

March of the phallocracy: the new Nine Elms.



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Nine Elms and the destruction of London

Vauxhall Nine Elms and Battersea now stands as a monument to the degeneration of our capital

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I have a recurring anxiety dream that begins in an overcrowded tube train. I reach my destination, adjust my mask and ride the escalator up towards the daylight. At first the experience is familiar enough—the posters on the walls still advertise the usual mix of action films and smartphones. But then I find myself in the midst of a howling void of nothingness, like a half-remembered scene from a post-apocalyptic film set in London. In this alternative reality, everything I can remember has gone.

This dream is much like how it feels emerging from Nine Elms or Battersea Power Station, the Northern Line's newest stations in 80 years. Here, another, unrecognisable London has taken shape while we weren't paying enough attention. Well into Boris Johnson's second term as London's mayor in the 2010s, this was a place where everyday life still went on, in the cracks

between London's 19th-century railways and the river. It wasn't pretty, but it felt real. Now, to paraphrase Karl Marx's view of the modern world, all that was solid has melted into air.

After decades in which almost nothing happened here, far too much has happened. Amid the surviving fragments of Victorian infrastructure, the low-rise industrial sheds and market buildings from the 1980s have gone, making way for a forest of towers full of empty flats that erupt from the pavement to reach as high as 58 floors. Relentlessly, they try to look interesting, with a colour palette that includes pink and gold. Some are cylindrical, others play gravity-defying tricks, pushing and pulling façades in and out like ransacked chests of drawers.

As a pedestrian, you can avoid the main roads and navigate an area four times the size of Canary Wharf by moving through landscaped spaces that, in the currently fashionable manner, attempt to look artfully wild and come studded with questionable sculpture. Hipsters have been encouraged to set up ground-level cocktail bars, looking forlorn amid the marketing suites.

Architecturally, it's mostly a depressing freak show, but it is one that has set the pattern for the accelerating transformation of huge swathes of London: Stratford, White City, Old Oak Common and many others. These so-called Opportunity Areas, defined in the 2004 London Plan during Ken Livingstone's first term as mayor, are still driving policy. They are characterised by high densities, clusters of towers and the outsourcing to private developers of the cost of infrastructure and affordable housing.

How and why all this has happened says a lot about the collision between global finance and local planning, and the unintended consequences of the attempt to shift responsibility for affordable housing and infrastructure from public control to private developers.

London's VNeB, which is to say Vauxhall Nine Elms and Battersea, doesn't have quite the same ring as New Yorkers contracting the triangle below Canal Street to TriBeCa, or South of Houston Street to SoHo. It wasn't even coined by a marketing team needily looking to inject a bit of insider cool into an

otherwise generic development. VNeB was the invention of Livingstone's planners at City Hall, who designated it as one of the most central of the 28 Opportunity Areas.

The rebuilding of the trumpet-shaped three-quarters of a square mile that follows the Thames from east of MI6's pharaonic pyramid, all the way to Battersea power station, has transformed London's social geography. It's the biggest thing that has happened to London since Canary Wharf.

When Canary Wharf was made an Enterprise Zone in 1982, with tax incentives designed to encourage the building of low-rise industrial units, nobody foresaw that 97 acres of abandoned dockland would become a major financial centre. And in 2004, few people expected that VNeB would turn into a residential area with the population and the unequal demographics of Monaco. Livingstone was asking for just 3,500 homes on the site: it's turning out to be closer to 20,000.

Canary Wharf's saving grace was that it remained in the hands of a single developer. Indeed, in its early stages it had a single planning authority, which brought a certain sense of order to the site. But VNeB is an urban free-fire zone, in which an assortment of international speculators have come and gone. They played the Wandsworth and Lambeth local authorities, successive London mayors and Westminster governments off each other. In the first stages of the game they assembled sites, pursued ever-larger planning consents, flipped them to other players and cashed in for a profit without building anything. Now the music has stopped, and those developers still standing are hurrying to complete their towers, hoping that their lines of credit will remain open and that the flat buyers keep coming.

Battersea power station is owned by a consortium of Malaysian investors, and changed hands five times before construction work started. The number of apartments there went from zero to 4,239 in a series of stages, as successive owners kept coming back for more. First it was going to be 750, then it was 3,400, with the number of affordable flats dropping to 15 per cent. It was cut again to reach the current total of just 9 per cent.

Embassy Gardens is being developed by the Dublin-based Ballymore, a survivor of the great Irish property crash in the wake of the global financial crisis, and Ecoworld, another Malaysian company.

