

1 'Olympic Masterplan Vision', view of the Olympic site from the north, 2003

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An analysis of historical representations of projects for the Lea Valley, exploring persistent motivations, the gap between visions and realisation, and forces that have resisted change.

Futures past

William Mann

For the 2012 Olympics, London was announced to us in images and words which combined sophisticated rhetoric and crude simplification. Two related promises emerged from the compact between design and politics: to replace a fragmented, neglected and polluted area with a smooth, harmonious new city district; and to bequeath an enduring foundation, a 'legacy', to the future. The references to ecology and inequality can be identified with their early twenty-first century moment, but the spatial strategy of a city in a park was something of a throwback to the twentieth and nineteenth centuries: a techno-pastoral in which nature redeems the city from its fallen state. In short: a vision of the future inherited from the past.

I will look here at the drawing that was used to sell the Olympic project and set it alongside a series of imagined landscapes from the preceding two hundred years. Each of these visions has shaped the Lea Valley as it is now and each prefigures aspects of the Olympic project, in terms of both its realisation and the forces that distorted and resisted it. In this sense, the complex tangle of the Lea Valley can be seen as an accumulation of incomplete futures.

The images I examine here make use of a number of representational conventions in order to carry their political burden forwards. The virtues of purity, leisure and liberty, and the evils of pollution, toil and constraint are encoded in tactics of design and presentation across widely varying times and circumstances. Reading these images with care, my aim is to construct an archaeology of the modern urban imagination in order to ask: are the conventions within which our collective imagination operates adequate to the challenges our cities now face?

The Olympic vision

In the perspective visualisation for the Olympics, the River Lea and its floodplain are seen from a great height with the citadel of finance (Canary Wharf) central in the background, close to the vanishing point *[1]*. A crystal bowl-like amphitheatre occupies the centre of the image, from which flows a web of curved paths, swooping and rolling over railway embankments and motorways, skirted by vast but half-buried buildings. This is an extensive and complex new infrastructure, overlaid on top of the network of rivers, a mineral river that branches, wanders and reunites. Paths, stadiums and supporting buildings all follow the same syntax of leaf forms and segmental vaults, a generative geometrical order binding small and large together in a territorial web. The carpet of man-made landscape spreads outwards from the stadium to cover the whole valley, spreading this geometric order to remake the everyday landscape that preceded it. Because it is a photomontage, the transformative potential, the before and after, is emphasised; the new order engages with and renews the resistant matter of the city edge. Scattered in an arc between the two, belonging to neither visual language, are the blocky forms of temporary stadiums, the Athletes' Village and Stratford City shopping centre.

It's an engaging vision: an image of harmonious complexity and flowing mobility. The branching pathways offer vague but suggestive visual analogies with networks and biotechnology. There is a singular focus, with the stadium the festive theatre on which all paths converge. Although many of the buildings are vast, they are subordinated to the landscape design and integrated through the vegetation on their roofs. The contrasts between the river-edge landscape and the abundant infrastructure are resolved into the naturalistic lines of the pathways, and the wooded islands that sit between these artificial streams. In contrast to the subdued tones of the surroundings, the vivid greens and blues promise natural purity and the luminous pathways offer free movement.

This isn't a problem in itself, but things haven't quite turned out like the vision. In place of the harmony and sweeping flows of the image, the landscape that visitors experience is filled with contrasts and abrupt changes. Instead of a crystalline centrepiece, the stadium is a provisional steel frame that is being remade to endure. The Broadcast Centre, the largest structure on the site, is a prefabricated shed of a scale and blankness

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typical of the pre-Olympic Lea. Released from the straitjacket of geometric unity, the site is now also divided in use and character, between an ecological northern half and an active, events-focused southern half. The land bridges over the highway in the foreground, and over the railway line in front of the stadium, were both realised, albeit in more halting and crude geometries, while that over the railway line beyond the stadium was not. This is more than a detail: the site remains an enclave, protected by a ring of infrastructure, connected only at selected locations. The peripheries of the site are not subservient, gratefully receiving regeneration, but dominant, a cluster of towers eagerly seizing a view of the public landscape.

It would be possible to find explanations for the gap between vision and reality in the excess of intervention or in a shortage of effective and co-ordinated control, both doubtless exacerbated by the short time period available for the realisation of this ambitious project. However, I would argue first of all that the Olympic vision was reshaped by forces which elude visualisation and which distorted and resisted the smooth, clean city in the park; and, secondly, that the singular overarching syntax of the vision offered little scope for the integration of the awkward legacy of the past. If we look carefully at the earlier visions of the Lea, and explore their historical circumstances, the invisible forces and the historically accumulated character of the site become clearer.

Prefigurations

The 2004 Olympic Design Statement argued that 'The Lower Lea Valley is an extraordinary aberration in the makeup of London.'[1] This has been the case for centuries if not millennia. The floodplain where the Lea rivers pass through the city's eastern edges has long been home to strange contrasts between provisional urban occupation and the residual wild landscape. Its hybrid spaces have been the setting for Londoners to escape or transgress the norms of metropolitan life. Its mixed character and degraded environment have been interpreted as either vacant or aberrant, justifying publicly sanctioned occupation and correction. Yet as the following series of representations make clear, the area is complex because it is a site where many of the conflicts and interdependencies beneath the surface of the city are expressed.

1837

The copperplate etching of the new railway line is panoramic, long and low *[2]*. It presents a bucolic foreground of two men fishing by a clump of oaks on the riverbank set against a backdrop of a glowing skyscape whose clouds part to illuminate the infrastructure in the middle ground. Looking north from Stratford High Street, the novelty of the passenger railway is presented in dramatic but ambiguous terms, neither unduly promising nor threatening. The image depicts the very beginning of the railways so passengers stand in open trucks. To left and right, old infrastructure frames the view: the waterworks pumping station at Old Ford, and the Pudding Mill to the right. While it's not clear whom this image was meant to reach, the message is carefully staged: the floodplain is already industrialised in part, and these are the parts affected by the new railway. The old river and the expanse of marsh are unaffected, remaining rural in character. At this time (as represented, for example in *Greenwood's Map of London* of 1827), the city stops short of the newly cut Regent's Canal, two miles to the west, the Lea is well stocked with fish and the marshes are still extensively used as common pasture. There is a symbiosis, or at least a tolerance, between industry and uncultivated land, an enduring characteristic of the edge landscape. This is not the first, but is perhaps the most emblematic of the infrastructures that would progressively carve-up the open pasture into small parcels; and this is the viaduct, vastly expanded over the following decades of railway growth, that will frustrate the Olympic network of paths. We are looking towards the site of the future stadium.



