

This is the final submitted version of the paper published as:

Gold, J.R. and Gold, M.M. (2019) 'Tales of the Olympic city: memory, narrative and the built environment', *ZARCH: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Architecture and Urbanism*, 13.

For citation purposes, please consult the published version.

## Tales of the Olympic city: memory, narrative and the built environment

### Abstract:

The Olympics have a greater, more profound and more pervasive impact on the urban fabric of their host cities than any other sporting or cultural event. This paper is concerned with issues of memory and remembering in Olympic host cities. After a contextual introduction, it employs a case study of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (QEOP), the main event space for the London 2012 Summer Games, to supply insight into how to read the urban traces of Olympic memory. Three key themes are identified when interpreting the memories associated with the Park and its built structures, namely: treatment of the area's displaced past, memorializing the Games, and with memory legacy. The ensuing discussion section then adopts a historiographic slant, stressing the importance of narrative and offering wider conclusions about Olympic memory and the city.

.

### Keywords:

Olympics, memory, London 2012, narrative, contestation

## Tales of the Olympic city: memory, narrative and the built environment

In November 2007 Jacques Rogge, then President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), visited Chicago to attend the World Boxing Championships. Given that the city was then bidding to stage the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, the influential Economic Club of Chicago took the opportunity to invite him to address the local business community. As expected, Rogge talked about the virtues of hosting the Games in terms of values, partnerships and enduring legacy, ending by pointing out that: ‘Once an Olympic City, always an Olympic city.’<sup>1</sup>

Rogge’s aphorism would have been accepted without dissent by his audience, by the 24 cities that have staged the Summer Games since the reintroduction of the Olympics in 1896 and probably by most of the would-be hosts that have filed unsuccessful bids in the last 123 years. Staging the Olympics was felt to confer permanent membership of an elite club with roots stretching back to antiquity. Like the terms ‘world cities’ or ‘global cities’, it was felt that being an ‘Olympic city’ was a status that any self-respecting metropolis with international aspirations would surely wish to have. Few would also have argued with his reference to ‘enduring legacy’, the outcome of important changes that had occurred in Olympic affairs over the previous half-century, whereby staging the Games had become a catalyst for profound and pervasive change.

‘When a city and region host the Olympic Games, it will never be the same again. The rewards are vast and felt long after the Games have finished.’<sup>2</sup>

The watershed was the 1960 Summer Games in Rome. Before that time, the Games might leave a sporting arena popularly known as ‘the Olympic stadium’, but relatively little aside from statues, place names and memorials to medal winners (Figure 1). Once the 1960 Games had set the precedent of adding substantial transport and housing projects attached to the business of staging the Olympics, the frontiers of ambition shifted. Games organizers and city planners alike realized that mega-event investment could be a catalyst for urban change, a *quid pro quo* for the heavy costs of staging the Olympics. Besides a suite of new sports facilities, these might well include substantial infrastructural improvements, creation of new neighbourhoods, urban beautification projects, and a fund of positive messages that might encourage inward investment. For its part, after reluctantly acquiescing in an economically-driven process that effectively saw the Games being used for instrumental purposes, the IOC became more proactive in its relations with its host cities. During the 1990s, measures were adopted that highlighted the importance of sustainability in preparing and staging the Games. In 2003, further measures were adopted that led to amendment of the Olympic Charter through adding a clause committing the IOC to take ‘measures to promote a positive legacy from the Olympic Games to the host city and the host country’.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Anon. ‘IOC President addresses Economic Club of Chicago’. *Olympic News*, 7 November 2007. Available online at: <https://www.olympic.org/news/ioc-president-addresses-economic-club-of-chicago>, accessed 15 June 2019.

<sup>2</sup> IOC. Olympic Agenda 2020 from start to finish. Available online at: <https://www.olympic.org/videos/candidature-process-2026-evolution/>, accessed 15 June 2019

<sup>3</sup> IOC. Factsheet Legacies of The Games Update – May 2016. Available online at: <https://stillmed.olympic.org/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/Factsheets-Reference-Documents/Games/Legacies/Factsheet-Legacies-of-the-Games-May-2016.pdf>, accessed 15 June 2019. For more on the subject of Olympic legacy, see Essex, S. and Chalkley, B. (1998) ‘Olympic Games: catalyst of urban change’, *Leisure Studies*, 17, 187-206; Jonathan Grix (ed). 2017. *Leveraging Mega-event Legacies*. Abingdon: Routledge; Becca Leopkey and Milena Parent, 2017. The governance of Olympic legacy: Process, actors and mechanisms. *Leisure Studies*, 36, 438-451.

