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London Docklands' Royal Victoria Square as 'Hortus Conclusus'

"...what really strikes you is the impact of the sky-scape, the broad horizons and often penetrating wind and the constant distraction and animation of low-flying aircraft..."¹

Though the origin of 'the docks' dates back at least to the Saxon period, the current scheme was built from the early 19th to early 20th centuries, accommodating the tremendous growth of East India Company, among others of its kind. Royal Victoria Dock opened in 1855 and was unprecedented in its scale, its imposing cranes and hydraulic lifts.

With new ship designs and alternative port locations, the east London dockyards lost their standing, shutting down completely by 1980. A year later, the English Parliament created the London Docklands Development Corporation for the purpose of rehabilitating the 5,100 acres of waterfront land.

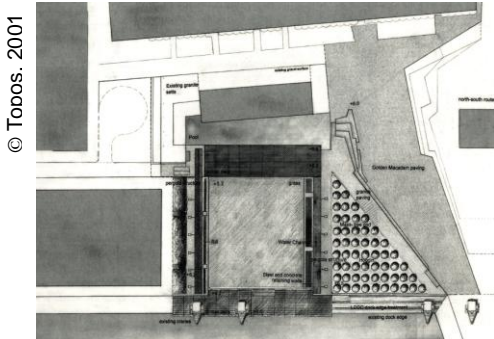


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1. View of Royal Victoria Square from the southeast, with historic warehouse to the north.

Royal Victoria Square evolved out of this rich and lively history, the immediate site having served as a 'finger dock' – permitting barges to pull up directly to the warehouse.

Completed in 2000², it is a fascinating, contemporary rendition of the 'hortus conclusus' by a broad and unique blend of qualities falling within the genera of: void, horizon, enclosure, and route.



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2. Plan view

Stable Void in the Volatile Surrounding

Flanked by a historic warehouse to the north and waterway to the south, the space was otherwise free from containment when handed to the designers. They knew it would not remain that way, however, and were challenged to imagine the form and impact of future development.

Like the French *place*, the common "relationship between buildings and urban space is reversed, from a built mass

¹ Allen, David, Docklands, London: In the beginning there was a space, In *Topos*, v. 35, June 2001, p. 43.

² Landscape architect: EDAW; Architect: Patel Taylor; Engineer; Aspen Burrow Crocker

with a hollow scooped from it to space with a built backdrop.”³

Perhaps it will work in the future as a void within the density, a moment of simplicity within the excesses. But even now, without the power of that contrast, it generates a remarkable sense of purpose. Its enclosure, clear horizontal and vertical lines, smooth, clean surfaces, axial organization, abstraction, and minimalist treatment of color, texture and form, create a welcome break from the fluctuating, indecisive surroundings, open as they are. The square is indeed “a ‘stabilizer’ in a landscape subject to change.”⁴ It draws people in and encourages them to stay, sit, and reflect on the world around them. In this sense, it is hortus conclusus of the type: contemplationis.

Of the four design experiments used by Aben and de Wit in their take on contemporary transformations of the enclosed garden, the telescope works most clearly with the element of void. Like the convent garden at Mariavall, the emptiness of the Royal Victoria Square emphasizes the openness of the sky and the temporal rhythms of natural phenomena – such as day and night, seasons, temperature, precipitation, celestial lights.⁵ The telescope expands one’s vision but it does not give wings or a sail. In the same way, the void is grounded and defined as it simultaneously enables the wild roaming of imagination or thoughtful contemplation.

Closely related to the concept of the void is the archetype of oasis and clearing. Royal Victoria Square clearly fits into this category, where “light and clarity complement the darkness and complexity of the forest.”⁶



3. View from northwest

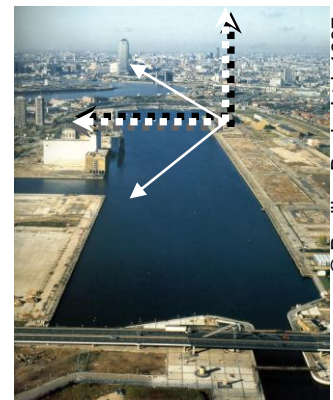
Framed Horizon across the Dockland Plane

As a paradox of the infinite and the finite, the Royal Victoria Square represents a moment of clarity and security while drawing in the magnificent, distant horizon.

