

Photographing the Olympic Park

BEN CAMPKIN

Within processes of event-driven urban change, and surrounding Olympic mega-events in particular, the proliferation of images and image-making practices is intense. Logos, architectural drawings, plans, maps, adverts, promotional films, data visualisations and computer-generated photo-simulations are just a few of the visual forms that are produced and circulate. Documenting, describing, shaping and otherwise affecting the site, these images have very real effects on how it is understood. Alongside official imagery, visual practitioners such as photographers, film-makers and fine artists are attracted to regeneration sites to record what might be lost, document and question what is taking place, and imagine likely or alternative futures.

With this proliferation of images in mind, Hilary Powell and I invited six photographers of the London 2012 Olympic Park to reflect on their practice and photographs in a salon held in the View Tube – a temporary building made of industrial containers overlooking the Olympic Park, designed as a platform from which to see and photograph the site under construction. Orienting themselves towards the Games and the area in distinct ways, these photographers create work that variously records, maps, surveys, chronicles, narrates, provokes, critiques and contextualises. They have all found a creative niche within the Olympic Development Authority's (ODA's) notorious control over the taking of photographs of and on the site.¹

In the salon, we set out to question the potential of the photographic medium in relation to the transformation of the area. How does photography change the way we understand or imagine the past, present or future of this locale? How do photographs influence the form or reception of other kinds of image circulating within the Olympic restructuring process? Which qualities of the site lend themselves to photographic representation, and which lie beyond its limits?

First to respond was Alessandra Chilá, who talked about her series "Olympian Visions".² Mainly taken before the enclosure of the area for construction works, the series consists of 40 images, some with texts, others just with captions giving the location and date. Chilá sets out to question the spatial and social dimensions of "regeneration", establishing a parallel

between the dislocation of the landscape and the displacement of people. Working dialectically with the images, the texts add an openly critical reading of the transformation, incorporating narratives that offset striking documentary images. The texts draw the viewer towards a specific interpretation, throwing into question the language of “regeneration” used by the ODA – such as the notion of “being green”, or the “demolish, dig, design” slogan – and its problematic embodiment of a *tabula rasa* approach to urban development. These texts claim a meaning for the images partly in order to prevent their misuse – in the photographer’s view – as visual commodities within the processes of regeneration under scrutiny. With a belief in the power of photographs not only to record, but to prompt new urban imaginaries, Chilá also makes postcard versions for wider distribution beyond the usual gallery context of her work. In response to the “dreamlike utopian world” she sees being construed through official images, the photographer sees her own work as a way to articulate a critical narrative of the transformation. For example, one memorable image of a warehouse blaze in Hackney Wick is intended to suggest the violence Chilá associates with the mode of change enacted upon the area.

If Chilá is interested in creating meaning between photographs and texts, highlighting what photographic theorist George Baker refers to as photography’s “notorious epistemological slipperiness”,³ in “Re-shoots”, photographer and local resident Chris Dorley-Brown⁴ presents before and after photographs of the same site – a presentation genre common in local government historical photography. The “before” shots are taken from archival images as well as a series Dorley-Brown produced for the London Borough of Hackney in the 1980s and 1990s. Their more recent counterparts show the site retaken from the same viewpoint in the 2000s. The project initially focused on Hackney’s tower blocks. The borough did not have its own archive of these buildings, and Dorley-Brown began photographing them when they were being spectacularly demolished at an unprecedented rate.

Regarding his method he explains: “I had no aesthetic choices to make – it was done for me, and I really like that systematic response. The rules were there – I knew exactly how to frame it, it was a given, and I had to shoot whatever was there.” However, the conditions in which the photographs were taken – time, weather, light – had to be determined, and all influence the meaning generated between the two photographs. Dissatisfied with the way the more up-to-date photograph in “before and after” comparisons is typically executed – with a lack of attention to detail – the intention here was

to present the frames on more “democratic” terms, challenging an automatically more generous, sentimental or nostalgic reading of the older image.

