

My scepticism may have been misplaced as Chinese developer returns to refloat Royals

An adventurous plan to build a commercial Chinatown in the Royal Docks looks a touch more likely this week. Xu Weiping is the boss of Chinese developer Advanced Business Parks.

The man who owns a single 160-acre business park in China wants to build a Canary Wharf-sized home for hundreds of Chinese companies on 35 acres of public land in Newham. Last October I wrote a sceptical article in the *London Evening Standard* on his proposal... For which I can now only apologise.

On Wednesday 29 May the trumpets will sound in City Hall, announcing a £1bn deal between ABP and the Greater London Authority and its junior partner, Newham council. Xu Weiping will be given preferred developer status. Plans will be unveiled showing how Mr Xu intends to transform the tumbleweed terrain close to Newham council's offices into a bustling Chinese office park. The plans have been shaped by Stanhope, ABP's UK development adviser.

Stanhope boss David Camp visited ABP's business park about an hour outside Beijing last September. He came back pretty amazed and said: "About



Xu Weiping's ambitious plan to build a giant home for Chinese companies is set to be launched next week

15m sq ft of space has been built and occupied over five years by hundreds of companies you have never heard of. Companies that ABP thinks will want to establish European HQs in a similar sort of spot in London."

Second coming

This is the second time that Mr Xu has come to London with a plan. The last time was in 2006. Then the more modest proposal he quietly fronted was a concept for a Chinese business quarter, the idea being to bring together more than 20 Chinese firms and agencies into a 250 000 sq ft showroom for Chinese products and services. That plan failed to materialise.

Development Securities and Standard Life were then struggling with plans for a 50-acre Royals Business Park, despite the boom. The pair had been granted rights in 2001 by the London Development Agency, legacy owner of the land. Adventurous plans for 1.6m sq ft of offices were drawn up. Not much beyond a single 250,000 sq ft speculative development emerged.

The scheme was rescued by Newham and is now the council's headquarters. I bumped into Newham's ebullient Labour mayor, Sir Robin Wales, a while back. What did he know of Mr Xu? The answer went roughly like this: "His background has been investigated. He's the real deal. We don't get many offers like this in the Royals. So, why not? Let's give him a go."

Cameron gets involved

Last time around Mr Xu was said to be unwilling to go above the heads of the LDA to government to plead a case that DevSec and Standard Life presumably thought was nuts. Not this time. ABP met David Cameron at a global investment conference last week, the *Financial Times* reported on Monday. One minister is quoted as saying the scheme is "going gangbusters". Dreadful phrase.

Talks have been held with Boris Johnson. The mayor of London says the deal is "not quite there". Well it better had be on 29 May, the date scheduled for Boris to blow his Chinese trumpet. The question is, will something more than a short blast of publicity occur between now and 2020, beyond a handful of Chinese companies setting up shop?

The Royals have been a developers' graveyard for 50 years. The Royals Business Park was a noughties failure. Way back in 1986 Richard Rogers designed "the most impressive shopping centre in Europe". The mall was to stretch the 2.5km length of the Royal Albert Dock. Only the brave develop in what remains a fairly desolate spot. But it looks like Mr Xu is going to brave it. Well done him.

A final word from Sir Stuart

Scepticism over Sir Stuart Lipton's plans to build up to 40 corporate "branded pavilions" on the 50-acre Silvertown site in the Royals may be partly dispelled by the news above. It has been 14 months since Chelsfield was selected as preferred developer. What progress? I asked on Monday. It's going well, says Sir Stuart, who expects to have some good news of his own in a few weeks.