\*\*\*FIGURE 1 about here\*\*\*

The accompanying logic of this might suggest a switch from leaving haphazard and vestigial traces as with the early Games to a present-day view that sees the Olympics as leaving a defined and decisive legacy impact upon the landscape of the contemporary city. Experience, however, shows that matters are not necessarily that simple. Legacy plans have a habit of being drastically changed or even scrapped. Venues and infrastructure are modified and changed out of all recognition. Local processes of commemoration and site interpretation filter the meaning of event spaces and Games venues. The Olympics can become commodified with allusions to the Games featuring in place promotional material that, it is argued, become implicated in neighbourhood change and gentrification.

This paper, which is concerned with memory and remembering, proceeds against this background. Its focus is to examine the complex and varied urban impacts of a fleeting one-off event that lasts just 17 days<sup>4</sup> and seldom returns to the same city within a generation. Working on the principle that history lies in the detail, it employs a case study of the still-evolving main event space for the London 2012 Summer Games, later known as the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (QEOP), to supply insight into how to read the urban traces of Olympic memory. In doing so, we begin by selecting three interrelated themes that are identifiable when interpreting the memories associated with the Park and its built structures. These are respectively concerned with treatment of the area's displaced past, with the strategies actively employed in memorializing the Games, and with the way that memory as legacy. The ensuing discussion section then adopts a historiographic slant, stressing the importance of narrative. These observations lead in turn to wider conclusions about Olympic memory and the city.

### **Of Soap and Engines**

The reasons for choosing to create an Olympic Park on an extensive brownfield site in the Lower Lea Valley at Stratford (East London) for the 2012 Games were clearly expressed in the discussions that preceded London's bid in 2005. London had staged two previous Games, both of which were took place in the west of the city: the 1908 Games at the White City stadium and 1948 at Wembley stadium. Neither event had left much trace nor by the early twenty-first century could either stadium act as a site for an Olympics.<sup>5</sup>

Instead, attention had switched to an extensive plot of brownfield land in the Lower Lea Valley at Stratford in the east of the city. Despite being located just four kilometres east of London's financial heart (the City) and enjoying excellent accessibility by rail, road and water, the area had long projected an aura of marginality. For more than two centuries, it had acted as a locale for noxious industries and as a dumping ground for toxic waste products. Some impression of its condition is supplied by Figure 2. Taken from Patrick Abercrombie's Greater London Plan,<sup>6</sup> an important planning document which saw an important future for the Lea Valley in terms of future development, it shows part of the area covered by the future QEOP as it was in the late 1930s. The former Great Eastern Railway's sidings and locomotive works occupies the left-hand side of the picture. The factories shown along the central highway (Carpenters Road) included soap-makers, leather tanneries, matchmakers and chemical works – all contributing to a visceral urban environment locally nicknamed 'Stink

---

<sup>4</sup> Even if adding in the associated Paralympics, the entire process is over in a little more than six weeks and Olympics moves on to a new host city; it is rare for them to return to the same city within a generation.

<sup>5</sup> The White City stadium was demolished in 1985; Wembley Stadium was demolished in 2002-3 and then converted primarily for use for football.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Abercrombie. 1945. *Greater London Plan 1944*, London: HMSO.

Bomb Alley'. Even then signs of dereliction are apparent, but the deindustrialization that intensified in the 1960s accentuated that tendency. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the area seemingly presented an impression of chaotic disorder and dereliction, with a landscape of redundant factories, heavily contaminated soils, toxic waste, blocked watercourses and areas prone to flooding (Figure 3).

