

Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 2015

## TOWER POWER

**From the South Bank to the East End, how London's skyline is being redefined by star architects**



From the South Bank to the East End, London's skyline is being redefined by ambitious developments with big names attached. Laura Freeman hails the rise (and rise) of the starchitects.

**The Hackney stretch of the Regent's Canal, even painted with the finest brush by the most sympathetic artist, could never be mistaken for Venice. There just isn't enough in the way of palazzi and romantically weathered bridges. But on a clear, bright day, with the sun on the water of the City Road**

**Basin, you might convince yourself that a gondola is about to appear from under the Danbury Street bridge and that the open Adriatic waits around the Old Street bend.**

Ben van Berkel, the architect behind Canaletto, a 31-storey apartment tower between City Road and the canal, certainly hopes so. When it opens early next year, the building, named after the great 18th-century Venetian painter of canal scenes, will stand like a bell tower above the Regent's Canal.

Founder of the Dutch architects practice UNStudio, van Berkel, 58, a gnomonic figure who inspires something close to hero worship among his staff at the offices in Amsterdam, Shanghai and Hong Kong, is one of a favoured number of international 'starchitects' giving the city its unique and exciting skyline — and whose name attached to a building's plans ensures favourable attention from the city planners. If a proposal arrives from van Berkel, Richard 'Heathrow Terminal 5' Rogers, Norman 'The Gherkin' Foster, or Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, the Swiss maestros who have made Tate Modern the most visited gallery of modern art in the world, City Hall tends to reach for its rubber stamp.

Peter Rees, former City planning officer and now professor of places and city planning at UCL, sums it up: 'All the developer has to do is have a really starry architect and whizzy drawings and computer-generated imagery and convince one man.' That man is Boris Johnson. Even if a local council rejects a proposal, developers can appeal to the Mayor's office. And Mr Johnson is all for towers — the starrier the name behind them the better. Steel and glass and a big name are good for Brand London. Canaletto is just one of several hundred new towers racing up across London's skyline. A report published earlier this year by New London Architecture, an independent forum group, and the property consultants GL Hearn estimates that 263 skyscrapers of 20 storeys or more are being built or have planning permission. Seventy are already under construction, 117 have been approved and 76 have been proposed and are waiting for approval (of the 70 towers already under way, 62 are residential — luxury apartments can be six times more profitable per square foot than office buildings). And so we have a race to the top, with some of the most recognised architects in the world eager to have their name attached to taller and taller towers.



Norman Foster's firm Foster + Partners, having redrawn the London skyline with the bulbous Gherkin and City Hall, started work in January on twinned towers of 32 and 46 storeys at 250 City Road. While they may look like yet more megaliths in glass and steel, this scheme — with apartments above and shops, restaurants and cafés at ground level — promises to be innovatively environmental. Solar panels will provide renewable energy, 'green' roofs will be planted with grass and shrubs to attract wildlife, and rain will be collected and used to water the surrounding planting. It has also been dubbed

'the most cycle-friendly high-rise in London', with plans for 1,486 bike parking spaces and a dedicated cycle lift to carry your Brompton up to the 46th floor. The first flats will be ready towards the end of 2018.

If one starchitect on the brief is good, two is even better. At the 42-acre Battersea Power Station redevelopment in South London, Foster + Partners have joined forces with LA super-firm Gehry Partners. Frank Gehry is the 86-year-old architect behind the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the Walt Disney Concert Hall in LA and the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris. His aesthetic is one of broken planes, jutting promontories and buildings that shake and bulge and thrust out at odd angles. Gehry Partners' planned Prospect Place at Battersea will see five wiggly-squiggly ziggurats built around a central tower to be called 'The Flower' — though really it looks more like a four-leafed clover. Flats start at £495,000 for a studio and rise to £3.2m for four bedrooms, but don't invest in furniture just yet. The completion date is still tantalising described as 'TBC'.

The building proposed to the immediate west of Prospect Place is Foster + Partners' undulating, 17-storey Skyline building, which will house luxury apartments, as well as 103 affordable homes, a medical centre, shops and a 160-room hotel. The roof will be given over to what will be one of London's largest roof gardens, stretching over 250 metres.