In some cases the earlier photograph is archival, as in the case of a 1948 view of sewers being replaced on Wallace Road, Hackney Wick. Dorley Brown photographed a present-day scene showing the street undergoing another cycle of maintenance, suggesting continuity between the street’s formal qualities and its management over the two periods. In order to enhance the parallels the Albanian workers were asked to adopt similar poses to those of their mid-20th-century counterparts in the tradition of street scene stagings purporting to be fly-on-the-wall depictions of everyday life.

The original enticement of this area for Dorley-Brown was its ambiguity – geographically confusing, topographically diverse and rich in urban mythology, it lacked obvious landmarks and so presented a particular challenge to photography. Rather like developers, photographers are attracted to informal or “disorderly” urban spaces so they can impose their own order on them; although for them the qualities of ambiguity may be something to celebrate rather than eradicate. The importance of photography as Dorley-Brown sees it is its ability to provide a meaningful historical narrative absent from a process that has lacked “civic decency” in its treatment of local residents. He sees this as the latest phase in a cyclical history of the area’s dramatic reconfiguration in response to shifts in the technologies underpinning society – a period that echoes the large-scale transformations associated with the industrial revolution. Projecting forward to an imagined third photograph of each site, he quips (or hopes) that “in 20 years it will be some kind of wilderness again”.

David George is another photographer who has worked extensively in this part of London, attempting to document not its formal or architectural features, but rather “the way the place made me feel”.⁵ Both George and Dorley-Brown observe that, prior to the Olympic development, this was a landscape which invited contemplation and self-reflexivity through its quietness and informality relative to other more regulated and populous parts of the city. George therefore sets out to use photography to document the urban landscape, but tries to capture what he deems its inherent sense of “melancholy” rather than its appearance. In fact, it is disappearance that interests him in “Dissolution”, a series of thirteen oneiric foggy scenes of the marshes, taken over a three-month period. Shot at the start of the day in the half hour before the mist burned away, each unique platinum print possesses a paradox of the ephemeral with the durable and exclusive. As the

title suggests, within each photograph everything seems to be disappearing, including figures who move through the frame as if escaping the photographer, ghosts that haunt these places that no longer exist.

In explaining the photographs George is directly critical of the Olympic development:

It's almost like it's been surgically removed, a lot of the area, and things dropped in. There's a corporate ideal of what a place should look like, rather than how it grows organically. Everything looks like a graft to me – it looks like it's just been stuck on, a lot of the stuff. I'm all for change, but I'm not for change just for the sake of it. I don't think... because something's new, it's better. It's just newer.

The developers' narrative of the pre-Olympic area is of a place without purpose, he argues, but this ignores its history as a site of industrial and technological innovation, an important "hinterland", providing resources for the city as a whole. The shift of meaning of this term, from something valued to something pejorative, indicating backwardness, suggests to him a more general devaluation of such spaces.

George's photographic response to the area is pictorial and overtly concerned with the emotional qualities of the urban landscape, perhaps reflecting a wider crisis in contemporary photography where "outmoded technologically and displaced aesthetically" it retreats into a more painterly mode.⁶ In contrast, and in a similar vein to Dorley-Brown, Peter Marshall continues to value the camera as an instrument of systematic urban survey, as evidenced in the series he has published in book form as *Before the Olympics*.⁷ Marshall has been photographing the Lea Valley and Lea Navigation system at regular intervals since 1982, being prompted to do so after hearing that commercial navigation was about to cease. In his work the impulse towards serialisation, and the repetition of particular views, is therefore driven by the anxiety of loss, or potential loss, as the character and underpinning socio-economic structures of the city change.

In his documentation of the built environment, Marshall cites the influence of canonical architectural surveys, such as Nikolaus Pevsner's series *Buildings of England*. However, for him, what such surveys leave out is more important than the individual buildings they feature, and one of the powers of photography is to give equal importance to landmarks, "background" architecture and infrastructure. His photos, some of which have themselves

become part of official surveys such as the National Building Record, strive towards a pragmatism that “is not about making pictures”.

