The nowhere neighbourhood

London is building a new district where no local can afford to live

WENDELL STEAVENSON

There haven't been elm trees in Nine Elms, in south west London, for 300 years. When the railway reached the south bank of the Thames at Battersea in 1838, the area was a swamp dotted with windmills. By the end of the 19th century, when Charles Booth mapped the socio-economic classes of London, the area was industrial, and included a coal wharf, a saw mill, gasworks and coke works. A few tenement streets were marked in black which, according to Booth's categorisations, designated "the lowest class, vicious, semi-criminal."

On the *A-Z* London map from 2000, there are no longer any residential streets in the area. Instead there are only the brown outlines of HM Stationery Office, New Covent Garden Market, a Sorting Office and Battersea Power Station (disused). Two access roads end in a beige unmarked territory, as if there were nothing there at all.

Recently I cycled along Nine Elms Lane through grit sprayed up by the cement trucks grinding past. It is a noisy place of metal thunderclaps and jack-hammer drilling. Muddy builders in fluorescent yellow vests man temporary traffic lights and cranes loom over the plywood construction hoardings. Among all this building work still stands the famous silhouette of Battersea Power Station, its four 103-metre chimneys in various stages of destruction and reconstruction.

The 40 acres of the old power station development are the centrepiece of the vast Nine Elms "Opportunity Area," which encompasses not only the power station site but a giant swathe of the Borough of Wandsworth and part of neighbouring Lambeth. The numbers are huge: £15bn of investment, 25 different sites to be built over 25 years, 16 developers, 16,000 new homes, 25,000 new jobs and over half a million square metres of mixed use development. There will be office blocks, residential towers, and a redeveloped New Covent Garden Market. "London's Diplomatic Quarter" proclaim the advertising posters around the moat of the new American Embassy, a shiny cube covered with an exoskeleton of halberd-shaped spike-arcs. The Dutch Embassy is also relocating south of the river and the Chinese are apparently interested in moving from their gloomy Portland Place mansion. There will be two new tube stations along a Northern Line extension. There are even plans for a footbridge across the river to Pimlico (although Pimlicans are up in arms). Nine Elms is the largest development in London and when it's done, the capital will have filled a wasteland with a whole new neighbourhood. It will take a generation to build.

After almost a century of urban sprawl towards the home counties, London is turning back again to face the river and rediscovering its canals—no longer moving out but moving back in. Moving east, there is a new "International Quarter" around the Olympic Park in Stratford, a new postcode, N1C, at King's Cross, and "London's Emerging Cultural District" is rising out of abandoned docklands on the Greenwich Peninsular. The artists' impressions of what to expect describe clean and modern lines, green lozenges of lawn, glass balconies with a bicycle and a café table for two. The architecture cuts new lines through the Victorian-Georgian terraces of London, just as it is doing in Manchester, Birmingham and Edinburgh.

But most people cannot afford to live in this shiny new future. In the midst of this dynamic upthrust is the sense of an

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uncomfortable paradox, one that is especially evident in London. That these new developments are investment opportunities for overseas buyers who do not live in them. And thousands of them are being built in the middle of a city that's at the centre of a national housing crisis.

Tony Belton moved to Wandsworth in the mid-1960s because, he said, "it was incredibly cheap." Back then there were still tanneries and factories along the Thames. "Filthy. Stinking. I remember a thing called the 'Battersea smell.'" He smiled and admitted he was probably part of the first wave of gentrification, "the new generation of university graduates, looking for places to live." When Belton was elected as a Labour councillor in 1971, the borough was "rock-solid Labour." As the decade wore on and factories continued to close, Labour lost ground and the Conservatives took over in 1978. They've held power ever since. In 1979, when Thatcher entered No 10, Wandsworth had 40,000 council properties. Over the next few years, under her government's right-to-buy policy, 18,000 of them were sold at a discount to council tenants. I met Belton in his Victorian house off Clapham High Street. He is still a Wandsworth councillor, friendly and somewhat rueful. I asked him about the effect of right-to-buy, two generations later.

"Social, economic. It's the whole gamut," he said, tilting his head. "When I started in politics Macmillan was prime minister. Council housing was the solution to the post-war housing crisis. There was so much of it back then that no one had a black mark against their name for living in a council house. Now if you are brought up on an estate you're immediately assumed to be on Benefits Street."

