
Architects' Journal, 24/10/24
Less concrete, more jungle: the £10 billion Earls Court vision



Navigating an 8m level change over an existing railway line, the Cascades step down from the Table Park, with Sheppard Robson's 42-storey residential tower (WB04) behind

Source: Earls Court Development Company

Richard Waite reports on how the team behind London's Earls Court regeneration project is embedding climate change shock absorbers into its huge plans

'Bringing the wonder back to Earls Court' reads the developer's strapline for the 20-year plans to create a new neighbourhood on the largely empty 17.4ha former Earls Court Exhibition Centre site in west London.

The outline masterplan for the Earls Court Development Company (ECDC) has been designed by Hawkins\Brown, Studio Egret West and Danish landscape architect SLA. It includes proposals for 4,000 homes, 230,000m² of workspace, and a trio of cultural venues built around swathes of accessible green public space on the site, which straddles the boroughs of Kensington & Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fulham.

The recently submitted hybrid planning application also includes detailed proposals for the plot's first buildings, drawn up by Maccreanor Lavington, Serie, dRMM, ACME, Haworth Tompkins and Sheppard Robson – the latter behind the scheme's centrepiece 42-storey skyscraper.

ADVERTISEMENT

The advertisement banner features a dark red background with a pattern of concentric, glowing red circles. On the left, the letters 'AJ' are displayed in white within a red circle. To the right, the text 'Architecture Awards 2024' is written in white. A small blue 'x' icon is located in the top right corner of the banner.

AJ Architecture Awards 2024

The developer claims the designs will recapture the site's one-time spirit of wonder when the giant triangular wasteland was home to vast exhibition halls and hosted events such as Crufts, the London Boat Show and the Brit Awards.



Source: Earls Court Development Company
Aerial view of the 17.4ha site, looking westwards

The final parts of the famous 1930s Art Moderne exhibition centre were flattened in 2017 to make way for Terry Farrell's unrealised proposal for four self-enclosed urban villages. But two years later the estate's then developer, Capco, sold the site to its current owner: a joint venture between Delancey, Dutch pension fund manager APG and Transport for London operating under the ECDC banner.

The design, site boundaries, finances and sustainability aims have all changed markedly since Farrell's earlier vision. The ECDC team says it wants its £10 billion scheme to look to the future, being a 'good ancestor' by leaving a positive long-term legacy. Its overarching driver is to create 'a people-centric and planet-conscious development for the 21st and 22nd centuries'.

That means building with sustainable materials ('timber where possible'), reusing existing structures and creating one of the largest energy-loop heating networks in the country. It also means designing for a changing UK climate where winters are expected to become warmer and wetter, and summers hotter and drier.



Source: Earls Court Development Company

The northern edge of the masterplan as viewed looking eastwards towards central London

As carbon emissions continue to rise, the Met Office predicts that by 2050, lengthy heatwaves – like the record-setting hot summer in 2018 – could happen every other year. According to scientific journal *Nature Sustainability*, the UK is on course for a 30 per cent increase in uncomfortably hot days.

At Earls Court, climate resilience has been one of the brief's core strands, built into the masterplan since its genesis four years ago. A key move has been to give over 60 per cent of the entire site to open spaces – either for people or nature. Green roofs are also planned, equivalent in area to nine football pitches.

Importantly, phase one, as well as delivering the first workspaces for clean climate-tech companies and around 1,500 new homes, includes the 2ha Table Park. This pivotal public space will be built over the existing 'deck' concrete structure spanning the West London Line, which runs through the site.

Linked to this high-level plateau is the Cascades – a stepped parkland with cooling water features, entirely sustained by harvested rainwater. The system has a storage capacity for enough water to ensure uninterrupted operation during a 60-day drought.

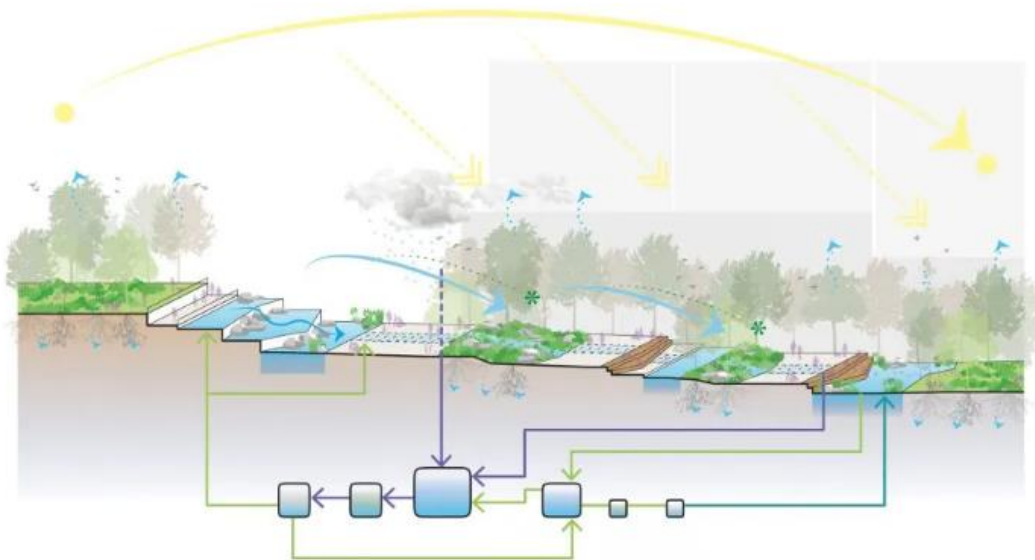


Source: Earls Court Development Company

A view of the Table Park, sitting over the railway

The ECDC puts a high value on water. It is pioneering a comprehensive 'water-neutral' management strategy to maximise water capture and reuse, and minimising site runoff from heavier, stronger, shorter downpours to stop sewer and surface water flooding neighbouring residents' basements (again).

The planting strategy includes climate-resilient species that need less water alongside more than 1,000 new trees – half of which would be semi-mature – doubling the number of trees in the entire Earl's Court ward. The developer has also pledged to 'set a new benchmark in urban air quality' aiming to achieve pollutant levels that are at least 10 per cent lower than the borough average.



Source:Earls Court Development Company

Cross-section of the Cascades showing water storage, drainage, and reuse



The team has worked hard to create a flow through the long-closed-off site for air, people and biodiversity. The scheme effectively introduces an always-open, biodiverse corridor stretching from north to south. As SLA partner Rasmus Astrup puts it, this means a 'fox could walk around Earls Court without crossing any major roads'.

Through years of consultation, some hard decisions have had to be made, such as rubbing out plans for some buildings altogether. Architect Sharon Giffen, head of design at the ECDC and formerly of Foster + Partners, explains: 'We originally had five buildings proposed around [the existing 1962] Empress State Building. We removed the corner block allowing the [other] buildings to breathe more, make the public space more generous and most importantly improve the microclimate.'

In terms of the buildings themselves, the design of the façades has been developed 'to reflect the tension between providing an appropriate level of daylighting within the apartments and minimising solar gains through fenestration'.

The team's sustainability goals were developed so they would be 'considered ambitious if set in 2050', and a long road into a uncertain future lies ahead before the Earls Court vision is fully realised. The first step will be winning planning approval. Subject to that, work could start on site in 2026.



Source: Earls Court Development Company

The new Aisling Gardens overlooked by dRMM-designed housing