

WATCH SITE UPDATE

Battle for Battersea

THE SAGA OF THE LONDON LANDMARK CONTINUES



by WILL BLACK

ir Giles Gilbert Scott's graceful art-deco Battersea Power Station—famed for its appearance in film and on a 1977 Pink Floyd album cover—defines the River Thames just west of the Houses of Parliament. Passing it on a commuter train from Victoria Station, Europe's largest brick structure is as synonymous with London as the red telephone box, which Gilbert Scott also designed. Viewed from the river, its front two chimneys and gently dilapidated dock provide a contemplative landmark, massive in scale, yet quietly settled within its surroundings. It is painful to imagine its replacement by yet another soulless, pristine executive apartment block with no connection to a geographical location or time period. Yet this would appear to be its fate. This past December, the power station's owner, Parkview International, announced it was selling Battersea to Ireland-based Treasury Holdings for £390 million, while leaving the historic structure in worse condition than when they acquired it 13 years ago. The move marks another depressing but predictable chapter in Battersea's history.

Like the phenomenally successful Tate Modern at Bankside, Battersea, whose construction began in 1929 and ended in 1955, tells us a great deal about London's vanishing twentieth-century industrial heritage. Battersea produced electricity for much of London between 1955 and 1975. The sulphur dioxide it produced finally ceased belching from its chimneys in 1983. Even if not all in the architectural world love it, none would doubt its success as a building and the importance of its surviving but never-seen art-deco interiors, which include faience tiles, bronze doors, and marble walls. As power stations go, Battersea is beautiful. In fact most Londoners adore Battersea with an unquestioning but perhaps inexplicable affection; it is a comforting and distinctive landmark of London, as much as St. Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey.

The station was decommissioned in 1984 when it was bought by John Broome, then owner of Alton Towers theme park. His leisure scheme, famously endorsed by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, collapsed amid spiralling costs. His contribution, although possibly with good intentions, resulted only in the removal of the roof and east wall before work stopped in 1987.

The site was then bought by property tycoon Victor Hwang's offshore Parkview International in 1993. He proposed a £1.5 billion makeover of the massive 15-hectare site, complete with two hotels, 650 homes, movie theaters, and a vast retail space within the historic shell. Sir Philip Dowson, former president of the Royal Academy, drew up a master plan while Nick Grimshaw, designer of the Eden project and Waterloo's Eurostar terminal, designed the shopping center.

When WMF placed Battersea Power Station on its 2004 list of *100 Most Endangered Sites*, it was perceived as a controversial move given a plan was technically "in place" and complete redevelopment slated to finish in 2008. Given the situation, WMF was right to list the site.

In July 2006, Victor Hwang took personal control of the power station when he appointed himself executive director of the project with his son Leo as vice-president and his daughter Vicky as director of leasing. Vicky's enthusiasm was at that moment seemingly unbounded. She was quoted in *The New York Times* on November 24th, 2006 saying: "We see the power station as comparable to the Eiffel Tower or to the Empire State Building. People love this building; I haven't had any negativity at all. There is a huge desire for this to happen." Less than a week later her father sold the power station.

Certain parts of Parkview's plans, a hotel that would have crept along the west wall of the station, for instance, did worry conservationists, but at least major parts of the historic structure would have been rescued. Had Parkview succeeded in achieving the model they proposed, the original architectural blueprint would have survived, albeit with a shopping mall on the inside. Battersea certainly cannot afford to ignore the requirements of commercial backers.

Yet with Victor Hwang's recent departure, this debate is now academic. His elaborate models and websites showing the redevelopment scheme seem as hollow as the station itself. Certainly Battersea Council members were strung along, giving permission for anything he suggested and ultimately for the four chimneys to be replaced as Parkview deemed them "structurally unsafe."



OPENING SPREAD: A VIEW OF BATTERSEA FROM SOUTH EAST. THE BOILER HOUSE WAS LOCATED BETWEEN FOUR CHIMNEYS WHILE THE LOWER BLOCKS TO THE RIGHT ARE THE 'B' STATION TURBINE HALL AND SWITCH HOUSE. ELABORATE PLANS TO REDEVELOP THE SITE PUBLISHED IN 2002, BELOW, WERE NEVER REALIZED.



A report last year, commissioned jointly by WMF and the 20th Century Society, indicated that the poor condition and fissures in the chimneys had been exaggerated and repair in fact would be a cheaper and more viable option.

