

Designing the Greenwich Peninsula's Design District



26 MARCH 2021 BY RICHARD WAITE



Aerial visualisation of Greenwich Peninsula Design District

Eight different practices have designed Greenwich Peninsula's Design District, which opens this May. HNNA's Hannah Corlett spoke to *Richard Waite* about the challenges of co-ordinating the scheme

At the end of May the first 'creatives' will begin moving into the almost-complete Design District on a car-free 1ha site next to the O2 on the Greenwich Peninsula.



Rather than a single large building divided into studios, the Design District is a 'place, with streets, squares and lanes accessible to all'. All tenants will pay annual rents of just £5 per sq ft (£54 per m²) for the first 12 months.

Its 16 blocks have been designed by a who's who of up-and-coming talent and award-winning practices (see *box below*). They have given the blocks different exterior treatments to create a 'riot of unexpected contrasts' and a playful 'architectural anarchy'.

Among the practices commissioned by Hong Kong billionaire Henry Cheng Kar-Shun's development company Knight Dragon was Assemblage, which rebranded as HNNA in 2019 and is now led by Hannah Corlett (*pictured below*). One of its two

buildings (C3) will, along with the neighbouring Architecture 00 block (D1), house the Bureau – an affordable members’ club and flexible workspace designed with Roz Barr Architects.

But Corlett is also the creator and co-ordinator of the district’s ambitious masterplan. The AJ spoke exclusively to her about making the vision a reality and how she helped marshal a diverse group of architects to deliver London’s first permanent, purpose-built creative district.



So take us back to the beginning – how did you first get involved in this?

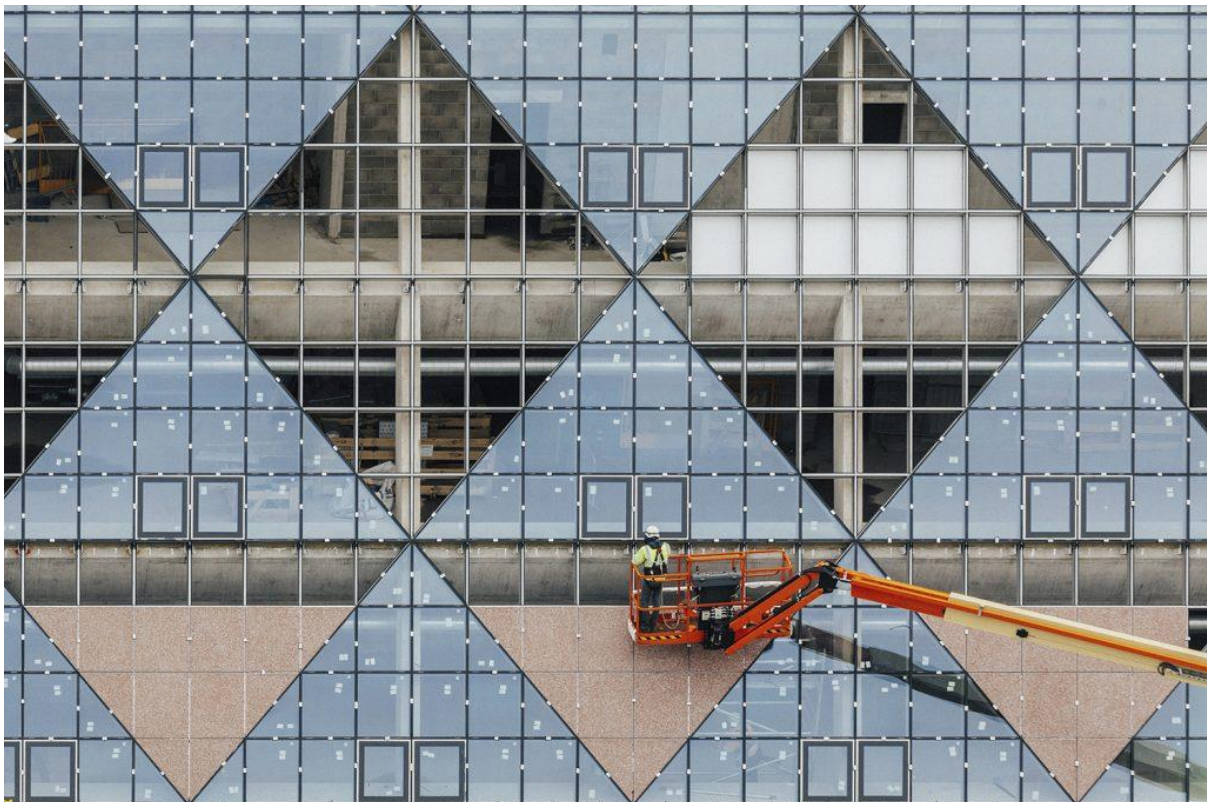
Knight Dragon bought Greenwich Peninsula with the vision of creating a thriving urban community. This was to include a film studio with an ecosystem of designers, makers, and innovators at its centre, creating a catalyst for the rest of the peninsula. Allies and Morrison created an overall masterplan for the redevelopment, and various architects tried to realise Knight Dragon’s vision to create a home for the creative community within this, but without finding the right solution. As we had worked with Allies and Morrison on the masterplan, Knight Dragon approached us directly to concentrate on the area that would become known as the Design District.

