

The Reconstruction of Nine Elms

When work on these volumes began in 2008, the main route westwards from Vauxhall along Nine Elms Lane and Battersea Park Road looked drab, at best. Much of what could be seen was the outcome of a campaign by Wandsworth Council around 1980 to attract manual jobs to Nine Elms in the wake of the collapse of its older heavy industries.¹ A car dealership at the Ponton Road junction; sundry short-life industrial sheds, reached from side roads; a filling station and a cash-and-carry: these were the typical fare before Battersea Power Station, derelict for twenty-five years, hove into commanding view. A few incidents on the south side might just have drawn a curious eye: the egg-crate roof of the New Covent Garden Flower Market, glimpsed behind a wall; then the Stationery Office building, angular, flamboyantly blue and yellow, designed by a fan of James Stirling (Ill. 8.52); after that, the Duchess pub at the Thessaly Road corner, one of just two survivals from Victorian Nine Elms.

On neither side of the heavily trafficked road was there much life east of the Battersea Dogs' and Cats' Home or, for that matter, housing. The main exceptions were Riverside Court (1978–81) and Elm Quay Court (1986–8), adjacent on the north side of Nine Elms Lane. Holding a thin strip between road and river released by the Covent Garden Market Authority, these ungainly blocks were in their way prophetic – a token that smart private flats might make headway in a degraded environment. They had the advantages of being within reach of the transport interchange at Vauxhall, and of overlooking the Thames, which they exploited with the array of rear balconies fast becoming standard on riverside housing. But for twenty years, until the Viridian Apartments replaced a school site at the top of Sleaford Street, they stood alone: Nine Elms remained unregenerate.

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The position, as these books go to press, is transformed. Lengths of hoardings line the main route, advertising regenerative developments. Behind them, pile-drivers stand at the ready amidst rubble. The car dealership and several low-rise industrial estates have bitten the dust, as has the Stationery Office, while the postal sorting office behind it lives on borrowed time. So also do the two sprawling sites of the New Covent Garden Market either side of the railway, the cement plant in Cringle Street, and the gasholders beyond Prince of Wales Drive. All these, and even the last-remaining railway warehouses in Pascal Street, are soon to be cleared away. Ponton Road is to be realigned (not for the first time) so as to skirt the compound of a new American Embassy – the most dramatic of prizes captured for a new Nine Elms.

The greatest challenge of all remains the Power Station and its 38-acre estate of long-vacant land. Here the latest scheme, blessed with planning permission in 2010, offered such an accumulation of tall blocks around the great building as all but to conceal it from Battersea Park Road. In November 2011 BPS Subsidiaries, the relevant arm of Treasury Holdings, latest owners of the Power Station, was taken into administration, once more throwing the future of this famously jinxed site up in the air. The approved planning scheme has however been retained in essence by the new owners, as explained on page xxx (Ill. 9.21).

In what shape this and other plans for revitalizing Nine Elms will emerge remains to be seen at the time of writing. Hatched in outline before the current recession took its grip, they have thus far shown powers of endurance in the coldest of economic climates since the 1930s. That however has been at the cost of a social or deeply co-ordinated approach to planning. The new Nine Elms (Ill. 13.1) is the largest regeneration scheme in central London since the Docklands (the King's Cross railway lands are smaller). A balance of judgement on it must wait until all the developments are not only complete but familiar, and some kind of community and place has started to emerge. All that is attempted here is to offer

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an account of the background and to list the schemes in play when this book went to press.

The Vauxhall–Nine Elms–Battersea Opportunity Area

In February 2008 the Greater London Authority adopted a London Plan setting out a framework for the metropolis over the succeeding fifteen to twenty years. It laid weight on ‘Opportunity Areas’, of which 28 were identified, mostly in London’s central and eastern districts. The administration of Ken Livingstone at the GLA had, under the influence of the architect Richard Rogers and others, already favoured redeveloping inner-city ‘brownfield’ sites. When Boris Johnson and the Conservatives replaced Livingstone that May, that side of planning policy showed no marked change.

