



## Camdens walk in the park

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**Gustafson Porter's park is the final piece of the jigsaw in the 10-year battle to provide London's Swiss Cottage with a new cultural heart. But has it been worth the wait?**

By Ellis Woodman

This week, do spare a thought for the beleaguered councillors of the London Borough of Camden. After 10 years in which their efforts to provide Swiss Cottage with a new cultural centre have never been far from the news pages, it's just possible that one of the country's bloodiest urban regeneration sagas may have reached a conclusion.

This development's history offers a frightening insight into the complexity of realising large-scale civic projects in an age of public/private partnerships. It is a scheme that took flight on the wings of laudable civic ambitions but was dragged ever earthwards by easy pragmatism and public disaffection. After this Saturday's inauguration of the final piece of the development - landscaping by Gustafson Porter - all concerned will be well entitled to a couple of months in a darkened room.

The Anglo-American practice's work should be warmly applauded as it goes some considerable way to transforming an ad-hoc assembly of pretty low-wattage buildings into a convincing place. Of course, a number of these have been corralled into a role for which they were never originally designed. The elevations of the 1980s office building and the 19th century terrace that respectively close the west and east elevations of this new square were never intended to address such a major civic space.

That said, the new buildings don't fare much better. The timber louvres that face Bennetts' Hampstead Theatre are hardly adequate to the task of creating an urban elevation. Terry Farrell's glassy sports centre is scarcely less anodyne, while the housing that sits beside it is bombastically gestural - for which Farrell, the original architect of the scheme, must surely accept the blame - and oafishly detailed - for which we have his successor S&P Architects to thank. The sad truth is that Basil Spence's library, newly refurbished by John McAslan, is still the best building on the site. Gustafson Porter's scheme wisely doesn't ask the surrounding elevations to work too hard. Extensive tree planting around the perimeter will, once matured, partially obscure the facades, creating a space of grove-like intimacy at the development's heart. It is here that we find the water feature that so agitated Camden's Conservative councillors after the closure of the Diana Memorial Fountain. It takes the form of a long plane of textured granite which cuts into the gradient of the site. A scrim of water permanently plays over its gently sloping surface while jets mounted at its high point intermittently spurt water down its length. In plan it has been kicked off the orthogonal to register the off-centre entrance of the new theatre.

Where the landscaping meets the buildings to the south it takes on a more architectural character. Here, a five-a-side pitch has been cut 3m into the ground. It has been lined in Portland stone reclaimed from the demolished sports centre, thus establishing a direct relationship to the library.

The scheme's other key structuring device is an unusual one for a British park - the paths that cut across the site are all edged by clipped hedges. Herbaceous perennials specified by Gustafson Porter are native British varieties mixed with hybrids and exotics embedded in British culture.

In a nation of gardeners, the idea that a public space might support such a refined planting strategy should be commonplace. That it is not is no doubt a consequence of budgetary considerations rather than any failure of imagination.

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