

Power houses

London's great Victorian power stations are slowly running out of steam, but a series of daring new developments is firing up the likes of Battersea, Bankside and Lots Road. Tamsin Blanchard separates the boilers from the builders

Next year, Lots Road power station in London's Chelsea Harbour will gasp its last breath, and the hot, deafening roar of the turbine hall will be no more. It's taken more than 20 years to close down – plans were first mooted in 1979. The station, which opened in 1905 and still supplies 75 per cent of the power that runs the London Underground, is the oldest power station in the world still operating in its original building. It even uses the same cooling pipes that cooled the water from the river in 1905.

The station, which initially boasted four chimneys, just like Battersea, was built to last. It would happily carry on for another 100 years, but the power is being transferred to the national grid, and the 8.55-acre site is being given a new purpose in life. No, it is not going to be an art gallery. Nor will it be a circus space, a dotcom nerve centre, a multiplex cinema or a Disneyworld. When Lots Road

shudders to a halt in September 2002, the architect Terry Farrell will begin work on a project with a budget of £350m to create an all-singing, all-dancing, ultra-modern 'extended urban quarter'. In other words, Lots Road power station will become, yes, you guessed it, luxury apartments, with 700 new living 'units'. Thirty-two per cent of them will be 'affordable' for Londoners who have regular jobs. Although it is unlisted, the main power station, including the 21ft-diameter chimneys, will stay. A public viewing platform is planned for the top of one of the chimneys.

Construction work is expected to take six years. The joint developers Taylor Woodrow and Hutchison Whampoa Properties will try to sell off the machinery inside, as it is relatively modern equipment and could still be used. Other key pieces, including a huge boardroom table that was first built for Greenwich power station, will probably be transferred to London

