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**Stratford High Street**

**DECONSTRUCTED  
HIGH STREET**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This proposal is a design strategy intended to promote the development of a coherent and self-identifiable community in the area around Stratford High Street historically known as the Bow Back Rivers and bordered by the A12, the Greenway and the Docklands Light Railway and District Line rail tracks.

This area is defined by its richly varied landscape of waterways and infrastructure, and by its role within the larger London metropolitan area as a primary corridor for transport, waste and natural ecology. While post-industrial decline has taken a toll on the urban realm and local community, today it sits on the doorstep of the UK's largest regeneration scheme and adjacent to the site of the 2012 Olympics. Massive changes are underway, but the way they will unfold over the next 20+ years is unclear.

This proposal responds to three key challenges:

- The role of Stratford High Street as a transport causeway compromises its ability to serve the community with necessary local high street functions.
- Uncertainty over the shape and timing of development in the area creates a need for any intervention to be based on points of permanence – or fixes – within the landscape.
- The scale of development in the area and fragmentation of stakeholders threatens to overwhelm weakly attributed values such as public space and community integration.

The proposed solution is to deconstruct the functions of the traditional high street and relocate them to the network of edges defined by the waterways and the Greenway. This is accomplished through a combination of design tools and approaches, building guidelines and targeted public realm interventions.

### Stratford High Street

Stratford High Street is a high street by name only. A more accurate description would be to call it a *causeway*, serving primarily to transport vehicles across the area and providing limited functions to the local area. Its eastern end is dominated by the Bow Flyover, which passes over the A12 and stretches 300 metres eastwards down the centre of the street. The central stretch features six lanes for vehicle traffic and thin pavements for pedestrians. This prioritisation of cars over people has created a street with minimal levels of sociability. The few businesses along the street are car-related and there seem few opportunities for the growth of fine-grain retail or places of exchange within the large and fairly uniform developments that are coming up along the street.

Measured against the four functions of a high street as defined in the 2010 High Street London report, Stratford High Street does not fare well in its current state, or potentially in the future.

This does not make it valueless. With regeneration promising to deliver a large residential population into the area, there will be renewed need for the functions of a real high street. The London Thames Gateway Development Corporation (LTGDC) and London Borough of Newham have initiated a programme of public works to improve the pavements and plantings along the street and remove barriers. Unfortunately, the flyover is unlikely to disappear, the street will continue to be a crucial transport corridor and the high-rises that have been built will have long lifetimes. Meanwhile, Westfield Stratford City will be a short bus ride away and Tesco is just across the Lea at Bromley-by-Bow. This raises the possibility of a large, residential population moving into the area without the benefits of a functioning high street.

Site. Bow Back River.



## Functions of a High Street

### Physical Fabric

Provides a key element of the physical fabric of the community, often embodying the area's historic origins.

### Places of Exchange

Provides places of exchange for 'social, cultural, political and economic activity' within the local community.

**Movement Corridor** Serves as a movement corridor, both for traffic serving the wider metropolitan area and for local movement within the neighborhood.

### Local Real Estate

Provides a uniquely flexible, small-scale form of real estate that often offers the opportunity for local ownership and services targeted specifically at the local community.

## Stratford High Street

*Dominated by generic new high-rises; Industrial heritage under threat from new development*

*No public spaces; minimal social activity;*

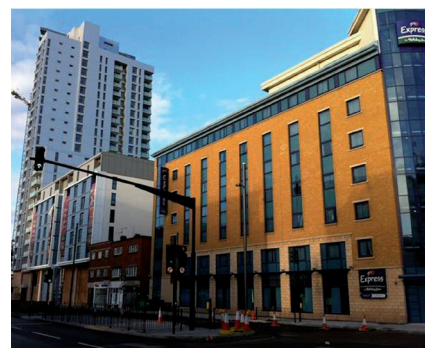
*Key corridor for London; Limited local or pedestrian*

*Complete absence of local retail activity; high rise street levels vacant or used as carparks*



V.W. Co. Ltd Metal Works, 1902.

Source: [www.newhamstory.com/](http://www.newhamstory.com/)



Express Hotel, 2010.

(Gort Scott and UCL, 2010)

## Stratford High Street, 2010



### Current and Future Population

Over the last two centuries, this area has played the role of an industrial backyard to London, serving the city's needs through food production and industry, as a source of technological innovation and as a corridor for transportation and waste disposal. As industry declined in the second half of the twentieth century, so did the fortunes of the area, but in recent years it has seemed poised for change, with the centre of London shifting eastwards. The Stratford High Street area is on the doorstep of the 2012 Olympic Games and it is the epicentre of the Thames Gateway regeneration. However, the new climate of financial austerity has made the promise of government financing seem unlikely, and private investors are more cautious than they were a few years ago. That the area will face massive changes is certain, but the nature of those changes is far from defined.

