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Questions of making the city

The sustainable regeneration legacy of London 2012

Materialising the Olympic Legacy: design and development narratives

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The Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in east London has a fantastic opportunity to lead the way in sustainable living for its neighbours across London and beyond. However, sustainability in the Park goes beyond the environment. It is also a story of social equality and employment, and of economic growth and prosperity.[1]

These words are taken from the London Legacy Development Corporation's publication of 2012, *Your Sustainability Guide to the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park 2030*. Underscored by the wording of the last sentence, they articulate an important 'story line' for the 2012 Olympics and its promised urban legacy – one in which the physically transformative and yet fleetingly enacted occasion of the Games figures as catalyst to the lasting transformation of east London's socio-economic prospects. The resolution of this process, as the story has been told by legacy leaders since the days of the Olympic bid a decade ago, is the sustainable regeneration of 'wasteland'[2] and the reinvigoration of a needy, post-industrial portion of London. It is a story in which a place and its inhabitants, cast respectively in the roles of stage and cast, are to undergo a series of changes that will, at least in theory, transport them together from one reality to another. In the process, as the above quote suggests, they will be able to become paradigmatic 'sustainable infrastructure for sustainable lifestyles'[3] for London in the future.

However, sustainable regeneration is not only promoted as a resolution to a story formulated in place-specific circumstances. It is also put forward as a major outcome of strategic work to respond to, and overcome, the criticised and all too common journeys of Olympic Games developments from investment and design to waste and ruination. In this context, sustainable regeneration denotes the capacity for the left-over spaces and structures from the Games to be part-recycled, part-repurposed in a post-Olympic urban context, to produce what London's Olympic Candidate File claimed would be at once 'a legacy for sport', 'a legacy for the community' and 'a legacy for the environment'.[4] Sustainable development stands therefore for the resolution of an alternative 'development narrative'[5] to that of the 'white elephants' of other Olympic host cities where Olympic designs have failed to secure economically, socially or environmentally sustainable futures. In this regard, sustainability and regeneration have also been viewed in terms of a paradigm, a development story which can be communicated as 'knowledge and lessons' for construction projects elsewhere.[6] To this end, the London Olympic Delivery Authority's 'Learning Legacy' agenda was established in the run up to the Games with the aim of promoting globally transferable exemplars of sustainable regeneration 'best practice' for other event landscapes.[7] But, in spite of efforts to codify sustainable regeneration according to a number of clear themes, it is distributed across varied strands of process and effect, geographic scales and levels of governance, ways of anticipating and making futures, and conceptions of duration and longevity. Within this complex field, sustainable regeneration implies no fixed, let alone certain, resolution, but is rather a heterogeneous collection of partial tools and measures, strategies and tactics, statistical accounts, visualisations and other interpretations of consequence and benefit. As a metaphor, it conveys the gist of an aspirational urban reality formulated in contexts of environmental challenges, issues of social inequality and economic volatility. But, as a set of processes and narratives of legacy development, its meanings are more open to exploration.

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Masterplanning and urban design

Richard Sennett argues that, not unlike that of a novelist, the 'urban designer's art is to shape the process of [an] exploration' that keeps 'possibility intact' but without disclosing its ending.[8] Masterplanning, urban design and architecture lie at the heart of sustainable regeneration legacy agendas, translating them into a story of spatial assemblage beginning in the site's post-industrial, pre-Olympic past and resolving via major redevelopment in an envisioned urban future circa 2031. This special issue of **arq** was established with the aim of bringing together a set of critical perspectives on London's

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Olympic legacy, looking at how it touches ground in effect within urban and architectural design. The issue includes seven papers of different lengths from a cross-disciplinary range of authors who ask questions of the role of design in generating and shaping the processes of materialising sustainable regeneration agendas and visions, and of the politics of designed change. While some papers shed light on issues connected with Olympic legacy designs and development narratives on the Olympic site itself, others sidelight them, as it were, from positions at its urban 'fringes' or from the stance of 'alternative' practice.

The significance of how the story of urban change in the Lea Valley has been articulated as a promise to people and places emerges as an important theme for several papers. A promise, Hannah Arendt argued, serves to 'at least partially dispel' the unpredictability of the future, particularly to the extent that it relates to human agencies that lie beyond the scope of scientific projection.[9] Understood in this way, the realisation of the promise of sustainable regeneration is, as I argue in my paper, reliant on the formulation of an ethical approach to what and to whom it is made, and not only on the prescription of specific outcomes which may or may not prove deliverable or effective. Looking across the ten-year history of legacy-focused 'representations of space', geographer Andrew Smith looks at how the promise of a 'green park' has been subtly rearticulated over time, and considers the significance of its 'more commercial orientation'. While this transformation is explained in terms of shifts in broader economic and policy contexts, it is seen to have important implications for the coherence of the sustainable regeneration story and indeed the veracity of the promise. Geographer and architectural theorist Andrew Hoolachan looks into the relationship between understandings of sustainable urbanism, geographic scale and scalar politics. Through the case study of part of east London's Greenway, he explores how the promise of sustainable legacy, formulated in a regional planning context, has been impacted by the more recent paradigm shift represented by localism. Design and cultural theorist Graeme Evans, in turn, argues that in spite of claims that legacy masterplanning would deliver by serving, less as an instrument of determination, than a 'hands-on cultural framework' that can learn from regeneration history in the East End, respond to community objectives and encourage a sense of local ownership, vision actually 'continues to rely on hyperbole and over-optimistic forecasts: of jobs, investment, homes and community'. These papers raise important questions related to the status of legacy promises, to the capacity of design and designers to inform, reflect or abet social processes such as gentrification, and to the role of the architect and planner in the times and spaces of democratised planning.