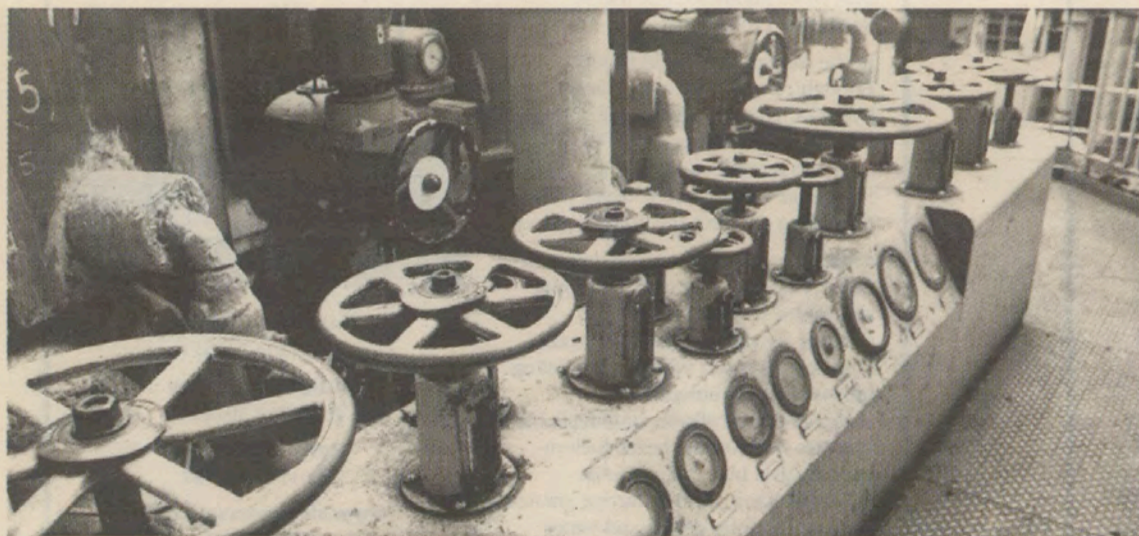
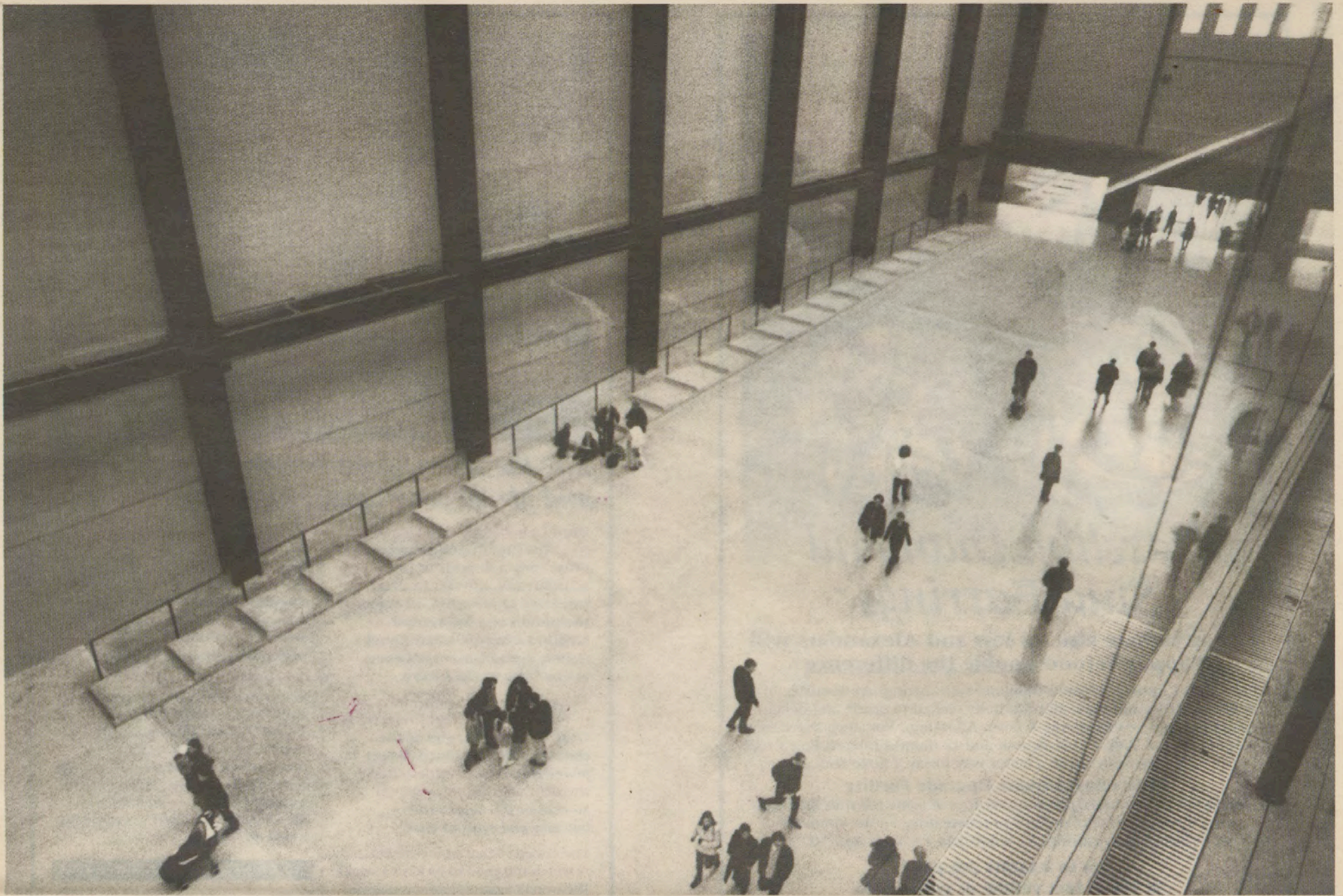
Transport's collection store in Acton.

