

Woolwich Creative District

Woolwich Arsenal was a serious production facility from the late 17th century. Rab Bennetts tells the story of its re-emergence

There is evidence of Thames-side armaments manufacture and storage at Woolwich from Elizabethan times, but the establishment of Woolwich Arsenal as a serious production facility dates from the late 17th century. Production ebbed and flowed with the enmity between countries and empires at war and, by the early years of the 20th century, a 'walled city' supplying the army and navy covered 1300 acres and employed 100,000 people - enough for a top flight football team that moved to north London in 1913.

First world war bombing raids revealed the vulnerability of such a large single site and ordnance manufacture was subsequently dispersed within the UK, but production of weapons and ammunition continued on the site until after the Korean war in the 1950s. It's staggering to think that the UK's first atomic bomb was developed within the densely populated fringes of London.

Land disposals followed in the '50s and '60s to the east of Woolwich itself, the area that eventually became Thamesmead

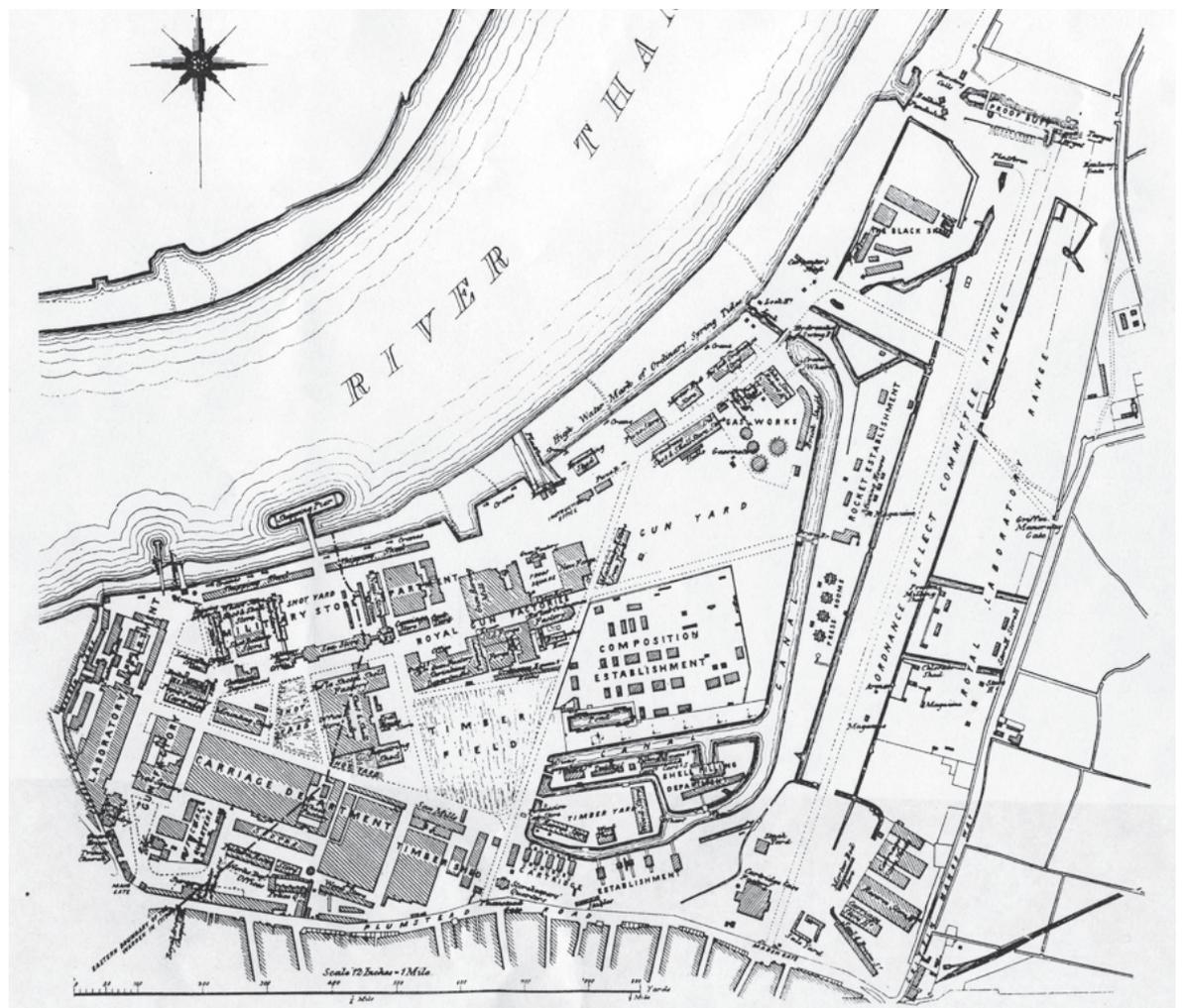
new town. My first 'proper' job was in fact as a year-out student at the Greater London Council within the planning and infrastructure team at Thamesmead in 1974-5, creating a network of cycle-paths, canals and walkways out of the industrial landscape left behind from the moated ammunition stores, firing ranges and loading docks. Thamesmead itself is a fable of post-war planning, with a heroic modernist vision that was gradually undermined by declining political will at the GLC (and by the fallout from Clockwork Orange which was filmed there!), but much of the 1970s infrastructure remains. One item that failed to materialise, though, was the Thames Crossing, which I recall was shown on the 1970s plans as 'to be completed by 1990'.

