



by GAVIN STAMP

# The Battle

**AN ARCHITECTURAL WONDER IN ITS DAY,**

**F**or 70 years now, the vast brick walls and towering chimneys of Battersea Power Station have dominated the South London skyline, impossible to miss as one gazes out a train window while rumbling toward Waterloo or approaching the Thames en route to Victoria Station. Two decades ago, those chimneys ceased to smoke. Once hailed as a masterpiece of industrial design—the largest and most modern electricity generating station in all of Britain—Battersea Power Station is now a blight on the landscape, its walls crumbling and exposed steelwork rusting.

But does it really matter? The power station is, after all, just a huge brick-clad steel frame that no longer houses the great turbines that once powered half of London. That the World Monuments Fund placed Battersea on its 2004 list of the 100 Most Endangered Sites suggests that it does.

Like many other redundant buildings, Battersea Power Station is a splendid architectural statement that deserves to find an appropriate and sustaining new use. The problem is that, despite its central, prominent location and landmark presence, it hasn't yet found one although the power station's younger sister, downstream at Bankside, has been converted into the Tate Modern.

Battersea was not the first large electric power station whose chimneys challenged the skyline of London—Lots Road, to power the underground railways, had already done that, upsetting the artist residents of Chelsea in the process—but it was the first to be regarded as modern architecture, and the first to elicit a positive critical response. This was largely owing to the involvement of one of the greatest British architects of the last century, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott.

Born in 1880, Scott had won fame early by winning the competition



# for Battersea

## LONDON'S FAMED POWER STATION STANDS AT A CROSSROADS

for the new Anglican cathedral in Liverpool at the age of 22, and he went on to design many other fine churches. But what is remarkable about him is that he rose to the challenges offered by the twentieth century. Scott designed university libraries at Cambridge and Oxford; he was responsible for the standard red telephone kiosk, at one time a ubiquitous feature of the British landscape; he designed the new Waterloo Bridge across the Thames and the new House of Commons that rose from the ashes of the old one destroyed in the Blitz; and he specialized in the dramatic treatment of large industrial buildings. He was consultant on the big blocks of the Guinness Brewery at Park Royal. His last great “brick cathedral” or “temple of power” was Bankside Power Station, only completed after his death in 1960; his first was at Battersea.

A large new coal-burning generating station by the Thames near

Battersea was first proposed by the London Power Company in 1927 to rationalize the capital's electricity supply. The engineer was S.L. Pearce and the architect J. Theo Halliday of the Manchester firm of Halliday & Agate. Building work began in 1929, but the erection of a huge polluting power station so close to Westminster and Chelsea on the smart side of the river caused disquiet and provoked opposition. Pearce's response was twofold: first, to assure the public that the smoke-cleaning technology would be effective in removing most of the sulphur from the exhaust gases—it was; and, secondly, if rather late in the day, to wheel in a knighted architect to improve the appearance of the building. Then, as now, architectural consultancy was a lucrative business for a famous designer, but Scott certainly earned his fee at Battersea.

As he was only approached in 1930, Scott was unable to alter the four-chimneyed “upturned table” configuration of the power station, which he disliked, but he so improved the elevations that by the time



**BATTERSEA'S TALL REINFORCED CONCRETE CHIMNEYS, VISIBLE WITHIN THE DERELICT POWER STATION, ABOVE, WERE INSPIRED BY FLUTED CLASSICAL COLUMNS.**

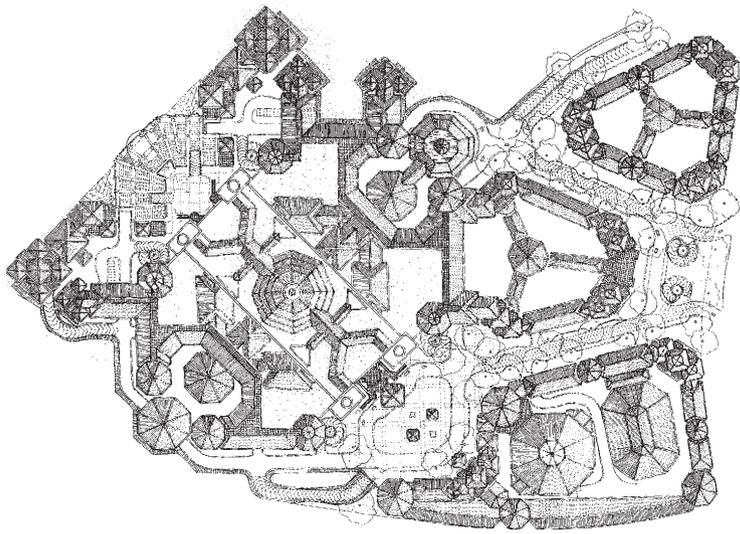
the first half of the station—Battersea A—was commissioned in 1934, it was widely regarded as a striking and successful example of modern industrial architecture.

