The Eagle has landed





It is over a decade since the first plans were produced for Eagle House. *Janie Manzoori-Stamford* reports on the turbulent birth of the latest addition to London's skyline

It has taken 12 years, four companies, two handovers and £150m, but finally The Eagle has landed.

And although it was a long time coming, just six months after the completion of the Sir Terry Farrell-designed 409,000 sq ft mixed-use scheme in Shoreditch, EC1, all 68,000 sq ft of commercial space has been let to start-up hub The Brew, Sainsbury's and Pret a Manger. All 276 new homes, including 16 for shared ownership and 54 for social rent, have been sold or let. And the design-led penthouse broke the local market ceiling when it was bought for more than £5.5m. It is a far cry from the £600,000 average sales price for flats in Shoreditch in 2015 and supports the long-mooted elevation of the Old Street area around Tech City to one of London's elite housing markets.

A lot has happened since initial plans were conceived nearly a decade ago. So how has the scheme stayed relevant against the backdrop of such a fast-changing area? And what will its record-breaking prices mean for the future of one of London's hippest postcodes?

Turbulent landing

At first glance, the exterior could not be more creative-friendly. In Art Deco style, reflecting the original 1930s building, it punctuates the Old Street grime while mirroring the colours and hues of some of the area's more traditional stock, such as the iconic Moorfields Eye Hospital. It stands out yet somehow also fits right in. But the 27-storey tower was not always destined to look this way.

The Eagle was always going to be a new development constructed around an existing building, the original Eagle House, which dates back to 1933 and has been incorporated into the new design. The scheme was conceived in 2003 by developer Groveworld and architects Farrells. Planning permission was not a simple process and involved intense dialogue with Hackney Council, which had concerns the proposal would be "visually obtrusive" and "unduly prominent". The conversations paid off when, in 2007, the planning application was approved for what was set to be the first high-rise on City Road.

The purchase price for the site, agreed at £15m to £20.2m, was payable on receipt of planning permission, at which point Groveworld was meant to build the scheme itself. But when permission was granted, it decided to sell. Irish contractor McCabe swooped in to complete the purchase for £18.5m. It appointed architectural firm Hunters and works commenced that year.

But the scheme stalled in 2009 before McCabe eventually collapsed under the weight of around £76bn of debt in 2012. That same year, Mount Anvil acquired the island site, which had lain dormant in the interim, in a jv with Area Property Partners and Morgan Stanley. The price paid exceeded £60m.

"Our team identified the area as having huge potential that was not fully reflected in the land price," says Mount Anvil chief executive Killian Hurley, who relished the idea of successfully completing this half-baked scheme. "The challenges associated with the already built concrete frame and various planning breaches created a very complex offering – and we have a team who love that sort of challenge."

Farrells was promptly reappointed to the project with a host of fresh challenges to face, not least the fact that by this point, the new building had already reached full height, just not according to its original plan.

Plan B

"Our first task, collectively, was to find out what they'd built because they hadn't quite built to the drawings; to the planning consent," says Terry Farrell, London master planner and principal at his eponymous firm. "We had very good flatplans but McCabe started to do their own, so we couldn't go back to where we were."

"The concrete frame was up to 27 storeys but with sheer walls in the wrong places," adds Hurley. "The floor-to-ceiling height was 2.35m, whereas we'd go for 2.5m as a minimum. This meant we couldn't do underfloor heating, which we'd always do. It offers better internal design and usable space."

Other design elements that did not sit well with Mount Anvil's commercial strategy included studios with balconies



"When you look out of the window in many cities, you see more of the same. Here we have diversity of occupation and building type"

and three-bedroom flats without; two-bedroom flats with one big and one small bedroom; and poorly laid out, small three bedroom-units having the best aspect.

"The challenge was they'd put up the frame," says Hurley. "So we had to work around it. This is the most examined building in London, from an engineering perspective."

Every inch of the structure was inspected in a process that took the best part of nine months, and solutions were found for each problem encountered, such as floor layouts that did not maximise commercial potential but could not easily be rearranged because a post-tensioned concrete slab had been used.

Had the bathrooms been moved without due care, the floor plates might have collapsed, so Mount Anvil's team carried out extensive surveys, which Farrells then laid over their floor plans to get a clear understanding of what was possible.