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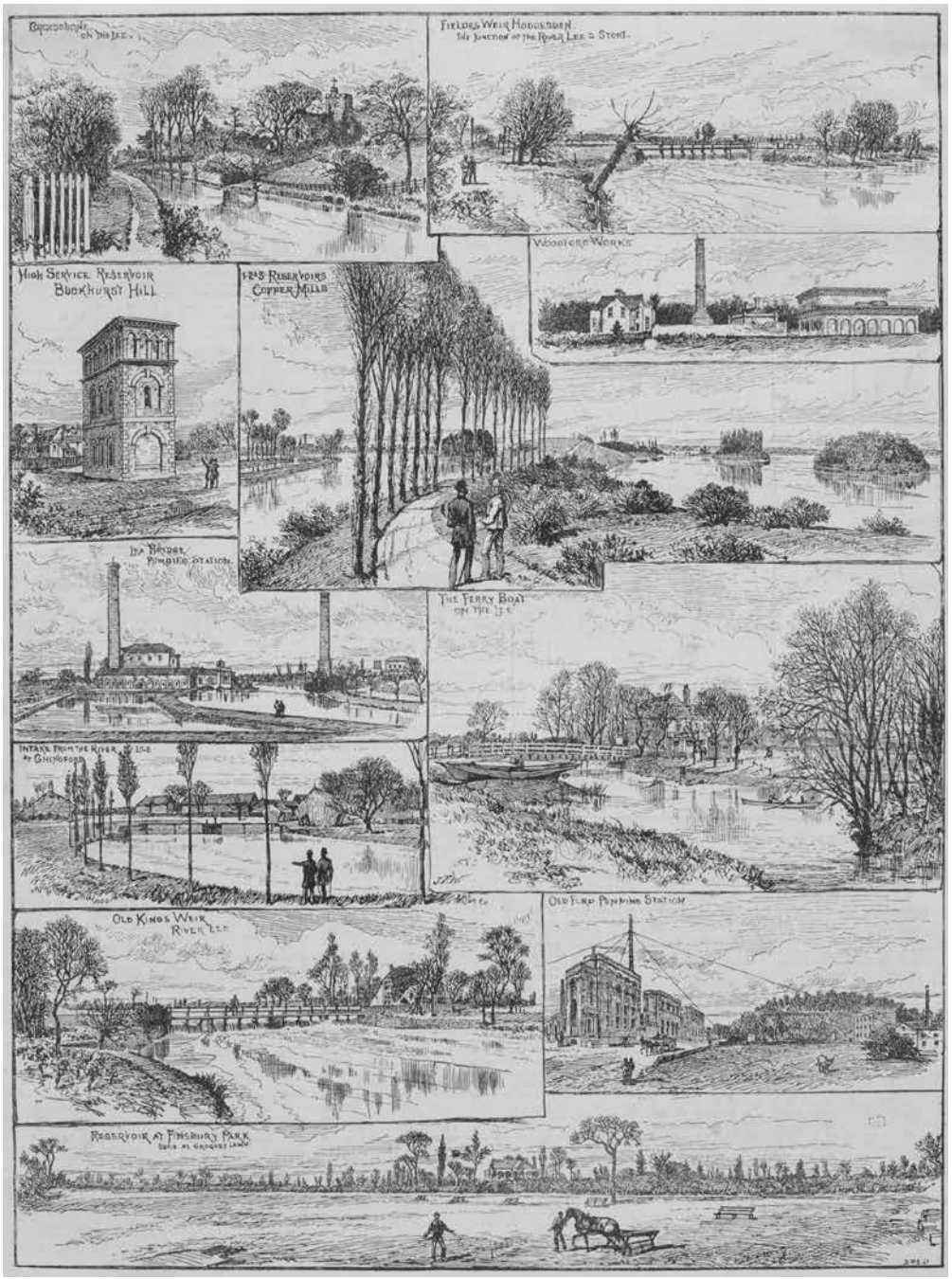
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1884

The anonymous Victorian artist who engraved a series of vignettes of sites belonging to the East London Waterworks Company chose to emphasise their pastoral, civic and recreational qualities *[3]*. Pump-houses echo church towers, down to their Norman arches, while orderly lines of trees and engineered curves complement shallow, irregular riverbanks. Rowers scull on the river in one engraving while, in another, a horse and ploughman work in the foreground. Two gentlemen walk through the pictures pointing demonstratively. The buildings are substantial and artificially aged and their chimneys serve as 'eye-catchers' in the picturesque landscape. The sense of easy leisure access and the continuity of rural life exude reassurance and calm. Despite the appearance of tranquillity, these vignettes present a revolution in progress: under pressure from energetic and informed campaigners, central government is forcing the creation of a metropolitan system of water supply, grappling supervision from the parishes and demanding performance from the private utilities. The switch from gravity-fed to pumped and pressurised supply supports the new sewer system, displacing the nutrient-rich wastes of the city from the market gardens to the waters of the estuary. The city has become less lethal to its inhabitants but has spread its environmental footprint significantly. With the exponential growth of the population, and their increased water consumption, water will take up more and more of the valley floor: the Walthamstow Reservoirs grow to 170 hectares and the Chingford Reservoirs to 310 hectares, greater in size taken together than Hampstead Heath.