In recent years, the area's older industrial buildings have been occupied with a variety of low-density uses – car-repair shops, construction equipment rental and wholesale businesses – but these have now all but disappeared as large pieces of the area have been identified for redevelopment. Pockets of commercial activity survive: small industrial businesses within the Marshgate Business Centre and a cluster of live-work artist residences that have recently relocated from Sugar House Lane to the Yardley Soap building. The Three Mills film studio sits inside its gated compound on land owned by the London Development Authority, but its long-term future in the area is uncertain.

Meanwhile, the Olympic Development Authority has cleared the majority of the Pudding Mill neighborhood to create the southern entrance to the Olympic site. The bulk of Sugar House Lane has been sold to Landprop (the development arm of IKEA) and emptied of occupants. Masterplanning is already underway by Gehl Architects. Near Bromley-by-Bow, Tesco has received planning permission for a major mixed-use development on derelict industrial land. Collectively, these projects have the capacity to add between a few thousand to more than ten thousand homes. The Olympic Park Legacy Company will control approximately 14 ha of developable land within the area after the Olympics, with development to begin after 2025.

The existing residential community is clustered mainly in the low-density Abbey Lane neighborhood. Separated from other nearby residential areas, the neighborhood has a cloistered feel, turning away from the canals, the Greenway and Abbey Mills grounds that define its edges. There are few services available to residents, who walk across the canals to visit the Tesco at Bromley-by-Bow, or down to Stratford Town Centre.

### Site perception and sparse existing population



## URBAN PROBLEM

In our assessment of the site, we do not believe Stratford High Street has the capability to provide the important local functions of a high street now or in the foreseeable future without massive structural change. It is too dominated by its role as a transportation corridor to adequately serve the needs of the surrounding community. The width of the road, speed of the vehicles and typology of its buildings create a kind of fortification against pedestrian and social possibilities. However, as London shifts its centre eastwards and regeneration brings a large new population into the area, there will be a much-increased need for the civic spaces and local functions of a high street. This is not limited to the provision of retail space. It extends to the more important role of a high street in providing places for social, cultural and political exchange, and local economic opportunities. These functions are critical if the area is to grow into a coherent and self-identifiable neighborhood – something that is a priority under new planning reforms – as opposed to a collection of segregated residential enclaves.

The area is also in the midst of substantial, but uncertain, change. During the course of our study of the area businesses were closed, neighborhoods emptied and entire blocks cleared. The Olympics will come and go in 2012, but the ripple effects of these changes in the local area will only be understood as they play out. Further uncertainty exists in the timeline of change due to its dependence on future patterns of investment and demand. The area does not need another ambitious master plan detailing outcomes over which no one stakeholder has control. What the area does require is a means of ensuring that as it grows, it will develop into a coherent neighborhood with the ability to support its immediate local needs. It requires a means by which the area's intrinsic assets – which are valuable at both the local and metropolitan scales – can be secured and integrated into these changes. It also requires a structure through which the economic benefits of the Olympic games and other large capital investments coming into the area can be captured and directed into the local economy.

