

Names to conjure with

When property developers 'place-brand' a district, the result can be incongruous, inappropriate – or just laughable. By Helen Barrett

Jackhammers are thumping away on Raven Row, a backstreet just around the corner from Whitechapel's hectic street market, and next to the emergency department of the Royal London, one of the capital's busiest hospitals.

A new development – The Silk District – is nearing completion, more than 550 apartments and offices promising “a new community in the heart of one of London’s oldest areas”.

In a promotional video, sleek urbanites sip coffee, shop in artisan bakeries and stride around rapturously on weirdly deserted streets.

The development, the video explains, is in “a location that’s going places”, which is reassuring, especially for international buyers who may not have ventured beyond central London before.

But to many familiar with Whitechapel, the nomenclature is a little incongruous.

New developments, sometimes entire neighbourhoods, are branded with ever-swankier names as developers, local authorities and the odd business group are forced to compete for attention. Some are inspired by the local history; others stretch credibility. Some are plain illogical, and some just don’t work out. But place-naming has always been a haphazard affair, prone to criticism, changing sensibilities – and sometimes mockery.

The Silk District harks back to London’s historic silk industry, largely founded in the 17th century by skilled, Protestant Huguenot refugees fleeing persecution in France. Many arrived in east London after Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685. The edict had granted Protestants civil liberties in a predominantly Catholic society.

True, some Huguenot weavers lived and worked in Whitechapel. But Spitalfields, not Whitechapel, lays claim to the heart of London’s silk industry. And Spitalfields is a mile away. As is the row of 18th-century silk weavers’ houses that also features in that promotional video.

And do Londoners really talk about “districts” linked to past industries? Isn’t that an American convention?

When I ask Mount Anvil, co-developers with L&Q, how they alighted on the name, they do not offer comment. They do say that the Silk District has won an award, that it includes a quota of “affordable rented homes” and point out that it offers London’s first residential Peloton hub.

But it reminds me of a property marketing trend, which I first saw identified by the writer Matt Brown, author of *Atlas of Imagined Places*: from *Lilliput to Gotham City*, which he calls “developed acts of name-conjuring”.

Eight years ago, Brown tried to map them online: London’s “districts”, “quarters”, “yards”, “villages” and “centrals”. He gave up when he lost count.

“The map was inspired by the much-criticised adoption of Midtown as a term for Holborn, Bloomsbury and St Giles”, says Brown, referring to a label that many Londoners first noticed on street banners in the 2000s. “It was the most egregious example but by no means the only one”, he says.

The concept is oddly pertinent. Brain Yard, another new development, currently advertises itself as “on the intersection of three dynamic districts: Farringdon, King’s Cross and Midtown”.

Perhaps the most misguided rebrand was a suggestion in the boom era of the early 2000s by the Candy brothers, to



Jason Patel

rename part of Fitzrovia. Property developers Christian and Nicholas floated the idea of calling part of the area north of Oxford Street NoHo – as in “north of Soho” – Square. The name was given short shrift by locals and the development was eventually built as Fitzroy Place.

You can see the logic. Branding turns a section of an inconveniently chaotic city into one, simple, saleable idea.

Add an Americanised label, and you have an internationally recognisable concept rather than an antiquated oddity. The precise origins of Holborn, for example, are probably lost to time, though the name was first mentioned in a 10th-century charter granting land here to Westminster Abbey.

“It all feels so inauthentic,” laments David Rosen of Pilcher London, a specialist property agent serving creative professionals and businesses. “They are trying to create something for a generation of people who don’t know and don’t question.”

Rosen urges more attention to history. “When it comes to naming buildings, the first thing I ask the developer or the architect is, what was on this site before you put this thing up?”

That strategy may work with, say, the Bagel Factory, a development of warehouse-style apartments and studios on the site of a former Hackney bakery (though Rosen has an issue with the spelling: “When you’re a Londoner, it’s a beigel”).

But it is harder if you are building where something less evocative once stood. The Silk District, for example, sits on the former site of Salestore, a self-storage facility where, until a decade or so ago, Londoners rented units in which to stash possessions they could no longer fit into increasingly tiny homes.

“Place branding” is what Simon Turnbull, founder and chief executive of Ion, a marketing company specialising in property, calls this fraught, delicate process of naming developments.

(Below) The new Silk District development in Whitechapel
Charlie Bobo/FT

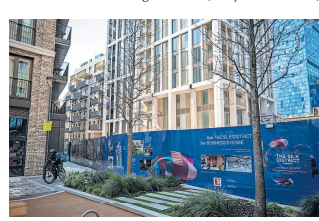
“When I first got involved, property was a fairly conservative business, usually about [street] numbers,” he says. “But people in this world now are much more interested in ideas, words and experiences. Everyone’s a global consumer; they only want to engage with brands that enhance their own identity.”

For residential developments, the stakes are high. Get it right, and your concept quickly becomes a prized indicator of status. Get it wrong, and it could end up a laughing stock. Turnbull points out that branding can be “an opportunity to bring coherence to somewhere where perhaps there wasn’t much before”. But, like Rosen, he says integrity and respect for history matter just as much.

The name-conjuring trend is not just a London thing. A few years ago, developers tried to rename part of South Bronx in New York the Piano District, a reference to a former manufacturing industry. But it was dropped after a local blogger branded it “tone deaf”.

Perhaps nowhere beats Norwich in lending its streets a faux-Manhattan energy. The ancient English city now has eight “districts” including a Cathedral Quarter (around a cathedral built in 1145); a Creative Quarter and even a Business District – all marked out with helpful street signage.

