

Ad-Hoc Urbanism: Hackney Wick and Fish Island

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Sandwiched between the A12, Greenway and the Lee Navigation Canal, and straddling the London Boroughs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets, lies an urban periphery called Hackney Wick and Fish Island. This sleepy area of light industry, artist studios and residential housing neighbours on the London Olympics site and the future Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (QEOP). With the major clean-up operation underway and the linking of Bow and Victoria Park with Stratford City, Hackney Wick and Fish Island has become critical to the economic, cultural and physical growth of East London.

Even before the announcement in 2004 that London would host the Olympics, artists were attracted to the area by warehouse studio space and cheap rents; also perhaps it offered an escape from the gentrification and urban renewal of nearby Shoreditch and Spitalfields. At that time, the area was a composite of brownfield sites, marshlands and the predominant light industries of fish smokeries and printing works. Photographic surveys by Stephen Gill, in his publication *Hackney Wick*, and subsequent works in and around the area documented gritty everyday lives and forlorn local landmarks such as Fridge Mountain. Mimi Mollica's photographs, *Hackney Wick Market* and Paul Kelly's film, *What Have You Done Today, Mervyn Day?* revealed the area's distinctive cycles of informal exchange and political agency. A permanent record of the area emerged, offering a visual benchmark for how dramatically communities can change in the proximity of the Olympics and legacy remit. Gesche Wuerfel marks the early negotiation of this legacy in her series *Going for Gold* representing the abrupt impact of the infamous blue line of construction hoarding around the Olympic site.

Local writer Iain Sinclair in *Ghostmilk*, and painter Leigh Niland in his portrait project *Wickcentric*, have expressed the character of a place losing its spirit. These included the loss of The Eton Mission and Manor Garden Allotments, the loss of long-term leases on studios, and Leabank Square community garden facing years of construction dust and noise. However the Olympics has paradoxically united and cemented existing communities, creating louder local voices and storytellers of a critical legacy.

Having lived in and around Hackney Wick and Fish Island since 2004, I have experienced first hand the incremental impact of Olympic regeneration, both as a creative thinker and pedestrian. In January 2011, I established a virtual Twitter nom de plume, @t_wickers, which lists 'extraordinary events, ordinary occurrences, incidental

inconveniences plus some general randomness from the island of E9'. During this time the area has undergone a dynamic urban renaissance with various kinds of formal and informal transformations. A fascinating measure of ad-hoc urbanism has evolved which I will attempt to chronicle here.

A place in-between

According to the urbanist Kevin Lynch the configuration of paths, edges, districts and nodes in a city forms a stable and simultaneously dynamic and responsive urbanism.¹ In Hackney Wick and Fish Island, these urban configurations can be found around the various estates in the area. It is often said that the area is home to the greatest density of artist studios in the UK. This is evident with numerous artists' studios and galleries such as Elevator and Schwartz scattered across the island, alongside residential estates to the North; to the South, near Old Ford Lock more studios are managed by Space, a charitable organisation founded in 1968.

The marginal public transport links to the area have been improved by the newly refurbished overland train to Stratford and Richmond, and a range of bus routes running through and along the western perimeter which will serve the network of warehouses, industries and old and new residential estates, bringing Olympics visitors to the site and its environs. To the East, the Lee Navigation River acts as a route for barges, rowing training and recreational walkers. As indicated in the Local Development Framework of the Hackney Wick Action Plan, this area will not be tied together neatly. Getting lost, back-tracking and enjoying serendipitous discovery is part of experiencing the area in transition.

In 2009 muf architecture/art conducted a creative industries mapping project to build upon existing assets and usher in a new kind of urban transformation. By incorporating the existing street, yard and canal frontage typologies, they envisaged through drawing 'a network of routes and animated public and semi-public spaces which could sit along the very different figure ground of the Olympic site-in both its game and post games guise.'² A project entitled 'Made in Hackney Wick and Fish Island' created a directory of producers that could be used as an economic and cultural attractor to the area, aligning it to other international cultural quarters found in Paris or Boston.

