

# Hackney Wick (Un)regulated

FRANCESCA WEBER-NEWTN

Flux (*mass noun*): continuous change; instability.

Hackney Wick is in flux. There are markers of Olympic-led regeneration within the landscape. Roads appear smoother, fresh paint marks the arrival of new parking bays, pavements have been extended, new banks installed, and trees have sprouted. The public realm seems cleaner, more ordered and manageable. Less visibly, there have been changes in land-ownership and land-use regulations. What is the deeper significance of these alterations? Do they signal an end to Hackney Wick unregulated?

On 30 September 2011 a joint Salon de Refuse Olympique and public works' "Friday Session" took place at the Electric Matchbox in Hackney Wick. Participants included artists Hilary Powell and Rowan Durrant, architects Andreas Lang (from public works, also chair of the session) and Colin Priest (Studio Columba), Joe Stillion and Benjamin Sebastian representing local venues Electric Matchbox and Performance Space respectively, Joanna Hughes (Mother Studios) and Anna Harding (SPACE Studios) as artist studios landlords, and photographer Mimi Mollica (via Skype). Through a cross section of voices and the eyes of practitioners past, present and future, the aim was to chart the transformation of the area and examine the changing social and spatial dynamics of Hackney Wick. Should we disrupt, engage or applaud the Olympic site, just across the canal? How do we engage in Olympic-led regeneration? Should we actively try to prevent the place-making strategies that put Hackney Wick on the (tourist) map?

Economics were at the base of the evening's debate. Given the high density of studio space and artists practising in the area, rent costs became a recurring topic. Questions centred on how artists would be able to afford the escalating rent, envisaged to keep rising when further Olympic-led regeneration spills into Hackney Wick. Joana Hughes explained how she had come to Hackney Wick from Brick Lane with the aim of providing affordable spaces for artists like her, who had been displaced by gentrification. She had set up Mother Studios as a self-managed alternative to profit-driven, privately run studios.

Anna Harding, director of SPACE studios, explained that her primary

fear was that former warehouses would be developed into residential flats rather than being kept as workspaces: “The main drivers around here are obviously land values. We all know that. The reason we’re all here is because people are sitting on property waiting for it to turn residential, so they can flog the land and make a lot of money.” The regeneration process not only tends to out-price tenants, but also changes the land-use of the spaces. Fighting for an employment-only model for Hackney Wick was in her opinion the only way to avoid housing developments which would kill the area.

The new flow of capital within the area was a worry for many practitioners. Mimi Mollica, photographer and former resident of Hackney Wick, gave his views via Skype: “The huge money machine is expanding and we are being squashed. I don’t think there is any solution to this trend... The problem is that London is owned by developers.”

So is this the legacy of the London 2012 Olympics in Hackney Wick? It seemed that the money and development that followed the Olympics had spilled across the canal into this otherwise modest corner of London. Rowan Durrant’s Superfix series was an example. His work operated precisely at the intersection of urban renewal and public art. Commissioned by muf architecture/art as part of a programme of public realm interventions funded by the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation, it consisted of high-gloss, orange-coloured bespoke corrections of infrastructure that had been damaged, neglected or broken, such as crash damaged railings or a missing K on the Central Books sign. Durrant’s work was an example of a successful collaboration with the authorities in creating urban interventions that engage creatively with the environment. Colin Priest, architect, local resident and the man behind the @t\_wickers tweets (“extraordinary events, ordinary occurrences, incidental inconveniences plus some general randomness from the island of E9”), said: “It feels like a permanent Christmas. We keep getting all these small sparkly gifts landing. And I feel emotionally and physically exhausted from the highs and lows of receiving all these gifts.”

This injection of investment seems a world away from the industrial Hackney Wick, the seat of plastics, printing and steelworks production. There was fear among participants that regeneration would engender a shift towards the development of residential units and spaces of consumption, which would threaten the heritage of a “working” and producing Hackney Wick. Would Hackney Wick become “just another Hoxton?” This theme reoccurred throughout the evening, illustrating a shared worry about the negative impacts of hasty development. Hoxton represented a model of

“things gone wrong”, an area that had seen confident commercial investment without concern for a more measured or sensitive planning agenda. The resulting changes were viewed with criticism: a city space designed to attract tourists, with residents increasingly marginalised in space and cost of living.

Anna Harding pondered whether the economic downturn had, perhaps, provided a silver lining and saved Hackney Wick from hurried development – at least for a few years. Artists are known to thrive in contexts where investors have been forced to speculate with more caution, where it is still possible to pay cheap rent, living and working in the ex-industrial building shells that stand empty, waiting for development.

But one should not forget the perennial role of artists as gentrifiers in contexts of urban regeneration. As one artist in the audience suggested: “We are gentrifiers, I know I am. I’ve done it three times, I’ve ruined various areas! I was in Notting Hill in the 60s, in Shoreditch in the 80s, and now in Hackney Wick.” So while we can open critical debate around space increasingly coming under market forces, and gradually owned by the well off, the process tends to begin with artists themselves. Artists are the first cog within a chain of gentrification. Yet, without the ability to set a rent cap, there is perhaps nothing to prevent this recurring process.

Why did artists move to Hackney Wick in the first place? Examining the reasons why the evening’s speakers began practising in Hackney Wick is an interesting exercise. The explanations revolved largely around a common theme: “freedom”. Mimi Mollica, who moved to Hackney Wick in 2000 and left in 2010, said: “We were able to do anything we wanted... without any limitation or frustration. For me Hackney Wick is synonymous to beauty and freedom, even if things were much rougher. I was able to shape the area around my needs, around what I wanted.”