When it opened, Lots Road was coal fired. What is now a carpark used to be a dock where coal was delivered along the river. It has always been used to power the London Underground, and underwent major modernisation in the 60s, when two of its chimneys were demolished. Much of the interior remains as it was then, including the four control rooms with their big dials, clocks and switches, like something from a Tom Baker episode of *Doctor Who*. Lots Road's sister station in Greenwich will continue to do what it was designed to do in 1906. It will be London's only original power station still in operation.

It's all part of the ongoing trend which began with Margaret Thatcher's controversial plans for Gilbert Scott's Battersea power station in the 80s. Almost 20 years since its guts were so rudely torn out, Battersea remains empty, but plans have finally been approved, and one of ▶

Lighting-up time: Alexandra Murphy has been photographing power stations for the past six years. Her first was Greenwich, photographed here in 1999, with its original control room (above) still working, and the Turbine Hall (right). It is the last of London's stations to remain in action





Power to the people:
 (clockwise, from top)
 Tate Modern at Bankside,
 December 2000; inside
 Battersea power station,
 March 2001; some of the
 controls at Lots Road power
 station, January 2001

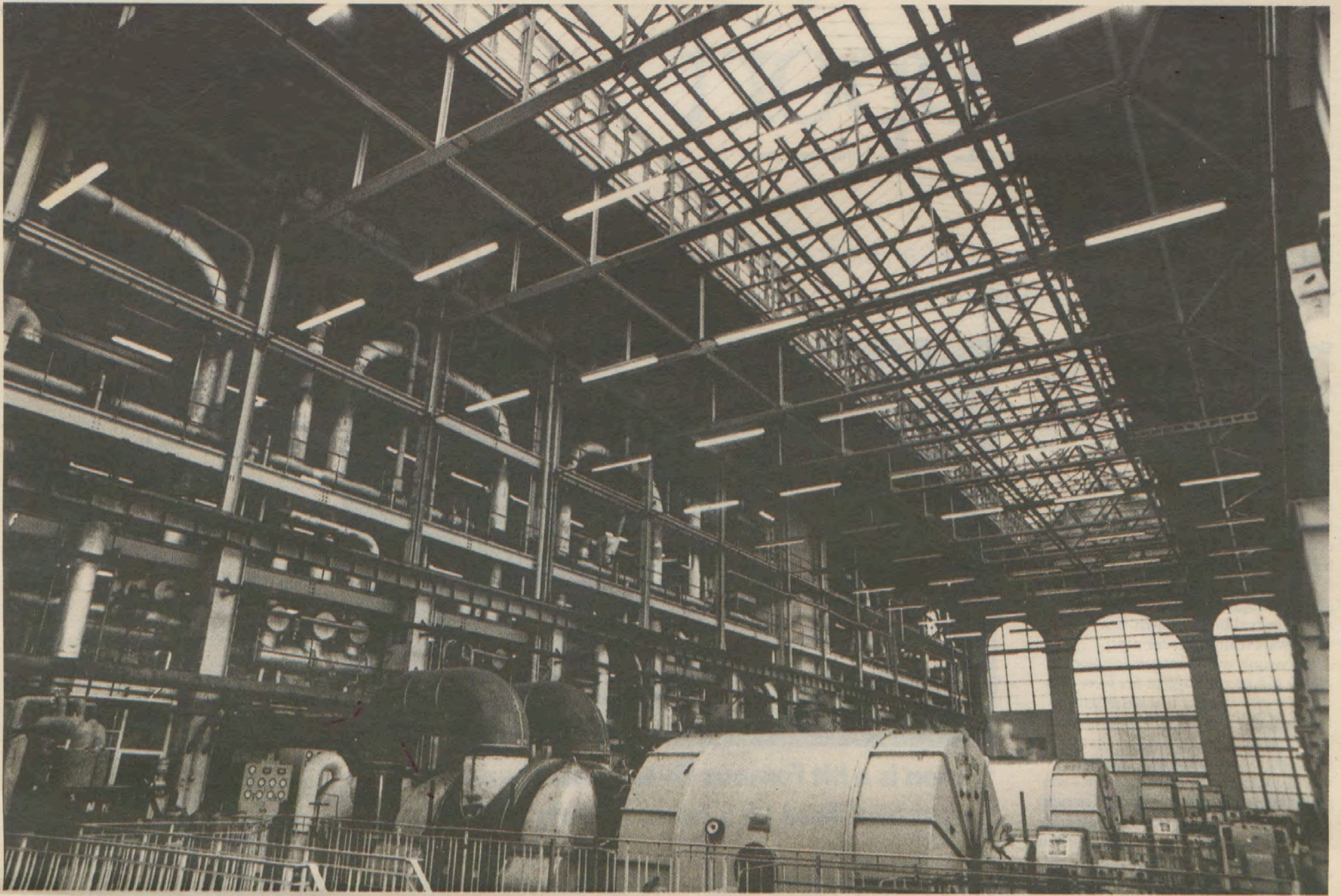
◀ London's greatest landmarks is destined to house a shopping and leisure centre, complete with multiplex cinema, cafés, bars and restaurants; a theatre designed by Ove Arup; a 725-room, five-star hotel arranged around two large courtyards, and a seven-storey office building. The power station's disused jetty will also get a makeover, designed by Nicholas Grimshaw.

