

# Legacy Visions

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On Saturday 1 October 2011, a salon discussion led by Iain MacRury, Director of London East Research Institute, University of East London (UEL), was organised in the View Tube. Other participants included Oliver Goodall, member of architecture and design studio We Made That; Juliet Davis, research fellow at London School of Economics; Jayne Hogan, architect; Oliver Wainwright, architectural critic and member of Studio Superniche; and Andrew Bailes, poet and boater.

At the time of winning the bid for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2005, it was widely agreed that it was London's "legacy vision" that had allowed it to triumph over the favourite, Paris. As Foreign Secretary Jack Straw put it at the time, the key to the victory was London's "special Olympic vision... the vision of an Olympic Games that would not only be a celebration of sport but a force for regeneration".

This was to become something of a mantra for those charged with overseeing the delivery of the London Olympics. Chief of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (LOCOG) Paul Deighton declared in May 2006 that "we are not just creating a sports park, we are helping to regenerate a community. We are not just putting in new stadia, we will be putting in utilities that can support a community and house thousands of people in new homes with new schools and hospitals." At the same time, the then head of the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) David Higgins described 2012 as a "sporting overlay for the biggest regeneration project in Europe". And that is how, since the bid was won, the actual Olympics have been conceived: as an ephemeral gloss resting on top of the real event – the regeneration.

The subordination of the actual sporting event to its putative social and economic legacy was not lost on participants at the Salon. Juliet Davis observed, "From the outset, regeneration seemed to be the major goal, sometimes to the extent that the actual Olympic games appeared to be this tiny, incidental moment in a grander project for which the main aim was to facilitate long term regeneration." And here we come to one of the major criticisms of the idea of an Olympics legacy that arose during the Salon: why is a sporting event, admittedly a mega-sporting event, being used to realise social and economic transformation? As Iain MacRury put it: "There

certainly seems to be weight behind the idea that the Olympics is not at all the right way [to realise these ‘legacy’ objectives], or at best, it’s not ideal.”

This was not to say that no one believed east London would not benefit from hosting the Games. For a start, as part of the development of the Olympic Park itself, two million tonnes of soil have already been detoxified, undoing an unfortunate biproduct of the area’s industrial past. There is also little denying the improvement in transport links, especially around Stratford. And one might even find some shards of optimism in the prospective housing and business developments. But what is troubling about all these specific legacies is why the UK central government, through both the Mayor office and a quangocratic quagmire, from the ODA to the OPLC, has needed an Olympic Games to take asbestos and arsenic out of the local soil? Or to put it another way, why was an Olympic Games necessary before an attempt was made to address east London’s limited, cramped housing stock? And surely, given that east London is home to thirteen out of fifteen of the poorest wards in the capital, it need not have taken an Olympic Games to try to provide the area with a significant economic boost.

Of course, as Jayne Hogan observed, central government has in fact long been aware of the problems that the Olympics is now being used to address. Hence, the promise of 10,000 new housing units needs to be set against the background of the decades-old Thames Gateway regeneration project, which also encompasses the east London boroughs now targeted under the 2012 legacy commitments. Moreover, the Stratford City project, now known as the Westfield Shopping Centre, which the Mayor of Newham Sir Robin Wales called “the real prize” of the 2012 transformation, also has a pre-Olympic history, having been given planning permission in 2004.

But what the Olympics seems to have provided politicians with, as MacRury put it, is a “narrative, a telescoped vision of the future”. That is, the London 2012 legacy can almost be seen as a story, a grand-narrative banner under which the UK state can justify and legitimise myriad social and political policies and objectives. This is why the hosting of the Olympics has, at the level of rhetoric, an almost magical quality: “The prize is the greatest in a generation – the chance to turn the rhetoric of Olympic legacy into fact,” wrote then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Tessa Jowell in 2008. Here the Olympics is presented as something akin to a gift from the Gods, or at least the International Olympic Committee. The Olympics has become nothing less than the reason and rationale for seeking to achieve certain social and economic objectives, some of which, as Andrew Bailes

noted, have involved evicting people from land and houses under compulsory purchase orders.

Yet, as I argued at the time, central government should not need to use a semi-magical story to legitimise its actions. It should not need to portray the Olympics as the agent or so-called “catalyst” of regeneration, which, like a snail’s trail, the Olympics magically leaves behind as “legacy”. What would have traditionally underpinned certain social and economic action would have been the public, in this case, those currently living and working in east London. As political actors, the public would have exerted pressure through certain mediating institutions, be it, as Paul Watt of Birkbeck University noted from the floor, local councils, or indeed political parties or trade union organisations. In other words, the public to a certain extent would have been the catalyst, the agent of so-called regeneration just as the organised Labour movement of the interwar years was the catalyst, the reason for the vast swathes of public housing that still dominate east London’s geography to this day. And it is in the absence of the public, indeed of democratic politics proper, that the Olympics has been called upon to do the job of the public. So now it is the Olympics that has become the reason for improving transport, the reason for building 10,000 homes, the reason for attempting to solicit various businesses into the Olympic Park once the athletes have packed up and departed. In short, the Olympics, and not a democratic mandate, has become the justification for state action.