At the time I was also teaching a master’s programme at the Bartlett, UCL, researching historic development and counterculture. This included looking at how artists were often used as sacrificial catalysts for undesirable, often post-industrial, areas and then priced out once those areas had become covetable. Our research investigated how to prevent this cultural drain in our cities.

Knight Dragon wanted to give creatives a permanent sense of community. The only way that could work would be by remaining affordable. However, everyone understood that the district's value would be to the rest of the peninsula.

How did you find your co-ordination role?

Sitting both sides of the table, overseeing the masterplan and co-ordinating the architects as well as being one of them was challenging. The client only agreed to take the route of 16 buildings by eight different architects if HNNA stayed on board to co-ordinate the design and the architects. At the time there were more architects involved in the Design District than in the rest of the peninsula development. Each month, we held separate design development presentations in the style of university crits. The seven other architects presented to the client and to us but not each other. It was important that they felt free to innovate around the brief independently, while we were there to ensure the district worked collectively. It meant we could co-ordinate and flex the designs but they kept their individual identities.



One of 6a Architects' two buildings on the campus

Photography: Taran Wilkhu

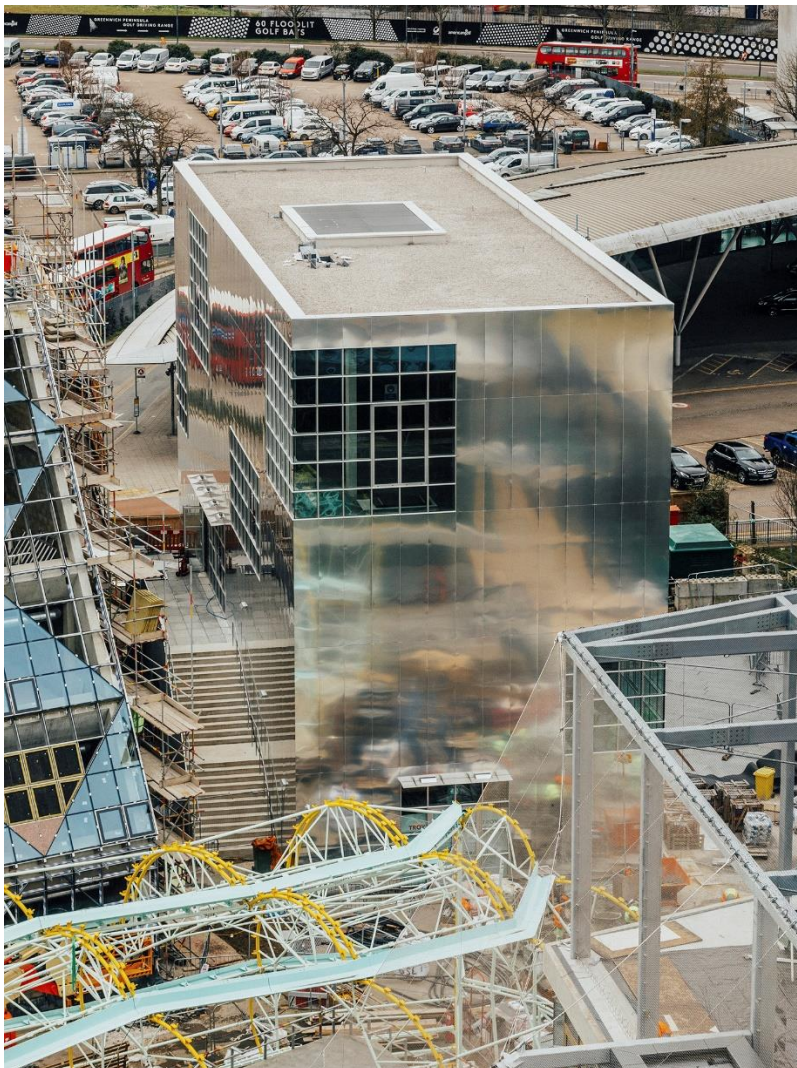
We kept to a single quantity surveyor, structural engineer and M&E engineer: Artelia, Whitby Wood and **Skelly & Couch**. We held separate monthly meetings between them

