

RIBA

# JOURNAL

## *New Ireland*

*From Cork to Cairo, Irish architecture is taking on the world*



Dublin wants the economic benefits of its revitalised waterside to flow further afield, and it is hoping to encourage more high-quality development by easing height controls for new buildings. **By Eleanor Young**

# Social climbers

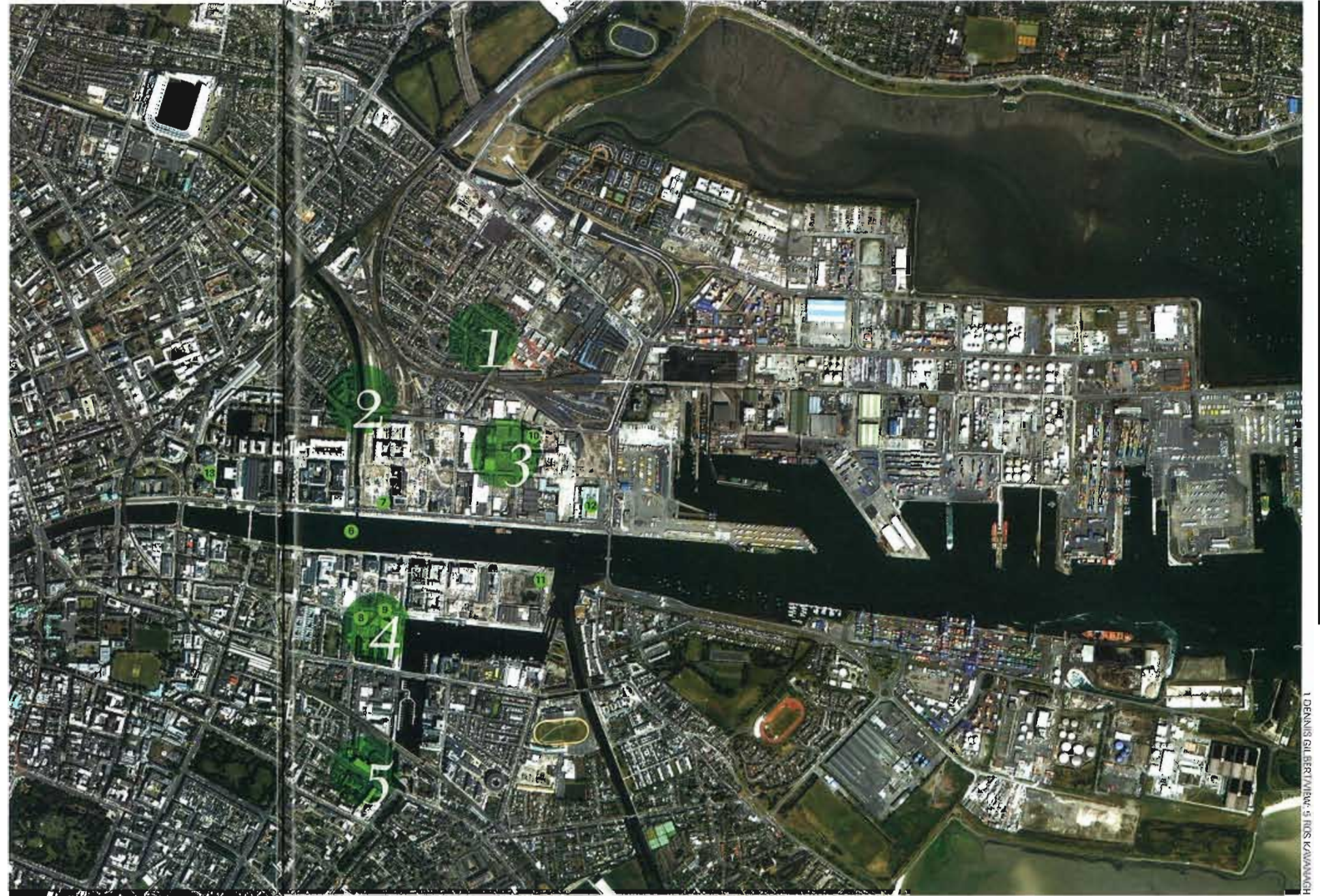


**D**ocklands developments around the UK have a familiar mix of oversized landmarks, blocky commercial developments and flats, leavened by the industrial legacy of warehousing. Dublin Docklands has all that. It feels like a high street pick'n'mix of the big boys of international architecture, with Foster+Partners' plans for the 120m U2 Tower, the Grand Canal Theatre by Studio Libeskind due to finish next year, and the global bombasts Santiago Calatrava and Kevin Roche competing for attention next to each other with Samuel Beckett Bridge and the National Conference Centre respectively.

Dublin's dockside regeneration has an added ingredient, however, in a social programme that is producing interesting projects from Irish architects, commissioned directly by the Docklands Development Authority. On the drawing board are schools by Dublin prac-

tices McCullough Mulvin and Sean Harrington. The Sean O'Casey Community Centre by O'Donnell+Tuomey shows where the ambition of tying together physical and social regeneration is succeeding. The project – well built, generous, with a delicately orchestrated plan interleaved with courtyards of silver birches – opens late this year. Its concrete tower, rising above the two-storey 1930s terraces of the East Wall area, has a symbolic power – linking the outlying district in to the increasingly high-rise developments of central Docklands.

The regeneration of the city's maritime heartland inevitably started with the area closest to the city centre, where construction of the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) got underway in 1988. Development followed along the broad but amenable waters of the River Liffey, and now the tendrils are moving outwards, with a linear park which will link



- Key**
- 1 Sean O'Casey Community Centre, O'Donnell + Tuomey, 2008
  - 2 Royal Canal Park, Agence Ter, 2010
  - 3 North Lotts masterplan, West 8
  - 4 Grand Canal Square, Martha Schwartz, 2007
  - 5 Altro Vetro, Shay Cleary, 2008
  - 6 Samuel Beckett Bridge, Santiago Calatrava, 2010