\*\*\*FIGURES 2 and 3 about here\*\*\*

All the key ingredients apparently existed to create an extensive and conveniently served site that, with comprehensive redevelopment, might well meet the IOC's preference for a compact Olympic Park integrated into the life of the city. Despite being centrally-located site, there were relatively few residents needing to be relocated and land acquisition would not be prohibitively expensive. Moreover, unlike the previous London Games that had taken place in more affluent West London, the new Games site was surrounded by grindingly poor and predominantly multicultural residential districts. Development of an Olympic Park in the Lower Lea Valley could be presented strongly in legacy terms; as much as a step towards combating multiple deprivation and social inequality as towards urban regeneration. The costs of rehabilitation might be considerable but these could be borne by envisaging the site not just as the space for a Summer Games but also as investment in the future urban district of around 30000 people that would appear. As Ken Livingstone, then London's mayor, stated in 2008:

'I didn't bid for the Olympics because I wanted three weeks of sport. I bid for the Olympics because it's the only way to get the billions of pounds out of the government to develop the East End – to clean the soil, put in the infrastructure and build the housing.'<sup>7</sup>

Certainly it was noticeable that once London won the bid in July 2005, work quickly commenced on two fronts: land acquisition and remediation (soil cleansing, rechanneling watercourses and burying powerlines) along with preparation of a Masterplan that embraced the permanent sports stadia within a plan for housing, work and open space.

Looking back on the bid and development phase, it is striking how much consensus the basic development principles enjoyed. The idea of using the Olympics as a catalyst for tackling physical and social regeneration simultaneously met little resistance, even from those who might be adversely affected. Certainly there was a general view that there was little of value in the area that would be lost through regeneration. At best, the existing Lower Lea Valley represented 'vast areas of nothing in particular',<sup>8</sup> at worst it comprised 'badlands' that needed redemption. Either way, development could take place at little cost as far as the pre-existing environment was concerned.

It was an imagery that served a purpose by providing a convenient dystopian reference point against which to juxtapose the more visionary elements of post-event physical transformation. Yet as the Olympic preparation phase gathered pace, alternative histories of the area start to revalorize the memory of the pre-existing Lea Valley. Centering on gathering oral historical and ethnographic evidence, research sought to make connection with cherished but by now largely mythic ideas that London's East End was occupied by traditional, stable

---

<sup>7</sup> Tim Burrows. Legacy, what legacy? Five years on the London Olympic park battle still rages. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jul/27/london-olympic-park-success-five-years-depends>. Assessed 16 June 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Polly Braden and David Company. Olympic legacy: photographing the Lea Valley, The Guardian, 7 December 2016. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2016/dec/07/adventures-in-the-lea-valley-polly-braden-david-company-photography>, accessed 20 November 2018.

and place-based working class communities. The ‘silenced history of Lower Lea valley’,<sup>9</sup> with its personalities and intricate micro-geographies, emerged, challenging the idea of the pre-Olympics Lea Valley as being a tabula rasa or an undifferentiated ‘polluted wasteland’.<sup>10</sup> Besides the redundant buildings and other characteristic remains of industrial decline, there were to be found an intricate matrix of small communities, a substantial social housing project at Clays Lane, some larger business enterprises and a great number of unassuming small scale economic activities. The importance of the cluster of artists’ studios that occupied converted factory premises in Carpenters Road was emphasized, especially given that some of the occupants were amongst the leading figures in the resurgent British art scene.

Those wishing to make a case against the politics of displacement and erasure – an alliance of academics, urbanists and community activists – readily appropriated these alternative memories of the past. Place became the focus of attention rather than space. The ‘blue wall’ that enclosed the Olympic site became a particularly potent symbol for protest. As Iain Sinclair, one of the leaders of this genre of writing noted:

‘In boroughs affected by this madness, the 2012 game-show virus, long-established businesses closed down, travellers were expelled from edgeland settlements, and allotment holders turned out of their gardens. As soon as the Olympic Park was enclosed, and therefore defined, loss quantified, the fence around the site became a symbol for opposition and the focus for discussion groups.’<sup>11</sup>

This form of reappraisal, which surfaced from roughly 2010 onwards, was too late to exercise any significant difference over the development process. Nevertheless, it did belatedly serve to marshal modes of remembering as a central plank in critiques that sought to castigate the Olympic project and, as will be seen, that fuelled rhetoric against the area’s subsequent drift towards gentrification.

### **Once were Games**

The Lea Valley, it must be stressed, was not the only site for the 2012 London Games. Two other zones (River and Central) housed sports activities, but these employed existing venues, temporary structures or spaces occupied on a temporary basis. Inevitably then, given that the QEOP housed the permanent structures, this would be the prime focus for memorializing the sights/sites of the 2012 Summer Olympics. That task was by its nature selective, assembling elements of the Games from which a story could be told and creating instant heritage from them, which in this case would involve marrying celebration of sports achievement with reassertion of a sense of the area’s social and industrial history. At previous Olympics that task has often been shaped by creating an Olympic museum<sup>12</sup> and indeed there was brief dalliance with that notion at Stratford. A scheme supported by the British Olympic Association in 2012 sought to gather together a permanent collection, to be situated in a new building close to the ArcelorMittal Orbit tower, in which:

---

<sup>9</sup> Hilary Powell and Isaac Marrero, eds. 2012. *The Art of Dissent: Adventures in London's Olympic State*. London: Marshgate Press.

