

The Olympics – place and legacy

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The site of the 2012 Olympic Park in the Lower Lea Valley is rich, complex territory. To most Londoners, even those who live nearby, it is little known and less visited. London's detritus heads this way, from the contents of Bazalgette's Northern Outfall Sewer to car breakers' yards. But there are also thriving businesses such as the Three Mills studio complex, on a site which has been in industrial use since the Domesday Book. The Big Breakfast and the original Big Brother were both brought to you from around here. Rows of pylons march up the valley, and motorways and rail lines cut up the landscape, but there is also greenery (not just buddleia), wildlife, and a remarkable network of waterways, tidal and canalised, with all the intriguing paraphernalia of locks, sluices and so on. There is *genius loci* in abundance here.

This is a working valley, but only from Monday to Friday. Walking around the Olympic stadium site in the sunshine last Sunday, I saw more cormorants than people, and heard more crickets than cars. But I also saw big excavators at work, just beyond the rail lines where the Channel Tunnel Rail Link is nearing completion, and the enormous Stratford City development is to follow. And I found the Big Breakfast house at Old Ford Lock now dwarfed by glassy new apartment blocks. Change is already coming.

Since last week's decision in Singapore, however, things are going to have to step up several gears. From being the land that regeneration forgot, the pressure is now on to turn this area, at short order, into one of the biggest building sites in Europe. The Olympic Park, designed by a team of all the talents, already has outline planning permission. The scheme includes new infrastructure on a heroic

scale, needed to join up and service the various sites in this fragmented landscape.

Olympic Games, Expos and the like, have in the past left surreal, dysfunctional environments in their wake all over the world. Such events have often been the opposite of sustainable. But 'legacy' issues have now become increasingly important in Olympic bids, and the Lea Valley's case as a candidate for regeneration can hardly have failed to impress the IOC.

The Lower Lea Valley is not a tabula rasa, though. What it needs is reconstructive surgery, not the grafting into place of a shiny new world. The design team that gave us the masterplan will, I believe, have been alive to this, but they have been working at a big scale and in a hurry. Now the pace will increase, and attention will be focussed on those two weeks in 2012. Seven years is not that long - try sketching out your own programme. New modes of public procurement give us more certainty about time and budget, but the concern for detail tends to be all in the process, not in the product.

The 'legacy masterplan' design, for what happens after the Games, looks promising - in outline. I am concerned, though, that those twin pressures will be such that the detail is never filled in. Good placemaking is about getting to a level of grain at the human scale and doing things with care at 1:5 as well as at 1:5000. Building up a structure of administration and procurement that cares about this will not be easy - it needs sorting out as a matter of urgency. The details are as fragile and vulnerable as those cormorants, the greenery, and the lock keepers' cottages: they all need champions. The big diggers on the other side of the railway make me nervous.

I want to see a great new stadium and an Olympic Games that we can be proud of. In those two weeks, keeping it local is not the point - I'm hoping not to see Chas and Dave topping

the bill at the opening ceremony. But after that, I would like to see a Lea Valley that is recognisably a new improved version of the one I know now, not something from another planet. I would like it to remain somewhere in particular, not merely a 'best practice exemplar' of new orthodoxies applied everywhere.

The other thing that worries me is: where will London's cars go to die now?