

House & Home

FTWeekend



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Architecture | Deyan Sudjic, who

moved into a crumbling warehouse when London's docks were still derelict and deserted, traces its transformation and legacy

In 1981, in the grip of what in retrospect I realise must have been a premature midlife crisis, I sold my three-bedroom Clapham semi for £65,000 and moved into a loft in Wapping. I left my Habitat kitchen and the stained-glass window depicting a galleon over the front door behind and moved into Metropolitan Wharf, a 19th-century Thames-side warehouse with 2,000 square feet of agoraphobia-inducing, wide-open raw space. It was big enough for an indoor bike ride.

Strictly speaking, my three-year, non-residential warehouse lease prohibited me from living there. So I built a box in one corner to hide the evidence of illegal habitation – in case of any unannounced visits from the landlord – installed a shower and hoped for the best.

I'd spent the previous summer in an artist's studio in Tribeca, New York, and liked the idea of finding something similar in London, where loft living was not yet the phenomenon that attracted the attention of estate agents. It was still a precarious way of life for working artists that offered little security.

The warehouses of Wapping, still smelling faintly of spices, fitted the part. Metropolitan Wharf stood out. Its woodwork had been painted pillar-box red to distract from the crumbling brickwork. Its top floor, with the river view, had once been occupied by a colony of architects, including a youthful David Chipperfield. There was a specialist dealer in *Dr Who* artefacts on the floor below and a music-equipment hire business above me, with an earnest co-operative growing mung beans in the basement.

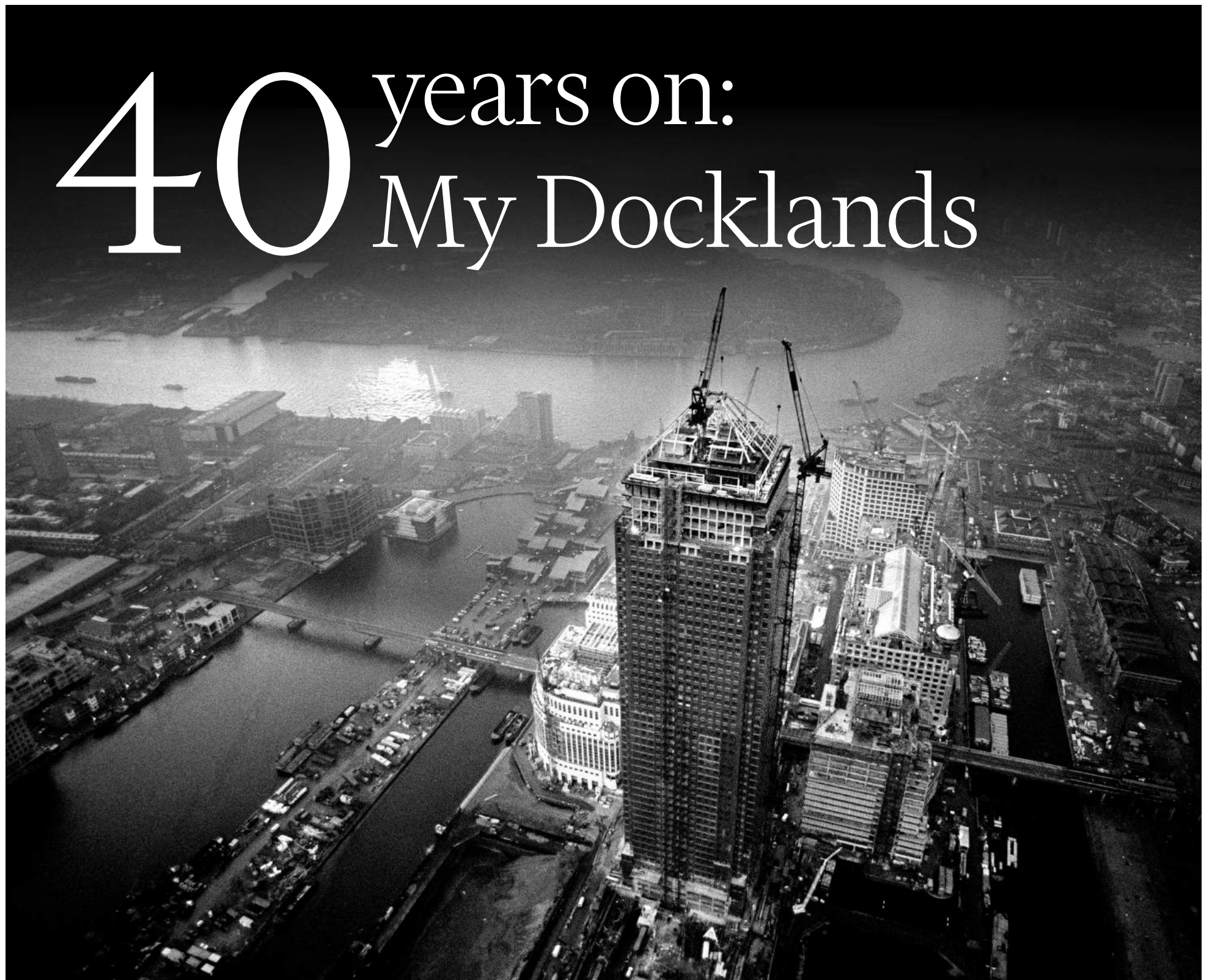
This was the year that the Royal Docks, the last of London's upstream docks, closed; the final act in a process of continuous decline ever since the East India Docks had shut down in 1967, triggered by the invention of the shipping container. There was now a full seven miles of continuous dereliction all the way from Tower Bridge to Beckton.

