The Battersea Power Station

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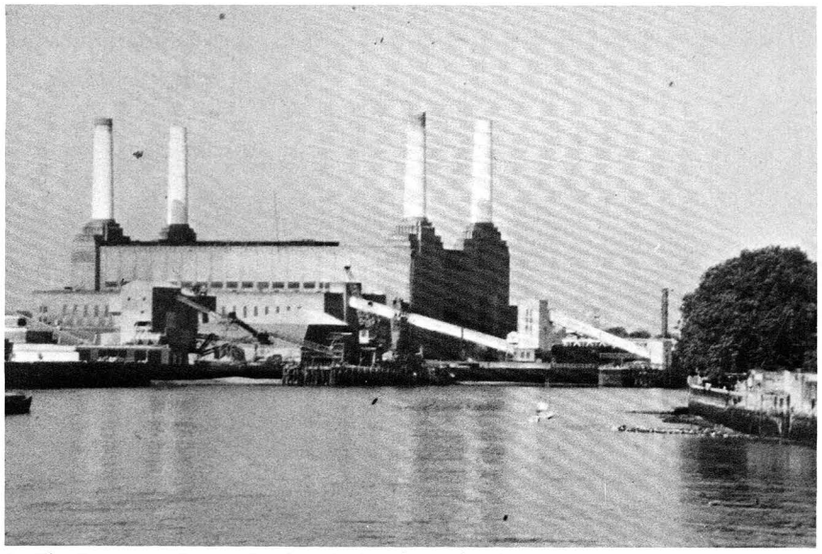
Built between 1929 and 1934 and further enlarged after World War II, the Battersea Power Station sits forlorn on the south bank of the River Thames in London (Figure 1). No longer does smoke trail from its great stacks; now, the dank piles of coal and the tangle of railway debris in the shunting yards give the building a wasted look. Yet it is a building of acknowledged architectural interest which holds a special place in the hearts of Londoners.

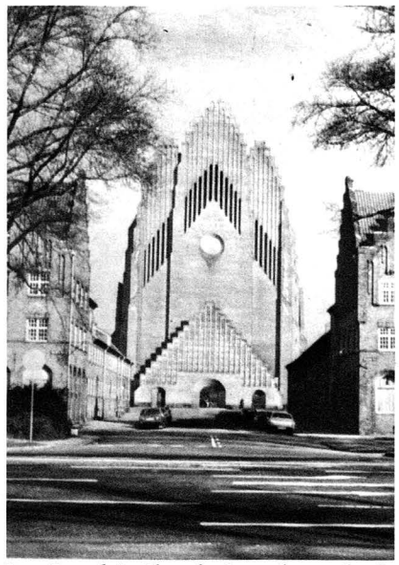


1. The Battersea Power Station. A view from the river.

As the subject of an adaptive reuse studio, the Battersea Power Station was presented to a fifth year design studio at Kansas State University in the Fall of 1983. The problem was to select a suitable new use for the building, based on an analysis of the master plan formulated by the local government, the London Borough of Wandsworth, and to present the proposals in the most convincing manner. The issues involved were semiological; they were of image, of what the building said, and of *making place*.

Traditionally the issue of making place was one of establishing a use, a function and an image, and of establishing an identity on a new and anonymous site. In urban centers where space is limited, it has become necessary to adapt and reuse the environment which has been created, and the issue of making place is now one of interpreting the identity of the buildings which exist and of extrapolating a use which serves the populace as much as it will serve the building in question. Through such an approach, adopted by the design studio, a fitting use for the Battersea Power Station was to be found.

Built at a time of architectural uncertainty, the Battersea Power Station combined the formality of Classicism with the boldness of Continental Modernism. The apparent symmetry of the exterior was matched by the fluted columns, the afterthought of the consultant architect, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott. These columns made reference to monumental columns characteristic of antiquity through to Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square (1839) and Adolf Loos' then recent entry for the Chicago Tribune Tower competition (1922).[1] The careful, almost Expressionist articulation of the surface of the building, the stepping and off-setting, and the massing and weight was closer to the new brick architecture of Scandinavia, than to the contemporary architecture of the Bauhaus, and spoke of P. W. Klint's Grundvig Church in Copenhagen (1913, 1922) (Figure 2) and Willem Dudok's Hilversum Town Hall (1929).[2]