When, in 1939, the *Architects' Journal* conducted a poll among artists, writers, and other celebrities to find what were considered to be the three best examples of modern architecture in Britain, Battersea Power Station came in second—after the Peter Jones' department store in Sloane Square but before Charles Holden's headquarters for London Transport above St James' Park Station. It was the hands-down favorite of the actor, Charles Laughton, the writer Rebecca West, and of Sir Kenneth Clark, director of the National Gallery.

Scott succeeded in humanizing the great bulk of the structure without denying its industrial character. This he did by composing the planes of masonry as dramatic masses and by choosing fine materials—Blockley bricks from Worcestershire laid with sand-colored mortar—as well as by relieving the great planes of brickwork with bands of non-historical ornament. The upper parts of the walls are recessed and given vertical fluting to create an Art Deco effect—what John Betjeman called “jazz modern”—while the tall reinforced concrete chimneys were modeled like fluted Classical columns. It must be admitted, however, that Scott's contribution at Battersea—unlike his later work at Bankside—was largely cosmetic. The great turbine hall inside Battersea A, lined with faience-clad pilasters to make it a true temple of power, and the astonishing Art Deco control room hidden inside the brick shell, were both the creations of Halliday. These deserve preservation quite as much as the exterior.

Scott's design for Battersea Power Station was only completed in 1955 with the raising of the fourth, and last, chimney—for a time it had been a “three-pin plug”—and the turbine hall inside Battersea B was a much more utilitarian affair, typical of the post-war period. But for all the effort put in to this brick cathedral, an electric power station has a comparatively short life. Battersea A was taken out of commission in 1975 and the second half was closed in 1983. Pearce's great turbines—unprecedentedly powerful in their day—were broken up and scrapped.

Following its decommission, the question then arose of what was to be done with this vast, redundant industrial monster. It probably would have been demolished had the building not been listed as of architectural importance by the British government—at Grade II—in 1980. This was, ironically, a consequence of the sudden demolition that year of the Firestone Factory in West London, a celebrated American-style Art Deco building, in anticipation of listing—an outrage which focused public attention on the need to protect the best examples of inter-war architecture.

