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Press cutting

Farrells

Planning in London

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Royal Albert Dock – a modular masterplan

Designing smart and thinking collaboratively ensures that this reimagined dock does not mimic the dereliction of its predecessor says Megan Jones



The Royal Albert Dock as reinvented by Farrells has been successfully unveiled in east London, creating an exemplar of adaptable architectural thinking, from its masterplan to its modular delivery. This is the first commercially-led phase of the 35-acre site set to be transformed into a gateway for international businesses looking to establish tangible roots on UK soil, whilst also contributing to the wider London market and demand. This former dockland will eventually be home to more than 4.7 million square feet of work, retail and residential space, where a rich mix of foreign and local enterprise will initiate a new, forward-driven era for this historic industrial site.

Following a tendering process, ABP London, partnered with Farrells and the wider design team, were successful in re-imagining this vast swathe of underused land as a nucleus of international business; a vision fittingly reminiscent of its industrial past. Where previously the physical handling of goods had dictated the ebb and flow of activity on site, it would now be a digitised industry connecting the dock to the global market, reigniting its commercial value and carving out a new relevance for the modern age.

A sensitive re-think was required to successfully create a place on a site hosting only the ghosts of its industrial past. A diverse mix of functions and flexible future uses were introduced to safeguard the development from becoming another banal business district on the outskirts of a city. In this context-less dock, Farrells sought to optimise on the natural transience of place from the outset, and the opportunity for unfettered growth it brings.

The masterplan is divided into six phases, each offering a distinctive character for a sequential redevelopment for the area. But whilst there is a logic to a layering of the land over time, these disparate urban segments are designed with a cross-functionality at their core, allowing each phase to create a different place. This cross-stitch of constituent parts is a recurring trope across the masterplan; from the build-up of its key uses, to the reconfigurable office plates of its commercial plots, to the modularity of its panelised construction, it is a development which celebrates flexibility and adaptability over time.

The first delivered phase boldly stakes its claim as a serious contender in the commercial market, with 700,000 square foot of lettable office space provided across 21 new buildings. Retail and leisure functions are interwoven alongside to supplement this burgeoning business centre, while two listed buildings also remain as emblems of the site's past. Where both once served the physical labourers of the warehouses, they will now serve visitors to a new era for this digitised dock.

The site's primary east-west axis has been reprised; its footprint retained, its function transformed from that of practical transport route to activated high street. The waterfront quay, once the site of cargo being unloaded from waiting ships, is set to become a bustling pedestrian promenade – enlivening the water's edge and infilling a vital link between the University of East London to the east and Newham Borough Council to the west. This holistic approach to place-making utilises existent qualities, such as the distinctive waterfront, and transforms them into characteristic points from which communities can organically thrive. The dock can confidently pinpoint itself as a destination in the developing regeneration corridor of the Thames, not only bolstering connectivity through and around the site itself, but as part of an outward-focused city- and river-wide outlook.

The challenge of delivering the first phase lay in developing a flexible model to ensure success in an already well-saturated field >>>



Megan Jones is an architect with Farrells on the RAD development



RIGHT:
Illustrative Masterplan roof plan

>>> of commerce. This led to the development of two distinct office typologies, tailored to supplement one another's growth and centred on the advent of an evolved model, the dockside townhouse. Unusual in the UK, but more often seen in Asia, these terraces, recognisably reminiscent of warehouses in their linearity, are vertically divided into 'house' units, but also offer a future horizontal split. This building block basis allows the user to assemble an office aligned to their specific working style and business development needs; providing a transformable kit of parts for workplace curation.

Supporting these typologies is a large-plate office building. Its generous floor area, wrapped around a central core, can be let per floor or split into multiple tenancies with minimal intrusion to the existing, efficient order of things. Options were integrated within the structural fabric to facilitate future multi-floor lets, and this, combined with the building's rational grid, unlocks endless spatial iterations, freeing it from the constraints of a singular commercial use.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Riverside night overall view

FAR RIGHT:
Street view

BELOW:
Night view



Flexible to the growing needs of place, the adaptable townhouses anticipate a greater future need for residential provision. Their floor to ceiling proportions and regularised window layouts enable their potential conversion to dwellings with minimised internal re-jigging. This modularity extends also to a further future, where the townhouses may make way for an entirely different function, as necessitated by the natural progression of place. The largely pre-cast build-up of the structure and cladding will allow this to occur in a sustainable manner; facilitating dismantling instead of demolishing.



The Royal Albert Dock is humble in its creation of office space that is compact and functional. It is this efficiency that has enabled 50% of the overall site to be retained as accessible urban landscape. Of this space, eight new squares will be carved from gaps in the urban grain, providing recreational respite for both office workers and casual idlers alike. Two of these London squares have been delivered, actively contributing to the mayor's desire to make the capital the world's first national park city.

The masterplan strives for reactive place-making that anticipates the future, without constraining it so rigidly that there remains no scope for alternative growth. The townhouses exist now as bold founding members of a new business district for London, yet in 20 years' time, may instead befit a growing housing evolution. The scheme's inherent adaptability has armed it with the tools to adapt and react to such future flux.

By designing smart and thinking collaboratively, we can ensure that this reimagined dock does not mimic the dereliction of its predecessor, but finds a way to remain relevant. This project provides a lesson in lifetime modularity – where the principles of adaptability stretch from its urban-scale sensibilities to its construction methodology, providing a flexible flat-pack masterplan for modern life.

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