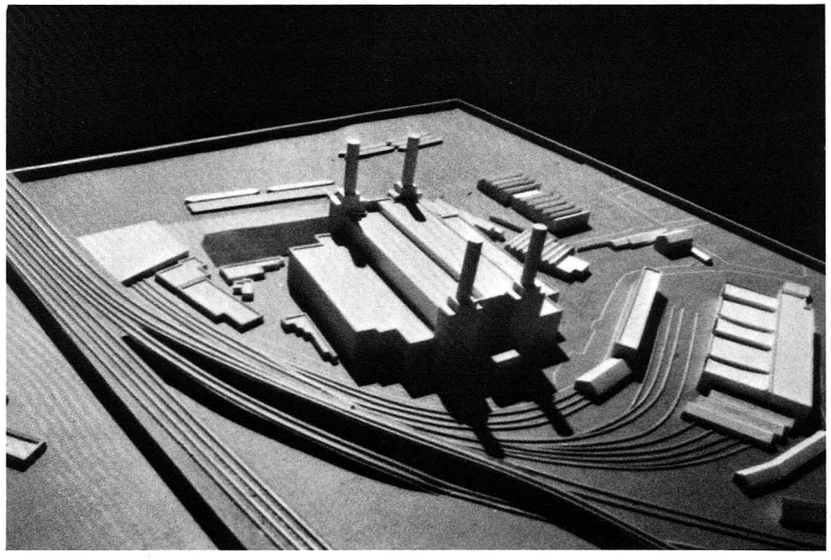
2a. Grundvig Church, Copenhagen by P. W. Klint, 1913 and 1926.

2b. Battersea Power Station. A view from the south.

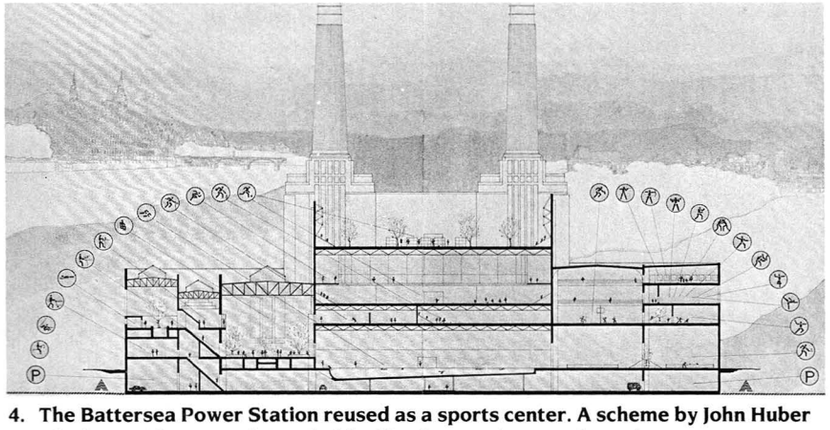
Use

The first impression of the Battersea Power Station is of its scale (Figure 3). It is extremely large, much larger in fact than any other building, except the Houses of Parliament, which addresses the River Thames. The building contains two vast turbine halls, A and B, located not between the chimneys, as might be expected, but in the lower, subsidiary wings. The great mass at the center of the building once held a myriad of transformers set on a multiplicity of levels. The Government preservation order, which governs the building, requires the retention of Turbine Hall A and its Art Deco control room and also, if possible, Turbine Hall B, where the later completed interior has the utilitarian look of the 1950's. Although the great turbines which one thundered in these halls have been removed, leaving only gaping chasms in the structure of the floor, the image of the building is still one of power. This is its most immediate message.

The power the building once produced was electrical. This was a power which crackled, sparked, and jumped, a power which was expressed figuratively in the zigzag flash of a thunderbolt as clearly as it was in the angular Art Deco of the first turbine hall and control room. The building was a homage to power as much as the work of Antonio Sant'Ella and the Italian Futurists had been twenty years earlier.



