



A BEACON OF LIGHT

Trinity Buoy Wharf is East London's blueprint for a sustainable creative-led ecosystem

Words: Jessica Furseth / Photos: Ahmad El Mad

Trinity Buoy Wharf really is out of the way, cut off from its Docklands neighbours by so much water and road that it might as well be on an island – people used to phone from the station to ask for directions. Fortunately, this is exactly the sort of location that lends itself to becoming an arts hub in East London – a piece of the city in a hard-to-reach corner where there's plenty of room to spread out and get messy, and no one will object if it gets a little loud.

Located on a narrow-necked peninsula between Canary Wharf and the Royal Docks, Trinity Buoy Wharf sits where the River Lea curls itself into the Thames. At first glance it's a compound of brick buildings and refurbished containers – this is the original boxpark model – with curious and colourful creative details at every corner. In an area increasingly dominated by tall blocks of flats, it's uplifting to encounter a place that feels so considered and in keeping with the area's maritime history.

Everything that happens at Trinity Buoy Wharf feels connected to the past – what this area used to be and is becoming, and what artists and creative forces have done to make East London such a vibrant place. Trinity Buoy Wharf has actually been here doing its thing for nearly 30 years, but even as buildings are rising at breakneck speed at every patch of the Docklands, refreshingly little is going to change here. Unlike many other arts hubs, where success means change, Trinity Buoy Wharf is going to keep offering space at very reasonable rents. So, how are they doing it?

Eric Reynolds, founding director of Urban Space Management, took over the derelict site in 1998 from the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC). They secured a 125 year lease – this security is a big part of it, but it's not the whole story. "We try to be an open air classroom, free and open to people," says Reynolds,



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as we wander about – anyone can visit and poke around. Over 700 people work at Trinity Buoy Wharf in one capacity or another, as there's a lot going on. There's the workspaces and exhibition rooms, but this is also home to London's only lighthouse (used to develop lighting equipment), and they maintain a small historic fleet of marine vessels. They also host several evocative arts pieces such as Jem Finer's Longplayer, a musical composition that started at the turn of the millennium and will continue without repetition for a thousand years.

It's peaceful out here by the water – it's term break, as otherwise this place would be filled with art students from the King's Foundation. The kids from the Faraday primary school, named for the Victorian luminary who worked on the site, usually keep things lively – they have their playground on the roof. Today there's a lot of people tinkering, whether it's on metal sculptures or on the SS Robin, the Victorian steam ship that's now part of Trinity Buoy Wharf's permanent operations. Sometimes it's rented out to film crews, or for events: Netflix hosted a series of immersive Stranger Things fan events here to mark the show's final season. But most of the time, the SS Robin is the place where four full-time conservators work, and where kids come to learn about how things used to be made by hand.

Reynolds is a veteran in the urban regeneration from the markets of Camden Lock, Spitalfields and Greenwich, but Trinity Buoy Wharf has a very different energy. "When we were selected [by the LDDC to run the operations] I said, if they were serious about making this a place for creative people, they shouldn't sell it. They should maintain control," says Reynolds. This resulted in the establishment of the Trinity Buoy Wharf Trust which holds the land, leasing it to Urban Space. "There's no public money involved. Everything is self-generated

out of this place. The deal is that 25% of the rent goes to the Trust, which uses it to support artists." This includes subsidising the English National Opera, which is still on site, as well as the arts programme, which includes the John Ruskin Prize and the Trinity Buoy Wharf Drawing Prize (the deadline for entry is coming up in June).

This is a practical place – buildings are put up quickly, elements are relocated as needed, and time is of the essence. "We have to meet the need while it's there," says Reynolds – when it's within their control, things happen fast. And when it's not

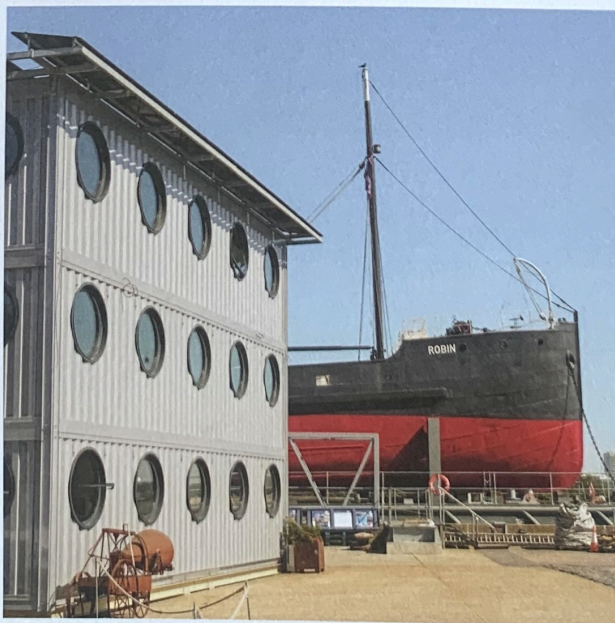


... let's just say collaboration could be running a lot more smoothly. But there's planning permission in place for two pedestrian bridges, to the east and north, which will do a lot for connectivity. Trinity Buoy Wharf is already a stop for the Thames Clippers riverboat service, as well as a parcel delivery ferry – Reynolds is tickled by this renewed focus on making practical use of the river.

Most of the time, the people at Trinity Buoy Wharf are free to work on what's important to them. "We really do the things that are interesting to us and our people," says Reynolds, pointing to the lightship that's now a commercial recording studio. The site is also home to London's first Container City, where colourful shipping containers are re-used to provide quick and easy offices and workspaces. A new building was delivered just before Christmas – it arrived by barge on the water and went up in a single day. The rent in the nice new studio is about £30 per sq ft, but some of the artists and musicians pay as little as £10. "The big organisations subsidise the small ones," says Reynolds –



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some of the artists have been here 20 years. "One of the things we said [when we took over] was that we wanted to avoid the normal position where artists go in, sort an area out, and then they are pushed out. We set up a different situation, so they can afford to be here as long as they want."

As unique as Trinity Buoy Wharf feels within London, Reynolds is careful to assert that this can be done elsewhere. "It's not clever – it's simple. We avoid waste, we keep it as low cost as possible, and that really is key. This way people can come and do interesting things."



Andrew Baldwin's curious metal sculptures that decorate the site are a visual reminder of this, as well as the regular cultural events held here. Among the things coming up next are works from Nicole Mollet, this year's artist in residence, and the 2026 Big Draw Festival in October.

Reynolds is optimistic about the future of Trinity Buoy Wharf – they're on solid ground. They're financially independent, they know who they are in the history of East London, they can make decisions without having to justify themselves, all while working at speed as the situation calls for it. Reynolds points to the central artwork in the square, a hackney carriage with an apple tree growing out of it. It's a nod to the site's origins as an orchard, and later, a destination for London taxi drivers seeking to pass the Knowledge. "It's called the Tree of Knowledge," says Reynolds – it went up quickly, without too much back and forth. "We just did it."

Find out more and discover what's on at: trinitybuoywharf.com

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