<sup>10</sup> Read, S. (2017) *Cinderella River: the evolving narrative of the River Lee, London: Hydrocitizenship*. Available online at: <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/23299/1/Cinderella%20River%20-%20Low%20Resolution%20pr.pdf>, accessed 20 November 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Iain Sinclair. 2011. *Ghost Milk: calling time on the Grand Project*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 62.

<sup>12</sup> See: The Olympic Museum 2019. Olympic Museums Network. Available online at <https://www.olympic.org/museum/collaborate/olympic-museums-network>, Accessed 15 June 2019.

Interactive exhibits will gather together London 2012 memories, show how the venues were built, and seek to inspire future generations. The collection will also celebrate London becoming the first city to host the Olympic Games three times.<sup>13</sup>

This project, however, came to nothing, with the only significant museum exhibit being the gallery display of Thomas Heatherwick's petal-based ceremonial Cauldron seven kilometres away at the Museum of London. Instead, the commemorative emphasis quickly switched to site interpretation, which superimposes an interpretative veneer on the site as a whole, its component buildings and landscaping.

That task was made reasonably easy by the fact that the central features of the 246-hectare Olympic Park would remain. At 'Games time', the QEOP featured the main stadium and village, together with the aquatic centre, hockey centre, velodrome, multipurpose arena (used for handball) and Media Centres. Only one significant structure, the demountable basketball arena, was temporary and this was removed pending sale in January 2013, with its seats incorporated into the new Lea Valley Hockey and Tennis Centre at Eton Manor (opened June 2014). Given that the rest were permanent fixtures that continued to serve in the same sporting arenas as for the Olympics, the task of making continuing sporting connection with the Olympics for these venues was neither difficult nor pressing. Indeed events such as the Anniversary Games, held in the main stadium each July, are explicitly intended as 'a legacy to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games'.

To some extent the commemorative message required as part of the post-Games reconfiguring of the Park needs to be aligned with legacy considerations, which can serve to dilute the Olympic connection (see next section), but it revolves around three main strategies. The first centres around measures intended to 're-live' the Games-time experience. It is conveyed by the usual panoply of guided and self-guided tours, but to a variety of audiences. These include foreign tourists and British visitors, but also include local inhabitants. The presence of school parties on weekdays is noteworthy, given that no child of primary school age will now remember the 2012 Games. Public art also reflects Games' themes. Examples include the 9-metres-high 'Run' sculpture by Monica Bonvicini, situated in front of the Copper Box handball arena; the retention of single examples of the Olympic rings (Figure 4) and the Paralympic movement's agitos symbol as giant sculptures; and Carsten Nicolai's LFO Spectrum created by digitally imprinting a low frequency oscillation sound wave, based on the five Olympic colours, on a security fence near the velodrome.

\*\*\*FIGURE 4 about here\*\*\*

The second strategy seeks to re-establish selective aspects of the *genius loci* by reviving memories of the pre-Games landscape in layout, particularly the canals and railway lines that crisscross the Park. The plaque on the recently-reopened Carpenters (Road) Lock on the Bow Back Rivers lists the companies that the passing barges might have visited – Bryant and May (matches), Yardley (cosmetics), the Standard Ammonia Company, Nicholson Gin (distilling) and the rest. Public art testifies to labour history in an area that has strong socialist allegiance. An installation entitled 'Spark Catchers', comprising wooden cladding around two electricity transformers, is embossed with a poem recording a strike at Bryant and May's in 1888 that was of importance for the women's movement. 'History trees' support metal collars, situated just below their crowns, on which are emblazoned short statements about the area derived from life-history interviews with area residents.