However, Marshall does understand photography as a discursive medium. These photographs set out to attribute value to industrial heritage – a manoeuvre that while less controversial now than in the 1980s has a new resonance in light of the *tabula rasa* approach of the Olympic development. Importantly, as well as documenting changing urban form, Marshall has also highlighted key protests against the Olympic bid, including the unsuccessful struggle of citizens to save Manor Gardens Allotments.

Also relating his work to the history of survey photography, but this time of the aerial variety, in “E20 12 Under Construction” Giles Price took to the air in a helicopter to photograph the site from which he had been prevented access on the ground. This approach enabled him to explore an interest in the massive scale of the redevelopment area, returning seasonally to record the process of its reconstruction. This method takes advantage of an oversight in the ODA’s culture of surveillance and image control: though it has prevented access at ground level, there is no legislation that stops photographers taking to the air.⁸ The only restriction, therefore, was determined by the laws which state that helicopters have to stay above 750 feet.

Aerial photography also satisfies Price’s fascination with cartographic images: “I’m really interested in Google Earth, and how that’s played into our visual language in the last decade or so. Within that, there are the limitations of detail, scale, and also the human interaction of what you can actually do with their very tech-driven applications.” In response, Price’s work tries to convey both the spectacle of such a mammoth urban reconfiguration, and detailed changes in the textures of the site over the construction period. The images are shot on the most advanced large-format digital cameras. In the same way that he uses the restrictions of legislation to determine the perspective, Price also negotiates with the limits of technology in producing his photographs.

There are, of course, many genres of photography not considered here, including the ODA’s own official photography of the site. Artist Alberto Duman raises the important question: where is the full archive of the ODA’s (publicly funded) photographs? Nor did we consider any work by professional architectural photographers, or photographs by “amateur” photographers or tourists. As Price comments:

When the Games open, it's going to be the first Olympiad where you've had twitter, social media... The volume of images that are going to be made in that concentrated time is going to be off the ceiling... You can't police images now any more. It's a fluid environment for everyone to disseminate a moment – not [the] death of the photojournalist, but citizen journalism.

Yet the draconian rules around the photography of the site are in direct opposition to the fact of photography's "democratisation", and the proliferation of technologies for furtive camera work. Using the threat of terrorism as a reason to prevent photographers working also seems disingenuous ("if I was a terrorist, would I be stuck here with a great big camera on a tripod right in the middle of the road?," asks one of the photographers).

There are of course aspects of the site that photography cannot capture, or would not be very good at capturing. What all of the modes of photography considered here suggest, however, is that even after what theorists have described as a "crisis of meaning" in photography, it is still a medium into which we retreat, or which we mobilise with powerful effect, as a way of understanding, documenting and responding to urban change. In this vein urban historian Rebecca Ross's observation provided a fitting conclusion to the salon:

I'm accustomed to thinking of photography as a more fluid medium than, say, buildings or the built environment – it moves faster, typically, and it's a less enduring medium, or a quicker medium than a building or a neighbourhood, or a city. So I thought this was really interesting because [the work of these photographers] is a reversal of that... It made me think of photography in a new way: photography as a stabilising element, as a way to deal with change. Usually concrete is stable, and photography is moving, but today this flipped around.

Endnotes

1 Chris Cheesman, "London Olympics Photo Storm", Amateur Photographer, 13 June 2007, http://www.amateurphotographer.co.uk/news/london_olympics_site_in_photo_storm_news_124174.html (accessed 5 November 2011).

2 Alessandra Chilà, <http://www.alessandra-chila.com/> (accessed 26 March 2012).

3 George Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field", October 114 (2005): 120-40.

4 Chris Dorley-Brown, <http://modrex.com/> (accessed 26 March 2012).

5 David George, <http://www.davidgeorge.eu/> (accessed 26 March 2012).

6 Baker, "Photography's Expanded Field": 122.

7 Peter Marshall, *Before the Olympics: The Lea Valley, 1981-2010* (London: [self-published], 2010). See also Peter Marshall, "The Lea Valley", <http://river-lea.co.uk/> (accessed 26 March 2012).

8 During the Games themselves, however, there will be a five-mile no-fly zone in place for the purposes of restricting film rights, and in response to the perceived threat of terrorism.