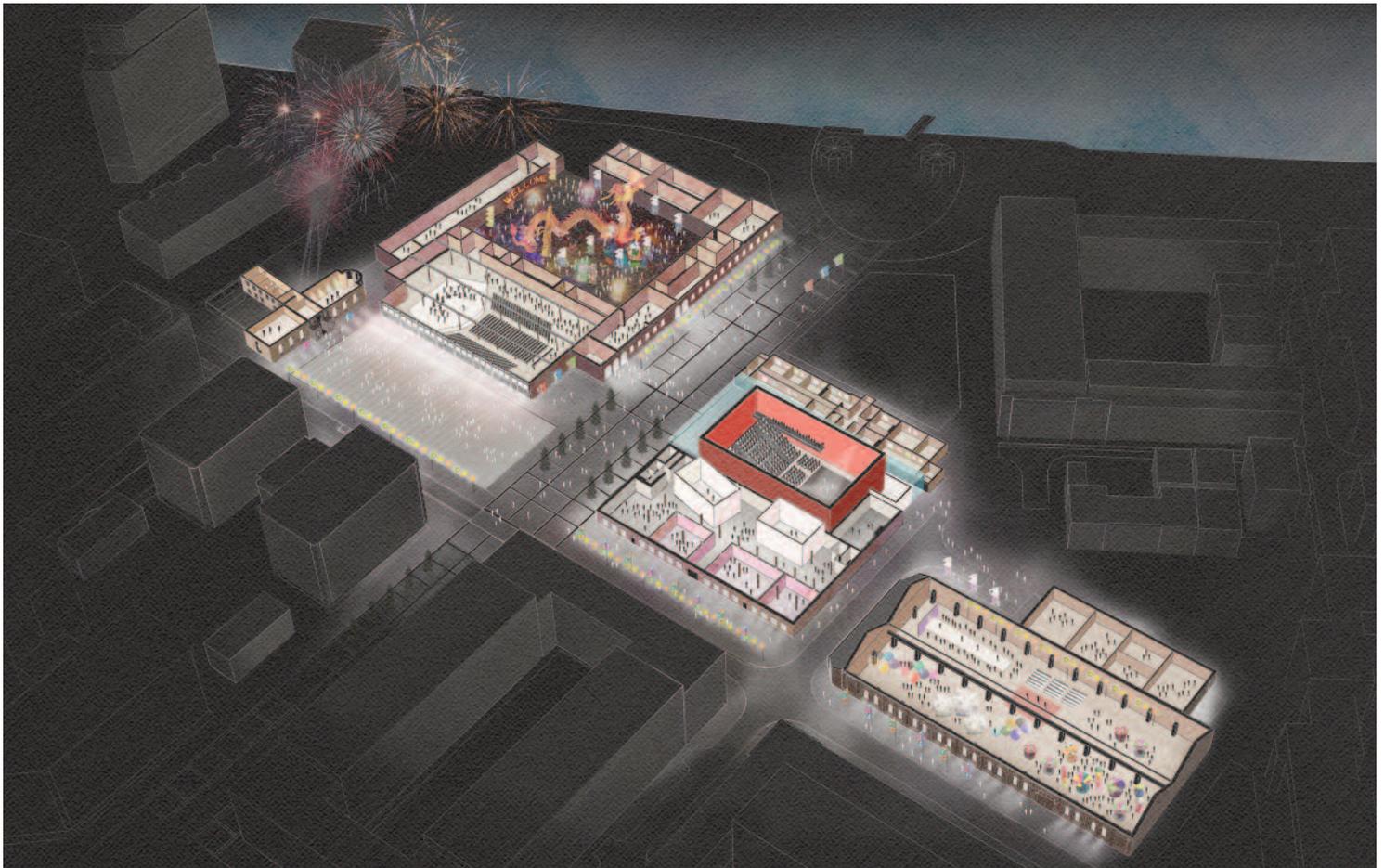
London is still waiting for the Thames Crossing, but recent schemes to add new mixed-tenure developments to Thamesmead hold out the promise of a future with far greater vitality.