  - 7 National Convention Centre, Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates, 2011
  - 8 Grand Canal Theatre, Studio Libeskind, 2009
  - 9 Hotel, Aires Mateus, 2008
  - 10 Liffey Trust, Shay Cleary Architects, 2008
  - 11 U2 Tower, Foster and Partners
  - 12 The Point/02, HOK Sport, 2008
  - 13 Abbey Theatre, design competition, autumn 2008





**Sean O'Casey  
Community Centre**  
Theatre, sports hall, creche, daycare – this centre serves many elements of the East Wall community. The quadrants of the plan neatly keep each use discrete. Links are provided by green internal courtyards and a mature, shared architectural language of simple but rich materials designed by O'Donnell + Tuomey. The 2000m<sup>2</sup> building with its tower gives East Wall its own piece of physical regeneration visible from other areas in Docklands.

▶ the East Wall community to the central area.

The desire to make Docklands into a liveable and attractive extension of Dublin created a conflict between different uses and needs and developers' returns versus quality design. Special planning powers allow swift approval for schemes which comply with detailed masterplan requirements and development is also encouraged by corporation tax incentives, initially introduced for the IFSC.

London Docklands Development Corporation was the model for Dublin Docklands Development Authority, which was established in 1997, but the Irish incarnation was set ambitious social regeneration targets. It insisted on 20% affordable housing when that was still radical policy for Ireland. As reports emerged on population churn and the attendant problems, the strategy changed to an emphasis on family homes and social provision to encourage a more stable community.

The latest masterplan for the 520ha Dock-

lands was drawn up by Irish practice Murray O'Laoire and is out for consultation. Creating places for families was one priority; the other was finding a new consensus on height. Seán O'Laoire, who has worked on Docklands from the earliest redevelopment plans in the 1980s to the latest masterplan, says: 'There has always been a very conservative view on height. And there still is today. The 25m height is dominant, aimed at reflecting the Georgian city.' This six-storey 'crew cut' has produced block forms with a repetitive, even stultifying, effect over a large area, despite the identification of four key sites for tall landmark buildings.

