



Loud and proud: there is nothing very appealing in the way the proposed Octave Tower from Ken Shuttleworth's Make Architects relates to the area's pointy bus station

This is billed as the hottest site in London yet there is only the vaguest idea of how it might look and feel

COMPUTER GENERATED IMAGE

ONE TOWER WON'T SAVE VAUXHALL

fundamentally different from its recent past. For it is, in the end, another piece of visual noise, with a random stepped shape, big diagonal slashes and arbitrarily patterned cladding that bear no particular relation to anything else. It will become another dated domestic appliance for the car boot sale.

There is nothing very appealing about the way the proposed Octave Tower

relates to the pointy bus station or the older and more modest red-brick buildings that survive on the site. If it is a benchmark for a future cluster of towers here, that suggests a Dubai-like competitive junkscape of buildings trying to out-shout each other. It is hard to imagine what could go alongside, except other, equally assertive towers. What is lacking, as it has been for

decades, is a strong sense of what this part of Vauxhall could be, and it is up to Lambeth's and the GLA's planners, more than Make Architects or private developers, to create an idea of the greater whole.

Lambeth's planners do indeed say some of the right things. They identify that the area "currently suffers from a lack of integration", is "disconnected

and discordant" and "lacks a true sense of place". They want "a high quality and integrated environment" and a "new public open space that achieves international standards of public realm design" and "high quality street furniture".

They propose pedestrianising some of the howling traffic interchange and want to create a "tree-lined boulevard with generous footways where possible and appropriate". They criticise St George's Wharf for "failing to provide a positive frontage" and want new developments to "protect positive aspects" and "combat negative aspects" of the existing environment.

All of which is fine and dandy and much better than having no such policies but it does not add up to a positive vision for the site. It does not give an idea of what the cumulative effect of several towers could or should be.

Trees and quality street furniture are all very well but a bunch of buildings like the Octave Tower will have a rather bigger effect on shaping the environ-

ment. Of course Lambeth should not design each building in advance but it is possible to give an idea of the whole without stifling creativity in the individual parts.

Architecture students are told to draw what they are thinking, to try it out and show it to others but no one has yet done this for Vauxhall. It is billed as the hottest site in London yet there is only the vaguest idea of how it might look and feel. All we have are some sketchy plans for the public spaces provided by Lambeth and the extremely specific and assertive designs of individual buildings such as the Octave Tower.

Actually, and unfortunately, we can have a pretty good guess at the character of the new Vauxhall. It will be much like the existing Vauxhall, albeit slightly improved at the edges. It will be the work of a brash private sector and a timid public sector. It will be a cacophony of show-off designs with some limp gestures to the public good in between.

It was ever thus.

NICE PLACES: NO 28

DOLLIS HILL SYNAGOGUE, NW2

Sir Owen Williams was the noble savage of 20th-century British building. Untrained in architecture, he was instead an engineer who knew more than anyone else about concrete. He built bridges, hangars at Heathrow and the Empire Pool, Wembley (now the Wembley Arena), out of the stuff. He even designed concrete boats. He engineered the M1 motorway, and designed the Daily Express's sleek and palatial old offices in Fleet Street. His structures were bold and

original, not because he adhered to some avant-garde theory but because he followed the logic of new materials to its conclusion.

He was, in theory at least, practical and rational. Which made him an odd choice for the design of a religious building, a new synagogue in Dollis Hill, completed in 1937.

He sought, nonetheless, to put something of the mystical into the project. He gave it hexagonal windows to evoke the star of David, and U-shaped openings that are something like abstracted seven-branch candlesticks. The

walls zig-zag in a way that strengthens the structure but also denotes something vaguely spiritual.

He succeeded in pleasing nobody. His clients didn't like it, and to placate them he reduced his fee. His fellow engineers came to regard the synagogue as one of his least satisfactory works. The building is odd, unusual, one-of-a-kind, and naïve. A trained architect would probably not have designed it. Yet for these reasons it is also engaging and touching and a rare exotic bloom in the north-west suburbs.