2 'View of the River Lea Bridge and Stratford Viaduct as now Constructing for the Eastern Counties Railway Company', 1837

3 'London Water Supply: the East London Waterworks', 1884



3

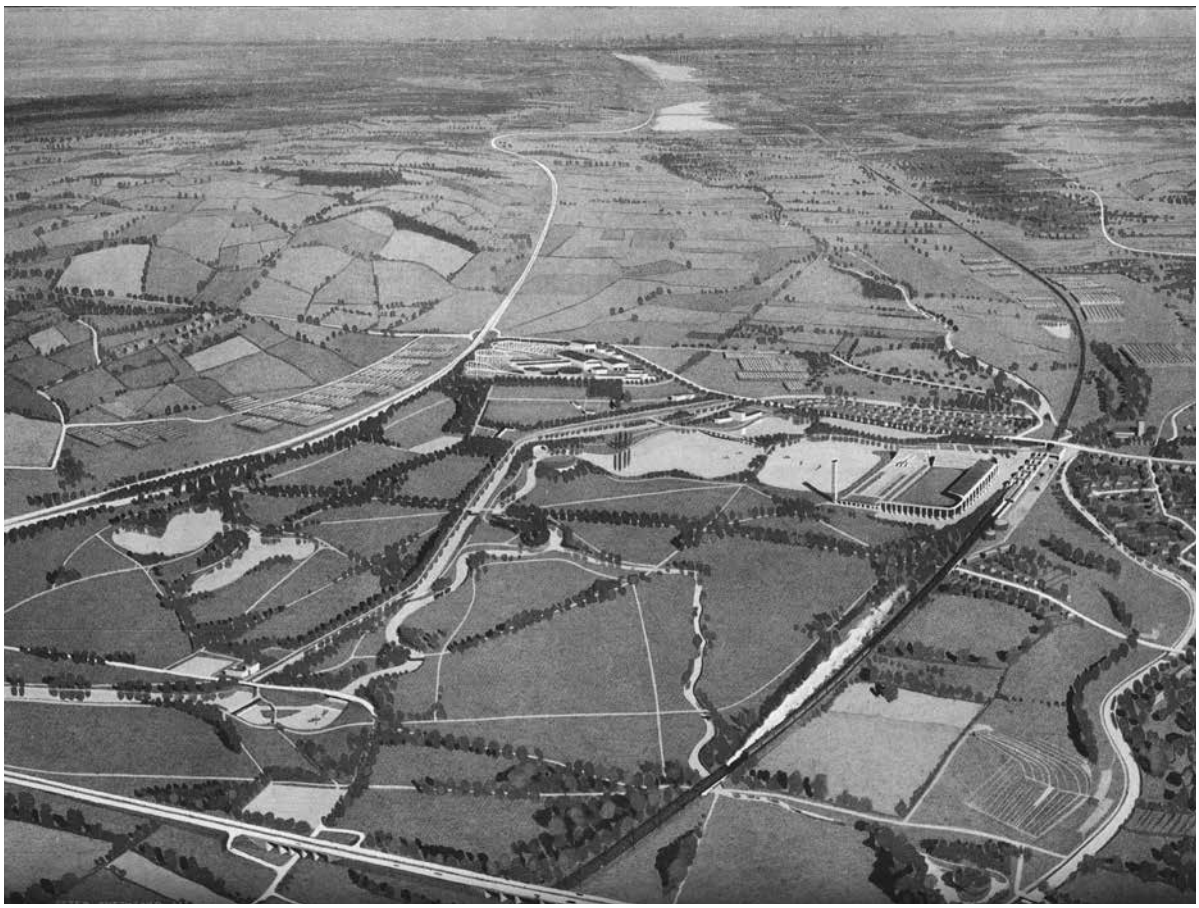
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1944

While troops fight their way through occupied Europe, Sir Patrick Abercrombie's visionaries labour away at the future of London. In the *Greater London Plan*, they view the Lea with a curious ambivalence, acquiescing to the growing dominance of industry in the valley – the productive machine that is feeding the war effort – at the same time talking hopefully about welding together existing open spaces into 'a great regional reservation'.[2] It is only far to the north of London, around Broxbourne, that they sketch out what this might be *[4]*. The designs are presented in the aerial view that would become common currency for the Lea's visionaries. A parkland is demarcated from the surrounding fields and glasshouses by the sharp lines of motorways and railways: infrastructure forms an enclave for the pastoral fiction. A river forks and meanders through the scene, swelling to form an irregular boating lake. Opposite each other, across this panorama, sit a sports stadium and a funfair, linked by a web of criss-crossing footpaths. Following the conventions of the Victorian park to the point of banality, it is a vision of harmony and leisurely exertion, an idyllic negative of total war. However, while it would eventually prove prophetic – its vision of the Lea, and the emphasis on parkland and active leisure, continues to shape the area – the impact was slow in coming. The ideas and actions recommended in the *Plan* would remain without significant follow-up for twenty years: Greater London did not yet exist, and the Lea was a border condition, awkwardly divided between London and Essex.

1964

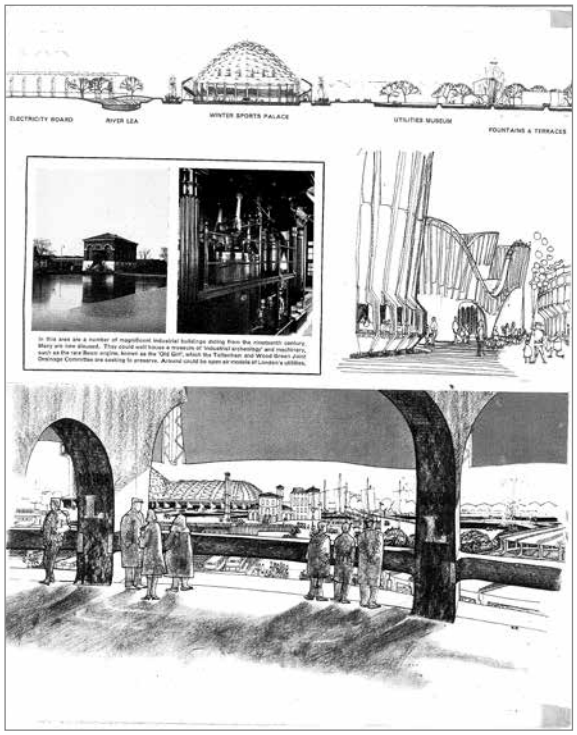
The Civic Trust's 'essay in the use of neglected land for recreation and leisure' stands out for its vivid visual rhetoric, alternately stark and playful.[3] The mixed contemporary state of the valley is set out in a black and white *photoreportage*, while its proposals are charted in a series of architectural cartoons by Nicholas Bawlf *[5a,b]*. The corrective ambition to 'clean up the river and rescue the surrounding land from dereliction' is softly stated and relatively innocent of the tensions it addresses.[4] In place of the pathos of neglect and abandonment is sketched abundant, endless play, spiced with occasional instruction: an Ice Palace, a motorcycle scramble course, a Riverside Pleasure Garden with permanent circus, dance hall, rollercoasters, a children's farm, a swimming pool and aquarium, a rose garden, an architectural maze, a parade ground, an arts centre, a light railway around the reservoirs, and a utilities museum – to name just a fraction of the report's many fevered suggestions. Published in the year of Harold Wilson's first UK election victory, it builds an argument for large-scale public intervention at the service of individual fun. Encapsulating that brief moment when 'post-industrial' seemed more of a promise than a threat, the valley is imagined as a promenade of exuberant structures for the diverse individual passions of the newly time-rich east Londoners – after their two-hour working day is complete. Putting flesh on the bones of Abercrombie's vision, and building on the momentum from the creation of the Greater



