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# Chip off the old block

Jonathan Glancey on how a sculpture by Christopher Le Brun became the template for the office of the future

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**Jonathan Glancey**

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Le Brun's sketches for office blocks: 'realised in shades of soft, London greys'

London is expected to be invaded by some 60m sq ft of new offices in the next few years. That's roughly 60 more tall buildings. How many of them will be works of civic art? How many designed for an increasingly Bladerunner-like urban sense and scale? Well, if P&O Developments has its way, at least one.

The company is better known for shipping than property, but it has planning permission to build a range of new offices at Waterloo. Architects RHWL were commissioned to design a trio of conventional postmodern office pavilions for a site ranging along York Road. But William Edgerley, P&O's managing director, wanted to do something better with the site, the building, the company's money and for London. By chance, he met Christopher Le Brun at a school sports day recently. And now Le Brun - a well-known painter, sculptor and former trustee of the Tate and the National Gallery - is part of the architectural crew.

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Le Brun had never thought of working on a building. He was also unsure of quite what skills he could bring to the demanding design of a major commercial building, when it was already in the hands of competent architects and Chris Wise, the lively engineer best known for his work with Norman Foster and Anthony Caro on the Millennium Bridge. And yet what Le Brun has helped create is a complete reconsideration of the tall commercial building.

Together, architects, engineer and artist have come up with a highly sculpted tower that looks like some giant, twisted aerofoil. Rising from a prowed plinth between Howard Robertson's monumental, Speer-like Shell Centre, the London and South Western Railway's Victory Arch and Nicholas Grimshaw's serpentine Waterloo International Terminal, the proposed building is more than an ambitious office block. Its plinth is designed to be a public space - a tree-lined pedestrian concourse, bridge and walk connecting Waterloo and the South Bank in one seamless flow. Its construction would entail the rerouting of York Road, and the demolition of a number of grim buildings that have disgraced Waterloo for many years, in particular the Tower Building, John Poulson's early 1960s tower, now home to the government's Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (Cabe).

Le Brun has undoubtedly brought artistry to RHWL and P&O's ambition. The wax models and sketches he has made to date are substantial proof of this. He talks convincingly about the ways in which light will fall against, and play with, the complex twisted vertical surfaces of the tower. He delights in thinking through ways in which the tower's plinth could be a beautifully lit artwork in its own right, perhaps pulsating with information and advertising relating to public transport and South Bank events. He suggests ways in which the tall office "wing" could be lit at night by slabs of colour.

Suspicious of hard, shiny computer drawings that "portray buildings intended for London in Venetian or Californian light", Le Brun has produced a set of subtle drawings, realised in shades of soft, London greys. He likes to draw in his Camberwell studio into the gloaming. "Mostly," he says, "we see London buildings in soft, hazy and cloudy light; I think it is important to try to get a feel of what a large building like this would really look like."

His wax models are even more beautiful - and more convincing. It would be fascinating to see one turned into a real building. To house such a big building in a relatively tight space over a web of railway lines, and to avoid conflict with "air rights" and issues of daylight with existing buildings, will require delicate balancing and inventive engineering. An office must also have its floors, its windows and expansive glass facades, and these need to be worked convincingly into the twisted wing profile of the P&O tower. Architects, engineer and artist have collaborated on a computer model that shows how this can be done, no matter which way the model is twisted and turned.

If a world-class architect such as Frank Gehry or Zaha Hadid were to propose a building along such provocative lines, they would be praised to the skies. RHWL, however, are commercial architects. Until now the practice has been a purveyor of conventional, sometimes bland design. With Wise and Le Brun, it has moved into new territory: a flagship commercial building that takes artistic risks, demands imaginative engineering and invites intense, sharpshooting criticism.

Whoever the architect, all must agree that in years to come, office design must be a lot better than it has been to date. The P&O project creates a model for the onslaught of commercial buildings to follow: it is near a railway station (reducing the need for car parks), it gives something back to the city, and is a work of art in itself.

Le Brun, and Wise, in their different, yet mutually compatible ways, have raised the design game at Waterloo. And Le Brun is properly concerned that, should the building go ahead, he will

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continue to have some say on both its design and construction. It would be sad if the artist were simply being employed as a cultured pet to help smooth the project through planning permission; thankfully, this is not the case. What matters, however, is that a building of this ambition and prominence is beautifully built throughout. The nature of development has much to do with speed and timing, and a scheme like this needs time to get right. Time for subtlety; time for something of an artist's touch.

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