The ships that once clustered around the wharves and the 25,000 jobs that went with them evaporated, leaving nothing but mirror-smooth basins, disturbed only by the occasional arc of a bird taking flight.

In Wapping, on still summer nights, you could walk to the Pier Head along deserted cobbled streets and experience the scent of the Thames and glimpses of a full moon over Tower Bridge through the haze hanging above the dark and silent river.

A change was needed

When Michael Heseltine, then environment minister, embarked on a massive experiment in 1981 by taking the area out of the hands of local government, it wasn't just London's docks that were



40 years on: My Docklands



dying. The capital itself had been haemorrhaging people for half a century. At 6.8m, London's population was the lowest it had been since before the first world war, 2m fewer than at its peak.

Tower Hamlets, Southwark and Newham were stripped of their planning powers in the 5,100 acres placed under the control of the London Dockland Development Corporation (LDDC). Heseltine appointed Reg Ward, who arrived from running Irvine new town in Scotland, as the LDDC's chief executive.

Ward had an £80m-a-year budget with which to attract private investment into the area, and a barrage of incentives to offer. He established the Isle of Dogs' Enterprise Zone with no land tax, no training levies, no planning restrictions, a 100 per cent tax write-off on capital costs and a 10-year tax holiday.

The Enterprise Zone itself was limited to a cluster of sites around the three West India dock basins on the Isle of Dogs, but the LDDC's domain stretched from London Bridge in the west to the Beckton sewage farm in the east. Most of its territory was north of the river in Tower Hamlets and Newham, but there

was also a riverfront fringe in Bermondsey, dropping south to Surrey Wharfs.

The supremely pragmatic Ward claimed not to have a master plan, but took decisions bit by bit, so as to create "a plan that might only make sense in hindsight", he told *The Times* in 1986. The best Ward and his team could envisage in the early years was suburban-

On still summer nights, you could glimpse a full moon through the haze hanging above the dark, silent river

style private house building and low-rise industrial sheds. That was the Docklands I moved into.

Heseltine recently told me: "If I had made a speech then about what we were planning to do about London's Docklands, predicting everything that has happened there – Canary Wharf, the Dome, the Exhibition Centre, the Olympics, the high-speed rail link, London City airport – they would have sent the men in white coats and had me locked up."

The response from the local authorities – and Ken Livingstone's soon-to-be-abolished Greater London Council – to what they took to be an assault on local democracy was furious. The local authorities mostly refused to deal with the LDDC. And both sides spent lavishly on propaganda billboards that populated the gap sites between the corrugated iron fencing and the empty buildings. "It will look like Venice, but work like New York," declared the LDDC. The GLC response was to warn: "Big money is moving in, don't let it push local people out."

