

This project for creating a community arts centre in a threatened canalside warehouse in London's East End shows how effective architects can be in the community, and the importance of the pump-priming role of the RIBA Community Projects Fund. Nick Wates reports.

# LOCAL HERO

If it was not for architect Ben Derbyshire, a sturdy late nineteenth century warehouse known as Victoria Park Wharf would shortly be demolished and the site grassed over as the latest addition to the drastic, and now almost completed, 1940s Abercrombie plan for carving a strip of parkland through the East End of London. Instead, the warehouse is likely to become a community controlled arts centre, providing local people with much needed recreation and arts facilities and giving a focus to a park which might otherwise have proved somewhat sterile.

## The architect as catalyst

The project's fate will be determined over the next few weeks by Tower Hamlets Borough Council, and the GLC which is responsible for the park. If it overcomes these hurdles—and the signs are hopeful—it will be an excellent example of the catalytic role that architects, backed up by the RIBA Community Projects Fund, can play in starting up creative local projects.

The Community Projects Fund was started two years ago, half its money coming from the DOE. Since it began, 60 community projects have received grants which are intended to act as pump-primers by providing money for architects' feasibility studies. However, if the projects go ahead the money has to be returned.

## No ivory towers

Victoria Park Wharf is made of yellow stock bricks with Staffordshire blue brick window sills and cast iron window frames, and is a fine, robust example of late nineteenth century industrial architecture.

Derbyshire—an associate of Hunt Thompson Associates—lives near the warehouse and was dismayed to discover that it was earmarked for demolition. So he set about finding a way of integrating it into the proposed park.

His vision of some form of community arts use was greeted with enthusiasm by both Tower Hamlets and the GLC. The difficulty was how to develop a concrete, viable scheme with sufficient political backing to persuade the GLC to reverse its demolition plans. Derbyshire soon gained two key allies: the leader of Tower Hamlets council, Paul Beasley and the arts officer, Peter Conway. Both

immediately saw the sense of Derbyshire's plans but advised that the project would only succeed if it was clearly shown to be relevant to local needs and had public support.

In October 1982 Derbyshire and his wife pushed handwritten leaflets through 2500 local letter-boxes, advertising a public meeting to discuss the project. Over 100 people attended—a figure which amazed local planners used to attendances of less than a dozen people for meetings on the borough plan. After a slide show of ideas by Derbyshire the meeting voted overwhelmingly to pursue the project.

The next stage was to decide precisely what kind of centre it should be. Too many community centres fail because the activities provided are not what the local population want. The trust still had no funds but obtained a £500 grant from the Community Projects Fund. This went towards the costs of a reply-paid questionnaire aimed at finding out the most popular uses for the building. The survey revealed considerable support for retaining the warehouse, particularly as a centre for the arts.

## Artful proposal

On the strength of this quantifiable demonstration of public support, the Mile End Park Steering Committee (comprising councillors from the GLC, Tower Hamlets, Hackney and the City) decided to pay Hunt Thompson £3000 to do a more detailed feasibility study for a multi-purpose community arts centre. Based on the survey results and completed earlier this year, Hunt Thompson's feasibility study proposes a conversion comprising a hall capable of seating 225 people, five workshop/studios, exhibition space, a

bookshop, licensed bar and snack bar, and back-up storage and other facilities. Activities envisaged include exhibitions, drama performances, art classes, cinema, music, craft shows, playgroups and a pensioners' club.

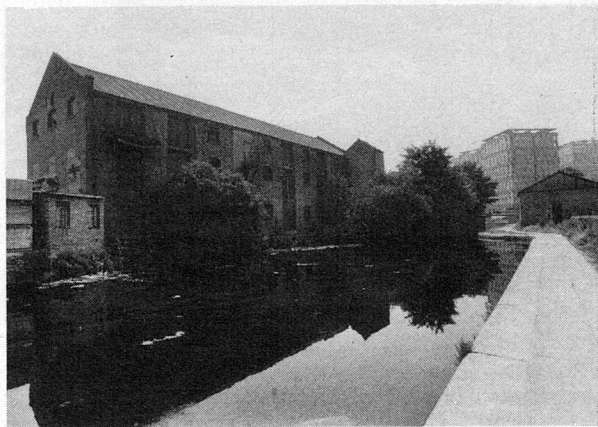
Running costs are estimated at £96 000, a least a third of which should be recouped by commercial letting. The remainder is being sought from Tower Hamlets council and the GLC.