A property-owning class was created in the 1980s by privatisation. Belton told me that in Wandsworth about a third of the sold-off council homes were now privately rented. (That seems to be the figure across London; and inevitably a number of those properties are rented back to the council.) It used to be, Belton said, that none of his fellow Labour councillors would have owned more than their own house, but now, "I am amazed how many of us are landlords. It's almost immoral."

The windfall from council house sales went to central government. It then cut local government housing grants and reduced councils' ability to borrow, which slowed the construction of public housing. Over the past quarter of a century, London's population has increased by two million to 8.6m, almost as many as the 1939 all-time high. But little new public housing has been built by councils since the 1980s, while the number of private new builds has remained consistent. The job of providing social housing has been devolved to housing associations.

When Ken Livingstone was elected mayor in 2000, things changed. He said London was an important global city; we should be looking to New York and Shanghai, not Manchester or Paris. He urged a rethink of planning regulations and an open attitude to more ambitious projects—the Shard, for example. Livingstone wanted to build a new London, but he had almost no money. The Treasury is highly centralised so that London controls only 7 per cent of all taxes paid by residents and businesses compared to over 50 per cent in New York and 77 per cent in Tokyo. The way forward, Livingstone believed, was to get private developers to build public housing. They would be encouraged by liberalised planning regulations and the scope of a city-wide "London Plan," and in return their projects would include a proportion of affordable homes. (The term "affordable" is slippery—it tends to indicate homes where rent is pegged to the median borough income.) Each planning application would be negotiated by councils on its individual merits, rather than regulatory templates, and the Greater London Authority (GLA) would coordinate the big picture.

"In the midst of this dynamic, kinetic, upthrust is the sense of an uncomfortable paradox"

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Battersea Power Station was decommissioned in 1983. For 30 years successive owners, developers and architects drew up plans for the site—a theme park, a shopping centre, Chelsea Football Club's new stadium—but the costs of preserving the crumbling, iconic Grade II-listed landmark scared them all away. In 2012 the site was sold to a Malaysian Consortium consisting of two huge developers and a pension fund.

Gordon Adams, Head of Planning for the site, told me: "There are a lot of people working on the project who were here under the previous owners and when you ask them: 'Is there a difference between them and the new owners?' they say, 'No, the master plan was fine, it was just that they didn't have enough zeros.'" Adams and I met in the site headquarters, which is housed in a handsome left-over brick Victorian building (soon to be demolished) overlooking the giant hole into the Northern Line extension and another giant hole into the Thames Tideway shaft, London's new super-sewer. "There hasn't been a development of so much square footage as this one since Canary Wharf," he told me.

"The original developers of Canary Wharf went bust," I said.

But it was hard not to be swept up in his enthusiasm. Starchitects Frank Gehry and Norman Foster have designed buildings that will flank the old power station and face each other across a curvy street that will be called Electric Boulevard. A sliver of park along the river will extend and open the Thames pathway to the public. The power station itself will be mostly filled with office space (Apple UK has announced a lease) with penthouses on the top floors. A lift in one chimney will take people up to a viewing platform. At the main entrance to the power station is an oval serried plaza named Malaysia Square, the design of which recalls the famous caves in Gunung Mulu National Park in Malaysia. "The owners wanted to put their stamp on the project," said Adams.

Several of London's big developments are sited on the large plots of disused land around railway hubs. But the sites are stuck with the same problem that rendered them black on Booth's poverty maps: they are cut off into cul-de-sacs by rail lines. These urban islands isolate their inhabitants and historically have been incredibly resistant to gentrification.

So I asked Adams about access. He pointed to two roads leading into the site for buses and taxis, although "cars would be discouraged," and a pedestrian tunnel through one of the railway arches to Battersea Park on the other side. I asked about shops. He said they were going to put high-end independent retailers into the railway arches along the viaduct, including branches of local delicatessens and grocers, a florist and a bakery called Flour Power. He pointed out a small shape on a green strip that would be a community hub/library and said that one of the railway arches would be given over as a community centre. I was surprised that much of the site was not yet really planned. On the maps, phases five, six and seven were putative grey rhomboids. "That's all 2025..." he said. "There is some talk of a hospital."