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London Council, this is effectively a foundational document for the Lea Valley Regional Park. What starts as a provocative speculation quickly becomes a blueprint. The winter sports palace and speedway track will be built within a few years, their hints of enchantment and risk translated into the more prosaic forms of an ice rink and a cycle track – a first leisure presence on the edge of the railway works at Stratford.



5a



5b

4 'The Lee Valley Green Wedge, looking South towards London, with the Broxbourne Park in the Foreground', from *The Greater London Plan 1944*

5 *a,b* 'Lea Bridge Gardens', pages from Civic Trust, *A Lea Valley Regional Park*, 1964

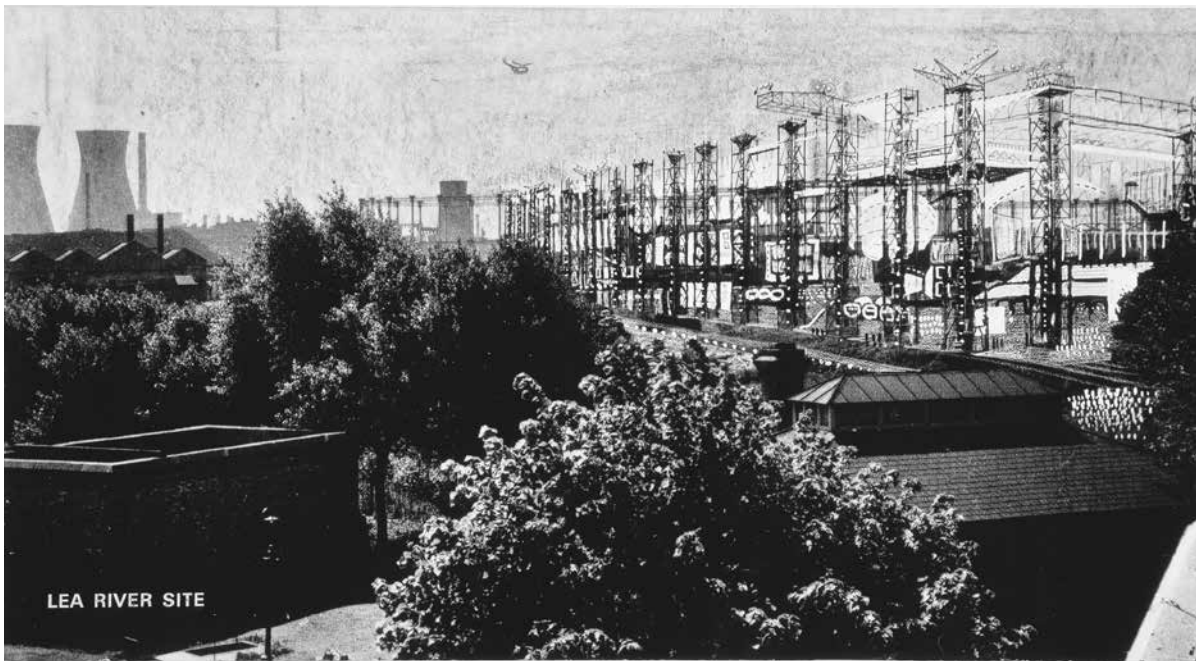
1964

Nestled among the fairground attractions of the Civic Trust's vision was Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood's 'Fun Palace', on a site at Mill Meads where industry and infrastructure sit beside the tidal river. Though independently developed it was co-opted into the vision for the valley, fitting well with the degraded surroundings: 'Its form and structure, resembling a large shipyard in which enclosures such as theatres, cinemas, restaurants, workshops, rally areas, can be assembled, moved, rearranged and scrapped continuously. Its mechanically operated environmental controls are such that it can be sited in a hard dirty industrial area unsuited to more conventional types of amenity buildings.'[5] However, beneath the surface similarities with the Civic Trust vision lie deep differences. Open to endless reconfiguration, the Fun Palace is both a libertarian and a collectivist space. It presents the emerging post-industrial condition in an industrial shell of trussed pylons and cranes. In Price's photomontage *[6]*, we are above the domestic landscape but within the infrastructural one. The frame of the Palace merges with the gasholders of Bromley Gas Works, a forest of steel above the tree canopy, below which are scattered brick sheds and cottages. Rootless, restless and urban in its overall conception – the idea was also touted for sites in Wapping and Camden Town – the Fun Palace in the Lea Valley takes on an altered meaning, presenting a vision of industrial society not so much receding as transforming from within. The vision is as far as the Fun Palace proceeds: with Mill Meads earmarked for storm water retention tanks, Price's project is blocked by municipal water engineers and quietly dropped from the government's 1966 Lea Valley Bill. Price, perhaps unwisely, declines the offer of the neighbouring Distillery Island, now film studios.[6] Over succeeding decades, the Fun Palace ethos, favouring the provisional over the permanent, blurring play and work, will move from the margins to a form of orthodoxy, colonising the Olympics and its Legacy through the shipping container 'Viewtube', the demountable stadium and the creative business hub in the repurposed Broadcast Centre shed.

