With its watery and derelict docks situated on an isolated peninsula almost entirely encircled by the River Thames, Canary Wharf in the 1980s was known to local residents as “The Island”. This nickname has stuck despite the area’s transformation into a financial centre today. Its giant, modern office blocks are at odds with the low-rise character of many London neighbourhoods, and its sole focus on commerce has attracted criticism of an “island mentality”. The starkly isolated area goes dead after office hours as there are no residents living there and neighbouring communities have no reason to venture in.

Planners are trying to remedy this with a new district alongside Canary Wharf that stitches together an authentic fabric of human living and restores a sense of local community. Formerly known as Wood Wharf, this 9.4 ha site is being master-planned by architecture and urban planning firm Allies and Morrison. They are placing residences and high-quality public and social spaces at the very heart of their plan for this new district, departing from the Canary Wharf Group’s conventional development approach. A remarkable 40 per cent of the land area is devoted to a network of inter-connected public spaces and gardens, which will include waterfront boardwalks that line long stretches of
the former docks. Residences will make up roughly half of the development, with offices and retailers making up the rest. When complete in 2023, more than 3,300 new homes will house 10,000 residents.

Residents will live and work in mid-density, lower-rise blocks with smaller floor-plates—a more “human-scaled” response to Canary Wharf’s crowded skyscrapers that have alienated many Londoners. To ‘soften’ the skyline, Allies and Morrison are proposing having a variety of building heights.

Buildings in the new district will avoid glass and steel in favour of brick and more textural materials, paying homage to the area’s centuries-old docklands history. Residents in this new district will also be allowed to continue an enduring tradition in London, and live on houseboats in adjacent Blackwall Basin. This respect for local culture and communities is central to the philosophy of Allies and Morrison, and has also been applied to its other masterplans for districts in London, Muscat, Beirut and Doha.

Key to the new district will be the way pedestrian bridges and its street network are designed to link it seamlessly with Canary Wharf, enabling people to move easily between one district and the other. The rest of London and the world will also be within easy reach: the new Crossrail line expected to launch in December means that Heathrow airport will be less than 40 minutes away. Locally, buildings will be made porous at street-level to enrich how people move around their neighbourhood. With retail and dining options also situated at street-level, it is hoped that this will bring a street life to the area—something which Canary Wharf sorely lacks.
What a master-planned commercial district needs is people; people who not only work there but also live and play in it.

Construction of the new district has commenced, and is expected to be complete by 2023. Source: Centre for Liveable Cities

The district also wants to provide more flexibility and verve in its local economy and work spaces. In contrast to the financial sector that dominates Canary Wharf, creatives and corporates alike will mingle and work alongside one another in the new district. Rather than be assigned a long-term fixed use, some buildings will be zoned to allow for uses to be changed over time. For example, an office block may evolve over years into a mixed-use block containing a hotel, health club, shops, offices, and homes.

What a master-planned commercial district needs is people; people who not only work there but also live and play in it. Allies and Morrison’s emphasis on public spaces, residences, and small-scaled architecture that is sensitive to local cultures, will bring a neighbourhood of people and homes into Canary Wharf. By making the area more human, and less discordant with the surrounding city, “The Island” will perhaps eventually lose its unfortunate nickname.
About the Writer

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About the CLC

The Centre for Liveable Cities was set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, based on a strategic blueprint developed by Singapore’s Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development. Guided by its mission to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities, the Centre’s work spans four main areas - Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms and Advisory.

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