Stratford High Street and Bow Flyover



## APPROACH

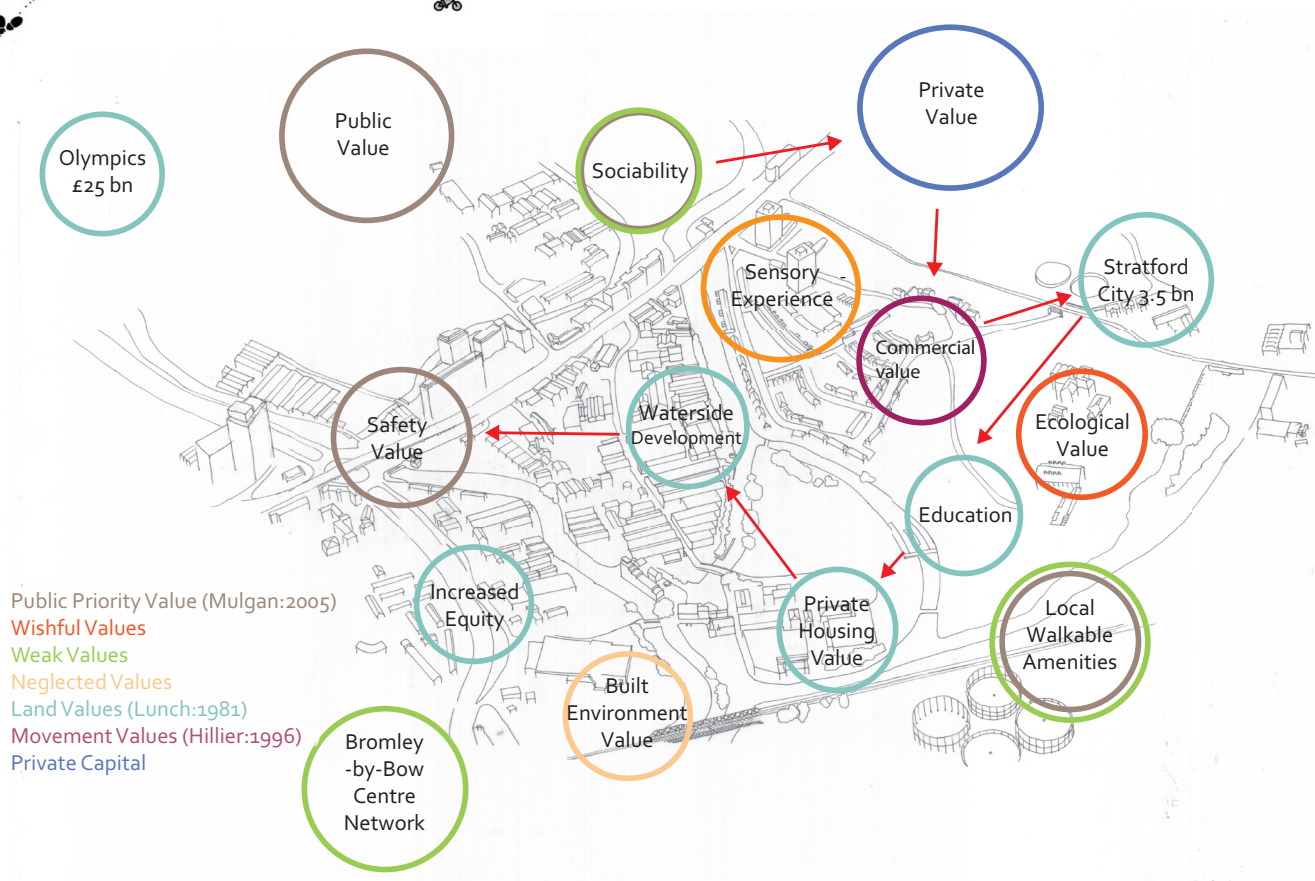
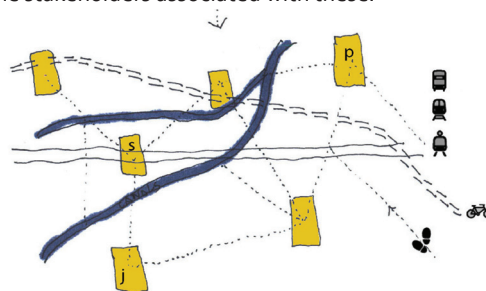
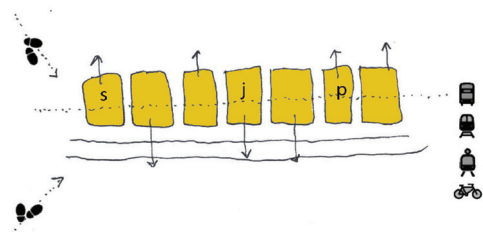
In our assessment of the urban problem we have formulated an approach pinned on a conceptual framework of three pillars:

The **deconstructed high street** proposes that the precedent of the linear form of the high street need not preclude the ability to have high street functions according to a different spatial logic. We propose that the functions of a high street – retail, places of exchange, physical fabric and economic opportunities – could be generated on alternative transit corridors and public spaces within the site. We identified the canals and the Greenway, whose contours create the layers and elevations of the landscape, and whose edges have historically defined the use and development patterns of the area, as the elements that won't change. These edges contain a more human scale than

the high rises of Stratford High Street and we have conceived of them as car-free alternative high streets.