Parkview claimed it had spent a few million pounds safeguarding the structure, yet when representatives of WMF in Britain visited the site in November 2006 there was no evidence of this. In fact, according to the *Financial Times* on December 1st, £200 million was spent on development plans and nine different architectural practices alone. It seems clear that monies spent on the station over the past 13 years have gone to project development rather than to any structural repair of the building itself—unless one discounts a special nesting site for hawks that went up a few years ago.

Meanwhile, representatives of English Heritage, the UK statutory body in charge of the station, admit they were “taken in.” A spokesman for them claimed they always “had to take Parkview’s intentions at face value.” They now admit to feeling “depressed” about the current situation. However, they see no reason why the new owners Treasury Holdings can’t pick up Parkview’s old scheme and run with it, although their belief that work will begin this spring seems optimistic, given that the new owners want another five years before they even announce their plans. English Heritage’s powers are limited. They can demand urgent repairs, but a “compulsory purchase order” would be unfeasible with a project of this magnitude. English Heritage has demanded a meeting with Treasury Holdings to gauge their intentions, but as yet one is not scheduled.

The amount of money needed to restore the site is beyond most commercial reach. The other issue that has bedeviled Battersea is the question of transport links. In 2004, Hwang promised to spend £25 million for an upgrade to the railway station, and his plans showed improved walkways and access from the river. Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London, quite sensibly pointed out last year that this issue is key to unlocking the site. Yet Battersea is located opposite Victoria, London’s busiest mainline railway station, separated only by a narrow stretch of the River Thames. It is near the fashionable and affluent area of Chelsea and overlooks the fine green space of Battersea Park, a major sports center. In east London billions are being spent starting from scratch on an entire region





for the 2012 London Olympics. Could the power station be re-developed as a major central London Olympic site? If not, why not learn from Tate Modern, which is expanding again due to high visitor numbers and has become something more inspiring than a shopping center. Battersea's riverside setting would make a perfect concert venue, and would not involve the trek out of central London that many venues demand. But the government seems to prefer concentrating on visionary new projects such as Wembley Stadium, the Dome, and sites chosen for the 2012 Olympics in London.

In October and November last year, Battersea was temporarily taken over by the edgy Serpentine Gallery and the station's rusting shell turned into a dramatic setting for its "China Power Station Part 1 exhibition." The multimedia exhibition of contemporary Chinese art and architecture drew a large audience who were enthralled by this intense setting for film, sound, and a wall of rotting apples. Bicycles were provided to cycle around the site while the renowned dim-sum restaurant Yauatcha took over one pavilion owned by Parkview. For five weeks the site was gloriously alive and active. Visitors were able to stand inside the monumental shell and appreciate its sheer scale.

It remains to be seen how Battersea will fare under its new owners. Early announcements indicate a wish to use many of the elements of the Parkview plans. There are worrying signs that they will try to increase the percentage of housing on the site, and Rob Davies, development director at Treasury Holdings, backed by Irish property developers John Ronan and Richard Barrett, has already voiced a desire to remove the chimneys. Yet without the chimneys and the historic fabric, what is the power station? It is of course a massive opportunity for real estate with a burdensome ruin on it, and some years back, Hwang told WMF in Britain Director Colin Amery that he had just bought a 40-acre site of "prime real estate."

There are rumors that Treasury Holdings is working on plans with architect Lord Norman Foster to increase the residential components of the site at a cost of some of the retail and leisure elements. While they have promised to invest £2 billion on redeveloping the site, their scheme would not be ready for another five years at least. One of the elements of the original plan likely to be kept is "London's most exclusive restaurant table," one table seating 14 people at the top of one of the chimneys. Presumably this would be a "replaced" chimney if the developer sticks to his word to put them back once removed. When WMF asked about the plan, Treasury Holdings refused to respond.

The failure of Battersea is not just a tale of developer's greed and neglect, but also a failure of ideas to regenerate London's most dramatic icon. The next few years are key for the station, but unless a developer is serious about restoring the historic fabric, Battersea faces a grim choice between rapid destruction or gentle dilapidation. ■



THOUGH DILAPIDATED, BATTERSEA'S ENORMOUS ART-DECO INTERIORS STILL BOAST DETAILS LIKE SIR GILES GILBERT SCOTT'S ORIGINAL MARBLE WALLS AND COLUMNS.