Another issue was the cladding. McCabe had used terracotta tiles instead of the stone from the original design. The decision to change it back seemed simple but in practice was a much tougher task. Extensive remedial works were carried out and improvements made, but consideration still had to be given to the limited weight that the building could support because of the way the concrete frame had been built.

A thinner and lighter limestone cladding was sourced from Portugal, with each piece requiring a bespoke framing solution in order to sit in front of, rather than on, the curved slab edge, which resulted in the creation of an extra 3,000 sq ft of residential space.

And at a height of 266ft, The Eagle became the tallest stone-clad tower since the Shell Tower was built more than 50 years ago.

Hurley says that getting the façade right added another £3m to the build cost, but insists it was worth it. "It was about trying to work out the best design and whether we could justify it commercially. We squeezed out more floor space, which could get us extra revenue, and the alternatives just weren't attractive enough."

Diversity by design

It is not just the exterior of the building that took its cue from the past. The Art Deco characteristics of The Eagle's facade extend to the interiors. A largely monochrome colour scheme features accents in the form of chrome radiators, period light switches and the edges of geometrically arranged tiling, while smoked oak herringbone flooring creates natural warmth.

And, with 70 affordable flats, Farrell says the residential demographic is in keeping with the diverse surrounding area. "Look out across London. You've got a Hawksmoor church over there, you've got social housing, you've got the City: an enormous range," says Farrell, as he surveys the impressive vista from a 24th-floor flat.

"Whereas when you look out of the window in many cities, like Houston and even New York, you see more of the same. Here, we have diversity of occupation as well as building type."

The introduction of a development like The Eagle arguably marks the next chapter in the gentrification of Shoreditch, resulting from the regenerative influence of the creative classes on the area. As such, the scheme has proved popular with a varied but ultimately affluent demographic of buyers.

Hurley says: "Tech City is a hive of cosmopolitanism and we have seen a real mix of buyers – tech start-up founders, doctors, bankers and lawyers. It is internationally diverse but, broadly, 60% of buyers were Londoners. The penthouse was bought by a London family, as was the penthouse at Lexicon, EC1, another of our projects, located 200m away from The Eagle and also on City Road."

Imposing identity

Eagle House, the building from which the scheme takes its name, dates back to 1933 and inspired the Art Deco design that runs throughout the project.

It was redeveloped from office accommodation to a mixture of affordable housing and, in partnership with The Brew, 15,000 sq ft of co-working office space, making it Tech City's largest start-up hub.

Farrell says: "Part of the whole project was that we'd restore Eagle House. We felt it gave it identity. That was the heritage gain and in return, we got the chance to do a tower. The finished tower justified the restoration of the smaller building."

The end result goes some way to disproving the adage that you can't make a silk purse from a sow's ear. The core concrete structure that Mount Anvil and Farrells had to work with was technically challenging, but the concerted efforts paid off.

So can we expect to see developments taking their cue from existing structures more often? Farrell certainly thinks so: "I think this kind of refurb is going to be a much more common thing."

Farrells is now working on the conversion of an office tower in Ilford, Essex, to residential, while Mount Anvil is busy redeveloping five grade II listed buildings in Camden, NW3.

Not just a one-off project then, but an inspiration for great things across London. The Eagle is flying high.

THE EAGLE

£190m GDV

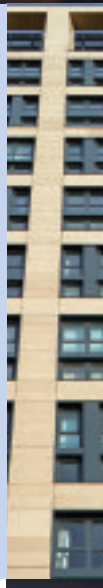
£50m profit

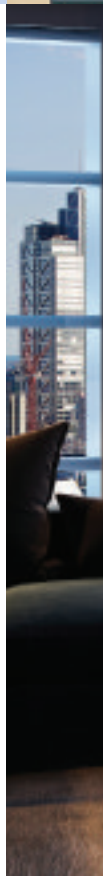
£20m price paid by DTZ to Mount Anvil for the freehold in 2014, a 5.73% yield

27-storey elliptical tower redevelopment of existing 1930s Art Deco Eagle House

276 new homes including 16 shared ownership in Eagle House, 54 social rent, and 20 luxury residences dubbed Eagle Black and located on floors 22-26 of the Eagle tower

68,000 sq ft commercial space including 19,400 sq ft of shops and 37,700 sq ft of offices







Terrace of Eagle Black's penthouse; below left: The Eagle; below right: cafe at The Brew; bottom: living area in Eagle Black flat