Despite the protests, Ward ploughed on. He funded the building of the Docklands Light Railway (DLR) to bring people into the area. An airport followed in the Royal Docks.

And then one day in February 1985, something extraordinary happened.

A new financial centre

Michael von Clemm, who combined being chair of the Credit Suisse First Boston investment bank in London with a role on the board of Le Gavroche restaurant, was invited down to Canary

(Clockwise from top) One Canada Square under construction in 1990 – it was completed the following year; Wapping today, where Deyan Sudjic lived in the 1980s; Margaret Thatcher, prime minister at the time, is shown a model of the Canary Wharf development

Harry Mitchell for the FT; Alamy

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Blinds don't have to be bland



Luke Edward Hall
Questions of taste

I have recently moved into a new home and need to put up curtains and blinds. Which rooms suit blinds best and what styles should I go for?

It can be a challenge at home to know which rooms will need curtains and which ones will suit blinds. In my opinion, curtains feel much cosier and generally look better, both open and closed. Go for curtains in rooms you want to feel particularly warm and inviting: drawing rooms, dining rooms and bedrooms.

I do, however, like blinds in certain situations. They work best in practical spaces, particularly in ones with small windows or in more awkward spaces, such as above a sink or behind a dressing table. I wrote a column recently about curtain styles. Although blinds are more straightforward, there is still a lot of choice out there.

A favourite style of mine is Roman: simple, elegant and timeless. Structured Roman blinds feel smart and work particularly well with striped or geometric fabrics because the rigid form allows graphic patterns to be seen properly and really shine.

Nicky Haslam's trompe l'oeil Shutter Stripe fabric, for example, always looks fantastic when made into blinds. See Haslam's own home in the Cotswolds, where the red colourway has been used to startling effect in his sitting room, and the blinds are finished with



fringing. John Fowler's similar Venetian Stripe design was often used by him for blinds, and paired with magnificent sets of curtains.

I also like loose, relaxed Roman blinds, when the bottom of the blinds are not straight but soft and gathered. These lend a more romantic, decadent feeling. They look particularly good made from plain fabrics, with contrasting tapes, borders or ribbons set in from the edge on either side.

In our bathrooms and little downstairs loo at home in the country, I wanted to do really fun blinds. When we moved in we decided not to change much about these rooms, focusing only on paint colours and window treatments. We picked bold colours for the walls: arsenic green, dusty lilac and bright blue.

The blinds needed to live up to these colours and so we asked our curtain maker if she could whip up

some Austrian blinds: all 1980s froth and pomp, big and puffy like pantaloons.

We used scraps of silk and taffeta I had lying around from projects (pink for the arsenic and lilac bathrooms, canary yellow for the blue loo), which added extra extravagance. The zingy colours in these rooms save the blinds from feeling too old-fashioned, and the elegance of the silk contrasts nicely with the sensible tongue and groove panelling.

I am not an enormous fan of Venetian blinds, as they can feel institutional. However, I could certainly be persuaded by some very good versions in a New York apartment decorated by Mlinaric, Henry and Zervudachi. These blinds feature red fabric tapes that lift up the slats, and the same red is used as a painted detail on white bookcases placed between the blinds. The overall effect is extremely smart and tailored, and rather masculine.

Sheer blinds work very well with curtains, with even more blinds or on their own, when one wants privacy but still requires a good amount of light – an ideal solution for bathrooms and bedrooms. Consider using a sheer fabric with a pattern or motif, or experiment with ruching. I love a ruched blind behind a set of smart curtains.

My designer friend Rachel Chudley often puts sheer blinds in her

'We asked our curtain maker to whip up some Austrian blinds, all 1980s froth and pomp, big and puffy like pantaloons'

Venetian blinds in a painting of the King's Road premises of interior decorators Colefax and Fowler, 1930s
Estate of Bianca Mims/Colefax and Fowler

bathrooms, and they almost always seem to feature a charming pattern or detail: Deco-inspired curves, for example, or rectangular blocks. Pierre Frey makes some lovely sheer fabrics: I particularly like its Louxor and Mandala designs, with their embroidered geometric shapes.

Let's not overlook the simplicity of a good old roller blind. Forget the usual, boring versions. Instead look to Marianna Kennedy, who makes beautiful rollers using book cloth and horsehair fabrics. The book cloth Kennedy uses comes in fabulous colours from lemon yellow to azalea pink.

