

This dire Battersea Power Station development is genuinely dystopian

12 March, 2018 Owen Hatherley



It follows all the Urban Renaissance precepts, yet this scheme is as grim as the 80s Docklands that Rogers was reacting against, says *Owen Hatherley*



Battersea will jennings.

Source: *Will Jennings*

[zoom in](#) [zoom out](#)

If you walk along the Thames between Pimlico and Chelsea today, you'll find something strange: Battersea Power Station has almost disappeared. This gargantuan building, which towered over this part of London for 80 years, is dwarfed, pinched and tucked in by the new apartments that have sprouted up around it. What is happening to the Thames looks increasingly like satire, some sort of activist's hoarding about the dangers of overdevelopment: 'they couldn't possibly really do that, could they?' Well, they have. And, curiously, as [a Guardian report](#) on 'ghost towers' suggests, it's not selling; 'New London' is broken.

This might just be the end of an era in London, the point where the new city that has been built along the Thames since the end of the 1990s finally stops; not just because there's no bit of riverbank left to fill, but because the results are so grotesque they can no longer be ignored or waved away with talk of progress, coffee and section 106 agreements.

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This is where it ends; developers offering cars to investors as incentives to buy flats in what were once meant to be pedestrian-based walkable cities, with empty private cinemas in barely occupied towers, and with what one estate agent describes as 'empty rooftop bars with no one living at home to buy drinks at them'.

And, whereas many of the luxury riverside developments have been on industrial wastes with few landmarks, here, it is happening around one of the most recognisable and best-loved buildings in London, suffocating it with utterly useless, barely inhabited luxury living solutions, in a city where homelessness has got to the point you can barely move now without walking past people sleeping rough. It is genuinely dystopian. How did things get this bad?

Something of the generic nature of the Linear City that has been built along the Thames in the past 20 years can be garnered from the name given to the new 'opportunity area' of which Battersea is the centrepiece – VNEB, short for Vauxhall Nine Elms Battersea. The ruthlessly overdeveloped nature of this new district, devoid of planning, intelligence or character, is a genuine nadir.

As always, the politics of it aren't hard to spot. There have been a dozen or so proposals for the Power Station site, from architects, developers, campaigners and fantasists – it's telling that the one that finally got built was the first to be based solely on the extraction of maximum profit from the difficult site.

Labour councils in, say, Newham or Southwark have let terrible things happen (encouraged them, in many cases), in the similarly vast ex-industrial lands they've redeveloped at Banksy and the Lea Valley, but they do have public things to show for it: a Tate Modern, a new swimming pool, a new park.

Conservative Wandsworth Council's oversight of this area, though, is pure laissez-faire. It's a huge new commuter suburb in the centre of the city, a tangle of superfluous skyscrapers around parodies of public spaces, all shunning the council estates and light industry clinging on nearby. Instead of a heart, VNEB has a heavy-security US embassy with a moat around it.

Among the more prominent parts of VNEB is Rogers Stirk Harbour's high-rise cluster, Riverlight. This is the final banalisation of the dreams Rogers and his New Labour friends once had for a 'New London' along the Thames, where a drizzly Barcelona would emerge on the wharves and sheds of an ex-industrial river, with coffee and culture and apartment living.

There was nothing wrong with those things per se; there still isn't. What VNEB reveals is the foolishness of assuming changes in architecture could themselves be a reform, as opposed to changes in the ownership of land and the laws in planning. We now have a place that follows all the Urban Renaissance precepts that is easily as grim as the 80s Docklands that Rogers was reacting against. 'New London' is, finally, dead.

This article appears in the Homes issue – [click here to buy a copy](#)

Readers' comments (8)

- [Alex Vincitori](#) 12 March, 2018 10:02 am

Wow, amazing how the Architect's Journal is becoming so biased and useless; it is perfectly fine to point out the faults of the redevelopment; however, I couldn't see any of the benefits.

Completely useless article.

- [Simon Carne](#) 12 March, 2018 10:56 am

Great article slightly crazy comment

- [Robert Wakeham](#) 12 March, 2018 12:21 pm

Go on, Alex, enlighten us as to the benefits, please.

- [Snowflake](#) 13 March, 2018 9:34 am

I think there are lot of inaccuracies in this article.

For a start, all the completed homes around the power station have been sold, and occupancy is around 60% at present but rising steadily, some apartments have only just been completed. If you had visited it, you would see that it's actually a bustling community now and far from a ghost town. The urban planning has also been very good, with retailers given very reasonable long term leases, often free for the first year. They have also made sure that all the retail spaces have gone to small local independent businesses and not big chains.

Secondly, why does the development in Elephant & Castle not draw the same ire from the author. There a massive amount of social housing was torn down and never replaced, at battersea. Is that less important than spoiling the author's view of a building. What has that development provided to the local community.

Thirdly, the only way the power station could be regenerated was with a commercial project, so it was inevitable that it would need to be apartments in close proximity. It's simply not realistic to expect land to be utilised. St Pauls, is far more boxed in than Power Station, that's just a fact of life in an overcrowded city. The recent sale of the power station to the Malaysian sovereign wealth fund shows that the power station is going is not going to be a profitable venture for the developers.

Finally, ask any of the 1000s of people who have good jobs because of this development, be that on the construction site or in the new shops and restaurants and they will give short shrift to articles like these.

- [J Outram](#) 13 March, 2018 9:42 am

Battersea is the true face of post-imperial tristesse, a ruined Goliath of industry covered in a psoriasis of apartments as a global investment opportunity. Amusing that the cure was the application of Brexit. Closing the door to Europe means London is no longer Samarkand on the Silk road between the USA and the EU. The construction industry is drying-up and the long night of the "Brexit Cure" is falling.

- [Industry Professional](#) 13 March, 2018 10:33 am

"For a start, all the completed homes around the power station have been sold"

Not quite true. Developers will proudly claim this though it is standard practice to sell 5% of the value to investors who then have the option of doubling this to 10% of the new value or flipping it to another investor who takes on that option. This can continue until the full value is paid or an option to pay off the entirety is taken on.

I understand that a very high amount of these 5% investors are abandoning their investment, selling the option on at a lower value than they paid for it to speculators who are willing on the higher risk. It also seems to be the case that other developments are being postponed so developers don't have to release embarrassing press releases about lack of sales.

"If you had visited it, you would see that it's actually a bustling community now and far from a ghost town."
"

I have, it isn't.

"Secondly, why does the development in Elephant & Castle not draw the same ire from the author." The author is not writing about the Heygate/Elephant Park scheme. It would be odd for him to mention it in this article. However, anyone who is aware of the current conversations would totally realise that Elephant Park, Lendlease, Delancey, UAL and Southwark are taking LOTS of fair criticism and direct action. I am not sure why you think the author doesn't like what's happening there.

"Finally, ask any of the 1000s of people who have good jobs because of this development, be that on the construction site or in the new shops and restaurants and they will give short shrift to articles like these." Silly statement. A well designed, ethical and considerate development would still require the same number and type of employees.

- [Michele de Laurentiis](#) 13 March, 2018 12:07 pm

Battersea is a vivid example of everything that could go wrong in big scale development: social benefits, aesthetic and urban innovation, governance. The way the main building has been patiently dismantled bit after bit over the last 40 years... On heritage related issues ref Battersea Power Station may I drive your attention to "Battersea Power Station: selling an icon". It's a World Monuments Fund funded documentary on the impact of the development on the preservation of the Power Station. Link here <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/batterseapowerstation>

- [Lisa Harmey](#) 14 March, 2018 12:00 pm
Winter gardens & train lines..it's neo Victorian?!