The 2008 plan earmarked ‘Vauxhall/Nine Elms/Battersea’, covering 195 hectares (482 acres), as a major opportunity area. The broad-brush document spoke of ‘improved public transport capacity’ west of Vauxhall, supported by ‘effective pedestrian linkages’. Veiled reference was also made to the Covent Garden markets, whose future was then under discussion. No doubt with Battersea Power Station in mind, the plan anticipated ‘important leisure and housing provision ... at Battersea’, and concluded that ‘good quality tall buildings in appropriate parts of the area will help reduce its perceived isolation, clearly signposting its transformation as an Opportunity Area’. On that basis, a minimum of 3,500 new homes were to be built here before 2026, with an ‘indicative employment capacity’ of 8,000 jobs.²

The area so designated straddled the boroughs of Lambeth and Wandsworth, but the Nine Elms and Battersea section fell within Wandsworth, where a developer-friendly ethos had long obtained. Under the stimulus of Sir Simon Milton, who had made his reputation as leader of Westminster City Council and

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now joined Johnson's GLA administration as deputy mayor for policy and planning, redevelopment in Nine Elms made fast progress.³ By the end of 2008 the coup of winning the American Embassy for the area had been pulled off, through a deal between the US Government and the Irish property company Ballymore for a fifth of the latter's 20-acre parcel around Ponton Road. Meanwhile Treasury Holdings, owners since 2006 of the power station, had brought forward a scheme masterplanned by Rafael Viñoly; to its east a Bahrain-based company had bought Tideway Wharf, while the Covent Garden Market Authority had received permission to redevelop its estate.⁴ All this took place before credit collapsed. The promotional targets of jobs and homes to be created in the opportunity area now spiralled ever upwards, eventually reaching 16,000 homes and 27,000 jobs. Less often mentioned were the social facilities which would cater for this future population.

Redevelopment of London's Docklands had been co-ordinated by a special authority with planning powers. Nine Elms enjoyed no such body. Instead the GLA sought to draw together this town-sized project, or string of projects, by means of an informal 'governance structure', consisting of a board convening the interested parties, supplemented by ad hoc subgroups. The boroughs were members, but the various local communities enjoyed no direct representation. Instead, the bare formalities of planning consultation were relied upon.

As no direct government subsidy was available, the crucial issue was the nature and funding of the infrastructure, estimated by a study in October 2010 at almost £1 billion. While the portion of the opportunity area closer to Vauxhall enjoyed fair transport links, western sections had to rely only on buses or the run-down Battersea Park Station, offering overground access to Victoria but no further. Here the influence of the power station's owners weighed heavily. The upgrading of the overground line had been inconclusively explored in the past. Conscious of the need to gear their housing towards employees in the financial sector, the developers pitched for a connection with the City and beyond by means of a new

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branch to the Underground which (in the version finally adopted) would leave the Northern Line at Kennington, stop at Sainsburys in the Wandsworth Road and terminate at the power station. The total cost of this Northern Line Extension (NLE) alone was put at £564 million. The money was to be found by 'tax increment financing' (borrowing against the increased potential tax revenue as the sites rose in value) together with a direct levy on developments. These measures were expected to add around £40,000 each on the cost of many housing units, thereby reducing to 15% the number of affordable homes to be built. The NLE was sanctioned by Government in November 2011. At the time of writing a Transport and Works Act was to be submitted in 2013, after which the line could be constructed and opened in 2019.⁵

Co-ordinating the various Nine Elms developments has taken a similar ad hoc path to the infrastructural proposals. For instance, once it had emerged that a cluster of tall buildings would be sanctioned at the Vauxhall end of the opportunity area, it was left to 'Design Council CABE' (the slimmed-down form of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment after its funding was reduced by the Cameron government) to bring the architects of the various schemes for the Vauxhall area together voluntarily in Summer 2011 and to promote a measure of coherence and agreement, the only agreed criterion being the impact of towers on the 'Heritage Landscape' around the Houses of Parliament. As Piers Gough put it: 'Everyone wants to build high and everyone wants to build two towers, producing a surreal doppelganger zone'.⁶

Redevelopment schemes

THE AMERICAN EMBASSY

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When American government representation to the Court of St James moves to Nine Elms in 2018, it will become the first London embassy of any major country to migrate south of the Thames. There had long been frustration with Eero Saarinen's landmark embassy building in Grosvenor Square. This came both from the diplomats, who found it hard to operate and defend, and from Mayfair residents, who saw neighbouring streets round the square swallowed up by voracious American security. The parting will be by mutual consent.