Damac, a property company owned by Hussain Sajwani, who developed a Trump-branded golf course in Dubai, is building a 50-storey tower, while Vauxhall Cross Island—a traffic island in the middle of a huge gyratory road system—belongs to VCI Property Holding, a Jersey-registered vehicle owned by the Al Shawaf family from Saudi Arabia. They bought it for a reported £65m from Kylun, a firm backed by an oil company based in the UAE. Planning permission was originally secured—after appeal—for a pair of towers, one of 41 floors and the other of 31. But the new owners immediately raised their sights. At the end of 2020 Robert Jenrick, then the housing secretary, allowed them to add another 22 floors to the previous total: the taller of the two will be 53 floors.

“Versace-branded flats on the 50th floor of one tower are on sale for £6.5m”

The redeveloped New Covent Garden flower market was originally going to be called Nine Elms Square. Its owners sold it on to two Chinese developers, R&F from Guangzhou and CC Land. It has been renamed Thames City and has some of the tallest of VNeB’s towers, including a 53-floor giant. Close by, One Nine Elms tower, which is five floors taller, is being built by R&F alone.

The owner of CC Land, Cheung Chung-kiu, turned what began as a packaging and luggage manufacturer in provincial China into a property company, based in Bermuda. He recently bought a 45-bedroom London house on Rutland Gate for £200m. He plans to gut the interior to create a triple-height ballroom and dig a two-level underground gallery for his car collection. Cheung’s stake in the stricken Chinese property giant Evergrande, founded by his friend Hui Ka Yan, is a reminder of the uncertainties that still overshadow the development business.

The riverfront from Nine Elms to Battersea was once the capital’s service entrance, the place it dumped all the things that a city can’t do without but doesn’t want to see on its doorstep. It’s where London collected its rubbish,

generated its electricity, distributed its fruit and vegetables, collected its parcels and sheltered its homeless. A collection of anonymous utilitarian sheds and broken-down wharfs has been wiped out to make way for a sprouting forest of skyscrapers.

Versace-branded flats on the 50th floor of one such tower are on sale for £6.5m. Embassy Gardens residents have the use of an attention-seeking glass-bottomed pool, spanning the 25-metre gap between a pair of 10-storey high blocks, although they seem reluctant to swim in it. The Americans moved their embassy to Nine Elms three years ago; the Dutch changed their minds and stayed north of the river. Apple is moving 1,400 people into new offices in the former power station, parts of which are being turned into a shopping mall and food court. A Japanese patisserie and the Dutch start-up Vanmoof, which sells electric-powered bicycles, are already in place.



Reluctant tenants: a glass pool spanning two of the towers in the new Embassy Gardens residency. Image: SOPA Images Limited / Alamy Stock Photo

There is a 2,000-seat performance space, and Battersea's developers will be trying to upstage Embassy Gardens' pool in the sky with a large glass lift inside one of the facsimiles of the power station's four original chimneys. Due

to start operating next year, it's equipped with a mechanism that will allow it to silently glide up from the floor of the turbine hall and emerge into the daylight at the top, like a giant soap bubble.

At the foot of the 15-storey-high glass cliff of apartments that wraps around the power station, an empty display case carries the message "village notice board" without so much as a trace of anybody searching for a missing pet. The bathos is inescapable.

Within the next few years, VNeB will have completed up to 20,000 flats and support 25,000 jobs. That's the equivalent of building a town the size of Salisbury, albeit crammed onto a site six times smaller, giving it a density to match Lagos or Karachi. It has been designed by an assortment of architects that includes the American firms SOM and KPF and the studios founded by Richard Rogers and Zaha Hadid, as well as some embarrassingly gaudy would-be Las Vegas-style work from the British firms Broadway Malyan and Rolfe Judd. It's hard to believe that some of them have ever been in the same room together.

The procession of looming towers that they have built between them makes VNeB's uncomfortable presence felt even in Parliament Square, where, looking west toward Millbank, the tallest of the skyscrapers are visible from the House of Lords and Westminster Abbey. They crowd into the view from Waterloo Bridge and seem particularly threatening from the steps of Tate Britain.

Seen from directly across the river, the development forms a continuous wall of towers 20 to 30-floors high, with the taller clump of 50 stories and more just behind them. In a piece of stable-door-closing post-rationalisation, the planners now attempt to dignify this mess by describing the towers as made up of "a central tier" with a reassuringly titled "secondary cluster."

This is the march of the phallocracy that Boris Johnson promised to halt when he campaigned for the chance to be mayor, but which in fact accelerated during his time in office. He would, he said, stop London from turning into

Dubai-on-Thames. Then he took the plan for 3,500 homes in the whole area and increased that six-fold.