These blinds look particularly marvellous with sober wooden shutters, light streaming through, as shown in many of Kennedy's own photographs. I am waiting for the right space to install one.

Whatever route you choose, dress your windows well. Give good thought to fabrics, of course, but remember the details, too: tapes and borders, extra sheers. Think about the kind of feelings you want to evoke.

My little country bathrooms feel completely glamorous thanks to their expensive, overblown pink and yellow silk blinds: a bit of old-fashioned glamour in the wet English hills.

If you have a question for Luke about design and stylish living, email him at lukeedward.hall@ft.com. Follow him on Instagram @lukeedwardhall

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House & Home Unlocked

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40 years on: My Docklands

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Wharf for lunch by the Roux brothers, who wanted to invest in a new cold store in the area. Von Clemm, who also maintained a parallel career as an anthropologist at Oxford and played an important part in establishing the Eurobond market, had the insight to realise that Canary Wharf's tax incentives and lack of red tape could be used to build skyscrapers as well as sheds.

Which is why three years after that lunch, I found myself on the floating gin palace that Olympia & York, a Canadian property company owned by the Reichmann brothers, chartered to ship journalists down the Thames to watch Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister, unveil its scheme for Canary Wharf.

She wore a Prince of Wales check suit jacket with improbably cantilevered shoulder pads. The bar on the boat had a whole table full of portable telephones

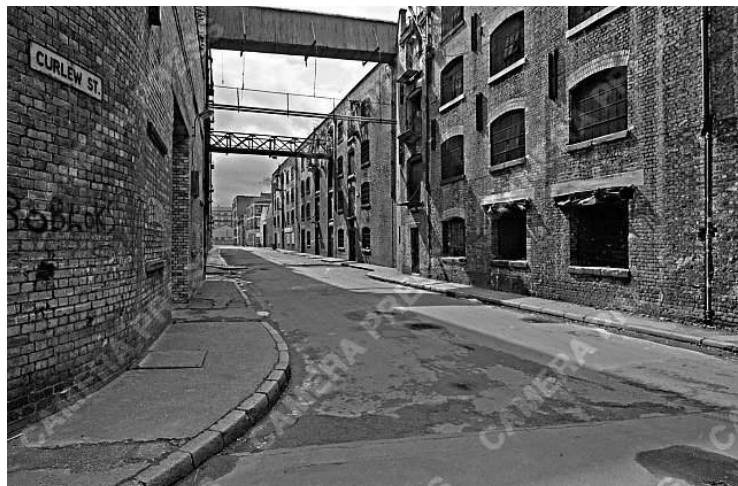
The tower briefly became a kind of vertical Fleet Street, with several newspapers taking floors at bargain rates

charging for the Reichmann entourage. It all felt eerily like an out-take from *The Long Good Friday*, which starred Bob Hoskins as an East End villain trying to go legitimate by developing the docks with American money.

Getting this far had been a white-knuckle ride. Von Clemm funded the flamboyant American developer G Ware Travelstead to plan a vast office scheme for Canary Wharf. Arthur May, a New York architect, designed three 60-storey office towers using a book on Hawksmoor churches that he kept by his desk for reference. But von Clemm moved on to Merrill Lynch, and Travelstead's scheme was unfundable.

By this time, the LDDC could not afford to see Canary Wharf's redevelopment fail. Christopher Benson, the corporation's chair, called Paul Reichmann to persuade him to take over the project. Heseltine relishes his memory of watching a famously non-interventionist prime minister joining the effort. She spoke to Reichmann personally, promised to fund the Jubilee line extension of the London Underground and even offered to move civil servants into offices there.

What really attracted Olympia & York was a simple calculation. In 1980, Tokyo had 400m sq ft of prime office space; New York had 300m sq ft; but London had just 160m sq ft.



(From top) Curlw Street, London Docks, 1985; Michael Heseltine, then minister of the environment, at a press conference for the Canary Wharf project in 1980
Gino Begotti/Getty Images

Because the City of London's planners ruled out high-rise buildings, insisted on keeping the existing street pattern and preferred new buildings constructed behind existing facades, when the financial Big Bang in 1986 ended the Bank of England's insistence that banks stay in easy walking distance, Canary Wharf looked a natural alternative.

