

Dan Westley

Meet Vastint's Head of Portfolio, who is shaping the future of UK regeneration and, as the new Co-Chair of Freehold, driving LGBTQ+ inclusion across the real estate industry.

“ Looking back, what first drew you into real estate? Did you ever imagine ending up in large-scale regeneration projects?

A conversation with my dad after university sparked my interest in real estate. As a child, I was fascinated by property listings, not just the houses themselves, but the floorplans and how spaces could be redesigned to work better. I hadn't considered commercial real estate until my dad suggested I shadow a surveyor friend, which opened the door to the industry. I began my career at CBRE, where the range of opportunities was vast. It wasn't until 7 years later that I moved into regeneration and development. Being involved in creating places that can

transform a location and positively impact the people who use them is what makes the work so rewarding.

Starting your career around the time of the GFC must have been challenging. How did that influence your mindset early on?

It was a very interesting experience to go through. Only 5 peers in my Masters class of over 80 got a job that year and the rest of us tried to find other roles, work experience, free days of shadowing people in the industry - anything to boost the CV. It was difficult but it wasn't anything you can take personally. It has given me a perspective from the very beginning that a job cannot be taken for granted, so I've

always felt an eagerness to get stuck in because it could all be taken away very easily.

Early on in your career at CBRE, you chose to focus on tenant representation. How did that shape your approach to real estate?

The end user is ultimately the reason this industry exists. Every occupier is different, and their needs are genuinely unique. Working in tenant rep gave me a valuable appreciation of those differences and reinforced the importance of putting the end user at the heart of every decision. Real estate needs to be flexible enough to adapt to a wide range of requirements, while also being distinctive enough to deliver the experience and environment people are looking for.

You've described your time at Battersea Power Station as both phenomenal and exhausting. What made it such an intense experience?

It was often described as the 'Everest of real estate' and so I think when you have a project of that scale over such a long period of time, you are bound to feel every single emotion. The global profile, level of investment and sheer amount of work it took to deliver, brought with it significant pressures, tight deadlines and dare I say a few strong personalities too. What made it all worthwhile was the overwhelming sense of achievement when the doors finally opened and the first visitors stepped inside. The pride of seeing years of hard work transformed into a place that people could experience and enjoy is unlike anything else, and it's a



feeling that continues to draw me to this side of the industry.

After nearly nine years there, what are you most proud of contributing to the scheme?

It's hard to single out one contribution, as bringing Battersea Power Station back to life was a true team effort. Personally, I am proud to have championed the lighting of the chimneys in rainbow colours for London Pride, a meaningful symbol of support for others.

You've recently stepped into your role at Vastint UK, what excites you most about moving from a single asset to a nationwide portfolio?

It's an exciting challenge that offers a broader perspective on the UK real estate market and the varying needs of occupiers across different regions. What I'm enjoying most is the variety. One moment I'm discussing marketing for a London building, the next I'm assessing how local political dynamics in Leeds could influence our development pipeline. That diversity keeps the role dynamic and continually expands my understanding of the factors shaping real estate across the country.

What are the biggest leadership challenges when managing diverse, large-scale regeneration programmes?

One of the biggest challenges is recognising that regeneration takes time. These projects are complex, involve a wide range of stakeholders, and rarely follow a perfectly linear path. Being willing to adapt as the project evolves is key, and that's not always an easy decision, if you have millions

WORDS OF WISDOM

If you could give your younger self one piece of career advice, what would it be?

Don't overthink your decisions and try everything – you have so much time to decide how you want your career to turn out so explore new ideas, go to the event, say hello to that new person. It's not that I would necessarily want my career to have turned out differently, but looking back, it's remarkable how often I find myself meeting or working alongside people I've crossed paths with earlier in my career. You never quite know which conversations, experiences or connections will prove valuable again in the future.

What skills or mindsets do you think are most important for students entering real estate today?

