

How Britain's red phone boxes are being given new life

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

- The red phone box is a well-known British design. In pairs or small groups, make a list of five more well-known British designs.
- Compare your lists.
- Say which of these British designs you have seen, worn, used, etc.
- Scan the article to see which of the things on your lists are mentioned there.

2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then find them in the article to read them in context.

monetize	aesthetic	quirky	refurbished	decommissioned	monograph
embedded	indispensable	kiosk	listed	adjacent	redolent of

- a formal piece of writing or a short book on a particular subject _____
- old-fashioned word for a phone box _____
- (of a building) important because of its history or design; cannot be changed without permission from the government _____
- relating to beauty, especially in art and design _____
- taken out of service and no longer in use _____
- earn money from something _____
- made a fixed and important part of something else _____
- difficult or impossible to exist without or to do something without _____
- next to or near something else _____
- slightly strange _____
- improved and restored by cleaning and painting _____
- reminding you of something _____

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Ringling the changes: how Britain's red phone boxes are being given new life

It's a design classic, but in these days of ubiquitous mobile phones, only 10,000 of the red kiosks remain on the streets. Can they survive the next decade?

Stephen Moss

27 August, 2019

- 1 Britain's red phone boxes were once a feature of every high street in the country, but now number only 10,000 or so (and half of those are decorative rather than operational).
- 2 In 2015, the K2 traditional red phone box was voted the greatest British design of all time, ahead of the Routemaster bus, the Spitfire, the Union Jack and Concorde. It was designed in 1924 by the architect Sir Giles Gilbert Scott.
- 3 In his 1989 monograph on phone boxes, the architectural historian Gavin Stamp called Scott's cast-iron box "a classical design of refined sophistication and timeless elegance". Stamp was a great enthusiast for Scott's boxes and led a campaign to preserve them after they ceased production in 1968.
- 4 There are still numerous Scott kiosks in central London, many of which have been listed as historically or architecturally significant.
- 5 The fact there were once more than 70,000 red kiosks and now only 10,000 remain on the streets suggests that a lot of boxes have disappeared. In the 1970s and 80s, many were melted down, but gradually the boxes' aesthetic (and monetary) value started to be recognized. Since 2008, rather than remove decommissioned ones that have not been listed, BT (British Telecom) has allowed local councils and charities to repurpose them under its adopt-a-kiosk scheme. More than 5,000 have been adopted.
- 6 Many now contain defibrillators, with the Community Heartbeat Trust leading the way in advising local authorities on conversion. The trust has adopted 1,300 boxes, more than half of which have been converted to house defibrillators.
- 7 Other uses for the boxes are rich and varied. Book-swap points that double as miniature libraries are popular. The village of Marton cum Grafton in North Yorkshire was one of the pioneers, opening a mini-library in 2010; another was opened in the London borough of Lewisham in 2013. I visited the latter and was impressed by the range of books. It is largely self-managing. People bring books in, take the odd one away and take it upon themselves to tidy up the seven shelves.
- 8 Art galleries in old phone boxes are also popular – an idea pioneered by the Gallery on the Green in Settle, North Yorkshire, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary soon. "A group of residents thought it would be a shame for the box to go, and the idea of a gallery came up," says Mike Smith, one of the half-dozen local people who keep it afloat.
- 9 Attempts have been made to monetize some boxes, in partnership with the Red Kiosk Company, which has bought 124 boxes from BT under the adopt-a-box scheme. The company gets planning permission for traders to use the boxes and charges about £300 a month to rent a box.
- 10 Mustafa Mehmet runs a coffee stall in a kiosk in Hampstead, north London. The problem comes when kiosk traders spill over onto the pavement, which is almost inevitable – try selling coffee to a customer with both buyer and seller inside the box.
- 11 Phone repair company Lovefone has a kiosk in Holborn, central London, in which it repairs cracked iPhone screens. The Lovefone technician who works there, Fouad Choaibi, loves it. "This is my office," he says. He has been based in the box for two and a half years and has embedded himself in the community, making himself indispensable to locals with cracked iPhones. The kiosk is very profitable, proving it can be done if you get the concept right.
- 12 Next to the pier in Brighton, Senegal-born Abo Fall is selling hats, sunglasses and beachwear out of two adjacent boxes. He has been there for two years and is keeping his head above water, but he says it can be a struggle if the weather's bad. "People like the boxes, and it's different from an ordinary shop," he says. Wherever you see a red box, you will see someone taking a picture of it, although, as the traders know all too well, that doesn't automatically mean they will buy a coffee or a sunhat.
- 13 Plenty of other quirky ideas have been tried. A box in the village of Meols, Merseyside, has been

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turned into a miniature museum dedicated to the band Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, who used to make calls from the box. And in 2018, to mark the 5,000th kiosk adoption, a box in Kingsbridge, Devon, was turned into "the world's smallest nightclub".