The third interpretative strategy seeks to animate the architecture. Participation opportunities (from stadium visits to use of the cycling and swimming facilities) are overlain

---

<sup>13</sup> Anon. 2012. London 2012: Olympic Museum to open on Park, Available online at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-17176884>. Accessed 14 June 2019

with the sights and sounds of 2012. Each of the permanent venues has ‘listening posts’, where winding the handle provides enough energy to power the replaying of a radio broadcast of an athletics triumph in the stadium. An exhibit near the main stadium invites the visitor to try and match the winning leap in the long jump (like the listening posts, it also relates to the success of a *British* competitor). The IOC requirement to display the medal winners is met by a ‘wall of champions’ (Figure 5), a somewhat insipid and almost illegible linear display on what would otherwise be taken as a security fence that surrounds the main stadium.

\*\*\*FIGURE 5 about here\*\*\*

### Memory as Legacy

London 2012 created an important precedent by having legacy planning work commence almost as soon as site preparation had started. Working around the permanent venues that were to be retained, the original Legacy Master Plan identified the northern part of the Park as being characterized by waterways and landscaped parklands with the emphasis on outdoor recreation and biodiversity. By contrast, the southern area would contain the bulk of the housing and workplaces for the new inner-city district (postcode E20), with the only significant spaces there being leisure- and events-oriented, along the lines of the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen or the South Bank in London. The conversion of the Athletes’ Village, redesignated as the East Village, to offer 2,818 homes (with planning permission for a further 2500) would go ahead as soon as possible post-Games. New housing areas, appropriating the ever popular tag ‘neighbourhoods’ would have resonances of popular living environments elsewhere, such as London’s Georgian squares and Canary Wharf’s loft living. According to the original legacy company:

Five new neighbourhoods will be established around the Park, each with its own distinct character. Some residents will live in modern squares and terraces, others will enjoy riverside living, with front doors and gardens opening on to water. With the right mix of apartments and houses, located close to the facilities communities need to develop and grow, the Park will have the foundations to become a prosperous, vibrant new piece of city.<sup>14</sup>

Mindful of the promises made about social inclusion and aware that the Olympic regeneration would bequeath high-value building land, the Legacy Plan promised that 35 per cent of housing would be affordable. Employment comprising 7-8,000 new jobs would be supplied at three hubs: the Press and Broadcast Centre in the west (now known as Here East); Stratford Waterfront in the east; and Pudding Mill in the south.<sup>15</sup>

These ideas were fully endorsed by the IOC when making their final evaluation visit before the 2012 Games, who clearly appreciated the mutual benefits to be had. London would gain a gleaming new inner-city district. The Olympic movement would gain positive endorsement of its vision for urban legacy; a regeneration that would leave positive traces of the Olympics embedded in the townscape of their onetime host city. Having inspected the plans and perhaps suitably impressed by artists’ impressions of future inhabitants engaged in walking, jogging, cycling, gardening, and taking the air on their balconies, Jacques Rogge, announced at a press conference that London:

---

<sup>14</sup> Olympic Park Legacy Company. 2010. *A Walk around Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park*. London: Olympic Park Legacy Company.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*



has raised the bar on how to deliver a lasting legacy. We can already see tangible results in the remarkable regeneration of East London. This great historical city has created a legacy blueprint for future Games hosts.<sup>16</sup>

As the schemes developed, efforts were made to align toponymy with Olympic or Paralympic memory. Official placemaking activities saw roads, open spaces and housing projects retain Games-related names or receive new ones that make clear reference to the Olympics: Tessa Jowell Boulevard, Mandeville Place, Guttman Square and De Coubertin Street. Yet this is a two-edged sword. Equally, references to the Olympics constantly find their way into property advertisements, with mentions of the Games and the Summer of 2012 featuring in real estate promotional material. For some at least,<sup>17</sup> this aligns Olympic values with neighbourhood change and gentrification and suggests the commodification of Olympic memory.

To elaborate, the early plans would always face the art of the possible. Fulfilment of their objectives would always rely on finding private partners because, unlike the preparation and Games phases, little or nothing was available from the public purse. Considerable problems arose, for example, with the future of the main stadium, retitled the London Stadium. As has occurred elsewhere, Olympic stadia have a tendency to become ‘limping white elephants’,<sup>18</sup> which was eminently possible in London once the owners had decided to retain the capability and sufficient capacity to stage major athletic meetings and other sports festivals. After protracted negotiations with football teams, the only likely candidates to become anchor tenants, West Ham United gained a long and generously provisioned lease that, arguably, is a long-term drain on the public purse.<sup>19</sup> The net result has been for the stadium owners (the London Legacy Development Corporation) to make continual modifications in the visual appearance and overlay that makes it seem less connected with the past and more like the club’s home ground (Figure 6).

