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On Crowded London Streets, Councils Fight a Flood of Phone Boxes



London is being flooded with new phone boxes. Critics say they are basically glorified billboards, but planning laws treat them as an essential utility.
Credit Jane Stockdale for The New York Times

By Benjamin Mueller

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LONDON — The British telephone box is not dead yet. In parts of central London, a box stands sentinel every 100 feet — and if phone companies got their way, they'd plant one every 50 feet.

But these are not the red cast-iron cubicles that for generations were emblems of Britain. Instead, critics say, they are eyesores, covered in digital ad screens and capable of being turned into surveillance posts.

Worst of all, perhaps, some are being imported from New York.

The result is a battle over Britain's public space, waged between local city planners and telecommunications firms. The most contentious fight is in Westminster, in the heart of

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London, where new phone kiosks are being squished between construction barriers and bus stops on crowded streets.

The classic red booths, with domed roofs and molded royal crowns, were rendered obsolete by the rise of mobile phones. Yet, phone companies never relinquished their rights to the sidewalk. Under British rules that have effectively been in place since before the iPhone existed, phone boxes are still considered vital infrastructure, and companies with proper licenses can keep building them so long as local councils cannot credibly object to the particular site or design.



A new generation of phone boxes is replacing the iconic red ones, which have been either removed or, in this case, repurposed.

Credit Andrew Testa for The New York Times

And so the phone companies set about to put up a new kind of booth: two-sided digital displays with internet connectivity and touch-screen maps that flash craft beer and credit card ads — and also have a phone attached.

“A lot of them are advertising totems with a telephone handset on it,” said John Walker, the director of planning for Westminster City Council. “They’re just a blot on the landscape.”

Some councils are being flooded with phone box proposals at numbers 900 percent higher than a few years ago, according to an association of councils in England and

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Wales. Companies have submitted proposals for 300 new and replacement kiosks in the last two years in Westminster alone, where the boxes already stand six to a block on a stretch of busy Edgware Road.

The councils are lobbying the central government to change the law.

Critics call the profusion of high-tech, advertising-centric booths — kiosks, in the new parlance of phone companies — one piece of a [broader sell-off of Britain's public space](#). The phone boxes passed from public into private hands in the 1980s when British Telecom was privatized under Margaret Thatcher and its monopoly over the booths ended.

Now, with [austerity measures](#) slashing maintenance budgets and leaving streets gashed with potholes, councils are also contending with proposals for what they call glorified billboards.



Some of the old phone boxes have survived, worse for wear.
Credit Jane Stockdale for The New York Times

Some of the proposals in Westminster are for traditional booths with a wall for advertising. Others, like the New York imports, called InLink kiosks, are sleek-looking internet-connected posts with touch-screen maps and electronic signs that flash at passers-by while also, privacy advocates say, harvesting data from their phones. They're a collaboration between BT, the descendant of British Telecom; Intersection, a smart

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cities firm with links to Google's parent company, Alphabet; and an outdoor advertising giant.

Planning documents say the InLink kiosks are expected to be able to “anonymously monitor” things like “pedestrian movement,” raising concern that they can follow anyone whose phone passes within Wi-Fi range. The kiosks also come equipped with cameras, though BT says they have not yet been turned on.

“The infrastructure for building a surveillance network is being installed on British streets,” said Adrian Short, a data analyst who has built a [web portal to track InLink applications](#). “And councils either don't have or don't feel they have the right to refuse them.”

The new boxes would join or, in some cases, replace a hodgepodge of grimy 1990s-era phone boxes already on the street.

And because each of London's 33 local authorities deals separately with planning, it falls to teams of local planners to sift through stacks of phone box proposals.



Critics complain that phone companies are turning drab, '90s-era phone boxes into glorified billboards that are becoming an eyesore on London streets.

Credit Jane Stockdale for The New York Times

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Mr. Walker said they arrive at his Westminster office in paper stacks dozens at a time, sometimes just before the Christmas holiday. Then the clock starts ticking: 56 days until, in the absence of an objection from the council, the phone company has the right to start work.

Establishing credible objections is a laborious process, forcing planners to solicit input from nearby businesses and traffic specialists. The phone companies often promise to remove two 1990s-era boxes for every new one they add, but Mr. Walker said Westminster did not want any, period.

Matthew Carmona, a professor of planning and urban design at University College London, said the situation “has, in a way, caught policymakers by surprise.” After removing phone boxes that fell into disuse with the rise of mobile phones, he said, “the phone companies have realized they can make money from them in a different way, and in doing that they can bypass any regulations.”

The spread of the phone boxes has also exposed the drawbacks of London’s fragmented planning system. Accommodations for the visually impaired, for example, [differ in each of London’s boroughs](#).

Sarah Gaventa, a former design adviser to the British government, said a public art project she was working on had required dozens of applications to seven different local authorities, a barrier that she said did not exist in other major European cities.

Image

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The newest phone boxes are sleek looking, Wi-Fi connected stands with touch screen maps and electronic signs that flash at passersby while also, privacy advocates say, harvesting data from their phones.

Credit Jane Stockdale for The New York Times

New York City, faced with corner after corner of disused pay phones, took a different tack. It solicited proposals for a custom-designed phone box, and though [problems have cropped up](#) with the internet-connected kiosks, the city is now expected to earn half a billion dollars over 12 years from its cut of the advertising revenue.

London, on the other hand, has largely been left to watch as rival companies vie for space on the streets.

By replacing old booths with internet-connected kiosks, the phone companies say they are decluttering streets and giving Britons and tourists alike modern tools for navigating the city, resulting in more calls and frequent use of the touch screens. Neil Scoresby, BT's general manager for pay phones and InLink, said the company complied with planning laws and, on occasion, agreed to remove a box a council didn't want.

InLink said the company only stores unique identifiers for people's phones after they sign up for the service and does not currently track pedestrian movement.

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Westminster City Council has rejected around 175 applications for additional or replacement phone boxes over the past two years. But the phone companies can appeal to a government planning inspector to erect them anyway.

Now, the Westminster council is seeking broader powers. It filed a claim in the High Court of Justice in August seeking to force the planning inspector to consider, beyond the site and appearance of new boxes, whether there was a need for them.

Mr. Walker said the Westminster council has a better idea about what to add when old phone boxes get yanked out: "We'd rather have a tree," he said.

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