There was a sense from all the speakers that Hackney Wick was initially attractive because it provided a blank canvas for experimentation. It was an unregulated space. The industrial core of the area produced many seemingly empty spaces. These urban “voids” – vacant spaces with no obvious function – provided the kind of basis for what discussants considered “head-space”. The feeling was that Hackney Wick, as an area embracing post-industrial transformation, was becoming a place where creative freedom was more restricted. As spaces were “filled” by development, they became ordered spaces where movement was more prescribed.

Another attraction for many practitioners was the “community”. Hackney

Wick represented the potential for rich and spontaneous collaborative networks, among artists as well as between artists and local industries: artists could be found asking mechanics for old car tyres for installation pieces; photographers could be useful to local businesses for their promotional material. Joe Stillion, co-founder of the Electric Matchbox, said he relied purely on word-of-mouth recommendations, rather than formal advertising, to promote his IT business. This seemed a sign that the informal networks in Hackney Wick were effective.

Has Olympic-led development flattened the creative impulse? Has the freedom, community and rawness of Hackney Wick disappeared? Can spaces of freedom be retained within a context of massive development? Responses varied. While some of the discussion centred on unpicking the meaning of “change”, there was also a strong sense of the need not to dwell too much on the past and the losses and instead to engage with the present dynamics. This was most apparent in the composition of the speakers and audience, who represented the Hackney Wick of past, present and future. In simple terms, some of those at the salon discussion had displaced others in the same room. “If you look at me, you’re looking at the past. You guys are now paying a humungous amount of money,” explained Mimi Mollica as he addressed the room. Benjamin Sebastian of Performance Space, who had recently relocated to Hackney Wick, had a different perception: “We moved to the area because what we saw was a very active and interactive, creative community.” One person’s freedom is another person’s restriction; displacement represents constant movement. While the evening’s debate centred specifically on the transformations felt by those present, they were only the most recent face of continual evolution.

The question of whether residents could exert any power on the ongoing process of regeneration was central to the debate – especially with the increasing attention being paid to the role of Hackney Wick as a close neighbour to the Olympic Park. There was a consensus within the room that an opaque veil concealed planning agendas – seen to prevent successful discourse between the authorities working top-down and the residents having to engage bottom-up. This led on to a discussion of the problem of consultation. Andreas Lang questioned whether authorities treated these rituals more like mandatory tick-box exercises than valuable exercises in communication and engagement.

One question-cum-solution to the issue of political voice came from Anna Harding, who suggested the declaration of an autonomous state

of Hackney Wick and Fish Island. A reply came quickly from the floor: “We’ve already tried that... and it didn’t work.” The reference was to the Manor Garden allotments, which were evicted in 2007 to make way for the Olympic Park. Despite appeals and media attention, the allotments were lost. When the discussion moved on to potential models for “autonomous zones”, such as the Fristad Christiania in Copenhagen, it became clear that the political and economic conditions needed for such alternative, anti-capitalist projects were not present in Hackney Wick. The ownership of the land is parcelled between various public and private developers – including the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation, which was the main actor behind the development of the area surrounding the Overground station. With this matrix of ownership and development plans, it was clear that there was only limited room for manoeuvring an alternative political and social space.

The discussion turned to ways in which residents and community groups could be able to make an active change in their urban environments. The £1 million “Wick Award” – a lottery grant to help foster community in Hackney Wick – was one suggestion. With a reasonable plan, this could provide an ideal mechanism for arts-based projects that bind together the residents and artists. A further suggestion was that section 106 of the Town and Planning Act 1990 could be used to promote local community schemes. The Act has been increasingly used as a planners tax – making it an obligation for planners to address local infrastructural improvements, affordable housing or recreational facilities within their commercial proposals. While these seem like feasible possibilities for manoeuvring within the world of planners and developers, a key question arose: was there in fact a “common goal” which could provide the motivation and ignite collective community action? The discussion that ensued seemed to highlight the disparate nature of individual concerns, as well as the limited time and energy available for collective action.

The burnt out cars that once littered the streets of Hackney Wick are being replaced by smaller, creative expressions. You might see a fluorescent mushroom almost hidden in the crack of a building, or a set of pearly white teeth spray-painted onto a wall – signs that an artist community has found this space attractive. The most self-parodying symbol that Hackney Wick is on the map is the Hollywood-style lettering that stands on top of Oslo House: HACKNEY WICK. Anyone entering the area from the Overground sta-

tion receives a bold welcome: a visual exclamation mark and sign that you are entering a “place”.

Have the changes discussed above produced a shift from Hackney Wick *unregulated*, to Hackney Wick *regulated*? Has the nearby Olympic development crushed the spirit of place? Has the rawness and freedom the Wick once represented been tamed in order to produce a more manageable area? What was evident at the Salon was a sense of *uncertainty* within Hackney Wick’s creative community. Some participants, like Mimi Mollica, said they had “had their fill”: “It’s happened already, the total change of the area.” Others considered they were part of the current phase of evolution, and were helping to shape the way Hackney Wick would look in the future: “You have to ride it out, you can place your bets now!” said Joe Stillion, of Electric Matchbox.

What also became clear in the Salon was that there were only fragments of common goals between practitioners and residents. Also, that collective action required a huge personal investment. Yet, critical engagement in the future of Hackney Wick, as planned by local and Olympic authorities, seemed to an extent possible. There were tactics available: copying a local councillor into an email exchange, acting relentlessly, forming collective platforms, resisting planning proposals, talking the same language as planners and developers. While it might seem useful to analyse Hackney Wick in terms of the binaries of order–disorder or control–counter-control, maybe one should look creatively for the spaces in between.