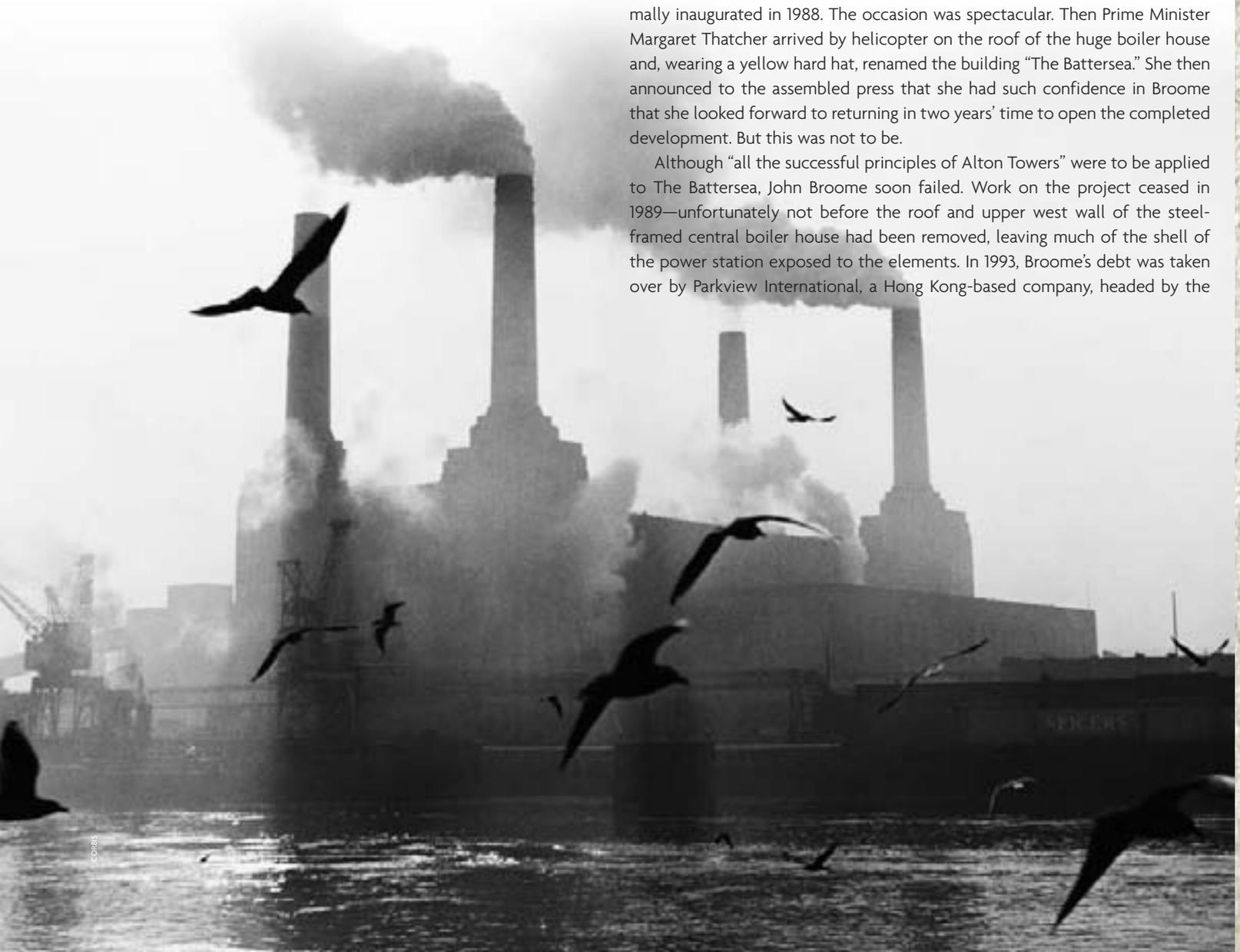


**ONE OF NUMEROUS PLANS FOR THE BATTERSEA SITE, THIS ONE, PROPOSED BY JOHN OUTRAM ASSOCIATES IN 1997, INCLUDED TWO THEATRES, A 20-SCREEN CINEMA, AND A CIRCUS. BELOW, THE STATION RUNNING AT FULL STEAM IN THE 1950s.**

Battersea Power Station fortunately had many friends and admirers. Its fame as a landmark was such that in 1977 a photograph of it, complete with a gas balloon in the shape of a pig, had famously been used on the sleeve of Pink Floyd's album, *Animals*. The Thirties Society—since renamed the Twentieth Century Society—founded in 1979, campaigned for the preservation of Scott's industrial masterpiece, and, in 1981, SAVE Britain's Heritage published a report, entitled *The Colossus of Battersea*, recommending its conversion for leisure and recreational use. In the event, a competition was organized on behalf of the Central Electricity Generating Board in 1983 to find a developer-led team to take on the building and its surrounding site—36 acres of development potential in all. The most realistic proposal was probably to convert the power station into a refuse-burning plant. This, however, was not deemed to be glamorous enough and the winner was declared to be the Roche Consortium with its scheme to make Battersea into "London's Tivoli Gardens." In fact, all of the power station's subsequent problems stem from this unrealistic decision—backed by the local authority—to try and make a popular leisure center out of an industrial building.

By 1985, the Roche Consortium, which had bought the derelict site for £1.5 million, had become Battersea Leisure, a company run by John Broome, the man who had made the gardens of Alton Towers in Staffordshire into England's answer to Disneyland. In 1986, a scheme was launched to convert Europe's largest brick structure into Europe's largest leisure complex, with 200 shows, amusements and rides, a massive ice rink, and restaurants. Some 6.2 million visitors a year were confidently predicted by the year 2000. The project was formally inaugurated in 1988. The occasion was spectacular. Then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher arrived by helicopter on the roof of the huge boiler house and, wearing a yellow hard hat, renamed the building "The Battersea." She then announced to the assembled press that she had such confidence in Broome that she looked forward to returning in two years' time to open the completed development. But this was not to be.

Although "all the successful principles of Alton Towers" were to be applied to The Battersea, John Broome soon failed. Work on the project ceased in 1989—unfortunately not before the roof and upper west wall of the steel-framed central boiler house had been removed, leaving much of the shell of the power station exposed to the elements. In 1993, Broome's debt was taken over by Parkview International, a Hong Kong-based company, headed by the





Hwang brothers from Taiwan, which specializes in property development in Asia.