Continuing this theme, Watt argued that London’s Olympics bid, based as it was on the legacy vision, “was an indication that although [politicians] acknowledge we’ve got all these needs, we can’t do anything to meet them. So we need the *deus ex machina* [of the Olympics] to come in to do it for us.” But because of the legacy’s estrangement from those in whose name it is being pursued, “it is not going to meet actual social needs”.

This gap between legacy promise and social need, the gap between presentation and reality – a consequence of the bypassing of the public – was mined throughout the salon. Alberto Duman, speaking from the floor, argued that there is a danger of “overestimating the significance of the word ‘vision’”. The Olympics has not provided a vision, he continued, it has provided “visuals” – especially computer generated images, which have been politically deployed in promotional material, prospectuses and government documents during the run-up to this Olympics to a greater extent than ever before. That the reality of developments in east London was secondary to the politically imagined fantasy was evident in the moment computer gener-

ated images, showing a serene park landscape, a bustling commercial centre and affluent inhabitants, was used in 2005 before anything had actually happened in what is now the Olympic Park.

These visuals betrayed something of the contradictory political flavour of the legacy project, argued Davis. On the one hand it has to claim to be benefiting local people, while on the other it wants to attract private investors governed by commercial rather than social imperatives. “So you get this real visual disjuncture between the built environment,” Davis continued, “which is more affluent and more commercial and more about expensive flats and so on, and the representation of the public which tries to appear more locally rooted but in a way that effaces any trace of current levels of deprivation”.

Moreover, having interviewed some of the artists who made the visuals for the first Legacy Masterplan Framework, Davis discovered that the London Development Agency (LDA) had dictated the actual appearance of local people in the promotional material. This meant that images of local people had to match the political image the authorities wanted to project. So no one could be pictured smoking or even drinking a glass of beer in the projected future of the Olympic Park community. Furthermore, “Everyone who featured in the promotional material had to be photographed by the LDA’s approved photographer. So it was an incredibly controlled image of what the future community would be.”

To such criticisms Oliver Goodall offered a note of caution. Advance computer generated image visuals are a necessary ploy today, certainly if you want to attract private investment, he said: “No-one wants to put up the cash for something unless they can almost taste it.”

Hogan, however, reminded us that here the competing notions of value at work in the idea of the 2012 legacy were coming to the fore. The much-trumpeted social value of hosting the Olympics has increasingly given way to economic value; the need to attract businesses and cram housing with high-earning professionals is winning out over the regeneration promises. Davis was not surprised:

It is impossible to escape the fact that there has to be a justification for the £9.3 billion to be spent on 2012 and its legacy. There has to be shown to be a significant value uplift. The businesses and land uses that were there before were able to be there because land values were so low – the lowest in central London. The people that used to live in the area of the park couldn’t live there now, not without

significant subsidies. So whatever is envisaged for the Olympic Park in terms of building – whether permanent or mean-time – it has to be able to reflect the fact that the land has a higher value than before. Ideally, they would have a higher social value, but the primary goal is that it has an economic value.

But the problem with the economic legacy of the Olympics is not just that it often runs counter to the social legacy. As MacRury argued, the problem was that the economic legacy, embodied in the planned future for the Olympic Park where retail business and affluent consumers walked hand in hand, belonged to an economic era considerably more financially buoyant than that in which we currently find ourselves. In short, the post-2007 economic crisis stands between the original legacy plan and its realisation:

The prospective future that was envisaged, that looks like the CGI, was better in 2005 and 2006 than it is today. The whole economic model of the legacy was about the viability and sustainability of public-private partnerships. Now, however those partnerships are simply not emerging... The original legacy plans depended on a picture of the global economy which was no longer in force halfway through the planning and construction of London 2012. This shows why mean-time or temporary uses of the park are becoming more important now; because the legacy script is hard to read, because the script that was begun is no longer there.

In the uncertainty over the urban legacy of 2012, given the collapse of the economic model on which it was based, both Goodall and Wainwright located reasons for optimism. “There’s actually something good and useful about unfinishedness,” said Goodall, “in particular, these zones of temporary use.” They present opportunities for uses of the Olympic Park different from those envisaged in the official legacy documents. Wainwright was similarly enthused, identifying a “glimmer of optimism”: “The whole of Amsterdam docks was built on a concept of mean-time use,” he said. What needs to happen now, Wainwright concluded, was that the Olympic Park Legacy Company needs to trust others, local people included, to decide how best to realise the unofficial legacy of 2012.