The two issues of height and family provision have come together in a local masterplan for the North Lotts area, drawn up with West 8. But first let's meet John McLaughlin, director of architecture for Dublin Docklands Development Authority. He grew up in Dublin but spent 12 years working with the French architect Gaudin and, in London, Lifschutz David-

son and Pringle Richards Sharratt. When he arrived at the docklands authority in 2004, one of his first moves was to order the redesign of Grand Canal Square. Out went the dull granite sets and in came red poles and deep angled planters designed by Martha Schwartz. It signalled a significant change: public spaces were going to have to work harder, not just to convince developers and prospective tenants that this was a safe place to invest but to make Docklands a remarkable new part of the city. 'I wanted to make it more architectural,' says McLaughlin. The next year will see the openings of two international projects on the square – Libeskind's Grand Canal Theatre and a hotel with striking chequerboard facade by the Portuguese practice Aires Mateus.

That was just the beginning for McLaughlin. The authority has helped private developers to invest €2.5bn over the past five years. It has handled land remediation, parcelled up plots and, perhaps most importantly, offered a

strong planning framework. Developers complying with that framework have a planning certainty that is otherwise impossible under the normal Irish system. McLaughlin has overseen Murray O'Laoire's masterplan and intends to reconfigure the huge Poolbeg Peninsula, site of city infrastructure such as utilities and incinerators as well as rich estuarine habitats. Now, in North Lotts, he is experimenting with a new strategy on heights and open space.

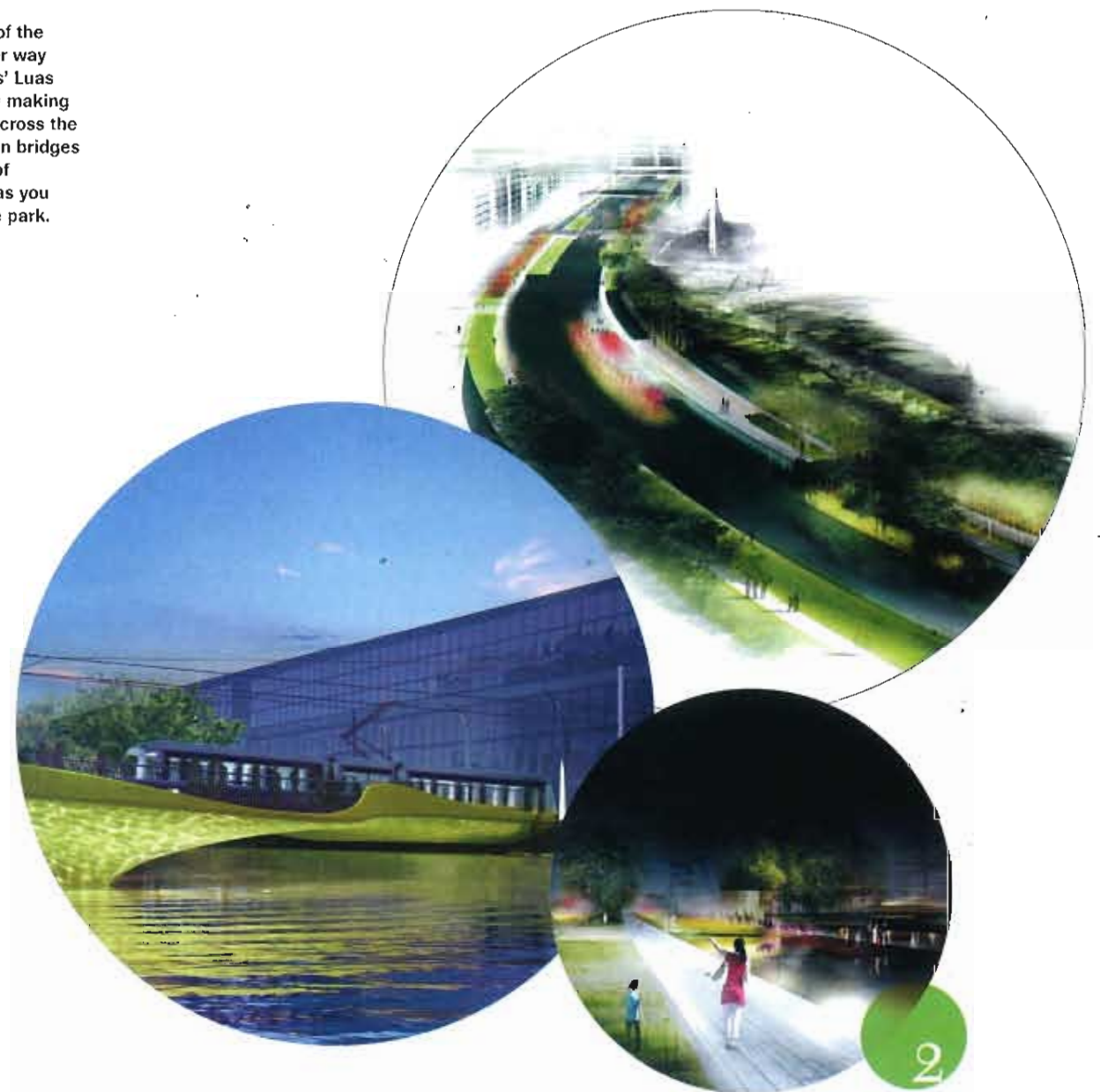
The idea is to allow more flexible allocation of height in return for design quality and public space. This should give the area a different character. As well as being a priority for McLaughlin, public space is embedded in the Dublin Docklands Development Authority remit of social regeneration. Two linear parks, the first along the newly restored Royal Canal, the second driving up into the community of East Wall, should help the economic benefits

