Will Alsop challenges Norman Foster in London’s East End.

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A few years ago, not too many people cared about Spitalfields market. It was a timewarp place, a wholesale fruit-and-veg market in East London, a concatenation of trucks and mess that gave you an idea of what Covent Garden used to be like before it went all trendy. And then - as with Covent Garden - the market moved out and went somewhere less interesting. And, inevitably, the old market hall followed the Covent Garden pattern and became a fashionable enclave of shops, stalls and bars - though not, thankfully, a tourist haunt.

Now, we are getting the inevitable fall-out of that move. Spitalfields, for centuries London’s first port of call for refugees, from Huguenots through Jews to Asians, has of late also become a frightfully modish place for well-heeled arts and media types who have snapped up the original Georgian houses in the area, following on from the original conservation vanguard of the 1970s who acquired wrecked houses for a song and successfully prevented the area from being bulldozed.

Today, property values in the best streets have soared. An annual arts festival is held there. The high profile of the area has helped to restore the masterly church of Christchurch by baroque genius Nicholas Hawksmoor. But the looming problem is the presence of the nearby City of London. This exerts pressure to build lucrative office space. For well over a decade, Spitalfields market has been threatened by successive plans for office blocks. The last recession provided a stay of execution - and the developers themselves magnanimously allowed their market hall to be colonized by the new wave of traders - but now, the endgame is approaching. Soon - maybe next month, maybe later - the latest revised designs from architect Lord Foster will be unveiled.

His buildings, whatever form they take, will bring the shining blocks of the City marching into the East End, and will involve the demolition of the newer rear half of the market hall. His clients already have planning permission for this, dating from the early 1990s. But the protestors have a volatile secret weapon. He is the internationally successful architect Will Alsop.
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The highly articulate and well-connected local protestors realize that they need to do more than draw up a roster of famous names to support their cause - which they have duly done, with everyone from Sir Terence Conran to Andrew Lloyd Webber supporting them, plus all the religious and ethnic groups in the district. They realize that it is not enough merely to moan: they need to present a viable alternative. In another era, this would have meant a folksy, Prince Charles-approved wholesome pastiche of the kind developers laugh at. Not today. Alsop, last year’s Stirling Prize winner for his excellent Peckham Library, is no shrinking violet. His response - shown here for the first time - is to challenge the developers to build much more adventurously - and maybe even higher.

His idea may look outlandish, but it is very simple. There is no need to slice into the market hall, he reasons - and no need either to bury the fascinating archaeological excavations in the open space just behind it. All you need to do is jack the office blocks high up into the air on stilts, leaving clear open space beneath. That way, the developers get their floorspace, and the Spitalfields residents get to keep all of their market hall, plus a preserved and sheltered archaeological lower level that could lead into the building’s thus-far unexploited basement.

Alsop does colourful and provocative buildings, as you see. Not so long ago, he was seen as a maverick. But today, he is taken seriously. He works for several developers himself. He has built in many countries. He understands the language of commerce. He has also worked with several local communities on arts projects. If any architect can break the impasse in Spitalfields with a touch of lateral thinking, it is he. Signing him up is a very clever move by the protestors.
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Perhaps not everybody in the Spitalfields protest movement envisaged something like this when they set out. The views of illustrious local residents such as artists Gilbert and George are not known, though they have signed up to the campaign. William Taylor, chaplain at nearby London Guildhall University and one of the campaign organizers, however says: “There’s real support for this. It is potentially a ‘wow’ building. Will is responding in his own way to the developer’s brief having spoken to us. Those who have been consistently against any offices here are now starting to concede that offices could be placed above the market hall in this way.”

Such a solution is actually very American, where “air rights” buildings are commonplace. Successful public spaces have been created beneath elevated skyscrapers, and historic buildings such as churches have been preserved by this means. There is absolutely no reason why it should not work here, and provide a resolution between developers and local traders and residents. And if you think the building looks somewhat startling - it isn’t nearly as startling as Hawksmoor’s church was, in its day.