

NEO BANKSIDE

2016

ESTIMATED
YEAR THAT
MOST OF
INNER
LONDON WILL
NO LONGER BE
AFFORDABLE TO
LOW-INCOME
TENANTS

Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, NEO
Bankside, Bankside, London, 2011–
The project will be a new exclusive enclave
that exacerbates social polarisation in
London and is unrelated to local planning
or housing needs.





Beyond the City's walls, Southwark was for hundreds of years one of the capital's liveliest boroughs: London's industrial backyard and entertainment district. It was the site of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens as well as several prisons, such as the Marshalsea. However, it fell into decline in the late 20th century as print works and the London docks closed. **Matthew Gandy** describes a new development in Southwark, adjacent to Tate Modern, which marks its reinvention as a luxurious enclave for the internationally rich.

The summer 2011 edition of the glossy *Tate Etc* magazine contains a double-page advertisement for a new housing development next to Tate Modern entitled NEO Bankside. 'Move in next door to Warhol, Dalí and Picasso,' reads the text, and 'brush shoulders with some illustrious arty types'. Designed by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, in partnership with the developers Native Land and Grosvenor, this set of four residential pavilions is the latest in a series of ultra-exclusive housing projects being built across London.

NEO Bankside replaces an earlier plan for the site – the infamous 33-storey Tate Tower – which was defeated in 2002 by vociferous local opposition from the Tate gallery along with nearby residents in other exclusive developments such as Bankside Lofts.¹ A phalanx of high-profile people have been enlisted for the promotion of NEO Bankside, as reflected in a nine-minute film on the project website entitled *NEO Bankside and the Neighbourhood* which plays extensively on the

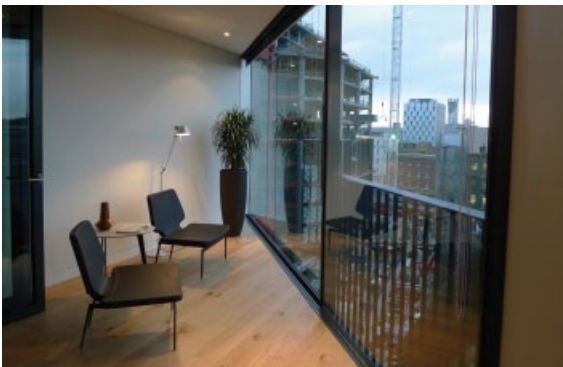
'working character' of Bankside in London's industrial past and the recent cultural regeneration of the area.² Most critically, however, a project of this kind could not have occurred without the very extensive public investment that has taken place in Bankside since the 1990s as part of urban regeneration efforts in deprived parts of inner London.

The exterior of the four pavilions is encased in a lattice of 'external bracing' that references the late-Modern facades of the Lloyd's Building, the Centre Pompidou and other architectural exoskeletons from Richard Rogers' past. The interior of the show apartment has a pokey feel despite its claimed size. The large windows cannot disguise its single aspect – one is conscious of standing in a larger space that has been spliced into two apartments – and the layout is consumed by a proliferation of corridors and en suite bathrooms. The design is reminiscent of what JG Ballard terms 'American interiors' characterised by 'overly spacious kitchens' and 'complete physical privacy'.³ Perhaps the oddest feature of all, however, is a triangular slither of enclosed space, produced by the subdivision of the building, which is described as a 'winter garden' with a 'temperate semi-external environment'. The intended clientele for these apartments, which are priced at between £1 million and £5 million, is hinted at in the promotional literature with its very extensive list of exclusive features ranging from a state-of-the-art wine cellar and 'richly landscaped gardens' to a standard of concierge service 'normally associated with five-star hotels'. The development must surely be aimed principally at overseas buyers from markets such as the Middle East, the super-rich of the former Soviet Union, or parts of east Asia that have remained relatively unscathed through the most recent episode of global economic turbulence. The market for these and other similar luxury developments is inextricably linked to new patterns of wealth inequality and tax evasion within the global economy.⁴

In order to really evaluate the significance of NEO Bankside, it needs to be viewed in a broader context. Whatever

This slither of space between two apartments is described as a 'winter garden'.

Interior of a NEO Bankside show apartment. Old Vic artistic director Kevin Spacey was the narrator for a promotional film for the development; his image remains eerily frozen on the flat-screen TV.



the apparent cultural or ecological novelty of the project, this is a venture very much rooted in old money, landed privilege and centuries of residential exclusivity in London, as indicated by the partnership between the developers Native Land and Grosvenor, who already own significant parts of Central and West London and boast assets of over £10 billion. Yet it also reflects a glaring dislocation within the London housing market between the actual needs of ordinary Londoners and the impact of global social and economic factors on patterns of investment for the internationally wealthy.