of regeneration to spread further across the Docklands. A new canal – 'technically a water feature', admits McLaughlin – will create valuable water frontage and an area with its own island identity.

So how could height work in Dublin? The southern side of Docklands has the city's highest homes so far: a delicious tower by Shay Cleary Architects on Grand Canal Quay, Altro Vetro. The 16-storey project shows the impact height can have. It fills the site of a small detached house, just 170m<sup>2</sup>, so the space is tight. There is something of a ship's quarters about the two flats shoehorned on to every floor, each with views over Docklands and the Dublin Mountains beyond the city – perfect corporate lets. The crisp glazed curtain wall is punctured by apparently random balconies. It would be great if the North Lotts development could sustain this quality of building.

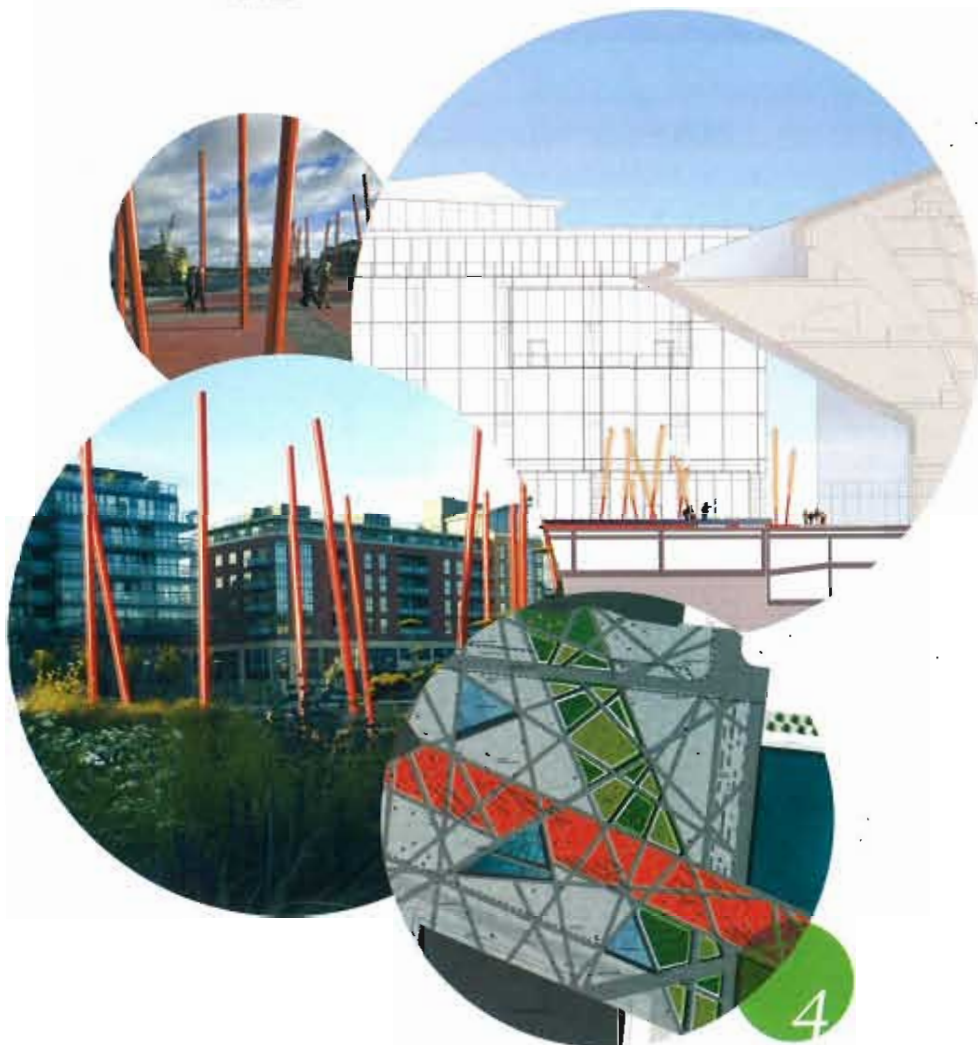
Shay Cleary is also nearing completion on ▶

**Royal Canal Park**  
Greening the edge of the Royal Canal is under way with Future Systems' Luas Bridge (bottom left) making a new connection across the dock. Smaller Corten bridges will connect areas of different character as you walk up through the park.





**North Lotts masterplan**  
The plan shows ideas for creating a new island north of the River Liffey and a linear park connecting the area of East Wall to the river. Less visible is the change in regime on height which could give it a more varied character.



**Grand Canal Square**  
Designed by Martha Schwartz, the square's red poles and planters take their cue from Studio Libeskind's forthcoming neighbouring theatre. It has already played host to music and theatre events.



► a quite different kind of building. The two-storey Liffey Trust enterprise centre, which will assist new businesses, is financed by apartments in two six-storey finger blocks. The building will include a performing arts school. There is a concerted effort to boost Docklands' cultural attractions, including refurbishment of the Point, the famous music venue, due to be renamed o2.

