

BATTERSEA POWER STATION

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Recreation of Pink
Floyd album cover

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Sometime, about forty years ago, we stopped making things. I'm not sure that we noticed at first. The process was so slow. Even then, the factories were still there, derelict, but capable of renewal, like some old car we had abandoned in the garage. Recently, it has become clear that we are never going to make anything again. We have become a different people. We no longer really deal with things. In a way, we have become weightless.

I think that we miss the things we used to make, not that this would encourage us to go at it again. The competition is too strong. Now we can do a degree in media studies. The pang of nostalgia we feel for a previous world is not new. Victorians, like Ruskin, Morris and Hardy felt sharp regret for the habits and social structures lost under the advance of mechanised manufacturing and agriculture. Now, we feel a sense of loss when we see the identity of communities, towns and buildings dissolving as their manufacturing base disappears.

All over Britain, towns are being reinvented. Poisonous industrial sites are bulldozed into the ground and a new world of IBIS Hotels, call centres, exhibition halls, conference centres and designer flats is springing up in their place. Who lives in these new places and what do they do? I think that they work in distribution, telesales, information technology and public relations. I'm looking for the engine that drives this, but the engine is not there. At least, not in any sense that I can grasp. An engine is a thing, it has weight and someone made it. Of course it's not there.

Our urban landscapes are in a state of uncertainty. They are emerging and dissolving all at once. We know what meaning they used to have, but we can't see the new ones yet. Naturally we cling to the old forms. They have a tangible identity. They are rooted in a world with recognisable social structures, with things that were made by processes that were legible. You knew where you were and places had meanings that were connected to what they did, what was made, harvested or passed through them. I heard recently that Hull, once the raucous, stinking gateway to the Greenland fisheries, is being re-branded as the Digital Estuary.

I can understand why the Battersea Power Station Community Group are in a state of high anxiety about the proposed redevelopment of their local landmark. Once it was the powerhouse that generated electricity for one fifth of London. It was built on a staggering scale. Great cliffs of sheer brick support four soaring white chimneys. They are fluted like giant classical columns. They give the building an almost religious solemnity, like a temple. When it was built it was described as "a flaming altar of modern power." Now it is all gone. For twenty years it has been roofless and derelict. With no smoke coming from the chimneys, they have lost their visual centre of gravity. They look like the legs of an inverted table or a sad upturned white elephant.

With strong public feeling, it is unsurprising that we should have legislation. So the shell of the power station, with its great white chimneys, has been listed. This means that it is legally protected. No one can knock it down without permission from the government. Naturally, the new owners want to turn it into a hotel, exhibition, conference centre and designer flats. English Heritage, the government agency charged with protecting

buildings, have insisted that the lovely dead chimneys should be kept. The catch is that structural engineers have stated that the old reinforced concrete has corroded beyond repair. The chimneys must be replaced with replicas.

I am struck by the English Heritage statement, "We are confident that the new chimneys will match the existing stacks in form and materials and that the power station's iconic appearance will be unaffected." What is an iconic appearance? It seems to suggest that the appearance of the chimney is an image of something else. A column perhaps. Whatever it is, we are assured that it will not be affected. I cannot imagine that the appearance of something can be unaffected by our knowledge of its history. It suggests that our eyes operate independently from our need to confer meaning. This is a real problem, because surely the stacks only become iconic through their use and their history. We see what we remember.

One of my colleagues suggested that they should silently tear down the chimneys overnight and re-erect the replicas before daybreak. It would be like a trick played on a child. We could continue to imagine that our weightless world gains identity through these replicas. It wouldn't work. Rumours would circulate. Odd bits of the old chimneys would turn up somewhere. They might become objects of veneration in their own right. Another idea might be to take the old chimneys down and lay them on the site like poisonous relics. We could ask Rachael Whiteread to make elaborate casts of them and put each cast in its place on the brick podium. How about making big metal braces to clutch the old stacks, and hold them up in the air like ruined dentistry?

Whatever you can think of, nothing is stranger than the proposal to erect replica chimneys. It seems surprisingly normal to us, but

it is not. Since Dresden, we have been making replicas of the world of our parents. Now it will happen again in New Orleans. We are desperate to cling on to artefacts, to things that have weight and were made. Perhaps these replicas will develop an allure or patina of their own, emblems of an uncertain age. Perhaps they will be torn down by a more confident generation.

Giles Gilbert Scott, the architect of the power station, had a peculiar expertise. He designed churches, cathedrals, power stations and the famous red phone box. Each building is a theatrical manifestation of an invisible force. He used a grandiose stripped classicism to embody unseen power. Everything he did was a cartoon of a temple.

For me the chimneys were always an image of something else. I saw them first on the cover of a Pink Floyd album. A pig flew overhead in lurid evening light. They belonged with the Post Office Tower on the cover of London Calling by the Clash or the Trellic Tower on the Battle of All Saints Road. To a teenager who had never been to London, they represented an infinitely glamorous, half ruined, modern dystopia. I wanted to go there. These images seemed to be about power and the ruin of power and the aftermath. Twenty years on these things still represent London to me. The chimneys have their real potency as images.