What about the affordable housing quotient, I asked. Adams said that because of scheduling complications, the bulk of the affordable units planned—Phases 4A and 4B, which include almost 400 homes and a health centre—had been moved off site, over to the other side of Nine Elms Lane.

The planning agreement between a local council and a developer is known as a Section 106. This sets out the proportion of affordable housing for the site and the mix of commercial, retail and residential buildings. It also includes infrastructure obligations like health centres, schools, bus stops, pedestrian plazas, access roads and playgrounds. Adams showed me the Section

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The new US Embassy. Dutch and Chinese diplomats may also move to the Nine Elms neighbourhood

106 for the power station site, a wad of bound documentation. "I carry it with me. It's my bible."

With his first London Plan, Livingstone aimed for an average proportion of 50 per cent affordable housing on new developments. But then, in 2008, Boris Johnson became Mayor. He was faced with the banking crisis and a bevy of nervy developers who wanted to renegotiate their Section 106s and revise the affordable housing percentages down. Peter Bishop, professor of Urban Design at University College, London, ran Design for London at the GLA under Livingstone. Under Johnson, Bishop told me, "it was a free market free-for-all. When Simon Milton, the mayoral advisor on planning, died in 2011, there was a huge increase in development, in the density and in building heights." Leonie Cooper, a Labour councillor for Wandsworth and a London Assembly member who sits on the Housing Committee and is Chair of the Environment Committee, told me: "Generally Ken used to push applications back to councils saying, get more affordable housing in here; Boris not so much." Developers I spoke with also agreed with this characterisation. In 2015 there were 47,000 units under construction (double the number in 2007) as well as 70 buildings over 20 storeys; planning for over 100 more had been approved.

There are always complications with big developments and everyone understands that there needs to be some renegotiation along the way. However, by considering each project individually, rather than against a universal set of city-wide guidelines, the system has become overrun by consultants who rejig developers' Section 106s.

When I talked to Ravi Govindia, the Conservative leader of Wandsworth Council, he explained that developers simply wouldn't operate without a profit margin. Councils had to work with them, otherwise construction would halt. "Yes, it's a process and yes, it can become very drawn out at times and needs brinkmanship," he told me. "But what part of life is not? I think it's about an honest dialogue between the two."

As central government grants to local councils continue to decline, Section 106s have become a way for councils to get developers to pay for infrastructure. Toby Lloyd of Shelter, the housing charity, told me: "Section 106 is essentially a tax on property development and is a vital source of affordable housing." A former developer I talked to said something very similar. "Thirty years ago the government was building infrastructure and affordable housing. Now a good proportion of public infrastructure is funded through development, like a development tax."

The extent to which local councils wring Section 106 obligations out of developers varies greatly. Labour councils tend to try and get more affordable housing. Conservative areas like Wandsworth—where the affordable housing quota applied to most of Nine Elms is only 15 per cent—less so. In Wandsworth, the vast bulk of the money received from the Battersea Power Station Development Company, to date just over £38m, is earmarked to help fund the Northern Line extension. Roughly £5m has gone to pay for schools' refurbishment and other projects. London is made up of 32 boroughs, each with its own governing council and priorities. One developer told me that one Labour council had been so cash strapped that it had taken money instead of asking for housing units.

I met Cooper in a pub on Nine Elms Lane. We talked through the jigsaw of interlocking Planning Acts and policies, local, city, national. She said that she "quite liked" the ethos of the Malaysian developers who were trying to create a sense of community, but that of course she wished there were more affordable units.

"Wandsworth has a shocking number of people in bed and breakfast accommodation," she said, which is what happens when councils have to provide tenants with emergency accommodation. Not for the first time I heard the complaint that Wandsworth

> "Nine Elms is unlike any development London has ever seen. It's a totally cornered off luxury fortress"

Council had benefited politically from an exclusionary housing system that had created a borough of middle-class Conservative voters. Cooper said: "They don't like poor people, they don't want poor people, and they try and get rid of poor people as a way of securing their hegemonic rule over Wandsworth."