The Abbey Theatre is also moving from the city centre and has embarked on a design competition for its 24,000m<sup>2</sup> venue. The judges line-up is a strong one, including Edward Jones and Michael Hopkins, the actress Fiona Shaw and, of course, McLaughlin.

This is unusually upfront participation for McLaughlin, whose role is more often about persuading, encouraging and cajoling. Having worked as an architect, he misses the detail of joining one material to another, but his work offers other rewards. 'It's like teaching,' he says. 'I am shepherding others.'

Docklands' success has come from promising developers an easy ride, parcelling up land and handing out permissions. But McLaughlin has ambitions for quality design that extends beyond landmark buildings. 'We have given too much certainty to the developer. We will link the quantum of development to good architecture,' he says. The better the design, the more you can make out of it, is his message.

Seán O'Laoire is looking forward to many of the buildings not yet out of the ground: 'It will be more dynamic architecture. Developers are increasingly recognising the value of quality and innovation. There is a demand for developers to demonstrate architecture that will comply not just with the letter of the law but also the spirit of the law.'

Hopefully this will happen in spite of the ugly economic conditions, so that the Docklands can continue the richness of tradition in Dublin rather than churning out an identikit waterside.

**Altro Vetro**  
As the tallest residential building in Dublin, Shay Cleary's tower connects with views of the hills beyond the city. Its crisp cladding, with sharp little balconies popping out of the flats, makes it an attractive new landmark for Docklands.