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Whither Soho's nightlife... withered?

For many, the spark has gone out of London's once-naughty square mile, writes Joel Taylor

Friday, 7th July — By [Joel Taylor](#)



Back in the day: 'Search for Paradise' in Old Compton Street – Soho has the highest concentration of licensed premises in Westminster

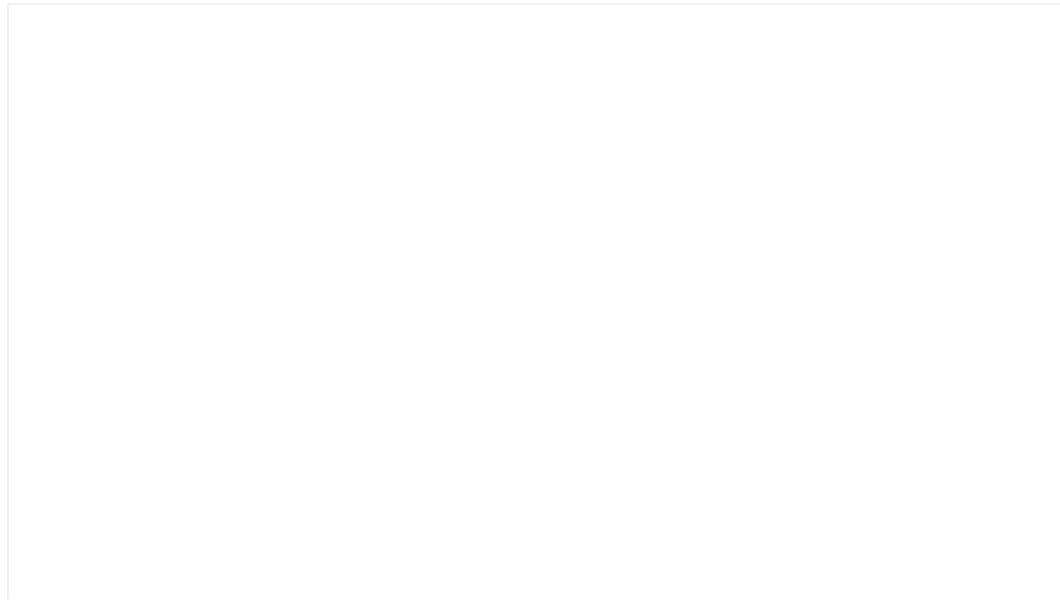
THERE may be a problem.

For many, the spark has gone out of London's once-naughty square mile; it no longer holds the allure it once did.

According to a recent piece in *City AM*, Soho is "dying on its feet".

And chief among its problems are its residents. Westminster City Council is, apparently, "in thrall to organisations like the Soho Society" who complained sufficiently about the outdoor seating in the area that became a feature during Covid-19 to have it stopped.

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The piece goes on: “Those who have lived in Soho since before, let’s say 1680 have every right to complain. Otherwise, it’s caveat emptor: if you move to an area synonymous with nightlife and complain about late noise, you cannot expect a straight-faced hearing, except from Westminster Council, it seems.”

For more than six years I worked in the West End, focused especially on Soho and Covent Garden, attending school fetes, festivals and social gatherings. And dozens of licensing hearings.

It was not the millionaire flat owners with whom I was speaking, but those who lived on social rents in central London.

The Soho Housing Association, for example, provides homes for more than 1,500 people in central London, the majority of whom pay less than 50 per cent of market rent levels.

They are not financially nimble, able to pick and choose where they live with the flexibility of their wealthy neighbours.

Yet, they were all truly remarkable with what they were happy to tolerate.

For example, in the early 2000s, any child leaving St James’s Residences in Brewer Street for Soho Parish Primary School would have to pass a parade featuring at least four sex shops.



The legendary Coach & Horses

Adjacent to the school was a clip joint, where young women would try to lure roaming men with promises of a strip show, or even sex, only for them to be fleeced for hundreds of pounds.

The city council was, at that time, struggling to close such venues down as their ownership was so opaque; local agreements were made that they wouldn’t operate during school hours.

Meanwhile the number of licensed premises in Soho has increased in the last 17 years.

In July 2006 there were 360 entertainment premises; in July 2022 there were 466, 25 per cent of which being late licences.

Soho has the highest concentration of licensed premises in Westminster.

In Old Compton Street, Frith Street, Greek Street and Dean Street, licensed premises have a capacity of about 10,000 people between 12am and 3.30am. There are at least 164 flats in Old Compton Street.

There is no doubt that the views of residents have long had an impact on Soho's late-night economy.

But I would argue that the impact of residents on the success of the area's nightlife is far smaller than so many other factors.

The major landowner – Soho Estates – is far more involved in the area's property wealth than it once was, helping push rents up further.

One of the consequences of this is maintaining a presence in Soho is especially difficult. It's extremely difficult for small owners to survive.

The most crucial factor, though, is prices. A pint of beer in Soho is regularly over £7. Combine that with more than one drink, food, a visit to a nightclub, travel, the cost of a night out can easily slip into three figures, possibly several times over. Considering the state of the economy, inflation and personal finances, that's a huge outlay of cash.

Christopher Howse, in his book *Soho In The Eighties* writes: "For me, Soho in the eighties was a love affair, if a dangerous liaison. It was no great achievement to survive it, for it was Soho that fell away from me and disintegrated."

In a similar way, my Soho from the early 2000s has disintegrated and this is what *City AM's* writer now fears.

It is, though, fair to say that the area is probably under the greatest threat it has ever faced from commercial forces and the tedious creep of homogenisation.

Rather than pitching one against the other, it is far better one appreciates what the residents of Soho can bring to the area's nightlife, keeping the flame alive and help sustain the vibrancy and individuality of the area, than heap undeserved blame on their vomit-stained doorstep.

• *Freelance writer Joel Taylor is a former West End Extra news editor*

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