There is some political pushback. Sadiq Khan became Labour mayor of London promising to reform housing in the capital and he has announced new London-wide targets of 35 per cent affordable housing on new developments. In November, a young Labour candidate in his 20s, Aydin Dikerdem, won the by-election in the council ward that encompasses Battersea Power Station. Dikerdem was born in the area and still lives there. One afternoon when he was out with friends canvassing on the Patmore estate across Nine Elms Lane, Dikerdem knocked on one door which was opened by a woman in her forties. She had a familiar story: "My son, he's in his early twenties, he's got two jobs and he can't move out of this flat, he lives with me. He's totally priced out of the area and he doesn't want to move away. I just don't know what to do." Dikerdem told her: "I know, I live with my mum too." Then his friend said, "yeah me too" and then another friend admitted he was also in the same situation. The woman just started laughing. "This is just crazy, that you guys are being held back like this!"

After his victory, Dikerdem showed me around the Patmore. We went up to a sixth floor walkway and looked out across the roofs to the steel and glass giants rising just across Nine Elms Lane and marvelled at their sheer size. "Nine Elms is quite unlike any development London has ever seen; it's a totally cornered off luxury fortress," he said. "It's so visually symbolic and obvious. It's almost as if they are making it easy to see. The affront. But all these people who live on the Patmore, are looking up at this thinking: how do I fit in now, in London?"

The issue of development and housing in London is a story with many facets. But at its heart is a basic question: how do we want to live? What kind of city are we building? The big new developments are creating a new socio-economic map of London. They are also building a new urban way of life. Instead of individual houses each with a back garden and a front door that opens onto the street and streets that meet at corners, there are bigger and bigger apartment blocks set in pedestrian precincts. Glass canyon versus *Hygge*.

I went to see the architect Graham Stirk, a senior partner at Rogers, Stirk, Harbour and Partners at their office on the 14th floor of 122 Leadenhall Street, more commonly referred to as the Cheesegrater. Stirk, who designed the Riverlight buildings, one of the few Nine Elms developments that has been completed, grew up on a council estate in Leeds.

"I've spent my whole life trying to make big things look smaller," he told me. "How does one put 860 flats in the middle of this semi-industrial environment and make people want to live there?" He described how he had carefully worked out the angle of the sun, and had situated the five buildings perpendicular to the river bank to create sightlines to the river, open-ended "like New York Avenues." He pointed out the details of colour, shape and perforation, so that "the façade creates depth and not a monolithic wall."

We talked about the larger scale of the developments going up in London. Stirk said that big buildings were nothing new for London. John Nash, who built Regent Street and much of Regency London, and Thomas Cubitt, the Victorian master builder responsible for the creamy monotone of Belgravia and Pimlico, had built long monolithic terraces and crescents. Stirk said that it was more about good architecture than sheer size. "When I look at Dolphin Square [the Pimlico apartment complex] for example, it frightens the life out of me," he said. "It's like someone parked an aircraft carrier."

The next day I walked around the Riverlight buildings to look more closely. I appreciated, now that Stirk had explained them to me, the slices of sunlight, the subtle angled recessing of balconies, the undulated landscaping, planted with swaying reeds and accented with red flowers. There were parks and walkways between the buildings, not all accessible. Some required a resident's keycard to get inside a glass walled enclosure. It was a winter weekday morning and the gardens were empty. I could see cool climbing shapes for children, but no children.

A sign read: "Strictly residents only. Quiet hours: 4pm to 8am. Strictly no pets except for access. Play area hours: 8.30am to ▶

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8.30pm April to October, 8.30am to 5.30pm November to March. Children up to 10 years to be accompanied at all times. No access into water features. No ball games."

Further east along the Thames, next to Vauxhall Bridge, is St George's Wharf, one of the first big new developments, built almost 15 years ago. It is a massif of a building, a thick wall along the river with square-cut towers, gull wing roofs and hospital-green tinted windows. It has twice been named "worst building in the world" by *Architects' Journal*. On the pedestrianised street level is a Pret a Manger, a gym, a large pub-restaurant and several estate agents.

I met a member of the St George Wharf residents' association to ask him how he liked living there. "What sold it for us was the river views." He and his wife have a three-bedroom apartment on the tenth floor with floor-to-ceiling windows, but there is not much storage space, so they use the small single bedroom as a closet. I asked him about atmosphere and amenities. St George Wharf has 30 retail and commercial units and he told me there had been problems with the noise. Owners of apartments buy them on 999-year leases. Ownership of the land—and not just the land the building is on, but the site, which includes the river path, gardens and access roads—is retained by the developer. This is common to most new large London developments built on industrial wasteland. Ownership of the 40 acres of the power station site—the roads, the river path, the pedestrian concourses and park—will be retained by the Malaysian consortium who will, as many developers do, turn the maintenance of the site over to a management company.