Be open to the unexpected. The traditional ways of "doing" real estate are changing. Resources are more limited, capital harder to secure and decisions are scrutinised, so solutions require an alternative approach or way of thinking. What real estate looks like in five or ten years' time may be very different from what you expect today, and that's what makes it such an exciting industry to be a part of.

of pounds of sunk costs in the ground. You won't see the results overnight, you need to commit resources, balance short-term pressures with long-term goal and maintain belief that you are creating a place where people will want to live, work and spend time.

You're now overseeing major schemes like Sugar House Island and Aire Park, how do you approach places that are at very different stages of development?

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to placemaking, and you can't rely on a "build it and they will come" mindset. Every development must respond to its location, community and market. It starts with understanding the people who will live, work and spend time there, then shaping experiences and amenities around their needs. Just as importantly, creating a sense of place should begin well before completion through early activation, events, meanwhile uses and community engagement.

How do you see the role of the office evolving?

We're still defining what the new normal looks like. Many "progressive" organisations still mandate office attendance, which feels at odds with the trust-based cultures they aspire to create. The office needs to earn people's commute by offering experiences that can't be replicated at home. As competition for talent continues, the workplace can play an important role in attracting and retaining people, if it genuinely supports flexible working. I don't think we're that far away from seeing the four-day working week become more commonplace.

INCLUSION & REPRESENTATION

After six years on the board of Freehold, you've recently stepped into the role of co-chair. What do you see as the next chapter for Freehold and its impact on the industry?

Stepping into the role of co-chair is one that I'm incredibly proud to take on. Freehold has grown into a network of more than 1,700 people and it's exciting to help shape its next chapter. I joined because I wanted to help make an industry I care deeply about more open, inclusive and welcoming. I believe people do their best work when they can bring their whole selves to work, and Freehold has always been about creating that environment. Looking ahead, we're focused on broadening our reach beyond London so members across the UK have access to the same community and support. As conversations around equality and LGBTQ+ inclusion continue to evolve, organisations like Freehold still have an important role to play in championing inclusion and driving positive change.

Were there moments in your career where you felt you had to push harder to progress, and what did that teach you about resilience?

This one is a little uncomfortable for me, as I was once told I didn't get a promotion because I was gay. That is quite something to experience and being absolutely truthful, it was my internal shame that stopped me from doing anything about it. I do go back and forth as to whether my reaction should have been more but in my mind I would have been playing into the hands of those who took issue with my sexuality. You sometimes surprise yourself in how you react to a situation, and I have to own the decision I took. Resilience is a moving feast and will change through life depending on how strongly you feel you want to fight. As my career has progressed and my



Name one book that changed your life.

The Velvet Rage, a book that many gay men read almost as a rite of passage.

For me it gave a greater understanding of why I think the way I do and a real sense of permission to be who I am.

confidence has grown, I'd like to think that I wouldn't act in that same way again, but let's hope I don't have to find out.

How important is visible representation and role modelling for the next generation entering the industry?

For me, it's fundamental because it's personal. Early in my career, I made the conscious decision not to come out until I'd qualified as a Chartered Surveyor. I felt that once I had that qualification, my career would be more secure. At the time, there was no one in a senior position who was either out or acting as a visible ally, so hiding that part of myself felt like the safer option. That's one of the reasons I volunteer for Boards and champion LGBTQ+ representation. Visibility matters. When people can see leaders who are open about who they are, it sends a powerful message that they belong too. That's how we attract the best talent, help people thrive and ultimately build a stronger industry.

You've been heavily involved in hockey, including growing the London Royals Hockey Club. What has that experience taught you about leadership and community?

I have played hockey for most of my life and I used to question why we had clubs like London Royal. Sexual orientation and sport are completely independent from one another. As a team sport, hockey is about people coming together, building trust, and being able to bring your whole self to the pitch. Having that sense of belonging and shared purpose has been an incredibly powerful experience. When it comes to leadership, it's taught me that success looks different to different people, and that effective leadership is about encouraging open dialogue, building trust and finding common ground. ”