RM



Mystical vision made concrete: Dollis Hill Synagogue's architect, Sir Owen Williams, more usually built hangars or bridges

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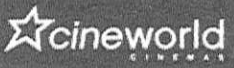
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Arts

The latest proposal for a show-off skyscraper in SW8 may be impressive but what the area really needs is a proper masterplan

Rowan Moore
Architecture Critic



WHAT Vauxhall has done to deserve it I don't know but there are few places in central London more cursed by poor planning and construction. Each ebb and flow of development in the past 30 years has washed up its scummiest bits of flotsam on Vauxhall's unlucky foreshore. It is ravaged by traffic and blighted by citadels of speculation that give nothing to their surroundings. Now it is due to undergo another makeover: the question is whether it will come off any better.

Vauxhall is defined by the brown glass Market Towers of 1975, MI6's faux-deco spy-castle of 1992, and the Noughties development of St George's Wharf, repeatedly voted in an annual poll of architects the worst building in the world. Amid these buildings stands a 2005 bus station with pointy, shouty bits of metal projecting into the sky, and the area is awaiting the building of the infamous St George's Tower, a pillar of tat that John Prescott pushed through against the advice of a planning inspector and his own officers.

Each project has the rapidly ageing tics of its time. As a group, these buildings resemble a car boot sale of outdated domestic appliances: a Seventies Teasmade here, an old VHS player or Wham! table lamp there. It is an anthology of most of the things that can go wrong with the planning of London.

It could have been very different. The site is blessed with a riverside location, great views towards Westminster, nearness to the centre and good public transport. It was once the site of the fabled Vauxhall Gardens, London's 18th-century pleasure ground, and some vigorous urban growths have now sprouted in the cracks between the big blocks - gay bars, the headquarters of the Big Issue and other charities, outposts of London's Portuguese community.

In the Eighties, the site was the subject of a series of architectural competitions that envisaged vibrant mixed communities and delightful networks of streets and spaces going down to the waterfront. Michael Heseltine called Vauxhall "London's greatest opportunity" before it slid into compromise and expediency.

More recently it was identified by Ken Livingstone's London Plan as an "opportunity area", suitable for extensive new development, and considered a good site for a "cluster" of tall buildings. It is the figurehead of a swathe of riverside land extending through Nine Elms to Battersea Power Station. With the United States embassy due to come to the neighbourhood and hope springing eternal that something might happen at Battersea, this zone is now promoted as London's greatest site of regeneration: bigger than Canary Wharf, and more central.

In recognition of Vauxhall's importance, the London Borough of Lambeth



is producing a "Supplementary Planning Document", currently in draft form, with the aim of "transforming Vauxhall into a sustainable and vibrant urban centre". The Greater London Authority is producing an "Opportunity Area Planning Framework", as yet unseen. And the proposed residential Octave Tower, 149.5 metres high, has been hailed by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) as "an exciting and interesting scheme" with "elegant massing and good proportions". It has, the commission says, "the potential to be a benchmark for the quality of future development in the potential cluster of towers at Vauxhall".

THE Octave Tower is designed by Make Architects, the practice founded by Ken Shuttleworth when he parted company five years ago with his former boss, Lord Foster. As a proposal, it's the clearest available indication of the way things might go in Vauxhall and, if CABE is calling it a "benchmark", it is presumably as good as things are going to get.

It is indeed an improvement on its neighbours. It promises to create a more pleasant experience at ground level, with a bit of an arcade and some shops, than the windswept fag-end of space that will be at the foot of St George's Tower. Clad in stainless steel and copper, it may look a little classier than its surroundings and its modelling may be more assured. The individual apartments seem well-proportioned. Its greatest virtue is that it takes a massive wedge of proposed development and makes it less clunking than it might otherwise have been.

But it doesn't give confidence that the architectural future of Vauxhall will be