

When a City Works: Learning From London

ROBIN F. ABRAMS

Texas A&M University

PROLOGUE

The explosions on the London underground and bus on July 7, 2005, caused extensive damage, injury, and loss of lives, and set in motion political discord that ruptured the social fabric of Britain. These events also obliterated the fact that, just the day before, London, or more specifically the Lea River Valley, was chosen as the site of the 2012 Olympic games, following an intensively competitive selection process. Also lost in the chaos was the fact that London's Olympic bid is a bold and comprehensive urban ecological revitalization of one of the most polluted river valleys in Europe, described as both the city's "last remaining hinterland"¹ and a "largely forlorn and derelict place."²

EVOLUTION OF A BROWNFIELD ZONE

The River Lea³, as it makes its way through London, acts as a seam that both unites and divides four East London boroughs: Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets, and Waltham Forest. It flows into the Thames directly across from the Greenwich Peninsula and the Millennium Dome. The river valley's history over the past two hundred years closely reflects the rise and fall of Britain's heavy industry. During Britain's early industrial movement, an 1844 Metropolitan Building Act limited certain industries from locating in London because of toxic wastes; many consequently moved to the raw land along the banks of the River Lea, where some have continued to operate to the present day. Also in the 19th century, the main works yard of the Great Eastern Railroad was developed just east of the river, on a 78 acre site that at one point employed 6,000 people. Significant communities of worker housing were built, many in the

shadows of what were known as the "dark satanic mills".⁴

The Depression that followed World War I hit the Lea Valley hard; factories were closed; there was massive unemployment, hunger marches and street riots, some of which were linked to emerging racial tensions. Large immigrant populations from the far reaches of the British Empire began to settle in this part of London, where housing was cheap and available, where they were permitted to dwell, and where there was falsely rumored to be low-skilled work. During World War II, because of its history as the heart of industrial London, the Lower Lea Valley and the London Docklands situated immediately to the west were heavily bombed, and most residents were evacuated.

By the mid-20th century, the boroughs that flanked the Lea, now considered to be the heart of East London, were a patchwork of dwindling industrial sites; abandoned brownfield sites, including the once-productive rail yards, un-reclaimed bombsites; dense neighborhoods of low income housing and largely unemployed residents; and, recognized by few at the time, a dying riverine environment. The lower Lea River had been canalized, leading to the destruction of the tidal habitat and wetland zones at its mouth. The construction of locks and a network of sub-canals insured that tidal flux no longer reached upriver zones, killing off plant and animal species, and severely inhibiting the river's ability to restore itself.

CULTURE OF THE LEA VALLEY

Today, the culture of the Lea River Valley is quite distinct from Greater London – a direct result of its history. Its boroughs are the most ethnical-

ly diverse in the metropolitan area, in particular having the large concentration of Bangladeshi in Britain. According to the 2001 census, over 110 languages are spoken in its streets; the white population is less than 50% and the practicing Christian and Muslim populations are nearly equal. Due largely to the redevelopment of the London Docklands to the west, and also to rising living costs across Greater London, the area has increased in population significantly over the past fifteen years, as the poor are squeezed out of gentrifying areas to the west and south, and as immigration has increased.

The Lea Valley has one-fourth the number of residents living in owner-occupied, paid-for housing as both London and the rest of England, and half as many residents living in mortgage-funded owner-occupied housing. Three times as many residents live in subsidized housing as the rest of the nation, twice as many as the rest of London. 84% of the population live in flats or maisonettes, compared to 19% for the rest of the country. 57% of residents do not own a vehicle, compared to 26% for the rest of Britain. The area has a relatively young population, with 41% under 25 years of age (London's average is 32%). Perhaps not surprisingly, the area has an unemployment average almost double that of the rest of London, with some housing estates above 30%. The area has a higher death rate, a higher birth rate, and significantly higher percentage of families on benefits than the London and national averages. On the "Scale of Deprivation", the Lea Valley boroughs ranked 4th, 5th, 11th, and 47th out of 354 local authorities.⁵