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Portrayals of the London Olympic site

Papers also highlight the significance of how legacy promises are developed in the context of official portrayals of the site and the wider East End's history. These have tended to emphasise the 'decline' of its industrial past as a direct counterpoint to a process akin to what Robert Beauregard describes as the formation of 'an ideology [...] that celebrates newness and growth, and portrays investors as risk-takers bringing prosperity to all and strength to the nation'.[10] The socially constructed nature of 'decline' as a frame for intervention is emphasised by anthropologist Isaac Marrero-Guillamón who looks at how art and small-scale architectural projects in the Olympic 'fringe' area of Hackney Wick were able to articulate 'an alternative narrative, one that spoke of the freedom of interstitial spaces, subterranean social practices, and unregulated plant and animal life' from that of wastelands. For architect-activist and Hackney Wick resident Richard Brown, the decline story would provide far too neat a rendition of the reality of this area, which he sees as having been shaped by neglect and exploitation while, at the same time, becoming a refuge for incubator enterprise and affordable living – double-edged and historically formed consequences of relative legislative freedom at an urban margin. Architect William Mann looks at a series of perspectival visions of the Lea Valley from the early nineteenth century to stress the historical failure of the architectural imagination to apprehend not just the complexity or other faces of decline, but its more generally 'heterogeneous and contradictory' nature and the legacies of loose assemblage. The will to formulate comprehensive, ordered solutions is, for Mann, 'a trap' for urbanists as it often negates the contingencies of development narratives which design must position itself within to be meaningfully responsive and also responsible.

Mann's critique is in part levelled at the illusionistic nature of conventions of architectural representation that often fail to engage with the forces at work in shaping fragmented and contradictory space. This recalls Dalibor Vesely's call for the creative practices of architecture to enter into more effective 'dialogue with the concrete reality of space'.[11] Experiencing and encountering urban spaces in a 'concrete' sense and using the arising reflections as the basis for developing a critical approach to mapping space is the topic of architect Oliver Froome-Lewis's paper. His 'Lea Valley Drift' project involves a *détournement* of Ordnance Survey material in ways that enable contradictory 'objects' within the landscape to be brought into dialogue. The map, thought by de Certeau as 'a totalising stage on which elements of diverse origin are brought together to form the tableau of a "state" of geographical knowledge'[12] is here shown to be able to create a 'change in expectation and hence in uses' of changing place.

Questions of the future

Other papers within the special issue also highlight issues in how designs approach the future, grappling with notions of uncertainty and contingency, will and responsibility. Graeme Evans draws on ideas from the architectural theory of Christopher Alexander to argue for the need for a vision that can more effectively encompass ways of making from the bottom up. Andrew Hoolachan points to the need for design thinking for sustainability to be better articulated across scales, drawing on ideas from history of the

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relationship between city and nature including the Garden City and Arts and Crafts movements. Isaac Marrero-Guillamón refers to examples of makeshift or temporary urbanism. In my own paper, I unpack the idea of the 'Open City' which encapsulates legacy masterplanning approaches to uncertainty and the challenge of long-term visioning, and consider how it reflects conceptions of the processes of future urban production as well as contemporary development politics.

Together, the papers reveal a number of key issues associated with the sustainable regeneration legacy of 2012 going forward. First are relationships between designed outcomes and legacy governance, reflecting how social actors engaged in city making are forging relationships between people and places. Second are questions around modes of looking and seeing – whether from above, below or askance – that are implicated in the politics of design, development and urban form. Third are questions of time in design, which bring us back to the idea of a story of urban change. The promise of sustainable regeneration can for sure be captured in no single image of urban future, as it must be defined by values and orientations that are continually rearticulated in the processes of making and in the shifting light of the possible.

Juliet Davis studied architecture at Cambridge University and completed a Ph.D. focused on early stages of planning for the legacy of the 2012 Olympics at the London School of Economics in 2011. She is a Senior Lecturer in Architecture at Cardiff University.

Notes

1. London Legacy Development Corporation, Your Sustainability Guide to Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park 2030 (London: London Legacy Development Corporation, 2012), p. 1.
2. Ibid, p. 34.
3. Ibid, p. 2.
4. London 2012, Candidate File, Volume 1 (Edenbridge: St Ives Westerham Press, 2004).
5. Richard Sennett, 'The Open City', in *The Endless City*, ed. by Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic (London: Phaidon, 2007), pp. 290–98 (p. 296).
6. Ben Clifford, Mike Raco, Susan Moore, 'The Olympics 2012 Learning Legacy Agenda and the Emergence of a London Development Model', Proceedings of Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting (2013).
7. Olympic Delivery Authority, Learning Legacy (London: Olympic Delivery Authority, 2011), p. 1.
8. Richard Sennett, 'The Open City', pp. 290–98 (p. 296).
9. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edn (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]), p. 244.
10. Robert Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities*, 2nd edn (New York, London: Routledge, 2003), p. 19.
11. Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 346.
12. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Stephen Rendall (London: University of California Press, 1984) p. 121.

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