\*\*\*FIGURE 6 about here\*\*\*

Rather more problems stem from the fact that effective remediation of the land had converted the lower Lea Valley into prime real estate. With this change, the shining visions of new urban landscapes became progressively commodified in promotional material; valuable adjuncts in the process of selling new housing and apartments. For instance, under the heading ‘The legacy of London 2012 means this corner of the East End is a frontrunner for families’, a recent advertorial in a UK newspaper noted:

Since the athletes departed, the Olympic Park has undergone a slow transformation into a place to live, work and play. It has its own postcode (E20, shared with EastEnders’ fictional Walford), Stratford’s shopping and transport links are on the doorstep — and,

---

<sup>16</sup> Owen Gibson. London 2012 has ‘raised the bar’ on legacy planning, says IOC president. *The Guardian*, 27 March 2012. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2012/mar/27/london-2012-ioc-legacy>. Accessed 15 June 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Penny Bernstock. 2014. *Olympic Housing: A Critical Review of London 2012’s Legacy*. Farnham: Ashgate; Valerie Viehoff and Gavin Poynter, 2016. This is East 20? Urban Fabrication and the Re-making of the Olympic Park: Some Research Issues. In Valerie Viehoff and Gavin Poynter (eds) *Mega-event Cities: Urban Legacies of Global Sports Events*, Abingdon: Routledge, 105-118.; Phil Cohen and Paul Watt (eds). *London 2012 and the Post-Olympics: a hollow legacy?* Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.

<sup>18</sup> John A. Mangan. 2008. Prologue: guarantees of global goodwill: post-Olympic legacies – too many limping white elephants. *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25, 1869-83.

<sup>19</sup> Glyn Robbins. 2015. From Upton Park to Olympic Park: What does West Ham’s move tell us about sport and regeneration?. *Local Economy*, 30, 975-982.

as you'd expect, the sports facilities are second to none. It's a gentle, outdoorsy sort of place, with paths, gardens and riverside walkways.<sup>20</sup>

When necessary, too, the need for private sector investment brought pressures that compromised and changed the visions that underpinned the grand plan-making for the Olympic Park. Expensive legacy promises on housing and environmental matters would come under pressure, especially given the value of the now remediated land. In 2013, for instance, a proposal emerged to create a Cultural and Educational Quarter on land that in the original strategy was set aside to be part of the Marshgate Wharf neighbourhood. Approving of the idea, London's Mayor Boris Johnson argued that the scheme would make far better economic sense than use of the land for housing and supported the name 'Olympicopolis' for the new cultural quarter. This was less a tributary allusion to ancient Olympia than a jocular reference to historic predecessor – the cultural and educational quarter established in South Kensington after the 1851 Great Exhibition and dubbed 'Albertopolis' after the Prince Consort.<sup>21</sup> Yet as the scheme developed, even this symbolic reference was removed, with the erstwhile 'Olympicopolis' now rendered 'East Bank' in imitation perhaps of London's South Bank. Here even the symbolic attachment to the Olympic project has been scrapped in the interests of property development.

### Telling Tales

Memory permeates the Olympics like a watermark, sometimes feint but always discernable. Even a cursory analysis reveals its enduring presence, *inter alia*, in accounts of the movement's origins, in its ceremonies and symbolism, in the unfolding of its working practices and, of course, in the landscapes of its host cities. In this paper, we have considered the way that Olympic memory is manifested in those landscapes, by particular reference to the QEOP in the Lower Lea Valley. In the case of London 2012, we have identified the differing conceptions brought to bear on memory of the pre-existing landscapes, examined the process by which interpreters have tried to anchor memory of the Games, and noted how memory is commodified as part of the legacy process. Each of these themes, in manifold direct and implicit ways, imparts information about the past-in-the-present and underlines the importance of understanding the narratives that frame meaning.