THE ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE OF THE RIVER LEA

Britain's urban brownfields were perhaps one its greatest economic resources in the latter part of the 20th century, and it has been highly effective in figuring out both the technical and economic means of reusing them. However, the Lea Valley poses its own particular challenges as a minefield of brownfields. Every major modern city relies upon designated dumping grounds, where less desirable but essential industries and services are concentrated, and, consequently, where lower income workers can afford to settle. As London boomed in the post war era, redevelopers' search

for cheap and available sites inevitably turned to the industrial lands to the east of the city center. The St. Katharine's Wharf and Canary Wharf redevelopment schemes, begun in the 1970s, caused an even higher concentration of negative land uses along the banks of the Lea. At the same time, the scale of development at Canary Wharf was so massive and so expensive, it essentially absorbed much of the available redevelopment energy in London for a thirty-year period, easing redevelopment pressure on land alongside the Lea. As with any culture, there is an insatiable desire for river-front properties in London, and large, expensive housing developments have been marching down the Thames, in pace with the redevelopment of Canary Wharf. But the River Lea's reputation as an industrial wasteland was such that it seemed to be beyond the reach of even the most intrepid developers. The only exceptions to this were a small number of government-funded initiatives, and an enclave of urban pioneers (Container City) at the point where the Lea meets the Thames.

THE LONDON PLAN

Margaret Thatcher abolished London's metropolitan government in 1986 in a sweeping political gesture, resulting in a slack period in the city's modern history. This movement also contributed to an easing of pressure on Leaside properties. Local government was re-established in 1999 through the Greater London Authority Act, and the first mayor elected happened to be the last mayor from the previous regime. While he could have spent the intervening years steeped in bitterness, Ken Livingston seems to have spent the time imagining wild and great things for London as it approached the millennium, and when he came into office he hit the ground running (or bicycling, as it turned out). The Greater London Authority Act also required the Mayor of London to develop a strategic plan, including a Spatial Development Strategy for London. In 2001, the city began to compile its first comprehensive plan in 30 years. This effort, The London Plan, was adopted in February 2004, and was to have a huge impact on the future of the Lower Lea Valley. The fact that the Lower Lea is the largest remaining redevelopment opportunity within the bounds of London did not escape the notice of the Mayor, nor the London Development Agency, which is charged with implanting the London Plan.

The London Plan designates the Lower Lea Valley as one of 28 opportunity areas⁶, and an area for regeneration⁷. Addressing the sub-area of East London, the plan states, "East London is the Mayor's priority area for development, regeneration and infrastructure improvement. It has many of the capital's largest development sites and a large number of areas suffering multiple deprivation..."⁸ There are four proposals for East London in the London Plan that will change human and natural ecology of the Lower Lea Valley: massive transportation improvements on land, rail and river; development of a new central business district in the existing town of Stratford; ecological restoration of the river, and the staging of the 2012 Olympic games. Each is intended to play a key role in the revitalization of the economy and environment of East London; each is inextricably tied to the others; and in each case, it appears to an observer, the city has attempted to display sincere consideration of the residents in place. At least on paper, the local government has made a commitment to respect the rights of the residents of the area to remain in their communities. However, a visit to the river corridor already shows many new loft-like apartments under construction, meaning the social and economic dimensions of the local communities is bound to change.

PLANNED CHANGE IN THE VALLEY

A new East London freeway, significant extensions of the London Underground, and several new bridges over the Thames are intended to improve access in and out of the Lower Lea Valley. A new route for the high-speed train connecting Britain to Europe via the Chunnel is being constructed in a huge swath beneath the area. At the same time, the Lea Valley rail yards, which became the largest rail freight depot in the UK before becoming redundant due to a shift in haulage traffic to the highways, had grown from 78 acres to 750 acres. This enormous brownfield site acted as a barrier cutting the Lea Valley off from communities further to the east. A planning decision was made to locate a new international rail station in the township of Stratford, Tower Hamlets Borough, and to develop a new central business district, of a scale to rival Canary Wharf, on the reconstituted land above the station. This effort comprised the largest planning application ever made in the bounds of London, and is intended to create a new heart to

east London. There are extensive websites dedicated to the future of the Stratford "new-town-in-town"; its description is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is significant to mention in the ways it will re-center the energy of East London, and also in that a major portion of its promotional marketing is based around the fact that it is in the Lea Valley Regeneration Zone, and will be the location of the Olympic Swim Centre. In contrast to the social and economic character of Canary Wharf development, which is overwhelmingly "white collar", the Stratford redevelopment is intended to serve the existing population of the surrounding area through new job creation and construction of large areas of affordable housing.

