

FOCUS

The new Islington Square development offers retailers location, history and affluent shoppers to boot. **Ben Cooper** takes a closer look at the plans



UP CLOSE: Islington Square

When you're building a new destination for London half a mile from where George Orwell wrote parts of *1984*, in the historic former home of one of the capital's biggest Royal Mail depots, you're not talking about the typical property development. With houses worth £3m upstairs, you're not talking about your typical retail space, either.

Blessed as it is with a catchment that most developers dream of, and the instant magnetic pull of being a few miles from central London, Islington Square has a lot going for it. Still, developer Cain International is pulling out all the stops – prestigious apartments, new public space just off Upper Street, slick retail units and a luxury cinema where residents can order food to their seats.

"It's unique in a way," says Cain International managing director Richard Pilkington. "We're creating a real destination. It's a continuation of the high street.

"What we've got there is quite a significant

piece of public realm at the heart of it, one of the largest public spaces in Islington."

The residential element is already open and, inevitably, hasn't done badly. In a year's time the retail space will be open and so far signings have been slow to come. So will Islington Square really be the new shopping destination for London that the developers are hoping? And what do retailers need to know about London's latest big project?

What to expect

Anywhere else plans may seem ambitious. But in north London, an area where house prices have doubled in the past 10 years, Islington Square has an air of confidence about it.

Yet, despite the phenomenal wealth in the area, getting retailers on board has been surprisingly hard. At the time of writing, Cain International hadn't got any retailers over the line – though nine deals were in solicitors' hands. So why the slow take-up for

such a prestigious scheme? Pilkington says that it's partly a sign of the times.

"It's more of a buyer's market," he says. "Conversion rate is not as high as it might have been three years ago. At one stage we would have expected to be 80% leased by now, but we have to look at it strategically.

"We have to filter through a lot of interest, there are people just window shopping. We're offering healthier packages with rent being slightly below prime Upper Street rents."

The developer is being measured by keeping an eye on rents nearby rather than looking to rents in key retail areas such as Covent Garden and Regent Street. Partly, says Pilkington, because it's trying to keep things in tune with locality.

The strategy is to aim for 60% of the space to be taken up by high street brands, and the remainder to go to local independent retailers, food and beverage operators and, says Pilkington, "London brands that have outgrown their space".

Building on a colourful past

Situated in the historic former north London Royal Mail sorting office, Islington Square is filling some very big boots architecturally. The building was once a buzzing hub where the majority of north London's mail was sorted – in the days when there were up to 12 deliveries a day – but now it's being reworked for the modern era.

It's a challenge and a balancing act, which Piers Gough, partner at CZWG Architects, the firm behind the grand design, says has been at the forefront of the team's mind.

He says: "The Baroque post office itself fronts onto busy Upper Street, forming the gateway into a pedestrian arcade leading to the heart of the regeneration project. Whilst retaining the original building's classic features, new additions to the existing converted structures are notably modern and suitably flamboyant.

"This high quality of design and specification is carried through into every interior space."

If this has been a challenge, an even greater one has been to make sure the whole thing flows. The key, says Justin Taylor head of EMEA retail at Cushman & Wakefield, which is managing the retail leasing, has been to consider Islington Square not as a one-off development, but as a new neighbourhood for London.

Taylor says: "The scheme will bring the community 'village' feel back to Islington, putting it back on par with popular Marylebone, Westbourne Grove, Old Spitalfields and Duke of York Square.

"Shopfits will be more experiential, with more collaborations, creating an exciting new

destination. Multiple access points to the square from Upper Street, Theberton Street and Almeida Street, will allow customers to meander between the old and the new. This architecture will offer escapism and breed curiosity, in the same vein as the Oxford Street entrance to St Christopher's Place."

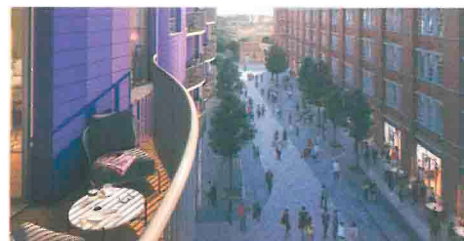
It's a high bar to aim for, but the team's clearly doing something right. It takes a lot to persuade one of London's most idiosyncratic theatres to move out of its historic home, especially when its home is part of its charm.

The King's Head Theatre's small physical presence, in the back of a pub on Upper Street, hasn't stopped it from gaining a cult status. But in July the company announced it was leaving its old home to take space in a custom-built, 250-seat auditorium in Islington Square.

It was quite a coup for the developer, and certainly got Islington talking. But headline-grabbing announcements aside, there will be plenty more work to do between now and next autumn before the retail units will start trading.

Pilkington is clear about the challenge of leasing the space, and the climate in which Cain International has taken on such an ambitious project. Whether you can create the "village feel" that Taylor describes overnight, only time will tell.

But with 65% of the local catchment falling in the ABC1 category, with an affluent shopper profile at 71% higher than the London average, the shops and restaurants will have some serious spending power on their doorstep to match the blue plaques of history nearby.



KEY FACTS

Cain International has given itself a big task in converting the iconic 1904 North London Royal Mail sorting depot into slick modern residential and retail space. Justin Taylor, head of EMEA retail at Cushman & Wakefield, lead agent on the scheme, says Islington Square offers retailers a "chance to be a part of a unique, curated mix of international as well as independent brands amongst one of the wealthiest demographics in London".

Just over a year away from the opening of the retail and dining elements of the development, here are some of the headline facts about Islington Square:

Developers

Joint venture partners Cain International and Sager Group

Architect

CZWG Architects

Leasing agents

Cushman & Wakefield and Shelley Sandzer

Cost

£400m

Size

Total: 500,000 sq ft mixed retail, residential, dining and leisure space
Retail and dining: 170,000 sq ft

Retail and dining units

35 units split across the North Arcade, South Arcade and the Boulevard

Leisure on site

The Lounge Odeon cinema – six screens each with a maximum of 40 seats.
A health club with gymnasium, two swimming pools and fitness studios.
Relocated King's Head Theatre (opening autumn 2018).

Scheduled completion date

Spring 2018 – soft opening, store fit-outs to begin; autumn 2018 – retail and F&B stores to open and begin trading.



Nearly two thirds of the development's local catchment fall into the ABC1 category