A different kind of progress, as the area around it is transformed in a massive urban regeneration project funded by the Port Autonome de Paris (PAP). Yet in the hands of MacFarlane and his partner Dominique Jakob, this radical building has rediscovered its formal and programmatic edge. Where once battles of cranes diggered their sarges along the dockside, a warped tubular-steel grid infilled with panels of multi-patterned glazing cranes and creeps along the long, low facade. Painted a corrosive shade of tropical lime, it snakes and twists like a virulent green parasite feeding off the carcass of the original building.

This compelling interplay of old and new is an apt expression of an area still in a state of intense flux. Over the last decade or so, this formerly disregarded quarter of eastern Paris has been energetically transformed from a grungy industrial backwater into an upscale neighbourhood. A pioneering precursor was Dominique Perrault’s French National Library (AR June 1998), whose gleaming quarters of glass towers lies just upstream.

Under the auspices of a Zone d’Aménagement Concerté (ZAC), a special planning and development status that gives added impetus to the processes of urban regeneration, new developments continue to reframe the post-industrial landscape. In 2004, the Ville de Paris launched a tender to design a new cultural centre on the riverside site of the Docks de Paris. Despite its historical significance, it was not a binding condition that the building be retained. Instead, competition participants were given the option to demolish or preserve it, or a combination of both. But such ambivalence was perhaps understandable, as once the docks closed, the building did not fare especially well. Prior to its recent remodelling, it endured 20 years as a carpet warehouse.

When it comes to coaxing new life into challenging structures, Paris-based Jakob + MacFarlane has an admirable track record. Projects such as the old Renault factory at Boulogne-Billancourt (AR July 2005) and a new restaurant for the Pompidou Centre (AR July 2000) speak of a sensitivity to history, but also manifest a boldness of approach. The brief proposed relocating the Institut Français de la Mode, Paris’ leading fashion school, from its staid premises in the 17th arrondissement, and combining it with a major new public exhibition space and an array of shops and cafes for the casual flâneur. The newly transplanted fashion students are the building’s emerging spirits: whether making clothes or attending lectures, their activities are consciously and constantly on public display through fish.