

# mad about the buoy

TRINITY BUOY WHARF IN EAST INDIA DOCK WAS ONCE A GRIM INDUSTRIAL CENTRE. NOW IT IS BEING TRANSFORMED INTO A VIBRANT ARTISTS' COMMUNITY, WITH OLD SHIPPING CONTAINERS PUT TO CREATIVE NEW USES.

REPORT BY **SABA SALMAN**

Style and innovation may not be the first words that spring to mind when talking about shipping containers, but they describe Container City perfectly. This scheme, a mixture of artists' studios and workshops created from old cargo containers, is the centrepiece of the new creative quarter taking shape at Trinity Buoy Wharf.

In an eco-friendly age, when waste and excess are frowned upon, Container City is the perfect symbol of our recycling times. Its space-age boxes sit boldly but comfortably alongside Trinity Buoy Wharf's Grade II-listed industrial buildings, and since May 2001, they have been providing workspace for around 55 artists.

Trinity Buoy Wharf may be familiar to moviegoers as a location for the Bond film *The World Is Not Enough*. It is a Victorian industrial complex that is situated just across the river Thames from the site of the Millennium Dome. Prince Charles is a fan of the place, and last year was vociferous in his praise of the imagination that has gone into its recreation.

He particularly commended the conversion of the Grade II-listed Chainstore, the largest of the surviving 19th-century buildings on site, which also incorporates the only lighthouse in

London. It was formerly used for the repair of chains and cables, and is now leased to the ultra-fashionable artists' cooperative Artangel, which is using it as the location for a sound installation.

Trinity Buoy Wharf boasts several handsome Victorian industrial buildings, storage spaces and workshops, many of them traditionally used for constructing and storing buoys; they are undergoing conversion into performance spaces, studios and multi-media workshops. The lighthouse is of particular interest: created for the purpose of training lighthouse keepers in the 19th century, it was also used by the scientist Michael Faraday for his experiments with electricity and for testing his theories about optical phenomena.

Trinity House was the lighthouse authority for the entire coast of England and Wales, and owned the site from 1803 until 1988, when it was taken over by the London Docklands Development Corporation. The LDDC created a trust to safeguard the future of Trinity Buoy Wharf, and chose Urban Space Management (USM) to develop the area. When the LDDC was wound up in 1998, USM took over with a challenging brief to create a dynamic artists' community in a four-year programme.

USM started its urban revitalisations more than 20 years ago with the transformation of Camden Lock. Managing director, Eric Reynolds, turned the derelict north London canal site into a successful inner-city market – and one of London's top tourist attractions. Under Reynolds, USM has also redeveloped Spitalfields and St Katharine's Dock in Wapping. Reynolds believes that in order to create a bustling development that will integrate itself with the local community and will generate long-term economic value, you need creativity, individual enterprise, and the involvement of the arts.

Although Trinity Buoy Wharf is an artists' colony of sorts, Hoxton (with which some have compared it) this is not. It is grittier, with a





more atmospheric feel. 'Hoxton is trendy and expensive. We're not expensive,' Reynolds says. 'Hoxton has become an entertainment centre, Trinity Buoy Wharf is more peaceful. We hope there will be entertainment on site in time, but for now it's a working place for artists.'

Reynolds' vision for Trinity Buoy Wharf is for it to be a destination in its own right, as well as a working centre for the arts and crafts. 'I hope there will be lots more people wandering around enjoying the place, and that it will remain a fairly open space. We want people feeling that they can use it as an "urban park", without it being a literal park. There are no trees, this is a hard-looking landscape, but it is an environment you can relax in and we are creating more public spaces.' There are plans to introduce cafés, bars and even student housing.

The area is currently accessible via bus or the DLR, at East India Dock. However, schemes are underway to create a new pier, which will connect the Wharf to the river, and a bridge over the River Lea. 'We should have a pier next year,' says Reynolds. 'That will be a major step in making the area a destination. The bridge will allow us to have a bus and connect us to the Jubilee Line. That will create a vibrant buzz and a knock-on effect locally as the area develops.'

Trinity Buoy Wharf's centrepiece, Container City, was designed by architect Nicholas Lacey. He transformed the bulky cargo boxes by welding them together and cutting windows in them. The ground floors offers disabled access, and the top two studios have balconies. Phase one of Container City consists of 15 40-foot containers stacked on three levels, which have created 4,800

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square feet of space and provided 12 studios. Phase two will result in another 30 studios. Construction costs are low as the buildings are made of recycled materials and rents are cheap – a 300 square foot space costs from £50 to £80 per month to rent. The units are quick to build, usually finished within eight weeks, and each is slightly different outside, with timber cladding, glazed patterns or paint finishes. Inside each container, space can be split according to need.

One indication of the scheme's popularity is the waiting list: 70 people have their names down for spaces. Lacey believes Container City is a model of how to rejuvenate similar sites across the capital. 'It's bringing lots of life to a part of Tower Hamlets that was not used much before. We should explore the potential of recycled containers, other ways of using them.'

Reynolds is already turning his thoughts to how to repeat the success of Trinity Buoy Wharf and Container City elsewhere. 'This is how we should be moving, creating community assets to the public's advantage. There are lots of leftover bits of London, such as ex-dairy sites.' It may be an old saying, but it is highly appropriate to Trinity Buoy Wharf: watch this space.

*Trinity Buoy Wharf, 64 Orchard Place, E14. For viewings or information contact Urban Space Management, T: 020 7515 7153; F: 020 7531 9786*

**Action all areas (clockwise from top left):** an artist's studio; circus performers hang out in a rehearsal space; the sparks fly as a metalworker gets down to business; 'A Quiet Afternoon in Cloud Cuckoo Valley' by the renowned artist Rowland Emmett undergoes restoration in one of the workshops; local artist Gillian Burrows puts the final touches on a painting of the Millennium Dome; the only lighthouse in London keeps a lookout