The mapping project fed into a public art strategy and a programme of temporary and permanent commissions by muf architecture/art, with Vicki Lewis, under the curatorial strategy of 'home-grown' public art. The local artist community was deemed to be central to the future regeneration of the area. Artists could help to imagine a new connected urban landscape that would support existing communities whilst welcoming, before, during and after the Olympics, all interested parties including artists, planners, residents and developers. If the existing complexity and richness of

the area could be tapped into, and if community resilience and cohesion could be nurtured, then the region might not become a victim of its own success.³

Spontaneous combustion

Other creative activities have sprung up against the backdrop of necessary change. For example from 27 July-13 August 2011, the project 'Films on Fridges' screened site-specific films in Forman's Smokehouse Gallery yard, from What have you done today Mervyn Day? to sports-oriented Chariots of Fire and Rocky. The free annual festival 'Hackney Wicked' was created, a 'spontaneous combustion of enthusiasm from the local arts community'.⁴ Now celebrating its fifth year in June 2012, local artists open their workspaces to the estimated 10,000 visitors who venture up heavy staircases to meet them in their studios or enter blackened empty shop fronts converted to galleries for some 'Kwick Love' or encounter a mural of a toothy Queen in sunglasses by local graffiti artist Sweet Toof.

'Out there, under the swirl of lamplights, billboards and urban detritus, 'bubble-Gums and pearly-Teeth' push themselves up through the pavement cracks and concrete facades like anarchic plants refusing the flimsy, rootless, cheap order of modern life.'
Olly Beck on Sweet Toof 5

In parallel to their public art strategy, muf architecture/art with Vicki Lewis and Mary George were commissioned in 2010 by Design for London and Olympic Park Legacy Company to explore how art practice could inform policy making in an area. 'We are artists how can we help...' was a chaired dinner debate evolving an artist manifesto and formulation of four, temporary peer-reviewed art commissions for Hackney Wicked in 2011. This included a project by Mary George titled Idiosyncratic Decathlon, a floating bottle top landscape Parkesine by Russell Thorburn, a mobile cinema by Verity Keefe and a work titled Do Long Bridge by Rui Pignatelli. The second phase of the project was a temporary programme of workshops, 'Art Boot Camp' introducing local children to the local artists' tendency to appropriate and reuse empty urban spaces.

These sequences of site-specific activities introduced over a short period of time are characteristic of an area in critical transition. Primarily through art practice, this landscape of events has enlivened the island. The humour and enthusiasm of the local residents is witnessed in their willing participation in festival weekend events such as the annual Coracle Regatta on the canal, as well as self-initiated pop-up boot and plant sales. There has been a lively exchange and blurring of boundaries between Hackney Wicked, the recognised arts festival, and the Hackney Wick Festival organised by residents in early September, with groups such as the Albion Kids Show and The Wick Curiosity Shop linking the two. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in *Performing the City*, notes that improvised events such as these demonstrate the public's tacit understanding of an urban vernacular, and create a social cohesion that cannot be

designed. Such improvisation relies more 'on repetition, re-enactment and renewal than on permanent materialisation'.⁶

Pro tem

Temporary occupation is not a new phenomenon. The recent economic downturn has made empty warehouses and shop-fronts available for artistic use. The temporary exhibitions, screenings and pop-up happenings that have taken place are increasingly valued as a part of urban growth and development. They are seen to forge and mediate relationships between communities.

The muf architecture/art commissions aimed explicitly to address the connectivity of 'currently isolated and/or disparate communities'.⁷ One project was Fish and Wick Vistas by Grennan & Sperandio. The artists asked sitters to identify a view that 'communicated a unique sense of place to them'.⁸ The portraits were then published over eleven weeks in the Hackney Gazette, making visible some of the people behind local creative enterprises.

'The Wick Curiosity Shop' was originally commissioned by Space in September 2008 for the Hackney Wick Festival, from public works, an East-end art and architecture-based practice. In collaboration with Hilary Powell, and with the support of Pudding Mill River, the shop is a small-scale archive and cultural space dedicated to the documentation and promotion of Hackney Wick and Fish Island. 'An eclectic collection of local produce, memorabilia, oral history, songs and stories from or about Hackney Wick' has been temporarily assembled in the area throughout the last couple of years, using discussions, walks and workshops, to accumulate new and old local narratives, documenting and 'capturing the life of a community in transition'.⁹ The Shop in 2010 was commissioned for a spring outing by muf architecture/art and took residency on Felstead Street with a week of talks, walks and viewings.

Other temporary projects included works by Rowan Durrant. In Superfixes the artist identified and fixed a number of broken public realm elements including a railing, a towpath sign, a missing sign letter and a bench. Alongside these are Hackney Wick & Fish Island Water Taxi by Manu Luksch, The Great Travelling Exhibition by Ben Long and PRINT(ED) MATTERS by Verity Keefe.

