Chips ... the hottest place in town
New Islington, Manchester

Anything but ordinary ... The Chips building in Manchester's post-industrial wasteland.
Photograph: Christian Richters

Chips is a lowbrow name for a high-concept building. There have been buildings whose form is inspired by trains, boats, planes, ducks and bowler hats (the famous Wilshire Boulevard Brown Derby restaurant in Los Angeles), even phalluses, but food is rare as an inspiration. There's a celebrated pineapple pavilion at Dunmore, near Airth, in Scotland, and the more puerile commentators see in Norman Foster's curvaceous skyscraper on St Mary Axe in London a gigantic cornichon. And that's about it. This, despite the conceptual link between good architecture needing to be functional and delightful, while good food needs to be both nutritious and delicious. Of course, good food and good buildings should also look inviting.

We are in New Islington, a post-industrial wasteland in north Manchester, a scene of truly compelling urban devastation. The name is a giveaway of local aspirations. Nineteenth-century developers in Liverpool created a Kensington, charming evidence of genteel yearnings. The attitude of northern cities to London is similar to Australians' attitude to England: a weird mixture of contempt and longing. So Chips was called forth as a landmark, a building to brand desolation with social ambition to rival London's N1. It's the starter for an area which will rise like a loaf; it's the grit in the oyster which forms the pearl. You see? Once you have started, edible metaphors become

Review: Will Alsop's Chips building in New Islington, Manchester | Art and design | The Observer http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/jul/12/chips-will-alsop-manchester-review
The architect is Will Alsop, one of the more self-deprecating and genial leaders of a profession too often concerned with bullet-headed corporatism, greed or naked vanity. Mischievous creativity has led him to great achievements, including the wonderful Peckham Library, but also to various calamities: his practice puts ambition before profit and a fantastic, if impractical, proposal for Liverpool's Fourth Grace produced, alas, not a great building but a spectacle of undedifying headbanging. Alsop has a ludic approach to building designs: often his ideas start as paintings. His pictures are full of colour and a tipsy bravura. His drawings are amusing. These images feed into his architecture.

Alsop was chosen to masterplan New Islington by Tom Bloxham, the funky-but-good-with-numbers chairman of Urban Splash, a developer which made its excellent name turning bereft industrial buildings in the north-west into lofts for the Facebook/pre-crash generation. It was Bloxham who, in the early 90s, named the Northern Quarter Manchester's coast of bohemia.

I asked him, as we cruised the area in a vast black Mercedes, at exactly what point Manchester's regeneration began. He said it wasn't the IRA bomb. Instead, it was the failed Olympic bid. Suddenly, Manchester realised it was not competing with Halifax but with Barcelona.

Bloxham did not want a "prissy" masterplan, hence the choice of Alsop, the least prissy architect you could hope to find. That was in 2002. Now included, for example, in New Islington is a range of vaguely Dutch-gabled canal-side houses by FAT. These make you smile. Alsop says: "One of the distinctive things about the contemporary moment is... there is no dominant style." So, instead of imposing one, he spoke to the few locals who remained. He did not say "Hello, I'm your new architect and I have come to knock down your old home." He had a pint with them and chatted.

The Chips building is on a narrow site bounded by canals (Manchester's money machine was lubricated by waterways that made it an inland port). To build it, an old hospital and mill were demolished. It's a concrete frame clad with colourful composite panels declaring the glory of canals and rivers: Mersey, Ashton, Rochdale. There are nine storeys of 142 apartments with a commendable mix of affordability and priceyness; incomes of all altitudes share the same entrance which is decorated - I am not exactly certain why - with a jellybean pattern.

The whole comprises three staggered blocks (inspired by chips) with audacious cantilevers disrupting the perception of what would otherwise be a daunting mass. The strange form - an engineering challenge since the cantilevers produce structurally demanding torque - was dictated by the long, thin site which made it expedient to reduce wasted circulation space. Each apartment is open-plan (Alsop advocates partying) with a central service core, and each enjoys exposed concrete and unusually generous floor-to-ceiling heights. At ground level there will be a huge restaurant and bar, a nice reminder of the communitarian sociability which 20th-century modernists so often aimed for, but so very rarely achieved.
Alsop says a test for a building's success is if the cabbies know it. Do you get in a taxi at the station and ask for Chips and get the reply: "You mean that hideous building with writing on it?" As it happened, our cabby did not have a clue and we had to direct him. But it's early days; Chips is not quite finished. In 2002, Bloxham may have overestimated the demand for 2009 apartments, but no one saw 2008 coming. He has, however, got New Islington an exuberant landmark. He says the problem with most architecture is its "mundanity". Potato chips may be commonplace, but the Chips building is not ordinary. As cheap as chips? For such an ambitious building, £20m is modest. Chips with everything? Certainly, I'd like to see more Chips everywhere.