“It feels like we’re trying to be something we’re not,” says Keiron Pim,



“It reeks of a lack of self-confidence. Look at us! We’re just like better-known cities!” There’s a bathos to it

author, university tutor and longtime resident. “Which is sad, because Norwich has its own history, a very rare combination of architectural heritage from medieval to modern-day.”

“But we have overlaid this corporate branding to fit some corporate template. It reeks of a lack of self-confidence. Look at us! We’re just like those better-known cities! There’s a bathos to it.”

Melanie Cook of Norwich Business Improvement District defends the scheme. “It’s all born of trying to make things better,” she says. “People want to live and work in places that are easy to navigate with smart signage, and it’s really just a way to do that.”

Not all historic names fit the modern age. Plantation Wharf, a development in Battersea, for example, has been criticised by Marsha de Cordova, the local MP, and others for its name and those given to buildings within it, such as Cotton Row and Molasses Row.

They refer to the transatlantic slave trade of the 18th and 19th centuries. De Cordova describes it as “a completely unacceptable name that is offensive to many people.”

“As this is a private development, only the management company and residents have the power to change the name,” she says. The development was first named in the 1980s. Vanessa Brady, a director of the management company, says the freeholder supports changing the name. She adds that the company is planning an exhibition on the area’s history and the process for change in the coming months, and it will then hold a vote for residents to retain or change it.

Sometimes a clean break with the past is preferable. Robert Wolstenholme, founder of Trilogy Real Estate, is a property developer who worked on a new district for the creative industries in London called Republic, which he describes as “a whole new community from nothing”.

It was previously called East India Dock, a Docklands business park named after the East India Company, which was founded in 1600 to trade in silks and spices but quickly turned into an international military force and colonial oppressor.

“People said, oh there’s so much history and charm around the East India Company! And I thought, for some people, maybe, but not everyone,” he says. “There were lots of atrocities associated with it. It’s not all clipper ships.”

Republic, he says, represents a new start. It suggests “a bit of tension, almost a rebellious state. And we are going to re-public this place.”

For Londoners, none of this is new. Some of the city’s most desirable Georgian and Victorian stretches bear names associated with private developers of the day.

Belgravia, developed in the 19th century, is named after the village of Belgrave in Cheshire, home to the second Marquess of Westminster’s country estate. The Marquess first financed the development of London streets full of grand stucco mansions, after buying land in the area known as Fields, “where robbers lie in wait”, according to one contemporary account in *Tatler* magazine.

The Cadogan Estate around Chelsea and Knightsbridge, with its thousands of extravagant, Dutch-style red brick flats and houses, is still owned by the Cadogan family, which developed most of it in the 19th century.

Fitzrovia was first coined in the 1930s. Norwich has its own history, a very rare combination of architectural heritage from medieval to modern-day.

Today, areas can find themselves renamed within days and sometimes hours – at least technically. Developers can apply directly to Google to add a new development name to its Maps function, assuming the application is approved.

Back in Whitechapel, future property developers have more history to draw on. It may not all be branding-friendly, but this is still one of the most interesting areas of London.

In the 1880s, Joseph Merrick, the so-called Elephant Man who suffered from a lymphatic condition that severely disfigured his face, was kept in a cage in a shop window at 259 Whitechapel Road.

The high street was once coaching inns galore – Dickens mentions a Bull Inn as the starting point for Tony Weller’s coach to Ipswich in *The Pickwick Papers*. The infamous Blind Beggar at number 337 was named after Henry de Montfort, injured at the bloody Battle of Evesham in 1265 and later found sightless and destitute. In the 20th century, the pub was home to gang-pickpockets and the scene of gangland killings.

But it was also in Whitechapel where Thomas Barnardo, founder of the homes for boys, trained in medicine. More immigrants have made this area their home since the Huguenot weavers arrived: Jewish, Irish and Bangladeshi among them.

The Bell District has a ring to it – the Whitechapel Bell Foundry was the oldest manufacturing company in London when it closed in 2017. Then again, perhaps not. You could argue that London has reached peak district.



▲ **TEM** oversized modern urn by Tuleste Factory x Manscapers. \$1950. Handcrafted in Mexico, this fibreglass planter makes a striking statement. tulestefactory.com



▲ **Carmel** table by OEO Studio for GUBI from £1299. Made of ceramic and steel, and available in a variety of sizes and colours. gubi.com

Outdoor pleasures

Interiors | Kit out your garden or

patio with stylish furniture and accessories, chosen by Roddy Clarke



◀ **Wild Wood** Pumpkin outdoor fabric by Andrew Martin. £86 per metre. Shown here on the company’s Bali chair, this fabric has a shower-resistant, anti-mould and antimicrobial finish. andrewmartin.co.uk



◀ **Outdoor lantern** by Chez Pluie from £849. Available in a range of sizes and finishes. chezpluie.com

► **Majlis outdoor sofa** module by Iwana Handan. \$5750. Handmade in Italy with removable, washable covers. artemest.com

► **Multiholk Art Deco** birdfeeder by Wildlife Garden. £64.50. A playful home that will surely become a favourite with local birds. wildlifegarden.com

▲ **The Mabel parasol** by Bobi Parasol. £125. A chequer-board design with a reclaimed wooden pole. glassette.com



▲ **Piazza outdoor mattress** by Birde Fortescue. £235. A block-printed design that is a great way to refresh existing outdoor furniture. birdefortescue.co.uk