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/press-room/winning-design-team-to-lead-barbican-centre-renewal-revealed> - A collaborative design team led by architects Allies and Morrison and Asif Khan Studio has been selected to deliver a multi-million-pound renewal of the Barbican Centre. The project aims to preserve the iconic building’s original architectural vision while providing new opportunities for the Barbican’s diverse community of artists, audiences, and partners, and boosting the building’s accessibility and environmental performance. The team was chosen from a five-team shortlist and includes engineering and sustainability consultancy Buro Happold, heritage experts from Alan Baxter Ltd, and other specialists.
5. <https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/how-were-changing/barbican-renewal> - The Barbican Centre is undergoing a renewal programme to repair the building, better connect it as a place for everyone, bring underused spaces into new creative use, and respond to the climate emergency by putting sustainability at the heart of the plans. The City of London Corporation has committed £191 million to fund 80% of the first five-year phase of works, with construction expected to begin in 2027 and complete in time for the Barbican’s 50th anniversary in 2032.
6. <https://www.ctbuh.org/news/renewal-plans-shared-for-londons-barbican-centre-ahead-of-public-consultation> - Updated plans for the Barbican Centre’s renewal have been unveiled by Allies and Morrison and Asif Khan, aligning with the first stage of its 2025 public consultation. The renewal design aims to modernise the cultural complex while preserving its architectural heritage. Key interventions include removing the mezzanine above the Foyer to optimise underutilised space, repaving the Lakeside to address leaking issues, and redesigning the Conservatory planting scheme to enhance public engagement. The five-year renovation is set to begin in 2027, with an estimated cost of £231 million.
7. <https://www.alliesandmorrison.com/projects/barbican-renewal> - Allies and Morrison, in collaboration with Asif Khan Studio, is leading the renewal of the Barbican Centre. The project aims to preserve the iconic building's original architectural vision while providing new opportunities for the Barbican's diverse community of partners, artists, and audiences, and boosting the building's accessibility and environmental performance. The design team includes engineering and sustainability consultancy Buro Happold, heritage experts Alan Baxter Ltd, landscape architects Hood Design Studio, lighting design agency les éclaireurs, and artistic advisors Isaac Julien and Nadia Fall.