Parts of the central area of Woolwich Arsenal remained in use for administrative functions, but many of the unique 18th



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and 19th century production buildings were pulled down after production ceased, long before the heritage and cultural potential of large-scale redundant industrial sites became apparent. Much of the central area is now being redeveloped by Berkeley Homes, who are well-advanced with a scheme to provide 5,000 new homes, together with shops, restaurants and an expansive public realm. Berkeley's timing is significant, as the regeneration area not only boasts a 1km riverfront and proximity to London City Airport but also a Crossrail station, which is due to open in 2018. The regenerative impact of such powerful transport links - hard won through political lobbying after the initial route did not include a station in Woolwich - could hardly be clearer.

Berkeley have converted or extended some of the surviving buildings for apartments and cafes, but a distinguished group of five existing buildings has been retained for public uses between the Thames and the site's imposing entrance gateway close to Woolwich town centre. In the last few years various proposals for these buildings have come and gone, partly due to economic conditions but also because of the sheer scale of the challenge. Now the Royal Borough of Greenwich has launched a visionary project to bring all five buildings back into use and place Woolwich at the forefront of arts and culture in London. As its name - the Woolwich Creative District - suggests, this is to be a cluster of energy and creativity, with resident performing arts companies mixed with visiting theatre groups, orchestras, dance companies and visual artists. The size and ambition of the scheme are socially and economically important for the immediate locality but are also hugely significant for London and beyond. Comparisons with the South

Bank Centre, the new facilities at Battersea and 'Olympicopolis' are self-evident, but the European dimension invites cultural links to large-scale, mixed use arts facilities in Paris, Madrid, Nantes and Duisburg to name but a few. The common factor is the re-use of adaptable industrial buildings for innovative public installations and performances serving a wide range of communities, in surroundings that are a world away from more conventional 'establishment' venues.

Two of the five buildings, all of which are listed, have a domestic scale that is suitable for studios, rehearsal or museum functions. The other three are far larger, with magnificent, multiple-bay production halls that could accommodate performances for 500-1000 people supported by 'pop-up' enclosures and support facilities. The essential character of heavy walls and light roofs, designed for the possibility of explosions, is something to exploit. Well-lit from above, with delightful steel trusses that defy gravity, the quality of the spaces invites intimate, colourful enclosures or epic open-plan performances. A public acoustic test with a full orchestra this September this year has already revealed exceptional acoustics in at least one of the unconverted buildings. Improvisation, so much a part of successful theatre, will be an obligation for performers and the design team alike.

The team led by Bennetts Associates is to convert the building shells into viable venues, with incoming resident companies generally carrying out their ephemeral fit-out themselves. The timetable is brisk and the first performances are expected in 2019, just after Crossrail connects Woolwich Arsenal to a potential audience of millions. ■

[SEE images next page >>>](#)



Client:
Royal Borough of Greenwich

Architect and Lead Consultant:
Bennetts Associates

Conservation Architect: Consarc

Engineers: Buro Happold

Theatre Consultant: Sound Space Vision

Acoustic Consultant: Gillieron Scott