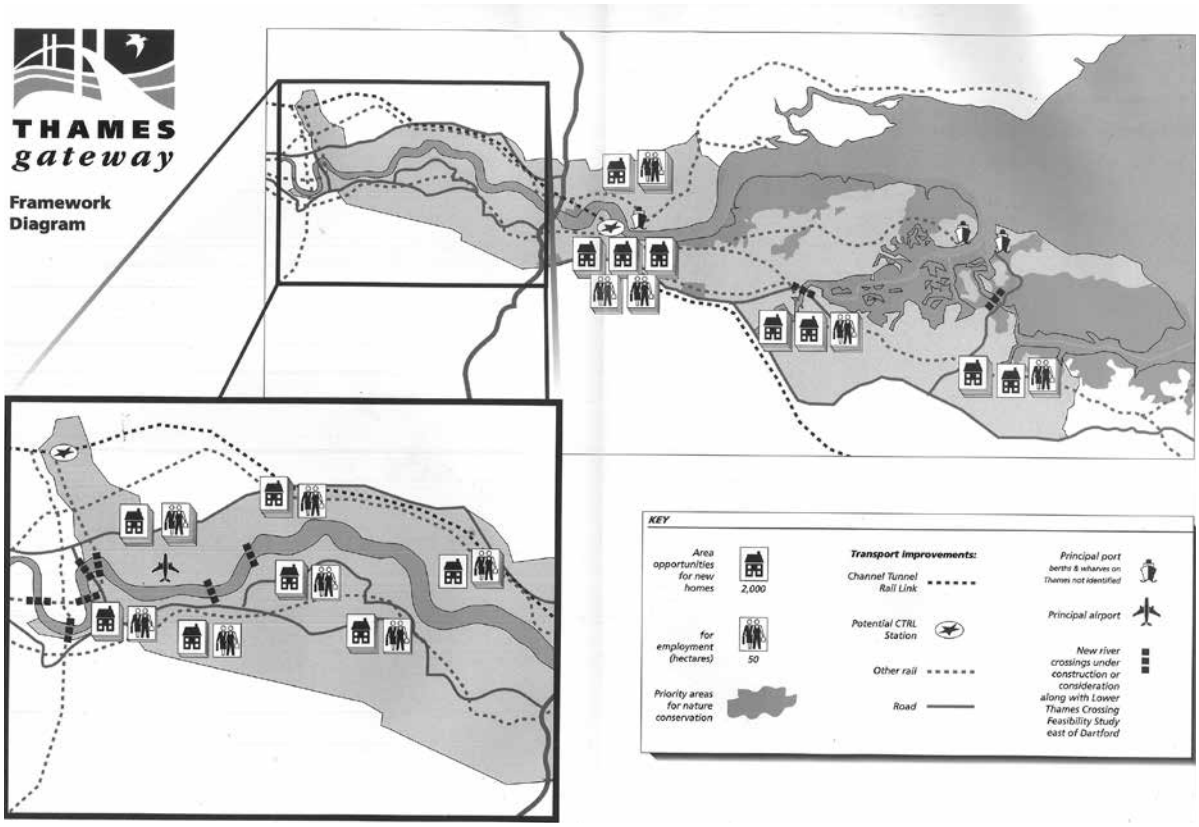
1994

The representation of the 'Thames Gateway', with Stratford at its tip, is diagrammatic in the extreme, a series of blue pictograms on a crude map, combining the unfathomable spatiality of a medieval map with the didactic tenor of a government statistical bulletin *[7]*. The coarseness of its presentation perhaps reflects the difficulty of representing sixty-two kilometres of urban, industrial and rural renewal on a single page. It also serves to conceal the paradoxes of the project, which sought to draw a series of local initiatives

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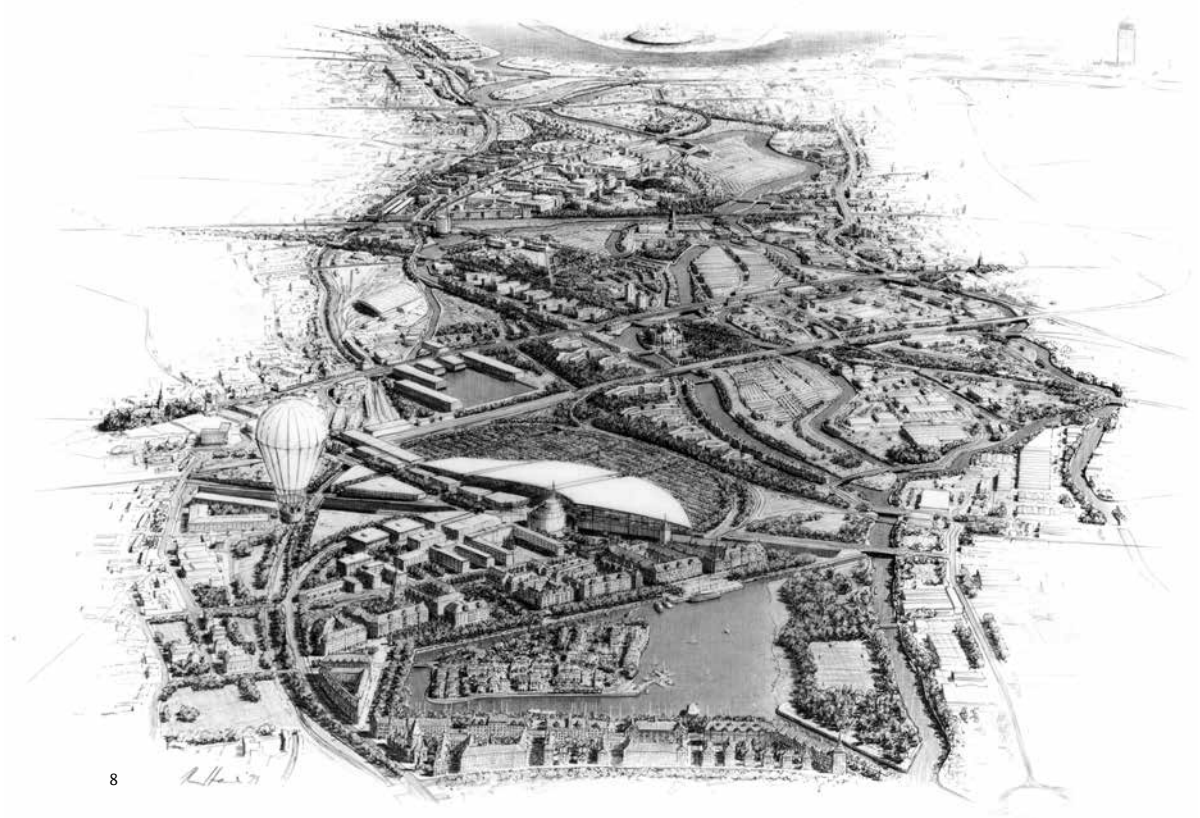
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into a single narrative through the transformative presence of the international high-speed rail line – all this without being prescriptive or statist. In this sense, it bears the stamp of Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for the Environment, an interventionist within a government committed to laissez-faire. The manufacturing plants which had lined the Lea when the regional park was imagined were now mostly in the past tense. A new city was to rise on the ruins of these smokestack industries and repair the environmental damage they had casually inflicted – but we cannot and should not know more precisely what it might be. The political revolution limiting the role of the state to enabling rather than delivering can be read in these lines. The star marking the international rail station at the meeting point of London with its devastated hinterland marks out the site for the future Games, and seals the economic and infrastructural impetus behind the remaking of the Stratford Rail Lands, thrown into the construction contract as a real-estate chip. For all its dryness, this is a new geology in the making, reconnecting Britain with the continent and raising the Stratford site above the floodplain with the deposit of tunnel spoil.