Not to be outdone, Foster's most formidable professional rival Richard Rogers, an 82-year-old social charmer (his wife is Ruth Rogers of the Michelin-starred River Café) with a history of controversy, has overseen Neo Bankside, a four-tower development by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, in the lee of Tate Modern. At 24 storeys, Neo Bankside is almost diminutive by the standards of Canaletto, but the buildings' external glass elevators offer a thrill you'd miss in the internal lift shafts at Old Street. A penthouse is on the market for £15m.



The Canaletto building



The Sky Pool at Embassy Gardens, Nine Elms

Canaletto itself may still be a skeleton, a great rib cage above the city, wrapped in picture windows around its lower storeys and open to the wind above, but the builders (and a visiting journalist in a fetching hard hat) can rattle up the side of the building in a lift like a metal shark-diving cage.

The view from the penthouse — a blustery, 4,000sq ft viewing platform in its current state — is spectacular. You can play ‘Spot the Landmark’: the BT Tower to the west, then Wembley Stadium, Alexandra Palace, Canary Wharf, the Walkie-Talkie, the Shard and the Crystal Palace radio mast. If you had money to spare, and a head (and stomach) for heights, a three-bedroom flat with a view of the Shard could be yours for £2,250,000.

Meanwhile, flushed with their success at Tate Modern, Herzog & de Meuron — very intellectual, very austere, very Swiss — are building a colossal 57-storey tower, One Wood Wharf, at Canary Wharf for 468 apartments. It’s a narrow, cylindrical building not unlike a nutmeg grater. (We already have the Cheese-grater at 122 Leadenhall Street, another Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners giant, at 48 storeys.)

Those starchitects without a London tower to their name hanker after one. Zaha Hadid, 64, the mercurial, Iraqi-British architect known for the Olympic Aquatics Centre, the Serpentine Gallery extension and, lately, for storming off the Today programme, has told Building Design magazine: ‘I’d love to do a tower in London, but it hasn’t arrived.’

Similarly, 49-year-old Tanzania-born David Adjaye, celebrated for his lean, pared-back buildings, which include the strikingly austere Dirty House in Hackney and the Roksanda Ilincic shop in Mayfair, would be eager to take on a tower if the opportunity arose. ‘To work in London — on any scale — is particularly exciting,’ he says. ‘It offers the chance to test new modes of engagement for the urban landscape in one of the most dynamic cities in the world.’

Is there a danger of becoming a little too keen on allowing starchitects to raise monuments to their egos? Certainly, there are sceptics. Harry Phibbs, a Hammersmith & Fulham councillor, points out that any developer facing a challenge from a local council or residents about a tower’s aesthetic appeal can counter: ‘Look, this is a very distinguished architect. You’re obviously very ignorant and unsophisticated because this is Norman Foster.’

Whatever one makes of it, the starchitects are set to be defining our skyline for a while longer — applications for ever-taller towers across London are up 11 per cent in the past year. Stand on the viewing platform of the Walkie-Talkie (20 Fenchurch Street) and the capital is a nest of cranes, necks bent over rising towers.

The oft-levied criticism that such luxury flats are merely 'safety deposit boxes' is not accurate in the case of Canaletto — the flats have largely been sold to UK buyers, many of them Shoreditch tech-startup entrepreneurs. Van Berkel spoke to one couple with young children who were thinking of buying a second flat in the tower for the grandparents (at £1,050,000 for a two-bed, that's an expensive granny flat).

The Canaletto, Nutmeg Grater and The Flower aren't finished yet, but already they are destined to be dwarfs among giants. In July, plans were unveiled for a 304m skyscraper on the South Bank. The tower, provisionally named Number One Undershaft, will be just 5m shorter than the 72-floor Shard. A CGI mock-up has been drawn and a planning application will be submitted later this year.

The name on the current proposal is Bryan Avery of Avery Associates, the architect behind the IMAX cinema at Waterloo and the London Transport Museum in Covent Garden. Would you bet against Avery and his 'Second Shard' being built?