NEO Bankside represents a colossal misappropriation of resources at a time of intensifying housing shortages in London. Richard Rogers, the 2007 Pritzker Architecture Prize Laureate, has been closely associated with recent debates over urban sustainability through his 1995 BBC Reith lectures 'Cities for a small planet', his role as Chair of the UK Government's Urban Task Force in 1998, and more recently as Chief Adviser on 'architecture and urbanism' to the former Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. With these impressive credentials it seems impossible to believe that this proposed development is an anomaly or a mistake: it rather reveals the hubris of contemporary architectural discourse as espoused by Rogers and many of his contemporaries.

The core dynamic behind London's housing crisis has been the failure to build enough social housing because political and economic priorities have lain elsewhere. Terms such as 'affordable housing' obscure the fact that most of London's households cannot afford to buy their own home and must therefore rent accommodation wherever they can find it. With recent changes in government policy to reduce rent subsidies and further choke off the availability of social housing, there will be a forced exodus of the poor out of inner London. By 2016 it is estimated that most of inner London will no longer be affordable to low-income tenants, and those outlying areas that do remain affordable will be marked by intensifying concentrations of deprivation and unemployment.⁵

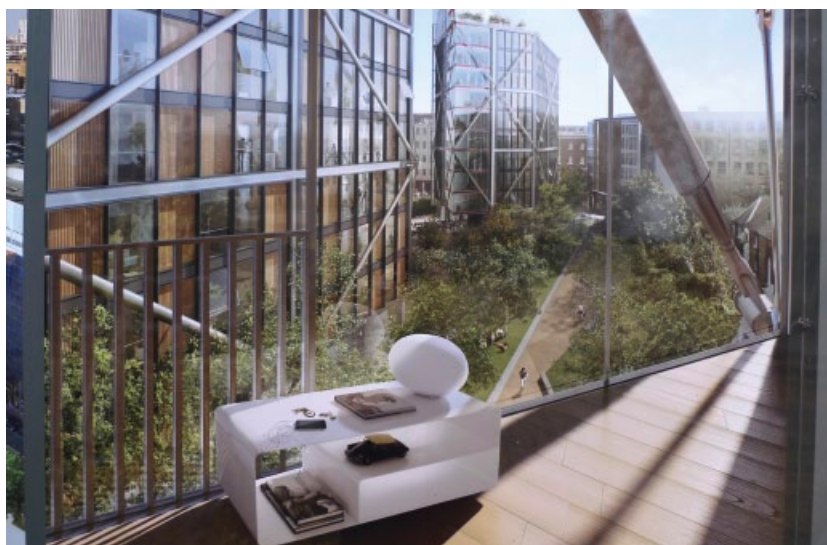
The character of London is changing and projects such as NEO Bankside are connected to the wider transformation of the city into an increasingly segregated and polarised metropolis. In 1999, the Urban Task Force, chaired by Rogers, published the influential document *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, which began with a mission statement calling for 'a new vision of urban regeneration founded on the principles of design excellence, social well-being and environmental responsibility'.⁶ Rogers and his colleagues decried how 'we have lost ownership of our towns and cities, allowing them to become spoilt by poor design, economic dispersal and social polarisation'.⁷ The construction of NEO Bankside, some 11 years later, reveals the apotheosis of this market-led vision for urban regeneration where issues of social inclusion or design quality have been repeatedly subsumed behind vacuous slogans or obfuscatory rhetoric. ▽

Notes

1. Andrew Harris, 'Livingstone Versus Serota: The High-Rise Battle of Bankside', *The London Journal*, Vol 33, No 3, November 2008, pp 289–99.
2. The promotional film for Neo-Bankside opens with Kevin Spacey, the artistic director of the Old Vic, followed by a litany of powerful local figures such as Ian Hislop of Tate Modern, Peter Kyle of the Shakespeare Globe and Jude Kelly of the South Bank Centre.
3. JG Ballard, *Miracles of Life*, Harper Perennial (London), 2008.
4. Nicholas Shaxson, *Treasure Islands: Tax Havens and the Men Who Stole the World*, Bodley Head (London), 2010.
5. See: Cambridge Centre for Housing & Planning Research, *How Will Changes to Local Housing Allowance Affect Low-Income Tenants in Private Rented Housing?*, Cambridge Centre for Housing & Planning Research (Cambridge) 2010; Cambridge Centre for Housing & Planning Research, *Housing Benefit Reform and the Spatial Segregation of Low-Income Households in London*, Cambridge Centre for Housing & Planning Research (Cambridge), 2011.
6. Urban Task Force, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, Report of the Urban Task Force chaired by Lord Rogers of Riverside, Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (London), 1999, p 1.
7. *Ibid*, p 2.

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An idealised living space as shown in the advertising hoardings for NEO Bankside. Note the scattering of art books by the window and the pastoral idyll between the towers.



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