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8

6 Fun Palace: perspective for the Lea River site 1961–65, photomechanical print of a photomontage on Masonite board

7 'Thames Gateway Framework Diagram', from *The Thames Gateway Planning Framework, RPG 9a*, 1995

8 'Newham's Arc of Opportunity', view of the Lea Valley from Stratford Rail Lands to the Thames, MBM Arquitectes, 2000, drawing by Kim Harse

1999

MBM Arquitectes' elevated perspective first presents the view that we will see many times in the coming decade and a half: the Lea branching, meandering and reuniting on its way from Stratford to the Thames *[8]*. In vivid tones of blue and green, it sketches the 'recovery of something lost'. Its strategic sweep is wide, its interventions bold, while the pencil strokes are delicate enough to render a wealth of detail. Large strategy and detail stand in intimate relation, in diametric opposition to the Thames Gateway vision. This is no coincidence, since Newham's so-called 'Arc of Opportunity' is a product of the first flush of New Labour: as stated in its introduction, it is 'the first to promote the Government's Urban Renaissance agenda'. The choice of architects from Barcelona who had been closely involved with the 1992 Olympics is emblematic of the ambition for a more sophisticated, integrated, 'European' approach to city-making. Large patches of the valley are to be made over to woodland and agriculture; a new canal arcs from the large yachting lake in the foreground along the eastern edge of the valley to the exaggerated meanders of the river mouth, the overhead electrical cables sunk beside it. The proportion of taller landmarks to compact, medium-rise housing blocks recalls the nineteenth-century city; a large white roof like a taut sail floats above the razor sharp cut that separates foreground and middle ground: the wolves of Stratford City and the Athletes' Village in sheep's clothing. The overall vision is not quite William Morris's *News from Nowhere* but the reconciliation of nature and infrastructure, of community and commerce is touching, gently inspiring.

Omissions and resistances

These representations span nearly two centuries and they trace the progressive urbanisation of the Lea Valley from pasture with the occasional mill to consumer city with vestiges of industry and wild landscape. However, while useful as evidence of the physical intent of specific projects, more important still is their rhetorical nature. For the way that they visualise the future communicates the ideas and illusions that underlie each project, accumulating and shifting over time. Think of them as an urbanist's version of Danny Boyle's London 2012 Olympic opening ceremony, tracing the journey from Olde England to modern London, imagining both pasts and futures as they proceed.

The images trace symbolic continuities and institutional discontinuities. Prepared respectively for the Eastern Counties Railway, the East London Waterworks Company, the Standing Conference on London Regional Planning, the Civic Trust on behalf of a coalition of boroughs and counties, Joan Littlewood, the Department of the Environment, the London Borough of Newham and the Olympic Delivery Authority, they demonstrate the sheer complexity of London's shifting governance; a confluence of private, local, regional and national interests. A longer history than mine would need

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to sketch out and explain many other bodies with partial and passing responsibility for the area, from the Metropolitan Board of Works (1855–89) to the short-lived London Thames Gateway Development Corporation (2004–13). The struggle for effective urban management is a crowded landscape, littered with extinctions.

Considering the discontinuity of the circumstances from which they emerged, the images display a surprising consistency of ideas. From the first to the last, they describe the complex interplay between the city's infrastructures and the underlying natural landscape and trace evolving conceptions of leisure. While the infrastructures are obviously constructed, these images reveal how much the ideas of nature and leisure are also constructions. Linear infrastructures and the watercourses entwine in harmonious tension, movement is unimpeded, leisure pursuits are innocent and festive and the water remains limpid and blue. With strokes of line and patches of colour, compositional juxtapositions and dynamic perspectives, the artists assemble a careful fiction of urban freedoms, of individual and collective wellbeing. As in Bruno Latour's characterisation of the Modernist construct, '"natural" [has] become a synonym of "carefully managed", "skilfully staged", "artificially maintained", "cleverly designed".'[7]

There is considerable continuity too in the inconvenient truths which lie half-concealed throughout this series of visions. Behind the loving depiction of water and vegetation lies the stubborn toxicity of land and water. Behind the representation of mobility lies the increasingly impenetrable knot of infrastructures. Behind the predominance of leisure lie the necessities of work and the curse of unemployment. The aestheticised picture of liberty cannot conceal the urban population taking liberties in their backyard, nor deflect determined individuals fighting for a stake in the future. Looming behind all of these is the unstoppable growth of London as a city region, from a population just below two million at the time of the first census in 1841 to a functional conurbation of fourteen million now. These invisible forces have distorted and frustrated the realisation of each vision, and have done so again with the Olympic project and its legacy.