Capital costs are estimated at £513 000; some 20 per cent lower than for a new-build scheme of similar volume. 'Buildings like these provide the sort of spaces that are needed for such uses naturally and economically,' comments Derbyshire. This money is being sought from the Government's urban programme and from funds allocated to the park by the GLC, from whom the building will be leased.

To bring the project to this stage Hunt Thompson—and Derbyshire in particular—have done an immense amount of speculative work, in design, promotion and political lobbying. The RIBA grant of £500 was 'fantastically helpful' according to Derbyshire, particularly as it gave the project credibility. But it covered only a third of the costs of the survey alone; the feasibility study has also cost roughly three times the £3000 provided by the Mile End Park Steering Committee, leading Derbyshire to conclude that community projects are only possible for architects doing other work as well. 'To be done justice, jobs such as this require an amount of time and energy which I couldn't conceive if all my jobs were like this.'

## The importance of being local

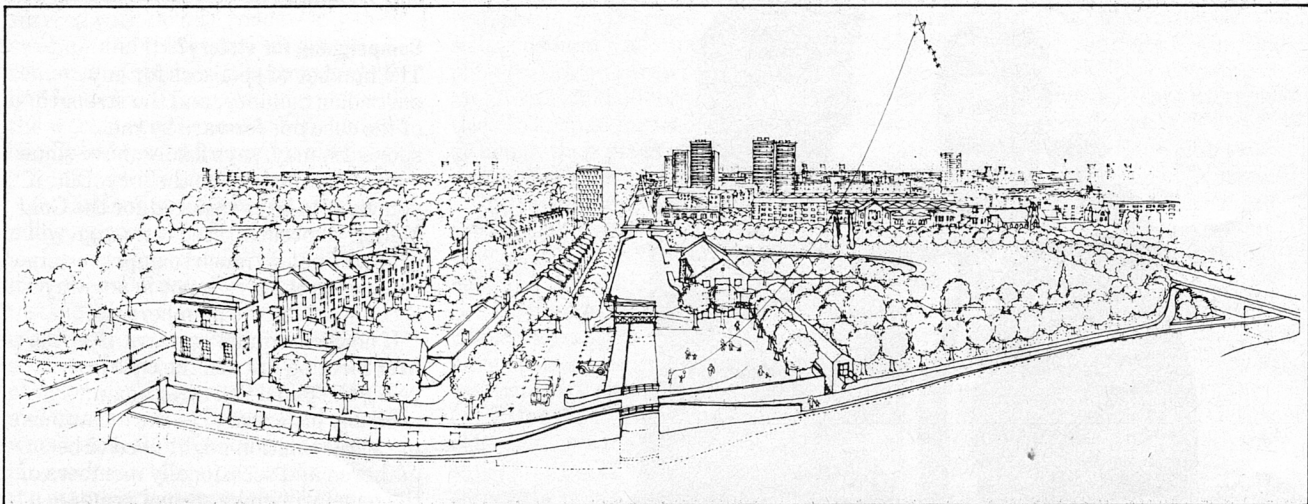
Living locally was the key to Derbyshire identifying the opportunity presented by the warehouse in the first place; linking it with the needs of the community and then being able to make something happen. His role as architect, promoter, client organiser and local resident could not have been performed by architects working for either of the local authorities. 'The GLC landscape architect is an extremely sensitive man,' Derbyshire says, 'but he doesn't operate in contact with the people round here. His terms of reference are to landscape the park along the lines of the Abercrombie plan. He can't be expected to do more than that unless he lives here.'



