

# White Heat London 12 / Workplace

## Fred. Olsen amenity building Early High-Tech 'shed'

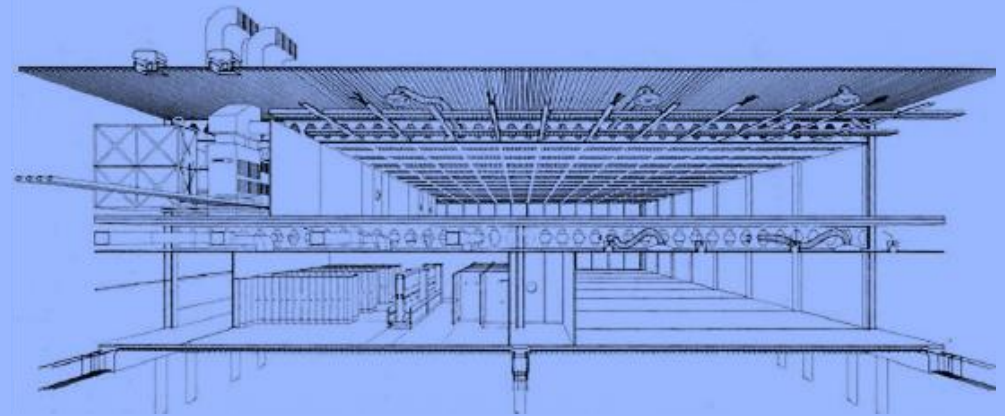
Foster Associates

1968-70

London's docks declined during the decade due to the growing size of ships, containerisation and union difficulties. A number of innovative projects attempted to avoid complete collapse, however, including one that prefigured the area's resurgence fifteen years later. Norwegian firm Fred. Olsen had been sailing from a berth in West India Dock for many years, resulting in its formal naming after their ships' destination: Canary Wharf. From 1965 it built sheds in nearby Millwall for the mechanised handling of palletised cargo and upgraded facilities for a profitable sideline in passengers, who were carried on the same fast, new vessels.

Seeking a rapid and cost-effective design for these it hired Norman Foster, part of a generation of young British architects just beginning to practice. Trained in America and exposed to new techniques and materials, they designed lightweight, flexible structures that were heavily serviced and often borrowed components from other disciplines.

Foster's amenity block for workers contained showers, a restaurant and a recreation room as well as offices. The two-storey building was placed in a 90' gap between two of the sheds. It was built from steel beams that, like the service runs, were left exposed, and it was sheathed in high-specification glass. An elevated, tubular passenger terminal ran along the quay outside, improving customers' experience too. Both lasted for barely a decade as the inevitable finally occurred.





At night the amenity block's bespoke glazing, heat-reflecting and – tellingly – made in Pittsburgh, became transparent. Foster would use the same effect a few years later on his curved glass building for Willis Faber & Dumas in Ipswich. Neoprene gaskets for sealing such panes came from the automotive industry, which employed them for fixing car windscreens.

On the first floor, office space for up to eighty staff achieved new levels of quality for the sector. The bold use of colour – green floors, brown services, purple handrails and yellow menu holders – was also characteristic of the emerging High-Tech movement.

Castellated structural beams are produced by cutting a standard I-beam in half along a tessellation line, offsetting the two resulting pieces and welding them back together. Services, including vacuum transit tubes, were also celebrated by exposure. Components that could be fitted 'dry' were a feature of this style and promised faster, better quality assembly.