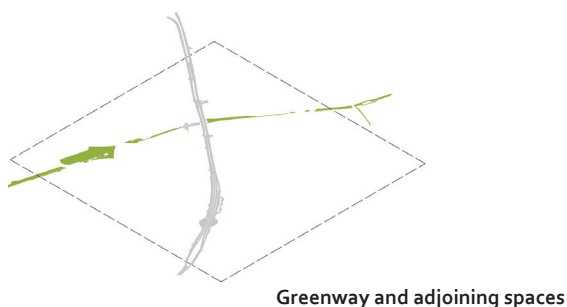
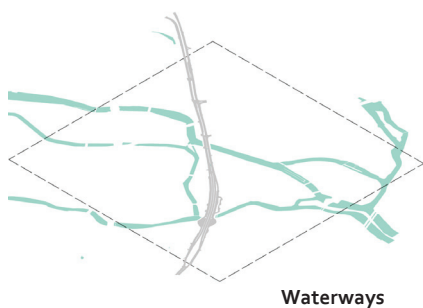
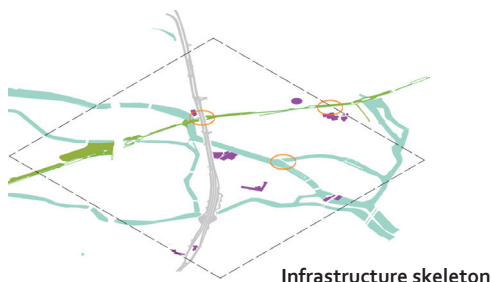
The **mediation of value**: Key within this process of negotiation will be the understanding of different values within the site. It is clear that all values are not weighted equally in logics of urban development. Capital in the built environment and land values are well understood in the market and prioritised by developers. However, the value of public space or well-integrated neighborhoods is less explicit and often lacks a clear stakeholder interest. Kevin Lynch (1984) differentiates between forms of *weak*, *wishful*, and *neglected* values. We have adopted Mulgan's (2005) approach of using a value map to visualise the complex interplay of different conceptions of value within the area and the stakeholders associated with these.

Clockwise from top: Traditional High Street Conception; Deconstructed High Street; Mapping Existing Values



## STRATEGIC PROPOSAL FOR INTERVENTION

The **fixes** are those things we have identified that remain constant in the varying degrees of potential change. These fixes address the waterways, Greenway, conservation fabric and protected ecology. Their value and longevity has been written into planning policy and they provide a strong framework from which to build a resilient public realm. These have been used to identify the edge conditions as the sites of intervention.



### Network of Edges

When considering the location of intervention our thinking became grounded in the interstitial spaces – the edges. But by this we don't refer to the outer edges of the site but the sides of the infrastructural channels, the edges of the canals, the sides of the Greenway and the spaces where these meet the road. This could be misunderstood as a public realm project, however not all of the 'edges' are public rights of way, and those that are may change in future restructuring. We see the rivers themselves as a public good and based on this principle we have imagined a scheme whereby this value can have a strong role in the uses of the edges. We have imagined that the streets could be 'inverted', assuming the role of backyard spaces that is currently occupied by the waterways, and promoting a car-free, diverse and quality environment – a successful **network of edges** able to support **alternative high streets**. The new configuration of local services we imagine inhabiting the spaces would be in a self-organising, logical arrangement of convenient high street activities in both linear and clustering formation.

There is a hierarchy to this network of edges. The **waterways** and their edges are defined according to the setbacks and grain of the existing and historic fabric and in the areas of ecological importance up to 20m from the water's edge. We have identified potential **nodes** of attraction in the network: the vacant plot on the high street where the rivers and Greenway intersect could be a point of entry onto the waterways and a concentration of commercial activity for both local and visiting populations. The leafy area of Abbey Mills adjacent to the Greenway area could serve civic requirements. The **Greenway** and its edges can link other **residual spaces** and under utilised green-spaces.

### Environmental and Asset Mapping

The dominant character of the area reflects its industrial past, but in fact its urban fabric is very diverse. Its different neighborhoods contain post-industrial warehouses, Victorian era residential pockets, large green spaces, tidal basins, new residential towers and tracts of cleared land being made ready for the Olympics. Hidden in this diversity are significant assets that could enrich the area's future, but it will be a challenge to value them in such a way that they will be protected and enhanced as the area grows in coming years.

#### History.

The Sugar House Lane neighbourhood speaks of the area's proud, but neglected industrial history. London's decline as a manufacturing centre left behind an intimate jumble of warehouses dating back to the nineteenth century lining the edges of the canals and clustered along interior lanes. In recognition of its historic buildings and unique interstitial spaces, Sugar House Yard was designated a conservation area in 2008. It joined other noted historic sites in the area including the Three Mills complex to the south, the cathedral-like Abbey Mills Pumping Station along the Greenway, and Warton House, the art deco former home of the Yardley Soap Company on Stratford High Street. These represent a significant collection of historic assets in the area, which are under-utilised or endangered due to lack of upkeep, poor accessibility and new development.

#### Green Space.

The area has approximately 12 hectares of large green spaces, not counting the canals. However these spaces are poorly connected to the surrounding community and each other, making them difficult to access and utilise. Abbey Mills, for instance, sits on a sprawling, nine-hectare site, a large portion of which is green and landscaped, but surrounded by high fences. Similar but less severe issues confront the Greenway and Three Mills Park, which are publicly accessible but poorly integrated with the surrounding community. None of the green spaces are strongly linked, even when they are adjacent to one another.