The Lea Valley Regional Park Authority was established in 1967, but it did not turn its attention to the Lower Valley until the late 1990s. Its 21st century mission is "to regenerate the Lea Valley from a neglected back yard into a "green wedge" extending right into the inner parts of east London."⁹ The more specific goals of the plan, particularly for the lower valley, focus on reclaiming wetland areas, improving water quality, serving adjacent communities' cultural-specific recreation needs, and providing grounds for intensive sports development. In effect, this has turned out to mean becoming the venue for the 2012 Olympic games.

LONDON 2012

It is difficult to pinpoint the moment, location, or person responsible for imagining the Lea Valley as a potential site for the 2012 Olympic Games. Newspaper coverage begins around 2002, and the concept appears in the London Plan, written between 2001 and 2004. Production of the master plan for the Olympic bid was coordinated by the London office of EDAW, an American landscape architecture firm.¹⁰ Originally, the master plan was presented as an equally-balanced planning effort between potential Olympic venue and/or ecological/social restoration of the Valley. If the Olympic bid failed, there would be an equally valid backup plan for revitalization of the river. Additionally, the consultants were developing a "legacy" plan for post-Olympic redevelopment, which is a requirement of the Olympic bid. A key element of the Olympic plan's sustainability outlook was the minimization of redevelopment needs post-Olym-

pics, through careful planning of the sports venues, the housing, the parks, and the public transit access points.

The plan focuses key sports venues in the Lea Valley, each facility having clearly laid out post-Olympic adaptation plans. The Olympic Village will become a community of mixed-income housing, a part of the new Stratford town center. A major public park along the river will link all venues in the Valley. During the Olympics the central park will function as a movement corridor (anticipating 500,000 visitors per day); will provide a low-cost means of viewing Olympic events on large screens hovering over the park; and afterward will become an essential link in the chain of ecological restoration projects that aim to reclaim the river corridor. Parts of this chain have already been constructed between the Olympic park and the River Thames (Mile End Park, for example)¹¹. Another significant aspect of London's plans for the Lea Valley is the extensive emphasis upon green and sustainable planning, carefully woven into pre-existing redevelopment plans for the area. The London bid has a central concept, "Towards a One Planet Olympics", which focuses on creating an enduring legacy for sport, the community, and the environment. One of the four main "legacy benefits" of the master plan is "To drive the regeneration of the east of London, delivering a high-quality environment for business and opportunities for local people."¹²

The five key themes of the London bid were: low carbon games; sustainable transport; zero waste; conservation of biodiversity; and sustainable legacy. To some extent, these will be achievable, given Britain's commitment to meeting these objectives on a much larger scale than the Olympics.¹³ Other environmental elements of the Olympic master plan include reiteration of Britain's ratification of the Kyoto Protocol and a promised government investment of US\$700 million, allocated for "environmental actions", to include such elements as recycling of demolition residue; restoration of river corridor habitat; extensive tree planting throughout the Olympic park; restoration of toxic sites, etc.¹⁴ The "legacy" requirement imposed by the International Olympic Committee will be addressed through the regeneration of 250 acres of contaminated, derelict, and under-utilized land, and construction of an Olympic

Village providing close to 4,000 new homes built upon brownfield sites. A key aspect of the London bid's sustainability effort, and demonstration of its attempt to reduce impact on local communities is the proposed linkage to London's transport system. It is proposed that a free day pass to the entire London transit system be attached to every event ticket; employees will be given free transit passes for the duration of the games.

The aim of the Olympic games is to ensure that in addition to avoiding negative impacts on the environment, they actually improve the environment and leave behind a "positive green legacy".¹⁵ On its official website, the International Olympic Committee states that the environmental element, which is one of seventeen themes host teams are required to address in their proposals, is one of the most important aspects. Candidate cities' claims were validated by an environmental expert. The London 2012 team proposal is unusually explicit in its detail, giving an overall impression of commitment to sustainability (at least on the consultants' behalf).

CONCLUSION

Walking the Lower Lea Valley today provides an impression of a place that is about to change. Small new projects are appearing at long intervals along its length – most of which is now connected by varying degrees of hike and bike trail development. Pioneer-developers are constructing new residential loft projects amid the abandoned and active warehouses.