But since the City of London was wily enough to have seen off every threat to its existence from Wat Tyler to King Charles I and the Great Fire of 1666, the City Corporation executed a handbrake turn in planning policy. It flooded the market with office consents.

Olympia & York struggled, and was eventually pushed into bankruptcy. George Jacobescu, the engineer who had been brought in from Canada to oversee construction for the Reichmanns, once told me that he had spent his first day in London walking all the way from his hotel to Canary Wharf to see for himself just how much of a

problem they would have attracting tenants. Battery Park, which the Reichmanns built in New York, is just 15 minutes' walk from Wall Street. Canary Wharf is 4 miles from the Bank of England.

"Why does it have to be so tall?" the Prince of Wales once inquired of César Pelli, the architect of the original Canary Wharf tower. The answer, which Pelli was too polite to give, was the obvious one. Canary Wharf needed an unmissable signpost.

Pelli's svelte, postmodern tower, with its steel skin designed to reflect changing London skies, initially proved hard to fill. It briefly became a kind of vertical Fleet Street, with The Telegraph, The Independent and The Mirror taking floors at bargain rates, before moving on.

In 1992, Olympia & York went bust, owing \$20bn. It took Paul Reichmann three years to raise the money to buy the development back from the banks, and he began building more towers, a process that has continued under successive owners ever since. The Economist reports that Canary Wharf accounts for 67,000 finance sector jobs, putting it ahead of Frankfurt as a banking centre. And it's no longer an office monoculture. Count in the hotels, shops and restaurants, and Canary Wharf employs around 120,000 people – or it did before the pandemic arrived.

As for the LDDC, that was dissolved in 1998. Michael von Clemm, who died in 1997 aged just 62, is memorialised by a bronze relief unveiled by Eddie George, the former governor of the Bank of England, that stands beneath Canary Wharf's tallest tower.

On its 35th floor is a space that feels like the map room from *Raiders of the*

Lost Ark. It is full of huge models with which the current owners, a combination of the Qatari government and Brookfield Property Partners since 2015, plan the next steps in the development, which has spilled beyond the original site and concentrates on residential property.

Docklands life

In fact, well before Canary Wharf became an alternative financial centre, the LDDC had succeeded in attracting housebuilders to the Docklands. The pioneers in the early 1980s lacked shops, restaurants or schools, but they did get amazing river views and post-modern architecture, such as China Wharf, designed by Piers Gough, completed in 1983 and now a listed building.

It was the start of a ripple effect extending south of the river eastward beyond the LDDC's original area into the Greenwich Peninsula, selected for the building of the Millennium Dome, now the O2 Arena, and the Millennium Village, where the Anglo-Swedish architect Ralph Erskine designed a colourful 12-storey block on the river in 1999.

After decades in which high-rise tower blocks were synonymous with social deprivation, they became popular with luxury developers – many from overseas. Knight Dragon from Hong Kong is now completing the so-called Greenwich Design District, a collection of 16 new buildings that will provide flexible work space to local creatives. On the north side of the Thames, Irish developer Ballymore – currently facing an angry campaign from flat owners for compensation for problems caused by flammable cladding at nearby New Providence Wharf – is completing the 10 buildings that make up London City Island, on the Leamouth Peninsula.

Even the Canary Wharf company itself is building residential towers, such as the 58-floor tower One Park Drive, by Herzog and de Meuron, architects of the extension to the Tate Modern. One-bedroom flats start at £840,000.

Today, Canary Wharf is emerging from the lockdowns and wondering if anybody will come back. London City Airport, closed for three months, is open again, though operating a small fraction of the flights that it did before.

By the time of the millennium, the population of Greater London had made up for its losses since 1938. Subsequently, it is widely believed that it saw its first drop during the pandemic.

Metropolitan Wharf, where I lived, is fully legal now, and its open spaces have been subdivided within an inch of their lives. I swapped loft life in 1984 for the white stucco terraces of Maida Vale, where you could see trees and pedestrians.

Deyan Sudjic is a writer and broadcaster and the former director of London's Design Museum