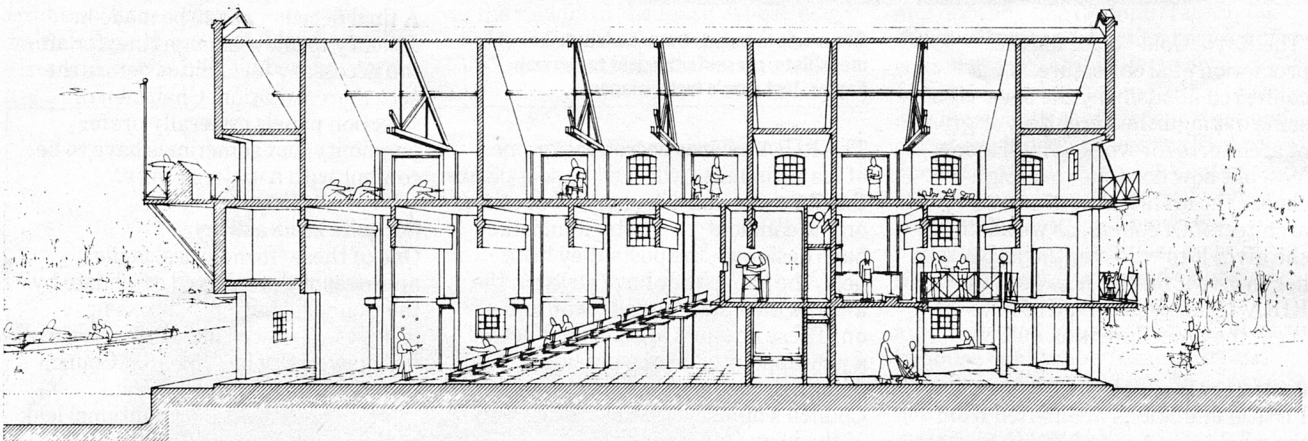
**1 Victoria Park Wharf now. Architect Ben Derbyshire claims that buildings like this provide the spaces needed for recreation and arts facilities 'naturally and economically'.**



**2 Victoria Park Wharf shown centre, on the canal and in its existing context.**

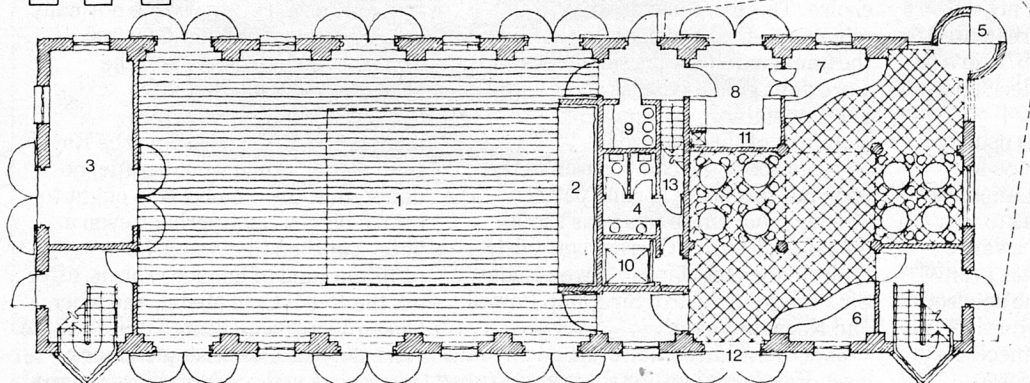


**3 Perspective, prepared by Ben Derbyshire, showing how the wharf could be incorporated into the newly created park.**



**4 Section through the wharf showing proposed conversion.**

0 1 2 3 4 5m



- 1 Multi-purpose hall to accommodate 250 people, 125 seated
- 2 Retractable seating for 100 people
- 3 Store/workroom
- 4 Lavatories
- 5 Entrance
- 6 Ticket sales/bookings, book stall
- 7 Coffee/snack bar
- 8 Kitchen
- 9 Bar store
- 10 Lift
- 11 Dumb waiter
- 12 Access to quayside
- 13 Store

**5 Ground floor plan.**