The unstoppable growth of the metropolis presses on each successive re-imagining of the area, demanding an increasingly panoramic sweep. The accelerating growth until the Second World War, and the dispersal of east London's population thereafter, are reflected in a spacious vacancy. By the time of the Thames Gateway, the floodplain appears to be viewed as both a void to fill and an aberration to correct. MBM's strategy reflects the emerging awareness in the late 1990s of London's housing shortage, through the sheer extent of new housing it proposes – but anxiety is kept in check by the harmony of the image. Aided by the omission of the (still standing) slab blocks of the Carpenters and Crossways Estates, the scale of individual blocks is moderate. The towers of the Trowbridge Estate in Hackney Wick have only recently been demolished so no one yet considers high-rise either necessary or desirable. When the Olympics were pitched just a few years later, London has a Mayor convinced of the need for density, and has given consent to the Stratford City development. The scale of accommodation creeps up, the 'landmark' towers creep in, and the density inflation of London's new self-rule has been ignited.

The inhabitation of the valley is at present resolutely piecemeal: the ten-storey blocks of the coarse, grand Athletes' Village given a simple unity by the utilitarian need for fast construction; the rows of towers lining Stratford High Street; a scattering of blocks along the Lea Navigation from Bow Locks all the way up to Tottenham Hale, some blocky, others insistently bright, a few pleasingly discreet; the yellow and red brick houses of the last regeneration but one at the Trowbridge Estate in Hackney Wick, and the old Lee-Enfield rifle factory.

Foremost of the invisible pressures in the Lea floodplain is the growing toxicity of the water and the ground. By the time the railways arrived, the source of water for the Old Ford reservoirs had already been moved from the adjacent river to Tottenham Mill, four miles upstream. The expansion of the city that the railways fuelled increased the discharge of sewage into the river, leading both to the construction of interceptor sewers and a further displacement of extraction upstream – the subject of the waterworks engraving. The serene tone of the waterworks print belies the fact that the 1866 cholera outbreak in east London, which killed nearly four thousand, was finally traced to the East London Waterworks Company's Old Ford reservoirs.[8] By the post-war period, the floodplain was being worked extensively for gravel extraction: Abercrombie's Broxbourne proposal was for disused workings, while the pits at Tottenham Marshes were being used for landfill. The open spaces lovingly catalogued in the *Greater London Plan* for the putative regional park had already been used systematically to deposit bomb rubble while the concentration of chemical industries, manufacturing and power generation left concentrations of heavy metals in the ground and a line of overhead pylons running up the centre of the valley. More recently, the increase of paved areas has led to sharper storm floods and more frequent discharge of untreated sewage from the outfall sewer where it crosses the valley at Abbey Mills, while urban run-off is channelled through the Lea's tributary brooks into a concentration of toxic silt at Tottenham Lock.

In the recent visions, it is hard to disentangle the ambition for a serious and large-scale clean-up from small proxies: is the clear blue water of the new lakes in Abercrombie and MBM's visions a statement of intent, or just a substitute for the Herculean task of cleaning the Lea Valley? The soil within the Olympic Park has been washed, grain by grain, the overhead powerlines buried, the toxic silt dredged, and the raw sewage held back by the new lock at Three Mills until the Lee-Thames tunnel

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9 Collage illustrating the historical layers and characters of the Olympic site, by Witherford Watson Mann Architects, prepared for the London Legacy Development Corporation, 2011.

intercepts and carries it to Beckton. The 'legacy' housing development on the former reservoir site at Old Ford can, without too much irony, be called 'Sweetwater'. Yet the hydrology of the wider river system remains toxic, as demonstrated when a summer storm in 2013 washed deposits from the drainage catchment into the deoxygenated water, killing thousands of fish.

The topography of work and innovation was always complex along the Lea: water- and tidal-mills competed with transport for control of the water, resulting in a systematisation of the river's branches, with one branch canalised and the other tapped for power. Disused, the latter is now the basis for the greatest biodiversity. At the height of the war effort, Abercrombie's team were

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clearly unwilling to challenge the dominance of industry in the valley. The plan that halved inner London's population (from five to two and a half million) and removed industry from the city, decided to leave industry in the Lea Valley well alone. The displaced industries would have to have somewhere to go, after all, and 'the last three miles from the Stratford Road to the River are beyond salvage'.[9] The Civic Trust's emphasis on leisure makes the stark emphasis on the economic regeneration of the Thames Gateway all the more striking. In a generation, the railway works, the timber wharves for the furniture industry, the toymakers and the fortress-like match factory had all closed, along with many others. De-industrialisation has changed from a promise to a curse. Work sits like an uncomfortable question over the visions: hard to represent but too important to omit. Out of all the trophies on offer after the Olympics, the cussed souls of Hackney Council chose the hulking shed of the International Broadcast Centre, a mark of their dogged and longstanding determination to retain industry in the borough.

Despite the visionaries' obsession with leisure, work won't go away, maintaining a tentative, provisional presence at Cody Road, Hackney Wick and Blackhorse Lane, where city-serving businesses and artists go about their business in shiny sheds and crumbling blocks. The baby-food factory at Leamouth has gone, its impressive array of sheds and pipes replaced for now by a sample panel for a residential block. The car dashboard factory workers have finally reached an agreement on their pensions and new firms continue to come forward to invest in the area, from a data centre and building for BT Sport on the Olympic site to Amazon and Sainsbury's in the highway-side business parks. Work has transformed fundamentally since the large workplaces of the twentieth century which each employed one thousand plus at their peak. Underneath the large shed roofs, the evolutions of work are unpredictable but continuous.

From their modest, picturesque beginnings, the railways and motorways have spread to both constrain and protect the patchwork landscape. Linear infrastructures career across the floodplain, demarcating its edges and dividing it up into small compartments. As well as the forks and joins of freely moving steel, concrete and water, are their endless intersections with each other. Motorway vaults over canal and dives under railway viaduct, sewer bridges river, aqueduct is undercut by flood culvert, tidal creek runs beside freshwater channel, steel cables arc across open water, wide concrete footbridge springs across tracks and steel pontoons duck under highway decks. With so many energies and elements to transport, everywhere is connected and extensive, yet also captive, diminished and self-defeating. North-south movement along the watercourses was always possible though is now improved; yet the A12 highway and railway to the east remain almost impenetrable barriers to a wider east London hinterland. The bridges and paths of the Lea River Park that would connect the Olympic site down to the Thames have proved surprisingly hard to sell to a public sector that has invested so heavily in linear connections.