In 2008, Space commissioned The Buxhall Bee by Lucy Harrison. Drawing upon the interests and activities of people in the area, the project connected local community groups and included events such as a swap shop and communal lunch and the publication of a community newspaper. In 2011, in the gap between the East and Westbound traffic of the A12 bridges Folly for a Flyover was created by Assemble CIC in conjunction with CREATE 2011 and Barbican Art Gallery, with support from muf architecture/art. It consisted of a summer-long programme of cinema, performance and plays, including boat tours, screenings and drop-in workshops. Together these relatively

fleeting creative activities have strengthened the identity of the place, creating a greater sense of local pride and metropolitan social cohesion. In doing so it is hoped its communities are given the chance to identify through participation the rare opportunity the neighbouring Olympics has offered to re-imagine and importantly re-evaluate the nature of its coexisting communities.

In November 2010 through a curatorial collaboration between Sophie Rees and Perce Jerrom, called Light Industrial Use Gallery, an outdoor sculpture exhibition Legacy I took place in Forman's Smokehouse Yard. The works were positioned against a scratched concrete background in view of the Olympic Stadium. A year or so later, Go-Opera was located on a need-to-know basis as a promenade opera in an as-found warehouse. Simultaneously, The Yard, a temporary theatre built inside a warehouse with an outdoor café showing a range of avant-garde productions was constructed. All tenaciously welcomed existing and new communities to engage in a dynamic and site-specific urban landscape.

In 2009 the first Hackney Wick Flea Market was initiated in upper-White Post Lane, a closed through road to QEOP. Musicians, designers and vendors established a weekend rhythm of selling and interaction, akin to the original Hackney Wick Market as seen in Mollica's photographs, although now it is a local art crowd that the market mobilises. In inclement weather, the Flea Market shifted to an empty pub, The Lord Napier, and then on to other open-air empty locations, most recently White Post Yard next to Hackney Wick station. In the shadow of prescribed development, alternative forms of cultural, economic and political behaviour emerge.

Permanent structures

Stable elements of Hackney Wick and Fish Island remain and have been reinforced alongside the public realm improvements prompted by muf architecture/art and J&L Gibbons LLP. Founded on three strategic themes, 'Green – Infrastructure', 'Ways (With) In', and 'Olympic Face/Local Amenity', the proposed 21 projects build upon the existing assets and character of the area, implementing a site-specific streetscape design code, Exception is the Norm: Hackney Wick & Fish Island Design Guidance to create a legible public realm, like those found at Prince Edward Road and Brinkworth Way.¹⁰

The second phase of the muf architecture/art public art strategy involves the commissioning of three permanent works to enhance the urban realm and improve connectivity across the site for the key routes across the area to QEOP. The first is a series of sculpted metal figures up the Hertford Union Canal towpath by artist Francis Upritchard. Second is bespoke street furniture made from recycled materials designed by Martino Gamper entitled Bench to Bench, a trail of benches and stools leading from Victoria Park to QEOP. Finally there will be a light installation at the Wick Lane

Underpass designed by Elizabeth Wright. These artworks will strengthen pathways through the widening Olympic area and also create new local landmarks.

A number of informal creative hubs have also developed. Stour Space on Roach Road in Fish Island is a 'socially minded organisation', promoting design and business in the local area.¹¹ With a fantastic view of the Olympic Stadium, the facility supports local initiatives such as 'Organic Wick' and has regular public designer markets for local creatives to sell their wares but also encourages links to local schools, community groups and Stratford City department stores. In a similar spirit, the White Building, a community arts centre managed by Space and designed by David Kohn Architects in collaboration with Exploration Architecture, will open in 2012. Located next to Mother Studios at a critical point leading to QEOP, it has been identified by the London Development Agency as a key component of the 'Olympic Fringe'.¹² Inside and around these hubs, galleries and cafés have become nodes of public activity, such as See Studio and The Hackney Pearl on Prince Edward Road, Forman's Smokehouse Gallery inside Forman's Smokehouse and The Counter café inside Stour Space, all help to establish a vibrant, networked neighbourhood.