Livingstone demanded 50 per cent affordable housing. Sadiq Khan set 35 per cent as a benchmark, and is trying to do better. But in VNeB, Wandsworth's policy has been 15 per cent. Even these figures have not been achieved. One Nine Elms is only 11 per cent affordable, little better than Battersea power station's 9 per cent. These paltry amounts are, we are told, the price of funding the linear park designed by the Greater London Authority that will soon run the length of VNeB, two new underground stations on the Northern Line, and hiding the refuse transfer station from the new apartments. It is also the outcome of impossibly arcane calculations about the viability of the developments.

The transformation began 40 years ago, when the last of Battersea power station's boilers finally shut down. The city's population had shrunk to just 6.7m people from its pre-war peak of nine million. Margaret Thatcher was drafting a parliamentary bill to evict Livingstone from County Hall, as it then was, and abolish autonomous government in London. Michael Heseltine used his powers as the environment minister to stop Battersea going the way of other lost Art Deco landmarks by listing it as a site of historic and architectural interest.

But, with the exception of the conservationist pressure group Save, nobody had a clue what to do with such a massive monument and the 40 acres of land on which it stood. The *Times* went so far as to offer its readers a modest cash prize for the best suggestion for a new use. Given its significance to the capital, the electricity generating board which owned the power station at the time approached the disposal of the building in a way that in retrospect seems almost frivolous.

It advertised for ideas for the empty building and set up a panel that inevitably included Hugh Casson, considered an architectural safe pair of hands ever since he had presided over the Festival of Britain. The panel picked the one that it liked best, and handed the site over without thinking to retain a financial stake for the public in its future success.

John Broome, founder of Alton Towers, was the not-so-lucky winner. He got to buy Battersea for what seemed like the giveaway price of £1.5m, with a promise to turn the power station into a theme park. Broome's drawings showed a space substantially larger than Tate Modern's turbine hall from its own days as a power station, dotted with hot air balloons, indoor rides hurtling patrons through the dark, pubs with thatched roofs, and Dickensian cobbled streets. It was blessed by Thatcher when she was prime minister, but it came to nothing.

The failure cost Broome his helicopter, his yacht and ownership of Alton Towers. The banks sold Battersea to the Taiwanese-born, Hong Kong-based Hwang family for £10.5m, along with Broome's outstanding debts. The Hwangs sat on the site for a decade without building anything, then finally sold it for £400m to the Irish-owned Treasury Holdings.

“Mayor Johnson said he would stop London from turning into Dubai. Then he took the plan for 3,500 homes and increased it six-fold”

The Irish company proposed a scheme even more feverish than Broome's Dickensian London theme park, involving a new chimney 1,000ft high and made of glass as part of an eco-power generating scheme. It was likely designed to get them approval for their less confrontational residential plans. Their strategy succeeded, but they went bust before they could build it. In turn their creditors sold the site on to the Malaysian pension fund, which valued it at £1.87bn when it changed hands in 2019.

The steady rise in the number of homes has made Battersea by far the densest part of the VNeB area, occupying just 10 per cent of the land but with more than 22 per cent of the homes. The most architecturally ambitious components are the two blocks wrapped around the southern flank of the power station, one designed by Norman Foster, the other by Frank Gehry, rising 15 stories high. They may be the work of two of the world's most celebrated architects but they are so close to each other that, were they not fully air conditioned, you'd believe you could smell the toothpaste from your neighbour's bathroom.