#### Ecology.

The waterways coursing through the area create zones of rich ecological diversity, particularly the tidal Channelsea basin immediately south of Abbey Mills. Long-neglected, it remains one of the few un-channelised waterways, with dense greenery along its banks, a muddy riverbed exposed at low tide and wading bird species. Flora and fauna unique to the area have also taken hold along the edges of the canals in many places, and the long waiting list for the handful of agricultural allotments within Abbey Mills is evidence of demand for a deeper engagement with the area's fertile potential.



Abbey Mills Pumping Station Source: Authors



Green spaces at Three Mills Studio



Canals wild ecology

## Waterways

The area has historically been defined by its waterways and industrial infrastructure, which gives the site its unique, layered topography. The railway lines, Greenway and flyover create man-made elevations, while the canals define lower, more ecological layers. The elevated stretches of infrastructure act as walls that enclose the site from its surroundings. The canals define the contours and character of its internal landscape. Their edges serve as both pathways and boundaries. While they could be understood as barriers in the typical connectivity paradigm, the Blue Ribbon Network policy in the updated London Plan prioritises use of the waterways as the primary consideration for planning of adjacent areas.

## Views.

As the site straddles the Lea River Valley, the sensation of being in a valley is heightened by views of the towers of Canary Wharf rising downstream, while the new Stratford City rises to the north. Views onto the Olympic Park are framed over the Bow Back River, and the canals themselves create incidental viewing corridors. These moments where different urban scales are felt – backyard views from the Greenway, views onto the waterways, valley views from the high street – have the potential to unfold new urban realities. If sensitively treated they can work as a tool in the way-finding system on the site and provide new framings of various views of the city, something that can be powerful in establishing place identity.

## Spaces.

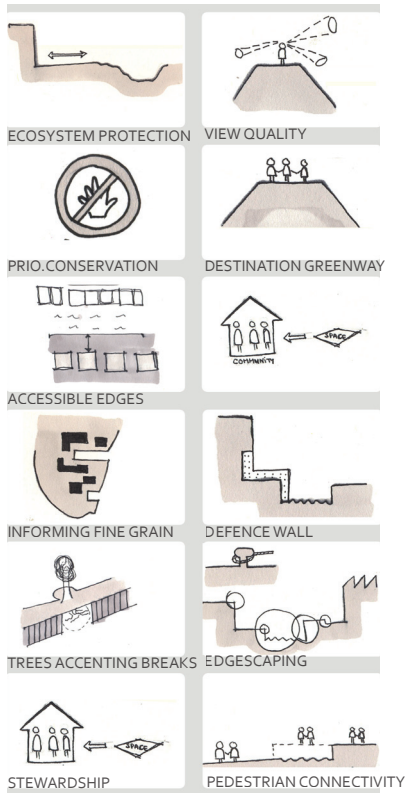
The different configurations of space within the area create value in diverse ways based on how they are used and how they affect the way people use them. Stratford High Street and the Greenway can be conceived of as *constructed linearities*: corridors turned inwards on themselves and closed in on the sides. This emphasises their essential nature as causeways, elevating the value of travel through space, but at the expense of interaction with surroundings. A second type of spatial configuration can be termed *ambiguous spaces*. These are generally the interstitial spaces formed at the intersections of buildings or of the different layers of the site – canal and roadway, roadway and infrastructure, infrastructure and canal. The environment created in these spaces offer different qualities – enclosure, security, acoustics and intimacy, as well as different flows and rhythms than more linear or open spaces.