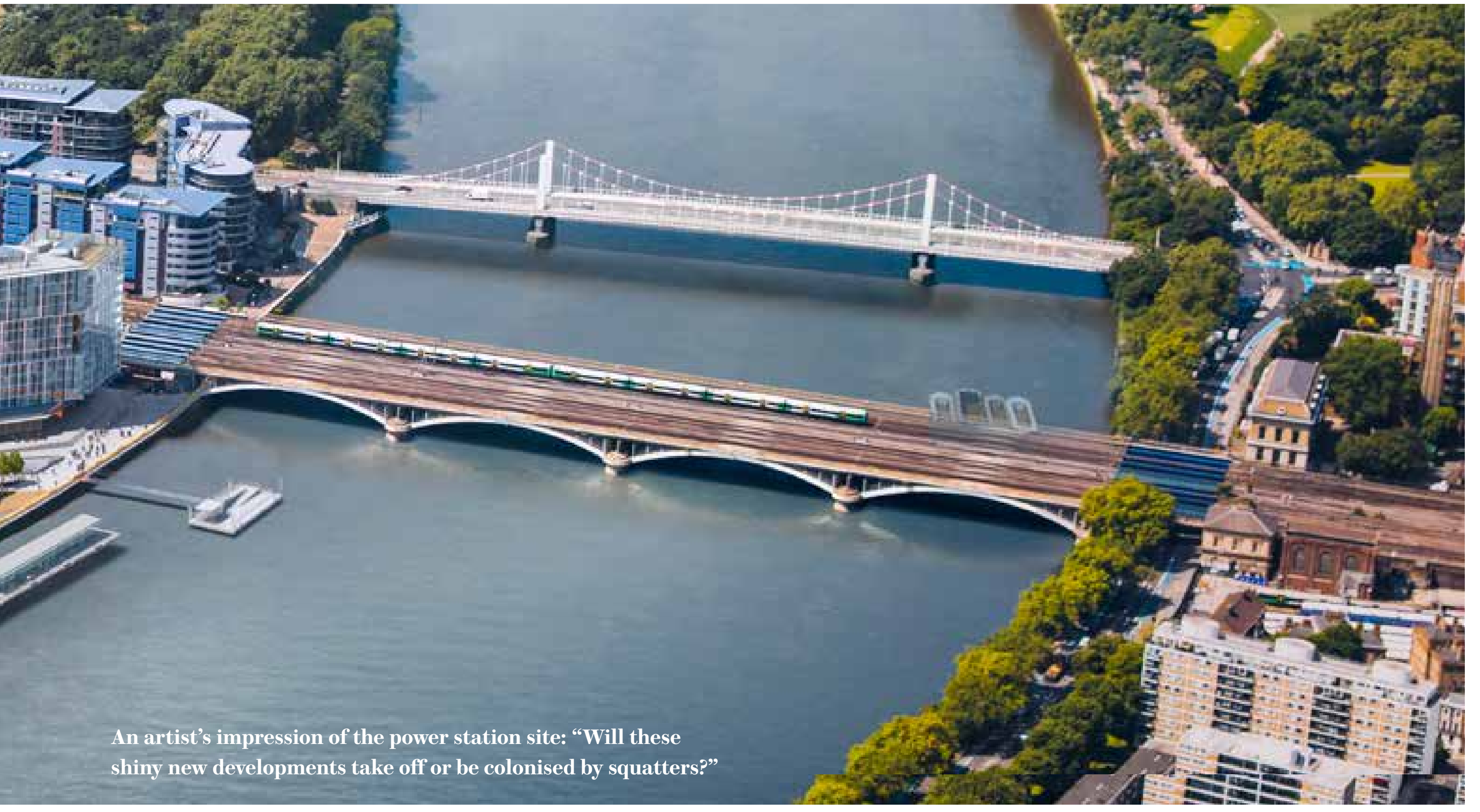
Section 106 agreements stipulate that roads and paths must be maintained and kept open to the public. But what about by-laws? Noisy pub crowds, cyclists, dogs, children playing? "It grates with a few people," the St George's Wharf resident told me. "After all they are paying for the maintenance of these public areas, they can even be legally liable if someone trips on a paving stone or something. There are grumblings: can't we just fence this off?"