3. The Battersea Power Station. A model.



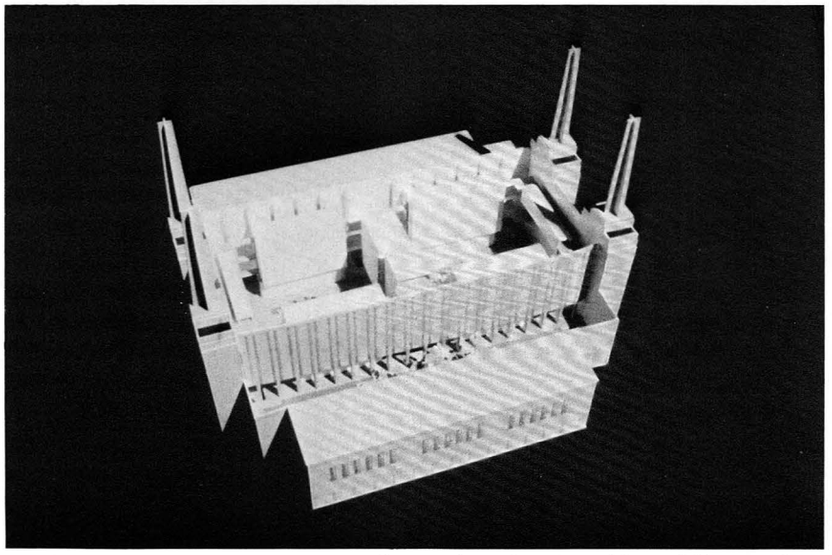
4. The Battersea Power Station reused as a sports center. A scheme by John Huber which provides a much-needed facility for south-central London.

Reuse

The Wandsworth Borough Plan had called for a use which would serve the residents of the heavily populated borough while not detracting from or competing with the established urban infrastructure. A shopping center, for instance, would not be appropriate.

Confronting the issue of making place, while providing a new use for the Power Station, it was soon apparent to the studio members that a function was needed which would relate both to the physical form and sheer volume of the building as well as one which would reflect, semiologically, the image and intention of the structure, its site, and its location. To this end, four distinctly different uses emerged.

An indoor sports center would be the most obvious and the most needed use for the building (Figure 4). This solution had already been proposed in the scheme the British architect Martin Richardson proposed for SAVE *Britian's Heritage* in 1980. It is the use which complies most clearly with the requirements of the Borough Plan. Also, it would provide a valuable metropolitan facility within an hitherto neglected corner of the borough. Yet as a use for the building, there is little about it that relates semiologically to the structure—unless the idea of power is taken in an Olympian sense. If such a literal interpretation of power were to be accepted, a variety of solutions might offer themselves. The