and all eight architects. It worked like speed dating and meant that each consultant didn't have to administer separate meeting schedules.

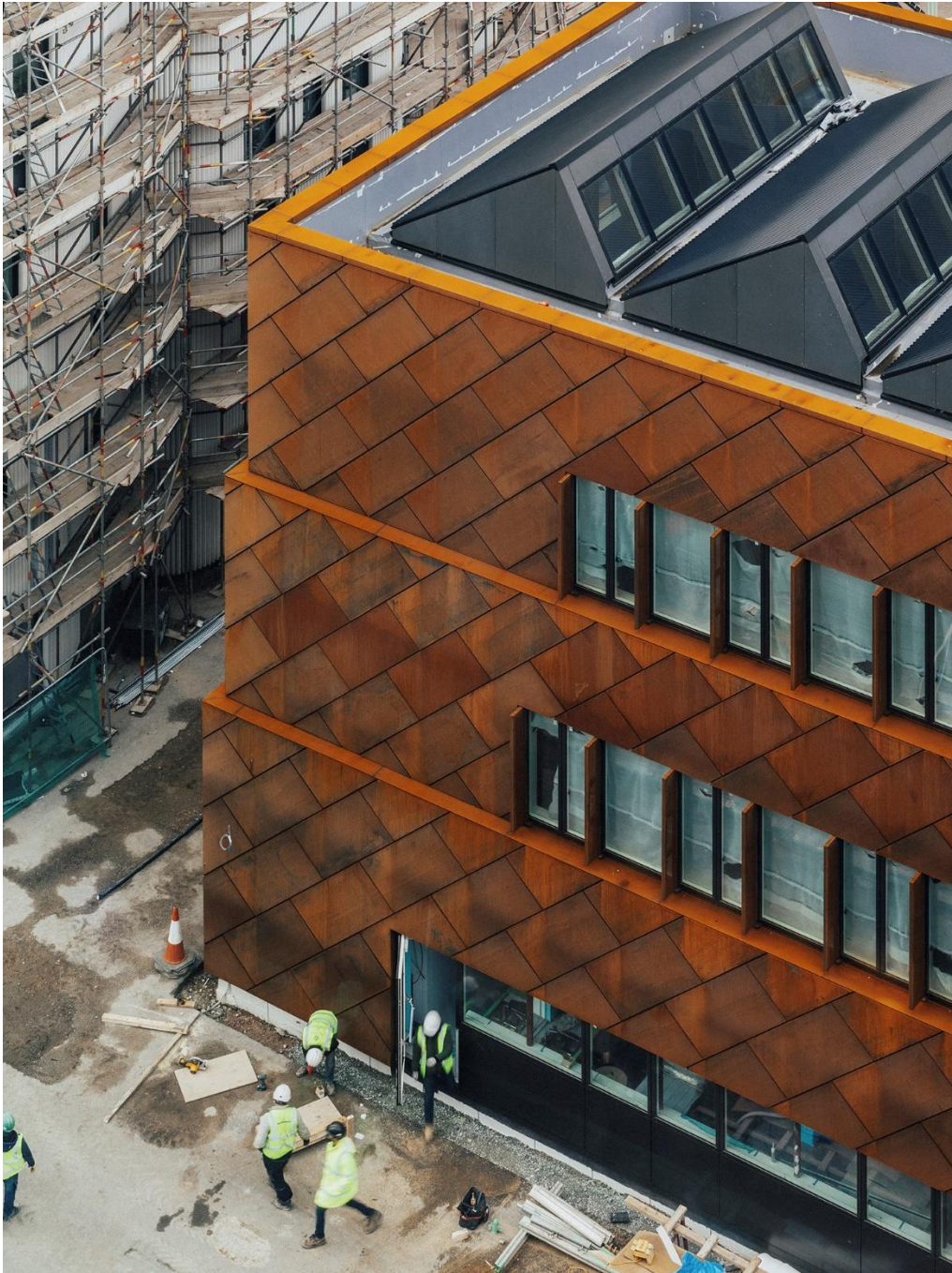
How have you been able to stop this being an architectural zoo?