Visual relationship with current developments



Valuable and unique spaces



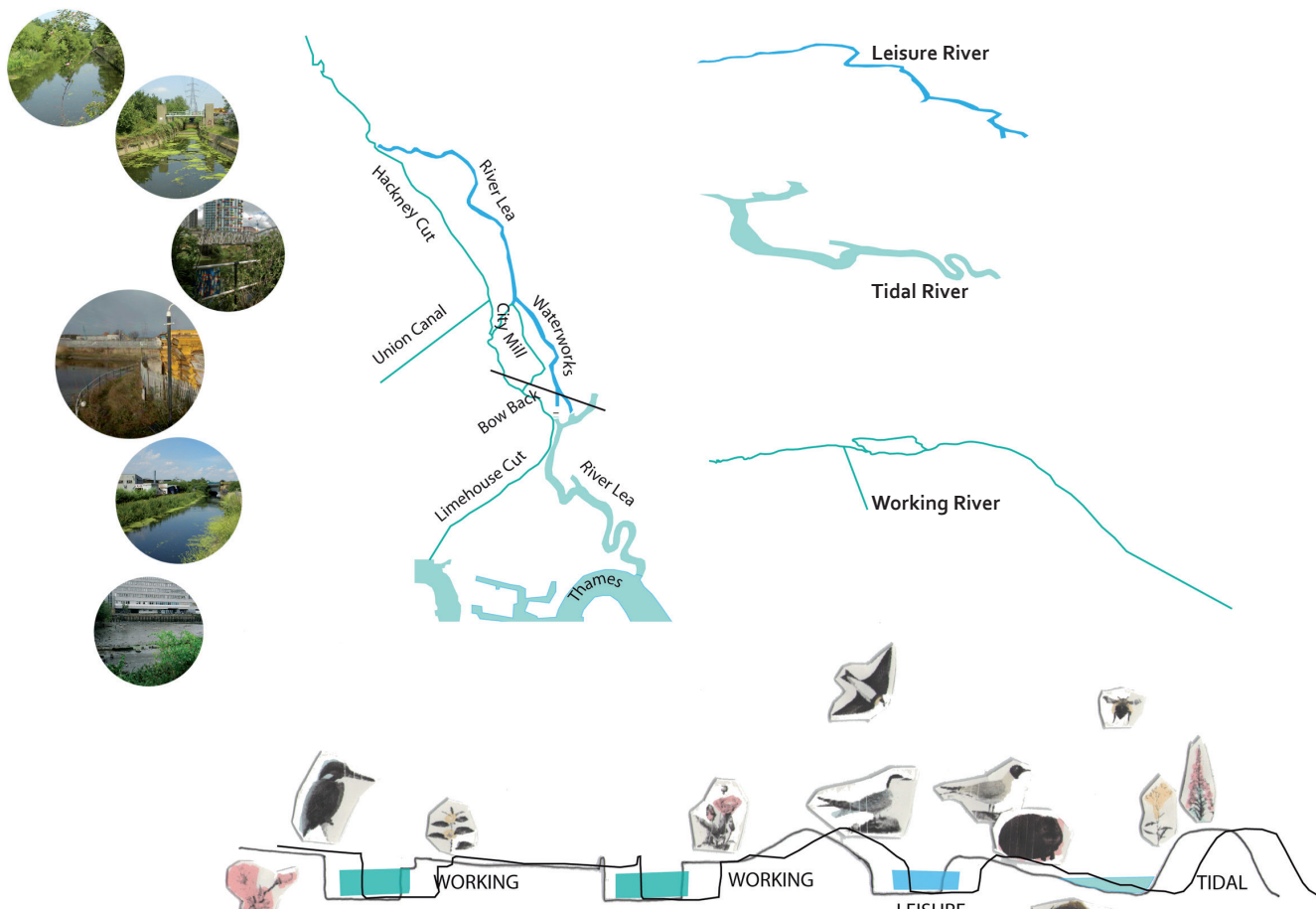
Above: Edge tools, approaches to existing edge conditions  
Below: Waterways Section

### The Edges

To understand the differences in character and use of the waterways we identified typologies according to channelisation, navigability, connectivity and projected traffic level linked to its route through the Olympic Park. Along with other characteristics such as adjoining land uses, built form and pedestrian activity, these differences led us to label those types the **Working River**, the **Tidal River** and the **City River**. A closer analysis of the spaces around the edges, their dimensions and the ecologies of the river informed the development of a tool kit to guide planning of the edges:

- The volume between the water level and the towpath above the waterway should either prioritise boat traffic or ecological overhang depending on categorisation of river.
- Where the defence wall exceeds the height of ground-level efforts should be made to integrate the wall into design, or development should stretch to the edge.
- Development along un-channelised tidal rivers cannot exceed the 20m ecological buffer.
- Access for future freight must be a priority for the working river.
- Developments must never 'turn away' from the canal.
- Pedestrian access is always appropriate on at least one side of the waterway.
- Efforts must be made for 'private' edge conditions to face onto the waterways and where appropriate encourage small business.
- Where public access is not appropriate effective guardianship of the edge must be sought.
- Effects on views from the Greenway must be considered in proposed developments.
- The potential of the edges of the Greenways as ecological corridors should be recognised.
- The Greenway's interface with ground level can be enhanced by more clearly defining points of access.





River typologies



## CASE STUDIES

The following case studies provide examples of the types of interventions we propose for each of the elements in the 'network of edges' hierarchy: nodes, Greenway, waterways and residual spaces. They are intended to provide conceptual guidance and inspiration for the potential of the spaces, the way in which those spaces serve the larger network and neighborhood area, and programmatic possibilities, as well as suggestions for implementation. They are not intended as design prescriptions.