In many of these developments, public thoroughfares are privately owned. City Hall and the area around it, the office blocks, cafés, restaurants, the sunken amphitheatre and coloured light fountains, are owned by the Kuwaiti government. Private security guards monitor the King's Cross development.

When I put this issue to Adams and Govindia, they played down concerns. Adams pointed out the quality of the design and materials of the City Hall plaza—"amazing granite paving." Govindia said the private management company would be paying for the maintenance of the site. I told him that I had seen security guards at King's Cross telling a homeless man to move on, and asked about the overlapping jurisdiction between police and private security and accountability.

"I think no skateboarding rules or no cycling, we [the council] impose them. But as you point out, we impose them after public discourse and debate. In these instances [on privately owned developments] they can be just imposed." He talked about children and ball games and turning a blind eye to cyclists, and then said, "I think you're right to raise it and in many ways it is a challenging phenomenon."

Developers own the infrastructure, but they also control the tone and tenor of the neighbourhood. They decide what kind of shops and restaurants get leases, whether the pedestrian precincts are dominated by chains or, in the case of the power station site, they encourage up-market retailers. But then again, community management has been practised by the big estates like the Grosvenor and the Portman in central London for centuries. Govindia said that in the long term it was better for a developer to be the landowner because "he becomes part of the community and therefore contributes to shaping the community. For our area that's going to have 25 years of their activity I think it's



An artist's impression of the power station site: "Will these shiny new developments take off or be colonised by squatters?"

helpful." Along the construction site of the Nine Elms Lane there is a giant new Waitrose, the only place to buy milk within 10-minutes' walk; Flanagan's, the local pub, had been bought by Austrian developers and its future is unclear.

At the end of St George's Wharf is the Vauxhall Tower, 50 storeys high, the tallest residential building in London and short-listed for the Carbuncle Cup in 2014 (the prize given annually by *Building Design* magazine to the "ugliest building in the UK completed in the last 12 months"). A *Guardian* exposé discovered that two thirds of the apartments were foreign owned and that a Russian senator paid £51m for a five-storey penthouse. The lower floors had been bought by "a former Nigerian minister, a Kurdish oil magnate, an Egyptian snack-food mogul, an Indonesian banker, a Uruguayan football manager and a former Formula 1 racing driver." At night most of the lights were out.

The issue of foreign ownership and of empty apartments, "safe deposit boxes in the sky," as Bishop put it to me, is as contentious as it is difficult to quantify. Title deeds are in the public realm, but tracking down the nationality of an owner behind layers of holding companies is tricky. The St George's Wharf resident told me he thought "probably 50 per cent of this development is, at most times, unoccupied. But there's just no way to know the number for sure."

The complexities of the real estate market defy any easy explanation. I tried to unpick some of the figures with Neal Hudson, a housing market analyst who spent 11 years with one of the big estate agents and has recently set up shop on his own. "I've spent my career trying to understand how it functions and operates," he told me. "The longer I am at it the less I understand."

Prices have continued, more or less, their steep climb over two generations. In the process, property in London, a burgeoning global city with a stable financial and political system, has become seen as a safe and appreciating asset.

"Flats are a commodity you can buy and sell," Bishop told me, "and therefore there is a lot of speculation, there are a lot of overseas investors. Then there's the influx of Russian money, Middle Eastern, Chinese. Every kind of money."

New developments are particularly attractive to overseas buyers. And overseas buyers are particularly attractive to developers. Hudson said he reckoned between 60 and 80 per cent of new build units were bought by overseas buyers. Real estate agencies track the numbers of foreign buyers but don't necessarily publish their reports because it's politically awkward. Developments are increasingly being built to be sold off-plan to institutional investors, pension funds and sovereign wealth funds. "Investment grade space," as one former developer put it to me, smaller rooms that bang against the minimum regulatory allowances, with an emphasis on location and transport links.