Following this event, the story becomes confusing as various projects for developing the land around the hulk followed each other with considerable rapidity. Schemes for residential tower blocks, for hotels, and for offices were prepared by a succession of different architects for Halcyon Estates, an overseas subsidiary of Parkview. The constant in all of these proposals was the idea of making the power station itself into a popular leisure complex. Parkview also negotiated with a succession of different investors to help finance these ambitious schemes, but in vain.

Meanwhile, local opposition to the development proposals grew. The Battersea Power Station Community Group had been founded soon after the building became redundant and has consistently called for greater participation by the local community and a proportion of affordable housing in any redevelopment of the site. This group—some of whose members nominated Battersea for inclusion on the World Monuments Fund's Watch list—has also pointed out that a major flaw in the leisure proposal for the power station is the remoteness of its location across the Thames with the absence of good transport links to enable a large number of visitors to easily visit the attractions. Battersea Power Station may lie close to a main-line railway, but there is no convenient local station to which a shuttle-service from Victoria might operate. The Community Group now argues that, as so many plans have stalled, the project needs a rethink and a new action plan should be drawn up after discussion between the local authority (the London Borough of Wandsworth), the landowners and developers, the local community, and other interested parties such as English Heritage.

Parkview's current proposals for Battersea are based on a masterplan prepared by Sir Philip Dowson, a smooth establishment figure brought on board in 1999. A number of other high-profile architects are also involved. The power station itself is to be converted by Sir Nicholas Grimshaw, who proposes replacing its missing brickwork with "high-tech"





CORBIS



**THE POWER STATION, NOW ABANDONED, TOP, BECAME AN INTERNATIONALLY KNOWN ARCHITECTURAL ICON WHEN IT APPEARED ON THE COVER OF PINK FLOYD'S 1977 ALBUM ANIMALS, ABOVE. FACING PAGE, ART DECO DETAILS ON THE DOORS TO BATTERSEA "A" AND INSIDE THE MASSIVE CONTROL ROOM WERE THE WORK OF J. THEO HALLIDAY.**

walls of glass; there are also to be two hotels and a theater designed by Arup Associates, offices by Geoffrey Reid Associates, and residential blocks by Benson & Forsyth. Full planning permission for all this was granted in 2001, but the Battersea Power Station Community Group has infuriated both the developers and the local authority by invoking judicial review of the extension of existing planning permissions.

Even without the group's intervention, however, the lack of activity on the site for so many years is worrying all those concerned about the future of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's great temple of power. The structure has been virtually abandoned since John Broome half-demolished it in 1989 and its condition was described as "very bad" in English Heritage's 2002 Buildings at Risk Register. Despite confident statements by Parkview, the majority of their development plans remain obstinately on paper. Early in 2004 some work was scheduled to start and some remedial repairs to the listed structure are being undertaken. A request had been made to the Secretary of State to upgrade the listing of the power station (supported by WMF in Britain) to Grade II, which would ensure more protection. The condition of the building remains worrying and the slow progress of any new development remains a cause for concern. The key to the success of any scheme to rejuvenate the site is to find realistic new uses for the power station itself and to radically improve the transport links. At present there are no very convincing new uses for the giant spaces of the power station—does London need more retail, more "design" centers, trendy restaurants, and bars? The most obvious need in South London is for more sports and leisure facilities for the local population and it is a mystery why Battersea has not been included in the much-heralded plans for London's Olympic Games bid.

Just as a volume, the sad ruin of Battersea Power Station remains a development asset, and while its great column-chimneys still stand on the massive brick corner towers to rise into the London sky there is still hope. Recent decades have shown that, with imagination and goodwill, even the most intractable of industrial buildings can be made to perform useful new functions. A decade ago, Scott's Bankside looked doomed yet, despite the government's refusal to list it, and it is now a roaring success as a major museum of modern art. Surely it is possible to agree on a realistic development scheme for the long-neglected but potentially valuable industrial site on the South Bank of the Thames which can satisfy the local community, preserve the power station, and still bring in a profit for the developers. The hope now is that the involvement of the World Monuments Fund will act as a catalyst for action.

Even today, abandoned and abused, Battersea Power Station is too good, too exciting, too familiar—and potentially too valuable to lose. It is one of the supreme monuments of twentieth-century Britain. As Marinetti, the apostle of Futurism, proclaimed 20 years before it opened, "There is nothing in the world so beautiful as a great generating station." ■

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