I was very aware from the outset that our approach would be open to criticism, but being overly prescriptive leads to monotony and predictability. Expressions such as 'architectural anarchy' have already been used to describe the district, but people are seldom indifferent when something new is proposed.

As a plot layout, the scheme sets a strong, clear framework, defining all the key spaces, edges, and movement routes. The continuity yet diversification of the buildings is deliberate and strategic. Variation and individualisation of building character is encouraged and supported in a frame.



Barozzi Veiga's nearly complete (A1) block on the Design District's north-western corner. (Foster + Partners' North Greenwich Interchange behind)



Mole Architects' Cor-ten steel-covered (C2) building

How have you kept the scheme affordable and how has that affected the design?

Each building was designed to be the maximum floor plan possible with a single core acting as both main staircase and fire escape. We kept the widths of the buildings down so they could be naturally lit and ventilated. We deliberately didn't set a materials palette; instead we gave each designer a fixed budget around which they could innovate to produce an affordable, sustainable skin.

Do you think the coronavirus crisis will have any impact on how the buildings are used?

There can be no doubt the coronavirus will fundamentally change the way that we work and live. It should. We needed to question old habits. For too long, little or no flexibility has been built into commercial leases, which makes committing to workspace a huge gamble.

A lot of consideration has gone into making sure the district keeps entry affordable but also flexible, so that floors, rooms, even desks can be rented on flexible leases or by the hour. Coronavirus has taught us that we don't all need to work the same way.

The Design District has developed an innovative new leasing concept: 'the On/Off office'. This gives tenants options to rent office space for one to three days a week, with the benefit of an 'active' landlord ensuring the workspace is fully set up for the tenant before they arrive, including bespoke IT provision, so it truly feels like their own permanent workspace – only without the hassle, cost or commitment.

What are you looking for as a marker of your success at Greenwich?

We want the district to have long-term success as a generator of new, under-represented design talent, as well as permanently making the Peninsula a distinct destination both to visit and to live in.

We want to raise conversations about the seemingly unstoppable drift toward big business domination

We hope that, as a result of the district, broader ways are sought to encourage innovation. Both architecturally in the questioning of overly restrictive design guides that are often counterintuitive to sustainability and diversity. But also that if you always look to maximise the individual moments and don't step back to look at the bigger picture then you will lose the moments and the differences that make cities, industry and culture surprising.

But we want more than that. We want the district to raise conversations about London's seemingly unstoppable drift toward big business domination, both in the architectural practices that are given commissions, but also in the brand monopolies that line our streets and the singular development of urban blocks with genericized

'big' architecture. Its distancing effect creates an 'us and them' dichotomy with a social impact, at a time when we should be encouraging us to become them.

Greenwich design district: who is doing what?

A1 Barozzi Veiga

A2 6a

A3 Adam Khan Architects

A4 David Kohn Architects

B1 Selgas Cano

B2 6a

B3 Adam Khan Architects

B4 David Kohn Architects

C1 Architecture 00

C2 Mole Architects

C3 HNNA

C4 Selgas Cano

D1 Architecture 00

D2 Mole Architects

D3 HNNA

D4 Barozzi Veiga