Taken as a whole, they add up to a specific and unique story. Each edition of the Olympics throws up its own issues in terms of the traces that selection of event spaces, decisions on commemoration and legacy strategies will leave on the Olympic city. Certainly if comparing London's current experience with the creation of post-Games physical legacy, it would contrast with previous Games, such as Athens 2004 or Rio de Janeiro 2016. Nevertheless, there are more general points to be made in terms of the ways in which narratives envelop and give meaning to both tangible and intangible outcomes of the Games. This is because narratives, as such, can be understood as containing two elements: a story or a structured and usually textual account of a sequence of events that occurred in the past; and a discourse, which refers to the way in which that story is presented.<sup>22</sup> The story encapsulated in a narrative can serve to contextualize change and to position the past in relation to the

---

<sup>20</sup> Tim Palmer. Life in London E20: what makes the Olympic Park a great place to live. *Sunday Times*, 20 January 2019. Available on-line at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/life-in-london-e20-what-makes-the-olympic-park-a-great-place-to-live-km3nlrjpt>, accessed 16 June 2019.

<sup>21</sup> John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold. 2017. Olympic futures and urban imaginings: from Albertopolis to Olympicopolis. In John Hannigan, John, and Greg Richards, eds. *The Sage Handbook of New Urban Studies*. London: Sage, 514-34.

<sup>22</sup> Patrick O'Neill. 1996. *Fictions of Discourse: reading narrative theory*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

present and future but the discourse is subject to the values of the observer and, as will be seen, can frequently be contested.

In the case of the Olympics, the long-dominant narrative for judging matters was essentially underpinned by a ‘Whig interpretation of history’, which rhetorically viewed the past in terms of the march towards ever greater achievement and enlightenment.<sup>23</sup> This narrative seamlessly linked together a set of hallowed but largely imagined origins,<sup>24</sup> applauded the struggle and vision of the pioneers (especially de Coubertin) in re-establishing the Games, celebrated progress made up to the present and looked ahead to the completion of a historic project. In the case of London 2012, the use of a brownfield site was seen officially in this manner, with the evidence of physical transformation interpreted as vindication of core Olympic values. Yet over time, the contrary voice has become stronger. With the task of soil decontamination fully achieved and tasks of physical rehabilitation fading into the background, the problematic issue of social legacy became the yardstick against which success was measured. Disappointments in this area have led, reciprocally, to the traces left by the Olympics being interpreted wholly differently by some observers in terms of dispossession, inequality and commodification.

This sense of contestation underlines the dynamic nature of narrative formation and change; a process that is clearly ongoing. New ingredients have steadily been added to the mix over the lifespan of the Olympic project to date and will continue to reconfigure the way that the traces of the past are interpreted. In terms of planning and site management, the powers of a mayoral development corporation (the London Legacy Development Corporation) responsible for the QEOP are set alongside the jurisdiction of the local authorities in which the Park is situated. Neighbourhoods are progressively being developed that will be filled with residents, many new to the area, who will effectively be living within the shadow of the mega-event. Already a delicate balance exists between looking back and moving forward, with the question of whose story is being told when interpreting the surviving features of London 2012. As Paula Reavey<sup>25</sup> noted: ‘the experience of memory pushes beyond narrative alone and emerges from specific scenes or settings, as much as time periods or stories’.

Beyond this, changes steadily occur in the broader metanarratives of the IOC’s relations with its host cities, such as the growing emphasis on legacy and the move under the IOC’s Agenda 2020 towards seeking more democratic support for Games projects.<sup>26</sup> That process can only be helped by examples of host cities able to demonstrate that the Games have produced thriving neighbourhoods and urban quarters whose roots lie in the Games but which have continued to develop their own character and vitality. Ensuring that the traces of the past are incorporated into these evolving landscapes benefits the IOC and local identities. Where they cannot (as in the cases of Athens and Rio) the dominant narrative is one of failure, waste and lost opportunities that questions the model of legacy that the IOC has been so anxious to promote.

---

<sup>23</sup> Herbert Butterfield. 1931. *The Whig Interpretation of History*, London: George Bell and Sons. See also John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold. 2018. Urban Segments and Event Spaces: World’s Fairs and Olympic Sites. In Carola Hein, ed. *The Routledge Handbook of Planning History*, Abingdon: Routledge, 348-63

<sup>24</sup> Eric Hobsbawm. 1983. Introduction: inverting tradition. In: Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Paula Reavey. 2017. Scenic memory: experience through time-space. *Memory Studies*, 10, 107–111.

<sup>26</sup> On Agenda 2020, see: John J. MacAloon, 2016. Agenda 2020 and the Olympic movement. *Sport in Society*, 19, 767-785.