Illusion to the past is unavoidable as the constructed waterway comes into view and especially as the two historic cranes tower along the square’s northern edge (In photo 3, only one of the two is shown –on the far right. The cranes on the left sit directly east of the square.) They frame the axial view from inside the square out to the southern horizon.

They also draw the view upward because of their height. A steel deck serves as a viewing platform slightly overhanging the edge of the dock, drawing one through the cranes’ protecting threshold to allow an even greater opening of the horizon. At this point, one has exited the enclosed garden and lost the wonderful sense of capturing the landscape inside a space. But the contrast of moving out to the deck can only enhance the power of the enclosure.

4. Aerial view of Royal Victoria Dock showing primary and secondary views from the square



³ Aben, Rob and Saskia de Wit, *The Enclosed Garden, History and Development of the Hortus Conclusus and its Reintroduction into the Present-day Urban Landscape*, Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999, p. 137.

⁴ Ibid, p. 12.

⁵ Ibid, p. 166.

⁶ Ibid, p. 25.

Enclosure as Illusion and Centrifugal Force

At first glance, it is simply the rectangular, lush, green lawn that creates a sense of enclosure as it deviates from the surrounding hardscape and dark waters. But there's more. The lawn is sunken at its southern end, with two granite steps leading down to it. A gradual slope lifts the northern end to level with the paving. Thus, one has the sense of stepping into an enclosed space and then being lifted out of it just at the point where he wants to turn around and look outward. He feels he is gazing from an elevated vantage-point—a mount or a prospect—even though he is merely level. The wall's illusion to enclosure is strengthened by brazen side canopies made of Corten steel and black concrete, which act "like fins of a scale that reflects but does not compete with the loading cranes."⁷

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5. Entrance to sunken lawn

This arrangement resembles the Greek 'agora' with its 'stoa' and the Roman 'peristyle' although the colonnades and canopies do not completely surround the space. If they did, the square would be a centripetal space. But with the inclined plane and framing of the horizon by the two cranes, the space becomes centrifugal. Again, the *place* is the one example given by Aben and de Wit that correlates this characteristic, as in the Place de la Concorde, which interestingly is also along the water. But Royal Victoria Square retains much more of the sense of enclosure than the Place de la Concorde, since its centrifugal motion goes only in one direction -southward.

The positioning and form of the lawn and canopies also allude to the historic finger dock, which would have of course been sunken and lined with more cranes.

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6. Lights and fountains with new footbridge

Route of Ceremony and Refined Leisure

Currently, the three primary groups of users of the Royal Victoria Square are those attending events at the adjacent London Exhibition Centre, those who live in the nearby residential area, and those who are traversing through the larger network of parks in the Docklands (for which the square acts as a nucleus).

There are definite ceremonial routes to follow all with a graceful sense of refinement mixed with playful leisure. The formal entrance happens at the granite steps in the middle of the south side. If

one intends to walk next to the park and not in it, however, he would skirt to the side canopies. Seated contemplation can happen there in the shade. Once on the lawn, one is drawn up the inclined plane to turn around and grasp the horizon and also to observe the fountain jets—lit at night by fiber optics, and gaze at the peaceful reflecting pool next to the warehouse. Here there are also places to sit for contemplation. Another route begins at the northwest corner of the square, passes the fountains and enters a field of kinetic wands with glowing red tips. It then moves through an orchard before reaching the steps of the exhibition center.

⁷ Allen, p.45.

Though, in their anatomy of an enclosed garden, Aben and de Wit describe the route as cyclic, the Royal Victoria Square allows for a slightly more complex pattern of movement. It will be interesting to see if future development will add to or subtract from this complexity.

The lead designer of the Royal Victoria Square makes no mention of the 'hortus conclusus' in his article in *Topos*, but he speaks its language liberally.⁸ Coincidentally or not, he has successfully transformed the enclosed garden in a contemporary urban space. It is not only a winner because it fits nicely into some spatial category, but it is simply evocative in its own right – at first glance, and even more so under the investigative eye.⁹

⁸ David Allen, EDAW.

⁹ Additional questions I did not have space to address here are: How does the water impact the sense of distance from the surrounding landscape? What is the impact of a bridge? How would the enclosure of the square change with a 'wall' of boats moored to the dock? What would be the best design and use for the surrounding empty spaces as far as their relationship to the square?