Herzog & de Meuron's Tate Modern at Bankside. On a much smaller scale, but with a similar spirit, is the Wapping Project, in east London's Docklands. Built in 1890, it was a small Victorian hydraulic power station. The Grade II* listed building lay derelict until it was rescued by the Women's Playhouse Trust, with help from the architectural and design practice

At the Wapping Project, you almost expect someone to flick a switch and the whole thing to rumble into action

Inevitably, there will be some housing, too, with apartments, duplexes and three-storey penthouses. Preliminary enabling work will begin this year. The project will make use of the original river water intakes and outtakes to help provide power for the heating and refrigeration needs of the site. The most famous and ambitious power station conversion has, of course, been

Shed 54. The result, which opened last year, is an unusual combination of gallery/performance space and restaurant, all set within the original machinery and structure of the building. The engines and pipes have become an art installation. As you eat from tables and chairs supplied by the Vitra furniture showroom and available for sale, you almost expect someone to ▶



Power play: (clockwise, from top) the turbine hall at Chelsea Harbour's Lots Road; close up of the engine work at Chelsea Harbour's Lots Road; the renovated restaurant/ gallery space in the Old Turbine Hall at the Wapping Project in east London

◀ flick a switch and the whole thing to rumble into action. In the old Boiler and Filter House, you can still smell the coal. The development of the building is ongoing, with plans to build a mezzanine level in the Turbine House, and to convert the water tanks on the roof into studios.

Power stations are an architect's dream project. Munkenbeck & Marshall have come

to such classic pictures as the 1945 favourite *The Wicked Lady*. It is also the studio where Alfred Hitchcock started his career, making his directorial debut with *The Pleasure Garden* in 1925. The film studios closed in 1949. Recently, the structure has been used as a temporary space by the Almeida Theatre, and has even been the venue for fashion shows by Alexander

It's a marketer's dream development: state-of-the-art apartments, a sculpture park, and a film-studio facility

up with plans for the Poole Street power station on the banks of the Grand Union Canal, between Islington and Hoxton in north London. Poole Street is no stranger to regeneration projects. It was the first to be closed, in 1914, after just 13 years. Originally intended to power Finsbury Park and Moorgate Underground, it was converted in 1919 into Gainsborough Film Studio, home

McQueen and Hussein Chalayan.

All of this adds up to one thing: it's a marketer's dream development. State-of-the-art live/work apartments, set in a sculpture park, and complete with a small film-studio facility, are projected for late 2002. But don't expect to be able to afford to live there, and definitely don't expect cheap electricity bills. ■

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH BY ALEXANDRA MURPHY