American embassies come under the State Department's Bureau of Overseas Building Operations, which entrusted the search for a new London site to the property firm Cushman & Wakefield. The final decision lay with the ambassador between 2005 and 2009, Robert H. Tuttle. When Nine Elms was selected from the many sites investigated, Tuttle remarked that it fulfilled the criteria for a 'modern, secure and environmentally sustainable embassy'. Undoubtedly security was the deciding factor in this radical choice. Later, the American architectural press noted the Bureau's reputation for putting security first, and confirmed that the result of the ensuing competition reflected the State Department's 'ongoing effort to fortify and modernize embassies worldwide'.⁷

The United States Government for its part was keen to play down British apprehensions that it wished to build a fortress. That was partly why an architectural competition was held, the first for a new American embassy since 1996. Following a master-planning exercise by Zimmer Gunsul Frasca of Seattle, and consultation, the brief was settled in 2009. It called for a building or buildings to house 800 people in a landscaped setting, 30 metres back from the road. The height was limited to 85 metres (cut down from the 97 metres first proposed). Despite a passing nod to the 'special relationship', only American architects were invited to participate. In compensation Lords Palumbo and Rogers were drafted in to serve on the jury. Thirty-seven applications were received, then whittled down to four: from Morphosis Architects; Richard Meier & Partners; Kieran Timberlake; and Pei Cobb Freed & Partners. In February 2010 the Philadelphia firm of Stephen

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Kieran and James Timberlake were announced as winners.⁸ The outcome displeased the British jurors and other homegrown arbiters of taste, who criticized the master-plan and favoured a more open-looking, fractured design by Thom Mayne of Morphosis. The best that one London critic could find to say was that the winning entry represented 'the architecture of euphemism'. Later came complaints that British firms were excluded from the procurement process. For their part the Americans accused local objectors of 'sniveling'.⁹

The chosen design (III. 13.2) may yet prove to have a suavity wanting in recent British architecture. Kieran Timberlake have made their reputation with landscaped buildings on American campuses and beyond, embodying a strong strand of technical research. Both interests are manifest in the adopted design, which according to Stephen Kieran will be notable for its integration of many environmental systems.¹⁰ On a backdrop created by the firm of Laurie Olin (the chosen landscape partner for three of the four final submissions), the architects' concept is imposed with a classical calm and geometry. The cube of the embassy itself is to stand over a lengthy platform bisecting a circle of landscape, taken up mainly by a moat towards the road and by grass and trees behind. What promises to save this simple idea from dullness is the façade treatment. Wrapping over the main structure all round the perimeter will come a deep, prismatically patterned surface combining glazing, shades and solar collectors incorporating a thin film of photovoltaic cells. The dominant material of this skin will be the fashionable transparent polymer ETFE. Here and there it will be cut into for recessed garden balconies or other features. By accident or design the insistent patterning of these regular façades recalls the Saarinen embassy, albeit in lighter, glitzier materials.

Perhaps the most reasoned criticism of the Kieran Timberlake design is that its strong geometry disregards the alignment of Nine Elms Lane and other local features, making it hard for future surrounding buildings to respond to the placing of their exalted neighbour. But the US Government and its architects may well wish to foster aloofness. This costly building, due to start on site in 2013 and to

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open in 2017, will set a challenge hard to match for the inevitably cheaper buildings destined to rise around it.

OTHER SCHEMES

Below are brief details of the projected future buildings within the area covered by these volumes between the Vauxhall Roundabout and the western boundary of the opportunity area at Queenstown Road. Schemes at Vauxhall and along Wandsworth Road are excluded, as these are in Lambeth and so fall outside the area covered by these volumes.

North of the main road

Tideway Wharf. Planning consent was granted in 2010 for a scheme on this five-acre riverside site designed by Rogers Stirk Harbour & Partners for St James Developments, a subsidiary of the Berkeley Group. The scheme, code-named Riverlight, came to the architects following a design competition held by the previous Bahraini owners of the site in June 2009, who sold on to Berkeley later that year. This scheme (III. 13.3) consists of five prow-like buildings facing the river, ascending in height from west to east. It will include 800 flats, a hotel, restaurants and shopping, and an extension to the Thames walkway.¹¹

Battersea Power Station. Further details about the intentions for this site when these volumes went to press are given in Chapter 9.