## References

- ABERCROMBIE, Patrick. 1945. *Greater London Plan 1944*. London: HMSO.
- BERNSTOCK, Penny. 2014. *Olympic Housing: A Critical Review of London 2012's Legacy*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- BUTTERFIELD, Herbert. 1931. *The Whig Interpretation of History*. London: George Bell.
- COHEN, Phil and WATT, Paul (eds). 2017. *London 2012 and the Post-Olympics: a hollow legacy?* Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- ESSEX, Stephen and CHALKLEY, Brian. 1998. 'Olympic Games: catalyst of urban change'. *Leisure Studies*, 17, 187-206.
- GIRGINOV, Vassil. 2018. *Rethinking Olympic Legacy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- GOLD, John R. and GOLD, Margaret M. 2017. Olympic futures and urban imaginings: from Albertopolis to Olympicopolis. In John Hannigan and Greg Richards (eds). *The SAGE Handbook of New Urban Studies*, London: Sage, 514-34.
- GOLD, John R. and GOLD, Margaret M. 2017. The enduring enterprise: the Summer Olympics, 1896-2012. In John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold (eds). *Olympic Cities: city agendas, planning and the world's games, 1896-2012*. London: Routledge: 21-63.
- GOLD, John R. and GOLD, Margaret M. 2018. Urban Segments and Event Spaces: World's Fairs and Olympic Sites. In Carola Hein, ed. *The Routledge Handbook of Planning History*, Abingdon: Routledge, 348-63.
- GRIX, Jonathan. (ed). 2017. *Leveraging Mega-event Legacies*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- HOBSBAWM, Eric. 1983 Introduction: inverting tradition. In Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, T., eds. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-14.
- LEOPKEY, Becca and PARENT, Milena M. 2017. The governance of Olympic legacy: process, actors and mechanisms. *Leisure Studies*, 36, 438-451.
- MACALOON, John J. 2016. Agenda 2020 and the Olympic movement. *Sport in Society*, 19, 767-785.
- OLYMPIC PARK LEGACY COMPANY. 2010. *A Walk around Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park*. London: Olympic Park Legacy Company.
- O'NEILL, Patrick. 1996. *Fictions of Discourse: reading narrative theory*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- POWELL, Hilary and MARRERO, Isaac (eds). 2012. *The Art of Dissent: Adventures in London's Olympic State*. London: Marshgate Press.
- REAVEY, Paula. 2017. Scenic memory: experience through time-space. *Memory Studies*, 10, 107-111.

ROBBINS, Glyn. 2015. From Upton Park to Olympic Park: What does West Ham's move tell us about sport and regeneration? *Local Economy*, 30, 975-982.

SINCLAIR, Iain. 2011. *Ghost Milk: calling time on the Grand Project*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

VIEHOFF, V. and POYNTER, G., 2016. This is East 20? Urban Fabrication and the Re-making of the Olympic Park: Some Research Issues. In Valerie Viehoff and Gavin Poynter (eds) *Mega-event Cities: Urban Legacies of Global Sports Events*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 105-118.

FIGURES AND CAPTIONS



Figure 1 The Olympic Medal Winners board, Olympic Stadium Berlin (photograph taken in 1977)

Source: The Authors



Figure 2 The Lower Lea Valley in the late 1930s as recorded in Patrick Abercrombie's Great London Plan (1945), seen from looking east from above Hackney Wick. Carpenters Road runs through the centre of the site with the factories mostly between it and the canal. The future Olympic stadium site would be to the left of the canal; the warm-up tracks to the right.

Source: ABERCROMBIE, P. (1945), Greater London Plan 1944, London, HMSO.





Figure 3 Portion of land in the southern part of the future QEOP as seen in May 2007. It is bisected by the Pudding Mill River, then a tributary of the River Lea. The Olympic stadium was situated to the left of the watercourse, the warm-up tracks to the right.

Source: The Authors





Figure 4 The Olympic Rings sculpture, QEOP (June 2019)

Source: The Authors



Figure 5 The 'Wall of Champions', an underwhelming version of the display of medal winners (see also Figure 1). A wall only in the sense of being a barrier, the winners names are embossed by alphabetical order of sport on the central rail. (June 2019).

Source: The Authors



Figure 6 The London Stadium, formerly the Olympic stadium, has been progressively changed in visual terms to give West Ham United, the anchor tenants, a greater sense of belonging.

Source: The authors

NOTE: All photographs are by the authors apart from Figure 2. The publication that this is from was published in 1945 and is now out of copyright.