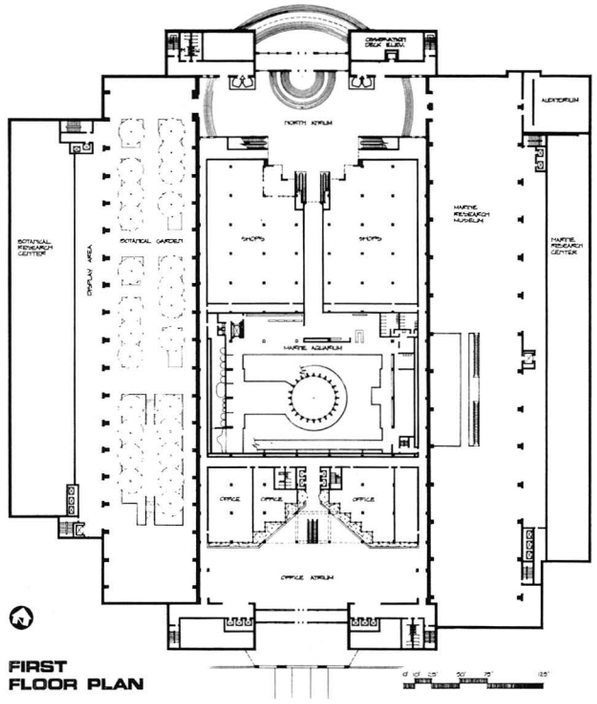


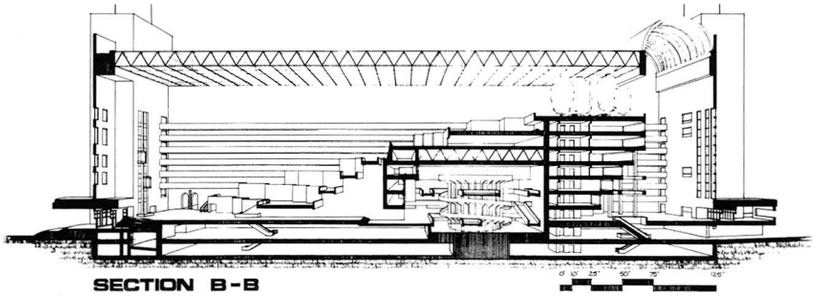
5. The Battersea Power Station reused as academic housing. This model by Jennifer Garrett shows the roof of the building removed and the inner space treated as gardens and courtyard housing.

building could work as an academic powerhouse (Figure 5) with a residential village or campus within the shell of the building. Yet such semantic contortions do not indicate a new use; more immediate reference needs to be sought.

The Battersea Power Station sits on the banks of the River Thames and is flanked by Battersea Park. The relationship of the building to the river was immediate and necessary; water was used to ferry fuel to the great boilers which were, in turn, cooled with water from the river. Thus, it would be appropriate to relate the building to the river, itself a source of power, through the introduction of aquaria or marina facilities (Figure 6). The river also provided the scenic back-drop to the Pleasure Gardens which were built in Battersea Park for the 1951 Festival of Britain. There the association with the vanished pleasure gardens of nearby Vauxhall was briefly revived. The same association could be expressed at the Power Station where the opportunity of indoor spaces would provide the security lacking in the earlier, outdoor gardens. But in such an adaptation little would be present to reflect the image and intention of the structure.

When dealing with a building such as the Battersea Power Station, the problem is not to be solved through interpretation by association or even by location, but more directly through