- 14 Individuals can also buy boxes that aren't listed and have no prospective adopter, so are being removed. A box in poor condition will set you back almost £2,000 on eBay, or you can buy a refurbished later K6 model for £3,300 through BT's approved reseller, X2Connect.
- 15 "We supply boxes to private buyers and commercial organizations," says a director of X2Connect, Martin White. "They go all round the world. We've done shopping malls in Florida and Dubai. They're very popular in Australia and America, but places in Europe take them as well. People put them in their gardens and companies have them in their offices. They buy them as birthday presents or just for themselves, telling us it's something they've always wanted." White

says that eventually the supply will dry up, but his company has enough to keep it going for a good few years yet.

- 16 The cult of the boxes is a strange and powerful one. They have featured on a million postcards and, having been a central feature of British life for much of the 20th century, in many films, too.
- 17 Scott's kiosks are loved in part because they are redolent of a time when the British were willing to build a small house from which anyone could make a call.
- 18 I wonder how Scott's phone boxes will look 50 years from now, when everyone has forgotten why they were ever there and thinks they were built as micro-libraries and art galleries, coffee kiosks and collection points.

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3 Comprehension check

Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's classic red phone box is called the Routemaster.
2. His original phone boxes, designed in 1924, were made of wood, painted red.
3. Many of these original phone boxes can still be seen on the streets of London.
4. Approximately 10,000 K2 phone boxes have been made since 1968.
5. It's no longer possible to make phone calls from red phone boxes in Britain.
6. Many people feel sentimental about Scott's red phone boxes and do not want to see them disappear from the streets of Britain.
7. Many of the old red phone boxes have been repurposed.
8. Private buyers can purchase a second-hand red phone box, but only from BT's approved seller, X2Connect.
9. X2Connect sends refurbished red phone boxes to buyers all around the world.
10. Scott's red phone kiosks have become an iconic symbol of British culture that are recognized across the world.

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4 Informal phrases

a. Underline the following phrases in the article.

1. take something upon yourself
2. keep something afloat
3. keep your head above water

b. What do the phrases mean? What are they used to talk about in the article?

c. Use them in sentences of your own.

5 Discussion

- When did you last use a telephone box?
- Was there a time when you used phone boxes on a regular basis?
- What are your country's top five iconic designs?

6 Developing and pitching an idea

You've been offered the use of an iconic red phone box that is situated at the entrance to a park near a busy town centre. You cannot move it, but you can adopt it or rent it out. Many different groups are competing for this rare opportunity, but only one group can get the phone box. What are you going to do with it?

Work in small groups. Come up with ideas for how you would like to use the phone box. Choose your favourite idea and develop it further. Discuss:

- who is going to benefit and how;
- how you intend to implement your idea.

Prepare a three-minute presentation to pitch your idea.

After all the ideas have been pitched to the class, vote for your favourite.

7 Webquest

Refer back to your lists in task 1, and find out more about one of the iconic British designs. Further suggestions and images can be found here:

www.wired.co.uk/gallery/top-25-british-designs-gallery

Present your findings to the rest of the class.

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KEY

2 Key words

1. monograph
2. kiosk
3. listed
4. aesthetic
5. decommissioned
6. monetize
7. embedded
8. indispensable
9. adjacent
10. quirky
11. refurbished
12. redolent of

3 Comprehension check

1. F – His classic red phone box is called the K2. The Routemaster is the red double-decker bus.
2. F – They were made of cast iron.
3. T
4. F – Production of the K2 phone boxes ended in 1968.
5. F – About 5,000 are still operational.
6. T
7. T
8. F – You can also buy them on eBay.
9. T
10. T

4 Informal phrases

- b.**
1. accept responsibility for something without being asked; used to talk about the mini-library in a phone box
 2. keep a business running, not let it get into debt; used to talk about the gallery in a phone box
 3. avoid getting into difficulties, especially debt; used to talk about Abo Fall's business selling hats, sunglasses and beachwear