As can be expected from a project of this magnitude, cracks are beginning to appear that may derail the best of intentions. The cost of the Olympics has skyrocketed from the projected £2.4 billion to £3.3 billion¹⁶ as of Fall 2006, and six months later reached £9.35 billion¹⁷. A new budget was developed in March, 2007, but by early December, Olympic officials were already saying it looked as if they would again exceed projections.¹⁸ Cost overruns on other government-sponsored projects, such as the Millennium Village, have resulted in a backing down from environmental and sustainability claims. Already key elements of the Olympic master plan are being scrapped (i.e., the £100 million fencing arena has already been cancelled, among other facilities). Increasing concerns over

terrorist threats could make the costs soar even higher, and further threaten the beneficent aims of the planning committee.

Resident activists in the affected populations have posted websites critiquing each project and predicting massive social upheaval. A significant report has just been released, entitled "Fair Play for Housing Rights: Mega-Events, Olympic Games and Housing Rights", which claims that 1000 people have already been displaced due to London 2012 reconstruction, and 15,000 jobs have been lost due to closures and business relocation.¹⁹ Presumably there will be a large gain in temporary jobs, but no guarantees that these will go to local residents.

There is also concern about the ability of the government to complete the project in time, which seems to be a perennial issue with Olympic venues. Nevertheless, critical pieces are in place for a dramatic transformation that will shape the River Lea's next incarnation. If, and it is a huge if, just half the promises and proposals for the Lea Valley come true, its restoration will be a powerful illustration of the potential to bring about environmental transformation and manage cultural impact, when such concerns reflect the value system of government, and the government is truly serving the will of the people. The people of London, and Britain, have made a huge leap of faith -- hopefully only the first Olympian feat to take place alongside that river.

ENDNOTES

1. Edwin Heathcote, "Development on an Olympic scale", *Financial Times*. July 24, 2005.
2. <http://www.leevalleypark.org.uk/>
3. The river is variously referred to as "Lee" or "Lea", perhaps indicative of its ambiguous position in the geography of the city.
4. <http://www.railwaypeople.com/rail-projects/stratford-city-development-17.html>
5. <http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/>
6. "Opportunity Areas have been identified on the basis that they are capable of accommodating substantial new jobs or homes and their potential should be maximised. Typically, each can accommodate at least 5,000 jobs or 2,500 homes or a mix of the two, together with appropriate provision of other uses such as local shops, leisure facilities and schools. These areas generally include major brownfield sites with capacity for new development and places with potential for significant increases in density. Their development should be geared to the use of public transport and they are either located at areas of good access or would require public transport improvements to support development." London Plan, Broad Development Strategy, Section 2.7.
7. "the 20 per cent most deprived areas in London at ward level as defined by the London Index of Deprivation." London Plan, Broad Development Strategy, Section 2.11.
8. The London Plan, Section 5.50.
9. <http://www.leevalleypark.org.uk>
10. Other team members included HOK Sport, Foreign Office Architects, and Allies and Morrison, with the London firm Fluid handling the public participation elements of the planning effort.
11. It should be noted that this park has already suffered serious deterioration and abuse, requiring substantial reconstruction, although it has been open for use just since the Millennium. It contains an ecology center that is closed, a constructed wetland that is not being maintained, several fountains that have been vandalized. It does have a hike and bike trail that is well-used by local population.
12. <http://www.london2012.com/en/bid/regeneration/>
13. At least the involvement of BioRegional in the Olympic planning effort is an indicator of commitment to these aims. BioRegional were the developers of BEDZED, one of the few zero carbon housing projects to be built and occupied. While there have been challenges to the successful operation of BEDZED, they have moved on to implementing larger aims, in particular advising on the Olympics and developing affordable housing developments in East London.
14. Games of the XXX Olympiad in 2012 Report by the IOC Candidature Acceptance Working Group to the IOC Executive Board. Lausanne, March 12, 2004.
15. http://www.olympic.org/uk/organisation/commissions/environment/index_uk.asp
16. Adrian Croft. "Cost of London 2012 Soars, Britain Says." *The Guardian*, November 21, 2006.
17. http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/other_sports/olympics_2012/4025027.stm
18. "London 2012 officials admit they could go over budget", *International Herald Tribune*, Dec. 4, 2007.
19. "Fair Play for Housing Rights: Mega-Events, Olympic Games and Housing Rights, Opportunities for the Olympic Movement and Others." Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), supported by the Geneva International Academic Network (GIAN). 2007.