

# Best show in town

It's on the biggest stage in London, it has audiences of 35,000 a day and it gets wild reviews from all who see it. Stuart Black reports on construction's smash hit. Photographs by Daniel Thistlethwaite

THE CROWD CONTAINS A CURIOUS MIX of people, even for London. There are the tourists, of course, looking like a multilingual army of amateur film-makers, but what are they doing with the pinstriped professionals from the financial services industry? And where do all those mud-streaked builders fit in?

What they have in common is that they form a rapt audience for the greatest show in London. At Canary Wharf, the construction industry has transformed itself from an oddly furtive enterprise – always hiding behind wooden hoardings – into a public drama.

The spectacle they are all watching is the creation of Canary Wharf South. Five high-rise office blocks designed by superstar tower architects Skidmore Owings Merrill, Kohn Pedersen Fox and Cesar Pelli are part of a development that will also include a vast underground shopping centre and a new park. It has become a crowd-pleaser because of its location: sunk 19 m below the level of the dock behind huge cofferdams, it is easy to see the action from the elevated platform of the Docklands Light Railway station adjacent to the site. Every day, tourists and commuters alike crowd the railings to watch workers hurry through a forest of latticed steel and concrete.

The Cox family from Bromley have made the trip to Docklands to share the experience with their grandmother, Liz, on holiday from Scotland. From the piazza in front of Canary Wharf they

**How can such light things do such heavy work? It's like ballet – so elegant**

Liz Cox on Canary Wharf's cranes

have been gazing south at the throng of cranes and buildings. Liz admits to a sudden enthusiasm for crane-spotting. "It's amazing," she says. "It's difficult to understand how such light things can do such heavy work. It's like ballet – so elegant."

Her grandsons Jamie, 7, and Stewart, 9, are wearing sunglasses bought by their mother so they can look at the towers of reflective glass without being dazzled. "I wanted to see the winking tower," says Jamie, pointing to Cesar Pelli's iconic pyramid-tipped design. He is also impressed by its two new neighbours, the 210 m tall HSBC and Citigroup skyscrapers, which were topped out in March. But the cranes are the best things; he has been counting them and recounting them all morning – the latest figure is 32.

People find the 4.5 ha site fascinating. Teachers bring parties of children to ▶



This page and opposite: The huge site at Canary Wharf South, as seen from Heron Quays Station on the DLR.

Building 8 June 2001



Left: Jamie Cox (left) and his brother Stewart on a trip to see the Canary Wharf South site and the "winking tower".  
Below: Cranes tower over the DLR platform.



► Look at work in progress; tourists add to the crush of 35,000 DLR passengers who get a view of the changing panorama every day.

Canary Wharf spokesperson Suzanne Wild confirms that the construction site is now firmly on the east London tourist route. She is inundated with requests for information from school parties and tourist groups. "The majority of enquiries are from tourist guides asking what's going on on the site," she adds.

Looked at from this perspective, the industry's assumption that the public see it as boring and unglamorous is hard to understand. Peter Murray of branding and communications agency Wordsearch says the industry should do more to exploit this interest. "I don't think the fact that people come to look at building sites shows much about construction's image; it shows more about the industry's lack of interest in its public image," he says. "The excitement of sites is undeniable, yet contractors feel they're generous if they provide a wired hole for passers-by to look through."

Murray says contractors should provide viewing platforms from which the public can watch in safety. He also suggests that contractors use hoardings to offer more information on what is happening, and set up marketing suites to tell the public what's going on.

"The French are very good at this," he says. "If you go the Rive Gauche development around the new Bibliothèque Nationale, there are posters up all over the place explaining what is going on."

## I come up here every day. It is different each time. It gets bigger and noisier with more people

José, Canary Wharf worker

Back at the wharf, circumstances have been kind enough to confirm Murray's analysis, with Heron Quays DLR station acting as a perfect viewing platform. Among the onlookers is Yoshiko, from Osaka, Japan, whose boyfriend suggested that she come, and art students Helen and Sarah. "We came down here to photograph the two new buildings, but found all this stuff. I wish I'd brought another film," says Helen.

Walk the 100 m or so to Foster and Partners' Jubilee Line station and another of Murray's comments is supported by Hendrik, a venture capitalist who moved to the area in September. He is looking at a display of computer-generated images showing how the development will look when finished.

"I get excited whenever I get to the station and wonder if there are going to be any more cranes, or another layer on the structures," he says. "It is interesting to see the pictures down here, then try

to locate where they'll be on the site. I wouldn't mind seeing models as well."

Even those working in the area every day are not blasé about what is rising around them. José, who works in a sandwich shop has been charting the changes. "I come up here every day," he says. "It is different each time. It gets bigger and noisier with more and more people. It's pretty crazy."

Roger, who runs a coffee stall and newsagent underneath Heron Quays station, agrees. "It is a technological feat," he says. "And the work is incredible to watch."

Terry, who sells the *Evening Standard* nearby, has a less elevated perspective. He is looking forward to the completion of the present phase in 2003. "There'll be something like 19,000 people working in the area. Coming out at night, it'll be like Wembley after a match. I might sell a few papers ..."

As Vivian, a station assistant for London Underground, explains, the shared fascination in the development is drawing together everyone who works or lives nearby – and many who don't. "All kinds of people are stopping to look at the plans and ask what's going on." So if the industry wants to win a few more hearts and minds, it seems, all it has to do is to tell them.

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