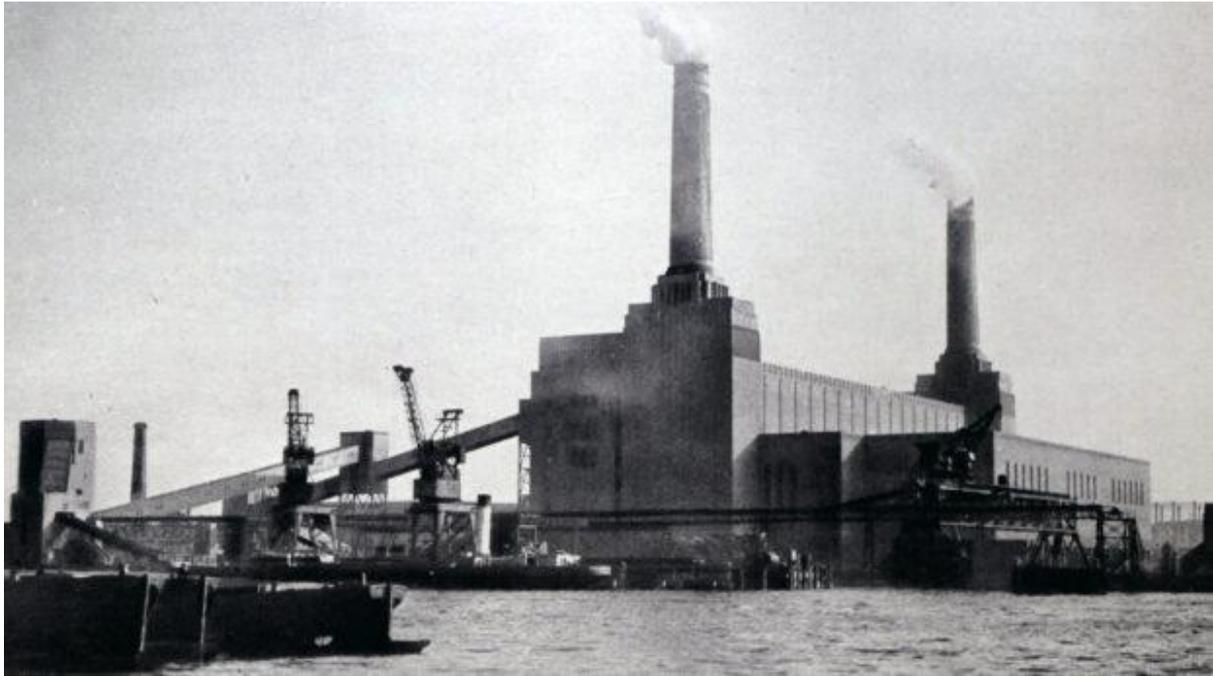
At ground level, virtually everything has been erased: market buildings and a refuse transfer station from the 1970s, supermarkets built in the 1980s, homeless shelters, light industrial sheds and a bus station from 2005 have all either been swept away already, or are in the process of going.

Could it have been different? If Broome hadn't stripped off the roof of the power station to extract the generating equipment and strip out asbestos, and left the structure to rot when he ran out of money, then the restoration would not have been so costly. His successors would not have been able to demand the right to put more and more multimillion pound homes on the site to pay for dismantling and then rebuilding the four chimneys.

If John Prescott, who as deputy prime minister was ultimately responsible for planning decisions, had followed the advice of his officials and stopped the building of the 50-floor St George's Wharf Tower at Vauxhall, then the south side of the Thames would not have turned into the closest that Europe comes to an Asian megalopolis. A public inquiry planning inspector had warned it would set a precedent for the random sprouting of excessively tall buildings all over London. Predictably, that is exactly what has happened. Equally predictably, every attempt to hold the line and set St George's height as a maximum has failed. There are already three towers that are taller in its immediate vicinity.

What is most mystifying is how little challenge this transformation has received. In 1984, it took nothing more than an insignificant extension to the National Gallery less than 100 feet tall to goad the Prince of Wales and his supporters into such a fever pitch of fury that it took 20 years for the architectural profession to fully recover. The Mies van der Rohe development opposite Mansion House involved a tower just 19-floors high, which the Prince of Wales used his bully pulpit to veto for fear of the damage it would do to London's skyline.

If we are looking for individuals to hold accountable for VNeB, John Prescott, Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson are high on the list.



The place a city can't do without: the construction of Battersea power station in the 1930s. Image: Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

In 2001, shortly after the destruction of the two ancient Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan by the Taliban, Livingstone was shameless enough to call English Heritage “the Taliban of British architecture” for trying to stop Gerald Ronson from building a tower at 110 Bishopsgate, immediately east of Liverpool Street Station. Prescott approved it, as well as the St George’s tower.

In Johnson’s years, the towers just kept coming unstoppably on. If the provisions of the section 106 agreement that local authorities use to induce private developers were not so skewed against the public, then the project would not be so dense, or so chaotic. If the electricity generating board had not rushed to dispose of its asset so precipitously, then the public might have done better. The New Covent Garden Market Authority was at least canny: it retained a financial stake in the redevelopment of its site.

In *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott imagined a striking urban future. We know that we were meant to be horrified by the vision he created, but at the same time it was thrilling to look at. The film had street life that makes Soho look tame, and was in a way a celebration of the possibilities of the messy energy of urban existence. It made life for the street-level underclass look so much more interesting than it was for those at the top of the gilded megastructures

created by Scott's art director. The saddest thing about VNeB is that it has the lifeless gilded megastructures, but little to match *Blade Runner's* street-level spectacle.

It did not have to be this way. Two centuries ago Pimlico, across the river from Nine Elms, was developed around garden squares five and six floors high that still support a rich urban life today. The new norm in VNeB is blocks often three times as tall as Pimlico's terraces. The chances that this neighbourhood will survive for as long as its predecessor on the other side of the Thames seem remote.

The Britain that built the new towns and the new universities in the 1960s, the London that created the Southbank Centre and the Barbican, would have done better. That approach may have gone, but for the future of the city, let's hope we can rediscover it.

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