Drawing illustrating the network of edges

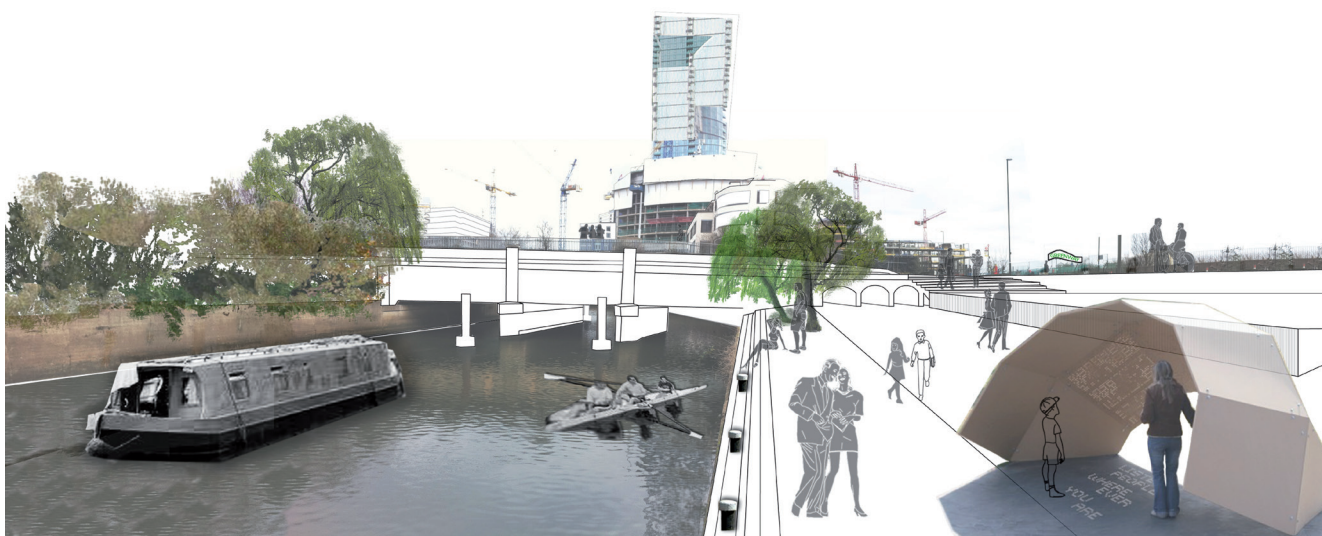


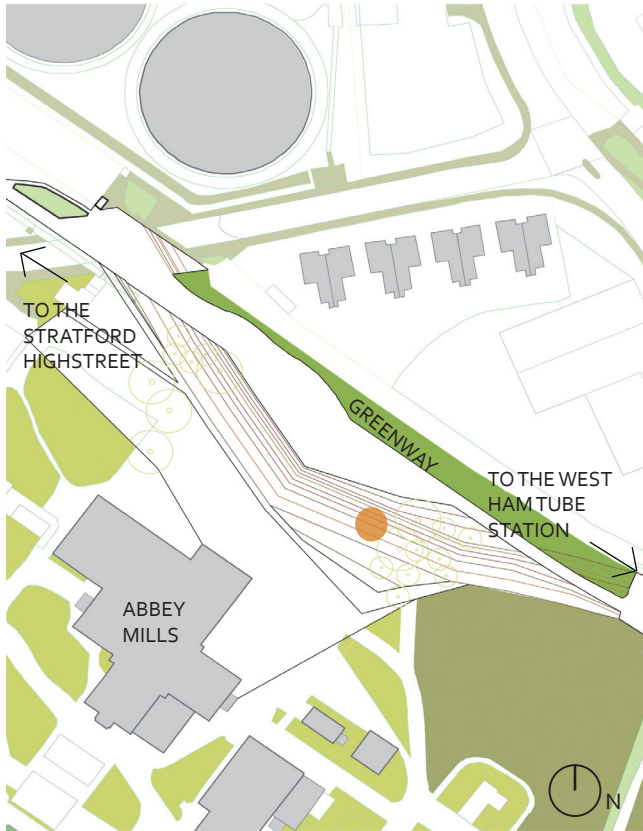


### Case Study: Esplanade

80-82 Stratford High Street is currently a derelict empty lot, but it occupies a key 'node' in the network at the intersection of Stratford High Street, the canals and the Greenway. It is one of the few breaks in the high rises that line the northern edge of Stratford High Street. In this case study we propose to reinvent it as a public space, providing a specific example of the node typology within the network. By preventing development and allowing public access, it punctures the spatial compression of the road corridor, bringing a human-scale space into the high street zone and preserving important views of the Olympic Park and down onto the Waterworks River. Landscaped to allow equal access to the Greenway, road and water's edge, the esplanade becomes an interchange, mediating between the separate layers of the network and enabling pedestrians to pass from the street onto its alternative pathways. The water's edge becomes a zone of activity. As a central public space, the esplanade serves a unifying function for the surrounding neighborhoods – as a landmark, a point of orientation and place of exchange. These qualities would be enhanced through a sponsored competition to design a pavilion, and flexible spaces would be reserved for local food and retail businesses. Targeted to be in place before the Olympics, the esplanade would be delivered jointly by the LTGDC, the ODA, LB Newham and British Waterways, with financial support from the developers building around it.

