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Power and glory

New Zealander Sam Martin stages a coup at Battersea Power Station, a landmark on the banks of the River Thames.

Words by Michael Barrett

You can take the man out of Canterbury but you can't take Canterbury out of the man. When I chat with UK-based Sam Martin he's fresh out of a meeting at his local cricket club – London New Zealand Cricket – where they meet once every couple of months to organise the season and keep the club going. Martin's got his kit ready; the coming weekend brings with it two Twenty20 games, fundraising efforts for the Christchurch earthquake fund.

But we're not here to talk about cricket. It's the remarkable coup Martin's London-based landscape practice, Exterior Architecture, has pulled in winning – jointly with LDA Design – the contract for the design of the iconic Battersea Power Station.

Some background. We all know that 99% of the time any use of the word 'iconic' is rather hyperbolic, however, in this instance, there can be little delusion.

Battersea Power Station, with exterior design by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, was built in two stages in the '30s and '50s, respectively. (Scott, in case you think you've heard the name, is also famous for his design of the red telephone box, Liverpool Cathedral and Bankside Power Station, now the

Tate Modern.) Battersea Power Station's four towering 53m chimneys and 64 million bricks make it easily one of London's most recognisable buildings. It's also the biggest brick building in Europe and a pop culture icon, featuring on the cover of the Pink Floyd album *Animals*, among other things.

It's also a relic. Decommissioned in 1983, the Grade II listed building has been mostly unused. Back in 2008, architect Rafael Viñoly was commissioned to develop a master plan for the building and its surrounding 15.4ha site. That plan, now approved, includes a 2.5ha park and 400m of water frontage, which will open up the riverside for the first time in 100 years.

Sam Martin is originally from Peel Forest in South Canterbury. He studied landscape architecture at Lincoln University and, before moving to the UK in 2001, was associate partner at Robert Watson Landscape Architects in Christchurch, where he says he focused on environmental impact assessments for government and commercial clients.

In 2007 Martin designed the New Zealand garden at Savill Garden in Windsor, and he has completed a number of large commercial and residential projects in the UK. The "easy part" of winning the Battersea project was getting his foot in the door and meeting with the owners, Treasury Holdings.

"They then presented me with the landscape architects' brief, which had been produced about a month earlier and given to a number of international firms. They had already started interviewing landscape architects when I went to see them. It was just perfect timing really and my having understood the main issues and presenting them with some possible outcomes that they were perhaps hoping for but hadn't really heard from anyone else."

The "hard bit" was finding a partner and producing something substantial – within a week. Enter stage right, LDA director Rob Aspland, with whom Martin had previously worked.

"Rob's been working on the Olympics and is a very good designer. When I contacted him he came over to my house that night, we had a beer and talked it through. We set to the next day, my team and his team, and eventually presented Treasury Holdings with a booklet in the shape and size of a brick, with the cover of a brick, in which we presented 53 ideas to take Battersea Power Station and park back to the future."

The 53 ideas related to the 53m of the chimneys, and the document covered everything from bats, moths, birds, water, energy, creation of energy on site, recycling of material from on site and the planting arrangement that they thought would be most beneficial to the "environment and place". It's safe to say they went beyond the parameters of the brief, but Martin says they wanted to "express our passion and understanding for the site".

"I think that's what got them excited."

Battersea once redeveloped will be a densely populated site. Martin says one key idea was the consideration of the buildings and the power station as



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a canyon. Across that canyon will be draped a blanket of green – on vertical surfaces and horizontal surfaces. Across the 40 acres of the site, 16 acres will be ground plane park and over 30 acres will be brown or green roofs. Only 25% of the finished product won't collect water. That framework will be enhanced with a conceptual forest, adding trees and verticality.

"It will be more like clearings in a forest – it won't be a structured landscape. The forest will feel lush, productive and full of nature with enough height and magnitude to mediate between the vast brick façades of the power station and the glassy elevations of the new blocks."

Martin expects to have design and planning applications filed by the end of the year, with a start on site for stage one and two in May–June next year. 01

01 and 03: Exterior Architecture and LDA Design's projections for the Battersea Power Station in South London. Parks and green roofing are a major component of the design. Only 25% of the finished product won't collect water. **02:** Battersea Power Station is the largest brick building in Europe. The decommissioned coal-fired power station has been mostly unused since 1983.