Field Gasholder Station site. In 2009 the National Grid's property arm commissioned an exploratory scheme from MAKE Architects for 'high density mixed use' buildings to replace the four gasholders on this site, of which two had already been demolished (page xxx). The resulting project came up with a cluster

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of four towers sitting on the foundations of the old gasholders and therefore circular in shape but sliced off diagonally at arbitrary heights, like glass-clad *penne*. The highest was to rise to thirty storeys. In 2011 the decommissioning of the two remaining gasometers was officially announced and MAKE were confirmed as architects.¹²

Marco Polo site. West of the railways, only one major site within the opportunity area is scheduled for demolition at the time of writing. That is the egregious Marco Polo House, Queenstown Road, whose history is covered in Volume 50. In 2006 the three-acre site was bought for £63m by a Russian consortium, Anastasia Ltd, which then embarked on a redevelopment scheme with the property investors Marcus Cooper Group. In January 2012 plans were approved to demolish the offices and build 456 luxury flats, as well as shops and offices. The *parti*, devised by Scott Brownrigg, architects, divides the site between three bulbous, raking blocks with continuous horizontal balconies.¹³

South of the main road

Embassy Gardens. Five acres of the twenty-acre site owned by the Irish-based property company Ballymore on the south side of Nine Elms Lane having been sold to the US Government for their embassy, the remainder is to consist of a balance of commercial and residential buildings guided by a master plan devised under John Letherland of Terry Farrell & Partners. The chief feature is a linear park (Ill. 13.6) which, it is hoped, may extend from Vauxhall on beyond the Ballymore holding to Battersea Park. Architects involved in the nine intended sites include Allford Hall Monaghan Morris; Fielden Clegg Bradley; and FLACQ. The targets aimed for are 2,000 homes, and up to 600,000 square feet of office space, along with a hotel and shops, all within a landscaped framework to be created by the firm of Camlins. The tallest buildings will rise to 23 storeys.¹⁴ A marketing suite for the Ballymore development was in course of erection east of Ponton Road in mid 2012.

Nine Elms Parkside. This title refers to the Royal Mail sorting depot site, which under a scheme co-ordinated by M3C Consulting is to be redeveloped to a plan by Allies & Morrison, architects, to provide 1,870 homes in blocks ranging from seven to thirteen storeys, a primary school, some community and retailing facilities and 'retained Royal Mail operations'. The linear park running through the south-side sites will open up at this point to create spaces provisionally christened Tideway Green (in reference to the 'historic tidal pond' formerly in this area) and Nine Elms Square.¹⁵

New Covent Garden Market sites. The replanning of the two large but awkwardly connected market sites follows from a long and gradual decline in their wholesale use, as patterns of urban provisioning in London have changed. The under-use of the Flower Market at the northern end was palpable, but not as grave as at the larger Fruit and Vegetable Market which stood half-empty amidst a sea of parking. The latter could only be seen at full pitch at weekends, when it played host to a raw and popular Nine Elms Sunday market. Neither building had been much updated since construction in the 1970s (page xxx).

Under the lively chairmanship of Baroness Dean (Brenda Dean), the Covent Garden Market Authority, owner of the sites, set about replanning in 2006. Consultation confirmed that most of their tenants preferred to stay at Nine Elms. Reconstructing both markets together on the larger southern site and redeveloping the northern site beyond the railway with housing therefore became the policy. Once government sanction had been obtained in October 2008, the Authority proceeded to choose architects and hold a series of public consultations.

The southern site will be rebuilt under the code name of The Garden to plans by Neil Tomlinson Architects, in five parallel buildings including not only the two main markets but also facilities for the public and possibly a college or housing next to Thessaly Road. The consortium Vinci St Modwen was chosen as the private

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development partners for this scheme in 2012. Following the rejection of an attempt to have the Flower Market listed, the northern site, close to Vauxhall, is to be entirely redeveloped to designs by Foster Associates. Here 1,750 homes are to be created in six buildings, of which two are intended as tall 'bookends' flanking the entry to the projected Nine Elms linear park and one is to rise to 47 storeys. The developer-partner for this scheme had still to be chosen at the time this book went to press.¹⁶