Bridges to the Olympics

The new bridges across the Lee Navigation Canal complete the route between the QEOP and Hackney Wick and Fish Island. As a symbolic counterpart to these bridges, the art of conversation has been used to tease out and conserve the past and link it to the present and future of the area. Storytelling is a primary method of gathering, sifting and making sense of a region's past. The Cut was a year-long project initiated by Space in 2010 to document the heritage of one particular section of the canal. Jessie Brennan, Chris Dorley-Brown and Daniel Lehan were commissioned to create new works in response to the hidden stories and histories of the people who lived and worked along this stretch. The works included drawings, photographs and a newspaper of interviews and artefacts.¹³ As the sporting landmarks of the Olympics neared completion, Art in the Park reaches out and inspires the immediate vicinity by commissioning artworks in the adjacent areas. In Light up your Street, Lucy Harrison collected song lyrics from residents of the five London Olympic host boroughs for a projection event in Hackney Wick in September 2011. Inspired by the art commission RUN by Monica Bonvicini, the project celebrates the musical tastes in the area, where 'local residents were invited to choose a line from one of their favourite songs that somehow resonates with them and says something about the local area and their hopes for the future'.¹⁴ In the second project, Mapping Your Manor, Harrison responded to Ackroyd and Harvey's tree planting commission, entitled Mapping the Park. Here audio recordings with people who live or work near each of the ten trees planted can be listened to in those places.

Criticism of the Olympic project has also arisen in many quarters and has been invited by artists such as Hilary Powell. Salon De Refuse Olympique in September 2011

provoked conversations and debates highlighting critical responses to the London 2012 Olympic Games site and the Cultural Olympiad. In one debate 'Hackney Wick (un) regulated', co-hosted by publicworks, a range of speakers including myself were invited to discuss the changing character of Hackney Wick that has inspired the work of artists, curators and commissioners in the area. These debates explored many concerns: tensions between independent and corporate economies; the toll on communities of constant physical transformation and renewal and the disproportionate scale of media interest in an authentic artistic quarter. In spite of the efforts to engage and retain existing communities, there has been considerable disquiet in the locality.

This anxiety was recently witnessed with the overpainting of an established graffiti site with a permitted Coca-Cola Feel the Beat Olympic promotion mural. Upon completion the project underwent a rapid succession of public guerrilla actions including splashed paint, tagging and re-appropriation via Facebook, calling for solutions.

Legacy and beyond

The identity of any area will reside in its working community. In Hackney Wick and Fish Island, the artistic community will change in the years after the Olympics. Some of the areas are earmarked for renewal and conservation when the Olympic Park Legacy Company becomes the Mayoral Development Corporation; others are tagged for demolition and there is a plan to build mixed-use housing towers and a perpendicular hub around Hackney Wick overland station. Public interest in the area will peak in July 2012 and probably wane thereafter. Perhaps some hope for continuing renewal post-Olympics lies in the Wick Award, a £1million injection of cash to the area from the Big Lottery Fund. The rather generalised aim is 'to help residents like you to make your community a better place to live, changing things for the better'.¹⁵

So far, it is clear from the strategic overview and subsequent artistic commissions undertaken in this area, that a new model of regeneration is taking place. Instead of mass sacrifice and erasure, or mere beautification, an accumulative process of renewal, revitalisation and social innovation seems to have prevailed. The mix of informal and formal, temporary and permanent actions has resulted in a unique multi-layered condition, ad hoc in many respects, that has a certain degree of flex. It remains to be seen how the ad hoc urbanism that has emerged in Hackney Wick and Fish Island in response to the Olympics will sustain this community not only through the summer of 2012, but in the years to come.

Notes

1. Lynch, K. (1960), *The Image of the City*. London and New York: The MIT Press
2. muf art/architecture (07/2009), *Creative Potential: Hackney Wick and Fish Island*
3. Ibid.

4. The Editors. (2010), The Hackney Wick. London: See Studio
5. <http://sweettoof.com/bio/>
6. 'Performing the City: Reflections on the Urban Vernacular' (1999), in J. Chase, M. Crawford, and J. Kaliski (eds), Everyday Urbanism. New York: Monacelli Press
7. www.muf.co.uk/archives/portfolio/136
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9. www.wickcuriosityshop.net/about/
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14. <http://lightupyourstreet.com/>
15. <http://wickaward.co.uk/about/>

Images

1. Sunset over Hackney Wick and Fish Island, Dec 2011
2. Blue hoarding along the canal, Feb 2011
3. Exhibition flyer
4. 'Hackney Wicked' festival, Wallis Road, July 2011
5. Prince Edward Road tulip tree, May 2011
6. Bench to Bench, Wallis Road, Dec 2011
7. Hackney Wick and Fish Island , Dec 2011
8. Feel the Beat Coca Cola poster, painted over All photos: Colin Priest