The dream of organised fun has materialised without ever reaching a peak of intensity: from the white water centre at Waltham Cross to the cinema at Pickett's Lock to what is more ice shed than ice palace at Lea Bridge Road, and on to the Olympic Park pleasure garden (really a playground) and the twisted metal frame of the Orbit; not quite the rollercoaster of the Abercrombie and Civic Trust visions, but – after decades of imaginings – close.

The public is increasingly spectral in these visions: from the vestigial fishermen of the earliest image, through the imagined throngs of the Civic Trust's cartoons, to the ant-like humans scurrying across the Möbius lanes of the Olympic pathways. In reality, the islands, peninsulas and enclosures of the floodplain are experienced as no-man's lands, reserves and territories for different tribes. The liberties taken with the wild spaces reflect the pressures of the urban areas around: boy racers on their motorbikes, disposable barbecues in the ancient marshes, cottaging in the railway triangle, raves at the Middlesex Filter Beds. Beside these marginal uses, strong communities of interest exist between fellow walkers, boaters, birdwatchers, allotment holders, with coalitions forged by greater threats, as highlighted by the Save the Marshes campaign. This group defeated the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority's 1980 proposal to extract gravel and create a motorised boating lake on the ancient wetland environment of Walthamstow Marshes.[10] Successive visions have therefore left contested blueprints and a legacy of mistrust. Substantive dialogue would always have been a challenge within the timeframe for the delivery of the Olympics, but no adequate forum preceded or followed the smooth public relations management of the games juggernaut. From my conversations in the area over the last decade, it seems that many users are deeply attached to the places, surprisingly open to the demands of others, understanding of the causes of abuse, but frustrated by the gap between the vivid and varied landscapes they experience and imagine and the institutional prospectus for the area. Are the conditions remotely present for a collective imagining of the valley?

From the marsh level view of the railway to the airborne view of Olympics, the accumulation of man-made landscapes appears to force the viewpoint higher and higher in successive visions just in order to see the increasing complexity. As the human presence recedes into the distance, it seems as if the soaring elevation has come at the expense of empathy or engagement with the specifics of place, like Harry Lime in *The Third Man* looking out with cool detachment

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over the ruins of Vienna from the top of the big wheel. There is an oscillation between engagement and detachment through the images, and it is telling that two views which eschew exaggerated persuasion – the dramatically ambivalent railway etching and Price's counter-pastoral – take a lower viewpoint. Yet with the transformation of the valley, the elevated view becomes a form of self-fulfilling prophecy: it wasn't before, but the reformed city-edge landscape becomes a spectacle to observe, in improvised community form at the View Tube, and as an expensive attraction at the Orbit. A narcissistic city is born, intrigued by its own construction, but detached from its decision-making.

An archaeology of the urban imagination

This, then, is today's Lea Valley: a patchwork of conflicting visions, carried forward on the pressures of seemingly irresistible growth. Successive visions have been started, but left incomplete, or have run out of control, before the next is overlaid *[9]*. Where the visions are smooth and frictionless, the Lea remains stubbornly heterogeneous and contradictory, resisting any predictions to the contrary.

The Lea Valley does not look like any of the visions discussed here because of the persistent forces that distorted their realisation. The increasing subdivision of expertise and responsibility resisted the formulation of interdependent solutions, distorting designs to the conventions of infrastructure, ecology and development. Borough and city-wide political interests have played a strong distorting role in an area that crosses multiple boundaries, frustrating strategic projects and pushing selective priorities. The pressures of land value have created the most visible distortion of the Olympic precinct's perimeter but the pressures of metropolitan growth bear intensely on the unbuilt as much as the built.

The Valley does not look like the imaginings projected onto it because its topography and texture, though superficially inviting, proved strangely resistant. The silty ground and multiple channels required a surprising nimbleness to navigate. Each step of the city's growth filled the valley floor with further infrastructures which were too expensive to consider moving so had to be incorporated or sidestepped. Finally, the Lea is not smooth and pure because the visions projected onto its space were partial and selective, editing out inconvenient realities of toil, pollution and conflict, appealing to obscure and abstract hopes of purity, liberty and innocent pleasures. The symmetry of the visions and their unintended consequences demonstrate what Bruno Latour describes as the interconnection of 'two great alternative narratives – one of emancipation, detachment, modernisation, progress and mastery, and the other, completely different, of attachment, precaution, entanglement, dependence and care'.[11]

The Olympic vision came with no small claims: 'In the Lower Lea Valley, the Olympics will demonstrate their relevance to one of the world's most pressing challenges: the sustainable development of high quality cities.'[12] Looking through the repeated skirmishes between design and the Lea Valley, it seems as if the Olympic vision borrowed the redemptive certainties of Modernism, flattening the complexities of the area into an image of complexity. Yet, without such expedient certainties, would a vision built around 'repair' of a complex system, rather than wholesale remaking, have commanded the necessary political and financial support?

What are the ethics of representation in this situation? Latour is surely right to argue that: 'In its long history, design practice has done a marvellous job of inventing the practical skills for drawing objects, from architectural drawing, mechanic blueprints, scale models, prototyping etc. But what has always been missing from those marvellous drawings [...] are an impression of the controversies and the many contradicting stakeholders that are born within these.'[13]

In the Lea floodplain, vision has followed vision like the succession of geological ages, building up a series of stratified deposits over two hundred years from the meandering Old River Lea up to the Olympic land bridges. Yet this stratification does not render preceding stages redundant, but rather each retains its physical level and its particular metabolism. As suggested in examples above relating to the urban water cycle or the geography of invention and making, ecology, work and mobility are dynamic systems, tangential but interdependent. In short, the city is never 'post-': it is an accumulation of capacities in which natural abundance, cultivation, toil and invention remain present. Having excavated and sifted the debris of these futures past, we might ask if some of the representational tools to better understand the complexity of our urban challenges might be those of historical examination. In the words of Michel Foucault, 'the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them'.[14]

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Notes

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