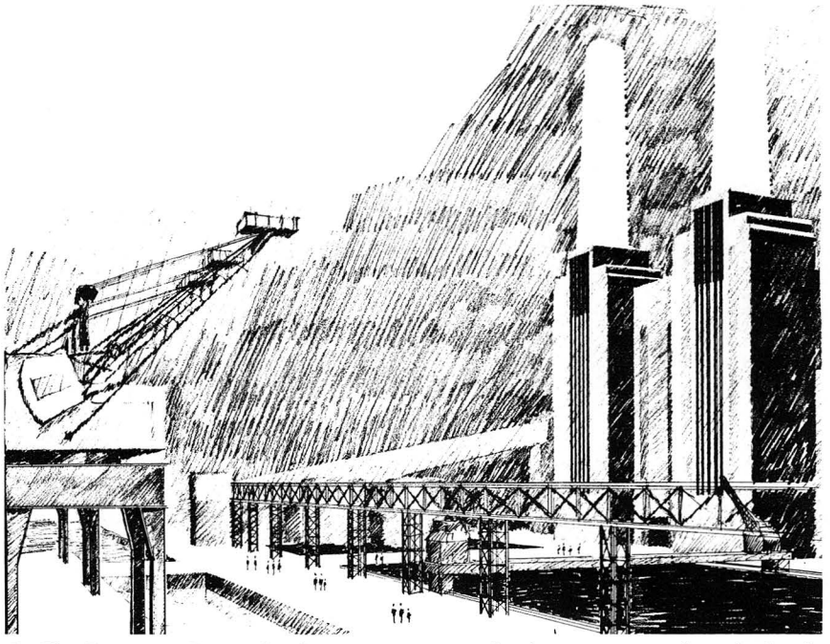




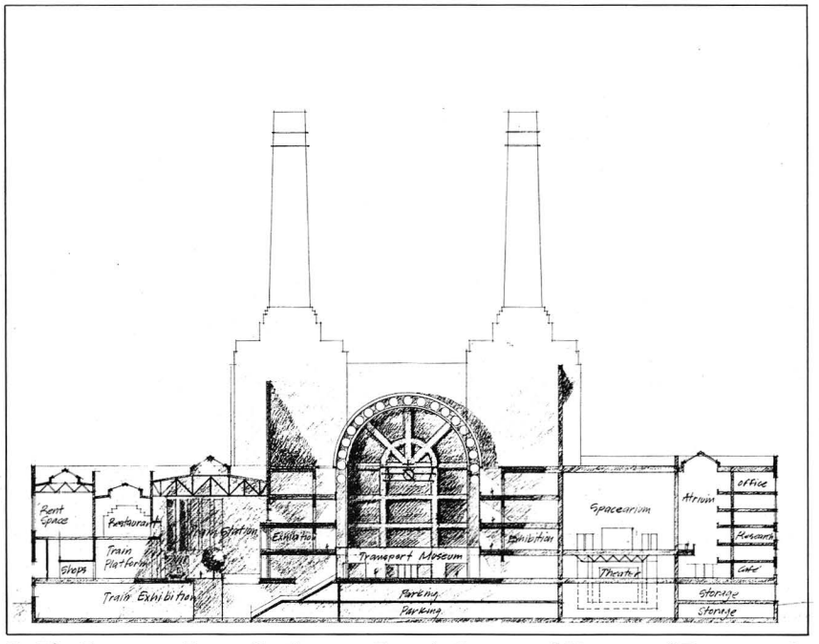
6. The Battersea Power Station as an aquarium. In this scheme by Mike Heule the centrally placed aquarium is surrounded by office and retail accommodation which provide the development with financial security.

the architecture. The building speaks of power; it is a temple to power as much as Scott's earlier Liverpool Cathedral was a temple to God. It is only through a strong and puritanical acknowledgement of the essence of the building that a use compatible with the building's language can emerge and the issue of making place can be satisfactorily resolved.

Reference should again be made to Antonio Sant'Ella, to his Stazione Aeroplani of 1912[3] and his Citta Nuova of 1913–1914[4]. It is as important to acknowledge the Futurist interpretation of the building as it is to acknowledge its form and context. In the issue of



7. The Battersea Power Station as a museum of prime movers and methods of transport. Here Kevin Kerwin has set the building on a plinth to separate it from the surrounding industrial debris which is allowed to remain.



8. The Battersea Power Station as a Transit Center and Museum of Transport. In this scheme John Wind runs the railway link right into the heart of the building, Turbine Hall A.

making place the function needs to be derived from the semiological interpretation of the building as much as from the qualifiable requirements of the context. If mechanical power is the language of the building, then a function which relates to power and at the same time conforms to the requirements of the context will provide the most suitable use.

This solution is found in the use of the building as a temple of power, a museum of prime movers and methods of transport (Figure 7), with the great voids of the building opened up to provide galleried spaces for the display of aircraft, ships, and railway locomotives. Greater financial feasibility is provided by the adaptation of the peripheral spaces into a transit center (Figure 8). Thus, the museum facility gives historical reference to the prime movers of the past while the building itself, regarded as a transit center, gives credence to the prime movers of the present. The building is seen as the focus of intense activity; hydrofoil and hovercraft link the building to the river, to the docks, and ultimately to the Continent; helicopter pads provide for quick access to London's Gatwick and Heathrow Airports; and perhaps even dirigibles nestle between the giant chimneys. Yet the strongest reference to power is demonstrated internally, in Turbine Hall A. In this vast, Art Deco hall, the old turbines have been replaced by the railway link which runs directly into the heart of the building from London's nearby Victoria Station. Thus, this space, as a generative center for the building, retains much of its former function, and the galleried control room above can once again justify its existence.

To find a new use for an old building is a problem which is increasingly besetting architects. Preservation orders demand the retention of buildings and clients look to their architects for solutions. Now the issue is not so much one of *making place* but of *placing* something, in the building, which *makes* it.

The Studio members were:
Bruce Ferry, Jennifer Garrett, Mike Heule, John Huber, Kevin Kerwin, David Kesler, Jonathan Knight, Renae Roggenbuck, Brian Tempas, and John Wind.

NOTES

1. For Loos' Chicago Tribune Tower see Charles A. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, London, 1977, p. 53, illus. 85.
2. For Dudok's Hilversum Town Hall see Richard Guy Wilson, "Willem Dudok: Modernist but not Mainstream," AIA *Journal*, 71, August 1982, pp. 44–51.
3. For Sant'Ella's Stazione Aeroplani see Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, New York, 1967, p. 116, illus. 42.
4. For Sant'Ella's Citta Nuova see *ibid.*, p. 116, illus. 43.