

The London Olympics – making a ‘piece of city’

Ricky Burdett discusses the Olympics’ ‘Great Leap Eastwards’ and argues that the city is on its way to improving on the pattern of social inequality. However, the journey will be long and fraught with challenges. City government needs to retain control and ownership of the land, and put in place checks and balances to ensure that land values and gentrification do not push existing communities in the vicinity out.



What happens when the Olympic park perimeter fence comes down? This is the single most important question that will test the success of the games in creating a lasting legacy. With only a few weeks to go and the venues and the Olympic Park complete, the city is already enjoying the global limelight after a sustained period of downright opposition, seen by some as an unnecessary intrusion and expense. With over 27 million visitors a year and still one of the world’s strongest financial centres, Londoners have been asking themselves ‘do we need the Games?’ and ‘what will they do for London?’ The quick answer to the first question might be ‘yes’, if we want to improve the city’s pattern of social inequality. But, it will take at least 20 years.

As many LSE scholars have pointed out, despite being a prosperous city of nearly 8 million people, London has its share of deep-set social and economic problems. In terms of its spatial geography, London’s western half is relatively wealthy and well served by public infrastructure and transport, while its eastern half is more deprived. The life expectancy of a man, for example, is five years lower in east London compared to parts of west London.

For decades, central and city governments have been trying to address this imbalance. From the 1970s onwards there have been many plans and initiatives aimed at regenerating the Thames Gateway (under one of its many pseudonyms). The London Docklands Development Corporation (inspired by Michael Heseltine), for example, kickstarted the redevelopment of the docklands, leading to the controversial realisation of Canary Wharf in the mid 1980s which recently broke through the -100,000 jobs mark. The Olympics is part of this complex urban jigsaw.

Ken Livingstone’s first London Plan (conceived before the bid for the 2012 Olympic Games was launched) identified two major growth corridors extending outwards from the centre along the River Thames and to the north-east towards Stansted Airport. It is where these two corridors meet that the Olympic site is located, with Stratford at its epicenter. Boris Johnson has reinforced this growth strategy, going so far as to give special planning powers to the newly created London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) to act as a ‘super development authority’ for the entire area, granting itself planning powers over more than 200 hectares of land that currently falls within the four London boroughs of Newham, Walthamstow, Tower Hamlets and Hackney.

Stratford is typical London town centre – a bit down-at-heel, yet versatile – but with exceptional rail and underground connections to the rest of the city and the commuter beltway of the South-East. It is also hoped international high-speed trains from Paris and Brussels will stop here from 2013 onwards. Rows of neat terraced houses inhabited by diverse ethnic communities sit next to 1970s social housing blocks and run-down shopping streets with discount stores and fast-food outlets. A network of canals and waterways winds through a rough post-industrial landscape with redundant gas cylinders and railway goods yards. Nearby, the streets are crowded with an increasingly cosmopolitan population made up of Asians, Africans, Caribbeans and a new influx of Eastern Europeans who mingle with native Londoners.

For the last decade this swathe of East London – especially the Newham part of it – has seen piecemeal yet sustained investment, spurred on the Labour-inspired gospel of the ‘urban renaissance’ (in which this author is implicated!). There is no doubt that Stratford and its surroundings are a fragmented, mildly dystopian, urban landscape much loved by psycho-geographers like Iain Sinclair, who in his recent novel

'Ghost Milk', regrets its imminent 'destruction' by the Olympian conspiracy. Pseudo-iconic residential tower blocks keep cropping up, responding in an uncoordinated fashion to London's housing need and new institutions are become lured by the relative low-cost but high-accessibility of the area.

It is easy to forget that a decade ago, well before anyone in London thought seriously about bidding for the Olympic Games, a consortium of developers joined up with London & Continental Railways (owners of much of the redundant railway land) to propose a massive shopping centre with over 5,000 new homes and several million square feet of offices. In effect, a second, less glamorous Canary Wharf had been planned and conceived – and received planning permission – three years before London won the bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games. Reflecting London's age-old pragmatism when it comes to land and development, the public sector simply 'piggy-backed' itself onto a private sector initiative.

In effect the Olympic Plan is a sophisticated grafting exercise. The £2bn shopping centre was completed by Westfield last September promising nearly 10,000 jobs to the local economy. The housing component of the 'private' scheme was turned into the Athletes' 'Village' – and has been sold on to consortia led by the Qataris and social housing groups. Office buildings and hotels will soon follow where temporary facilities and sponsors' pavilions now stand. And the Olympic Park with its sports venues, future housing sites, schools, health centres, roads and bridges will stitch this formerly disconnected site back into the intricate web of East London. The project has become an elaborate chess game in time and space that mirrors, in an accelerated fashion, the normal, organic planning process that determines London's DNA. As Tony Travers of LSE London has put it 'the Olympics has brought regeneration forward by about 70 years!'