The first tranche of 865 units in the Battersea Power Station site sold out in a week when it was put on the market in 2013. Between 10 and 15 per cent were quickly flipped for profit. Sales of subsequent tranches have been more sluggish. UK stamp duty hikes, variations in Singaporean mortgage rates, changes to foreign investment laws in China, Brexit wobbles, currency fluctuations, the falling pound, all affect different prospective buyers in different ways. The superheated market in central London of two years ago has cooled, but Rob Tinknell, the CEO of the Battersea Power Station Development Company remained sanguine when he spoke to *Property Week* magazine last June. The Malaysian Consortium, by all accounts, has deep pockets and can wait out what industry insiders have dubbed "Nine Elm Disease" by holding back tranches of apartments.

I visited a two-bedroom show home for the Frank Gehry building with a glassed balcony they called a winter garden. ▶

St George's Wharf, Vauxhall: twice voted "worst building in the world" by readers of *Architects' Journal*

It had an open-plan kitchen and was sleek and chic, but not very generous for £1m. Over and over again I asked analysts and developers: who can *afford* to live in these glass boxes? Because even if they are being bought by foreigners for investment purposes, they will need to be rented and how many professionals are there in London who can pay the kind of sums that these kind of capital values would require? And, I kept asking, who *wants* to live in these glass boxes? Because for all the high-end swanky concierge serviced mega-bucks buildings, many of the new blocks are being squeezed for as many units as developers can get permission for. Interestingly, everyone agreed with me that many of the new development flats seemed expensive and mingy and that they themselves wouldn't want to live in them; but no one had a good answer as to who would.

Developers are fond of saying that they are at the mercy of the market just like everyone else—that they are "price takers not price makers." But it's a fallacy that increasing the supply of housing reduces the price if the extra homes are being bought for speculation and not to be lived in; partly because it's not in a developer's interest to build so many units that the price goes down.

London, like much of Britain, has got so used to ever-rising house prices that it has been hard-wired into our national economics, our investments, our futures, our pensions, as if it were somehow a certainty, as safe as houses. Hudson, the housing analyst, said: "There is a consensus that prices can't fall in nominal terms because that would cause problems right across the economy, from individuals with their own circumstances, to bank debt secured against property."

It's the kind of assumption that allowed banks to rely on government bailouts. Hudson said you could almost see the moment when George Osborne realised how integral rising house prices were to the British economy when prices went flat two or three years ago. The then Chancellor reportedly told cabinet back in 2013: "Hopefully we will get a little housing boom and everyone will be happy as property values go up." The Treasury scrambled to encourage house-buying, through funding for lending, help-to-buy and mortgage guarantees. Hudson said it didn't matter that not very many people took these up. More important was the message it sent to the market. "They were effectively saying house prices will only go up or stay the same."

Over a generation in Britain, and most starkly in London, the division of haves and have-nots has been between those who got on to the property ladder 20 years ago and those who didn't and now cannot. "The housing problem is a social problem," a former developer told me, who seemed as worried as the folks at Shelter about the growing frustration of those locked out of the capital's cookie jar. Everyone agrees it is unfair, but it's hard to know what do about it. The government has announced over £3bn to fund new social housing in London. Maybe it will help in a decade or two. Meanwhile, the population of London continues to grow. More people are renting, rents have gone up, wages have not kept pace and housing benefits are being cut. "People are being squeezed out by the housing market," concluded Toby Lloyd at Shelter. "Growing numbers of key workers and even quite well- paid professionals are moving out of London to do less essential or less productive jobs in places where they can afford a home. What's the long-term impact on London going to be?"

Property development is a long-term proposition, buffeted by the changing winds of finance, politics and demographics; it is subject to unintended consequences. But so is social housing policy. Thirty years after right-to-buy, housing associations—privately-run non-profit organisations that took over large amounts of local government housing stock—are going into the private rental sector, buying units in new developments off-plan just like other institutional investors, and renting them at market prices. Profits from this essentially subsidise their affordable housing. Genius financing or a tightening noose? Will social housing become dependent on a speculative property price bubble—whether through housing association private investments or through the Section 106 obligations of private developers—even as the need for social housing grows because of ever rising prices? Will these shiny happy new developments fill up with mysterious numbers of people who can afford them, or will they bankrupt their developers and be colonised by squatters? And what happens if, instead of gentle sine wave market corrections, the bubble really bursts?

"London is probably capable of absorbing these developments," Bishop told me. "I live in a house that was built by a developer in 1830 who went bust and it was subdivided into slums and now it's a nice area. London will recover. London will eventually take over, like bindweed, absorbing, smothering." P