

FROM CLERKENWELL TO SMETHWICK: PIERS GOUGH

With epoch-defining projects such as the redevelopment of London's Docklands and the transformation of Clerkenwell into the capital's hippest district, Piers Gough became one of the UK's leading architects ■

The CZWG co-founder frequently appears in the media and is listed – alongside pop stars Busted and McFly – as a famous old boy of Uppingham school in Rutland. But despite enjoying such a high profile, Gough doesn't come across as either precious or arrogant. In fact, the adjectives charming, funny, affable, passionate and self-deprecating are more likely to spring to mind. He doesn't have his own office because he "likes to be in the middle of things" and one might hazard a guess that he is a popular boss.

Gough is masterplanning the housing-led, mixed-use development of Smethwick (see page 26), part of Regenco's regeneration of Sandwell. Regenco chief executive Ros Kerlake is determined that Smethwick – just six minutes from Birmingham city centre by Metro – will be "more than a residential development" being instead a district with its own distinctive personality. It's a view shared by Gough; he is enthusiastic

about plans to convert the 23 hectare canalside site into a lively combination of homes, parkland, commercial and leisure space blending renovated, historic warehouses and new buildings.

However, he observes that "sustainable communities seem to be the latest buzz words. John Prescott mentioned them 22 times at the [aptly named] Sustainable Communities Summit. It's quite ironic that regeneration has buzz words given the length of projects. For example, we began working in the Gorbals in Glasgow 16 years ago and have just started the last building in that job now."

The pace of the modern business world, he believes, is at odds with architectural practice. "I think architects probably feel a bit out of kilter. We go into architecture expecting to work on five-year projects, not quick contracts – we'd be in advertising or pop music if that was the case – but the current trend is towards bite-sized portions of work because



planners are afraid to go out on a limb." That said, CZWG hopes to be involved in Smethwick canalside for up to a decade.

Perhaps surprisingly, Gough, recently appointed "design champion" for Kent County Council, doesn't place architecture at the epicentre of regeneration. "Regeneration is about much deeper issues than simply architecture," he comments. "It's about getting the master planning right and the success of social services such as schools and doctors, economic factors and local political factors. If these don't work, even the most well-planned buildings won't be successful. Buildings should grow from the achievements of an area; they shouldn't be used to tell fibs. However, architecture does affect the perception of a place and whether it looks attractive or not." CZWG's work in Glasgow's Gorbals area has been particularly effective, he believes.

When asked his opinion on Channel Four's plans for a reality television show



Above and left: Piers Gough creations.

based on the regeneration of the entire town of Castleford in Yorkshire, Gough reveals he was asked to participate and declined. "I think it's the worst thing I've ever heard," he says. "I have this horrible vision of people shouting across a public square at each other and being told they have two hours to complete. The built environment is being sucked into a gameshow format. It's worrying."

It was Gough's work in London's Docklands, including Dundee Wharf, The Circle and China Wharf, that first brought him widespread public recognition. The fact that he is widely credited with pioneering London area Clerkenwell's rise from post-industrial nowhere to über-cool urban district with his 1992 conversion of the Summers Street printworks for Manhattan Loft Company (MLC), didn't hurt either.

"I remember Harry Handelsman [MLC founder] coming in here and saying that he had just seen a printworks down the



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GOUGH ON...



road that he wanted to convert," he recalls. "We went down there with him to have a look and... It started the trend towards loft living." What is so attractive about the loft lifestyle? "Lofts are a theatrical experience. They are mating spaces. Recent divorcees have invariably been living in oppressed circumstances and need a space that speaks of them. Lofts are also great honey pots for single people," he says.

Honey pots aside, could Smethwick be Birmingham's Clerkenwell? With Gough's experience of warehouse conversions in London EC1 and historic renovations alongside new builds in Docklands, he is ideally placed to transform the post industrial canalscape.

His fellow architects

Frank Gehry Gough brands the Guggenheim Bilbao architect, his collaborator on the controversial King Alfred project in Hove, as "spectacularly good". ■

Rem Koolhaas "The most exciting thinker in architecture. He helped architects to think intellectually about their position in the world." ■

Buschow Henley "A young practice that designs clever, glamorous buildings." ■

His favourite project

The Green Bridge in Mile End Park, London (pictured above). "I felt that I had changed something. I also like the heroic idea of the park winning out against the road." ■

Criticism

"I usually laugh at criticism. It bothers you less as you get older. I remember our first commission back in 1975 was described by one critic as 'interior designers unwisely let loose on the exterior of a building'. It's most hurtful when we are accused of being superficial. That happens sometimes because we make jolly, colourful buildings, but we're not." ■