Today, the construction workforce has passed its peak of over 10,000 people in what had become Europe's largest construction site. You can see the impact of the £9.3 billion (about €10billion) of public money, a massive and time-limited injection of cash into the social, physical and economic infrastructure of the area. Up to 2006, the 200 hectare site was mainly occupied by industrial sheds and low-level economic activities which have been relocated as part of the government's investment strategy. The site has been cleared, electricity pylons and overhead cables removed, millions of tons of polluted soil have been cleaned, sustainable energy plants built and new roads, sewers, cables and infrastructure have been provided for what will become one of London's new urban communities.

London has invented a new planning methodology for the construction of the Games and what it leaves behind for its so-called 'Olympic Legacy'. Many of the sports venues and facilities for the Games will be temporary but the investment in the infrastructure of a new piece of city will be permanent. Only four structures in the Olympic Park will remain after 2012: the elegant Velodrome by Hopkins Architects, Dame Zaha Hadid's expressive Aquatic Centre, Make's less flamboyant Handball venue and the (somewhat re-built) Olympic stadium (future users will be determined after the Games). The basketball and hockey stadia, the water-polo pools and other structures will be dismantled and either relocated or the building components sold or recycled. Some will be shipped to Rio for the 2016 Olympic Games or Glasgow for the 2014 Commonwealth Games, adding a novel dimension of sustainability to the Olympic project.

At the heart of the masterplan is the recently named 'Queen Elizabeth Park', cleverly designed to make the most of the infrastructure of canals that wind up from the River Thames along the Lea Valley. A web of promenades, bridges and walkways reconnect the park with its surroundings east and west – to Leyton and Hackney – reconciling the complex change in levels, interweaving between the heavy rail and road infrastructure that criss-crosses and surrounds the site. Yet, no cars will be allowed on the site during the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012, with all visitors – except for the IOC's privileged VIPs – having to use public transport, with up to thousands taking advantage of the high-speed Japanese bullet 'Javelin' train service to St Pancras station in central London in less than ten minutes.

After the Olympics, the wide promenades and bridges for the 1.5 million visitors will be reduced to the appropriate scale for a 'normal' city park. The same approach is being taken to some of the venues like the Aquatic Centre, where the massive and visually obtrusive side wings with 17,000 seats will be removed, returning the building to its original, intended sinuous form accommodating only 6,000 seats – an appropriate scale for what will become East London's major swimming and diving complex. A school for 2,000 students (from ages of 5 to 18), a health centre and other community facilities are being

constructed now for use by future inhabitants of the area and the existing communities nearby, while biomass-powered energy centres provide state-of-the-art district heating system to the entire area.

Most importantly, though, the land left vacant by the temporary venues after 2012 will become platforms for an entirely new 'piece of city'. Over 8,000 houses, arranged along traditional London streets, terraces and squares will be erected over a 20-30 year time frame, extending outward from the Athlete's Village and its relatively high-rise perimeter blocks now under completion around an elegant and inspired landscape terrain by Vogt. Here 3,000 units will be handed over in 2013, with half already given over to affordable housing and the other half recently purchased by the a private real estate consortium led by Qatari Diar, a Middle Eastern sovereign investment fund, and Delancey Estates. In this respect, the return on public investment is beginning to happen with private sector interest growing in the development potential afforded by this new East London opportunity.

But, all this will only be possible if city government retains control and ownership of the land, and puts in place checks and balances to ensure that land values and gentrification do not push existing communities in the vicinity out. Some of these mechanisms are in place. London's affordable housing policies guarantee that a significant proportion of any new residential development is reserved for more deprived families (anything between 30% and 50%). Legacy uses which create jobs and activity from the park are being sought and secured by the LLDC which owns the freehold of the site and will manage the activities of the park, bringing in private sector commercial and residential developers to invest in new homes, offices and shops across the 2.5 square kilometre site. There has been interest from major companies like the BBC, University College London and the Wellcome Foundation (a major medical research foundation) to relocate here. New hotels and offices are being built around Stratford International Station, creating a secondary but important cluster of new jobs and opportunities.

The legacy masterplan has been conceived in spatial and temporal dimensions. The open, rather flexible grid of streets does allow the potential for assimilation and integration over a long and realistic time period of over twenty years. So, when the fence does come down in 2013, London may have achieved the first step in its 'Great Leap Eastwards' on the back of the London 2012 Olympic Games. It will be a long and tortuous journey.

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