



Earls Court: From the ground up

The site of the former Exhibition Centres at Earls Court in London has a legacy of innovation and spectacle in its foundations, with a history of hosting grand fairs, captivating exhibitions and a towering observation wheel; so, it seems an appropriate place for bold design thinking to take shape. **Alan Shingler, Partner at Sheppard Robson**, reflects on the firm's role within this masterplan.

On behalf of the Earls Court Development Company (ECDC), we are the architects for the tallest building within the masterplan that envisions a new future for this west London neighbourhood.

Currently, the largest cleared development site in the capital, this project presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to bring this important urban space back to life. However, a project of this ambition inevitably comes with its challenges: the one I would like to discuss here is how to design a tall building that broadcasts the development's ambition to the wider city while also feeling grounded in its community and its new park setting.

The vision

The transformation of the Earls Court site will create a multi-generational neighbourhood with approximately 4000 new homes, a community hub and cultural venues – all embedded within 20 acres of public open space and green areas.

We are the lead architect for the Hammersmith & Fulham part of phase 1. This includes our 42-storey residential building alongside purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) and affordable housing schemes designed by Serie Architects and dRMM, respectively. Our building is a landmark for the site and for West London. It is located at a pivotal point in the scheme, marking the end of Empress Place Boulevard from the south, and the start of the cascading landscape towards Aisgill Gardens to the west and Lillie Sidings Square to the north.



➤ Earls Court
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Rooted in context

The vertical expression is often the heroic element of a tall building, earning its own headline-grabbing nickname. But does this focus on the skyline limit the conversation about the quality of our tall buildings? And how do we ensure that there is an intrinsic quality and thoughtfulness that runs from top to bottom of high-rise developments?

These questions can be answered, in part, by looking to Earls Court, where we had to grapple with questions such as how can a residential building be civic-minded, blurring the hard lines between resident and public spaces? How can a building be part of a park and not just located near or in it? Why are these questions important when creating a desirable place to live?

Engaging with these points, our designs include a generous podium base that connects to the 'Cascades', a series of new public spaces linked by the movement of water. This overarching concept is reflected back in the building's Cascading Waterfall concept. References to water are created through glazed bays and reflective metal tubes, giving the building an iridescent quality in different light conditions, and furthering the sense of its 'grounding' in situ.

The Earls Court site has unique characteristics. However, there are ideas from the project that can be applied to many other sites. In particular, how can the lower floors of tall buildings help create a place people want to visit through inspiring architecture, inviting landscape and a mix of uses. A tall building can be generous to its neighbours, grounded by cafes and restaurants, co-working, and even healthcare and education facilities, all designed to complement the arrival experience. This range of spaces can be stitched together through the public realm strategy, creating a human scale and openness that erodes the often perceived intimidating nature of tall buildings.

The social and community benefits of opening-up the base of tall buildings are clear, but it also makes commercial sense. Whether you work in an office building in the city or live in a residential building in Earls Court,



people increasingly want to feel part of the city and communities in which they are located. The right mix of private and public amenities can create an experience that is bustling and significantly impacts a development's identity and desirability.

Broadcasting ambition

But of course, the verticality of a tall building – the way in which it takes its place on the skyline – is still vital and carries its own civic responsibility. Our aim at Earls Court is to create a cohesive design with a clear architectural language that is legible throughout the building. We want this unifying strategy to rely not on a gimmick, but rather informed by a distinctive and technically-ambitious floor plan.

During the design process, we treated the abundance of nature envisaged throughout the masterplan as one of the key forces shaping our building. The Cascading Waterfall concept is one way this is expressed, but the connection runs deeper, with the building featuring a petal-shaped plan that creates 100% habitable dual aspect for all homes, regardless of size or orientation. The organic-inspired plan, with its soft curves, results in a vertically-articulated form, contributing towards a strong sense of slenderness and symmetry while indicating the innovations layered through the building to improve the quality of the homes on offer.

Drawing conclusions

It's rare to design a true landmark building – one that is both familiar at a distance and helps define a new community. The unique opportunities at Earls Court highlight the dual responsibility of designing tall. These buildings leave a mark on the skyline, adding to many people's experiences of a city, while we have carefully choreographed connections with the surroundings. We hope that the cumulative impact of both local and city-wide initiatives will mean our building will play a major role in shaping the ambition for a 'new West Side Story'.

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