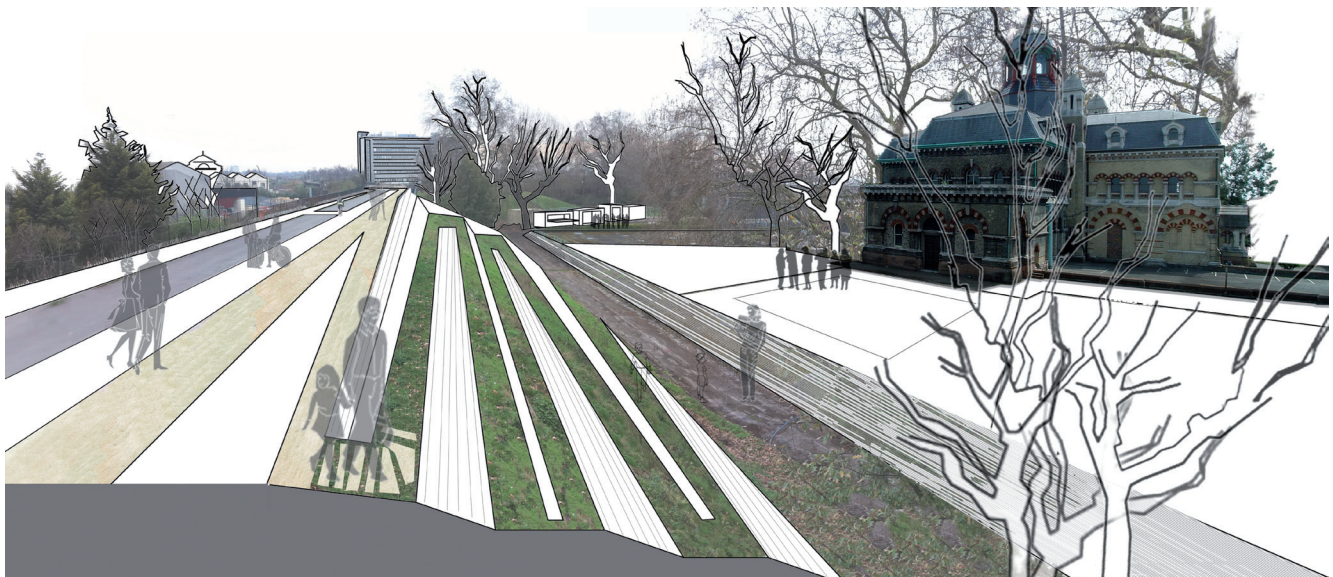
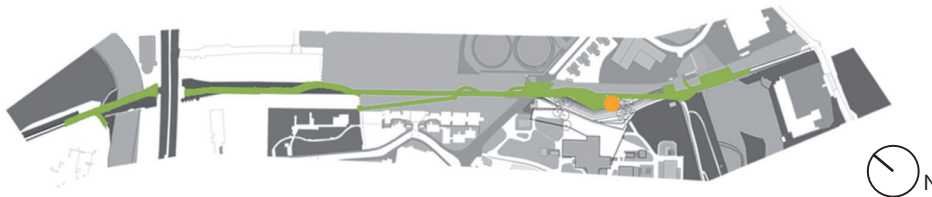
Drawing illustrating esplanade site





### Case Study: Amphitheatre at Abbey Mills

This case study examines the transformation of the Greenway part of the network from a one-dimensional transport corridor into a three-dimensional urban park by expanding its borders to include unused green spaces along its length and the slopes along its edges. Security is a primary concern on the Greenway and can be mitigated by generating activity and social presence through the provision of spaces rich with potential uses. Here we propose the removal of the fenced boundary separating the Greenway from the Abbey Mills Pumping Station Grounds. The newly formed park would be landscaped to form a terraced slope running down to the flat open area behind the pumping station. This area, backed by Bazalgette's cathedral-like nineteenth-century pumping station, becomes a performance space for concerts, recitals, outdoor theatre, community movie nights, etc. It would be rentable for events: balls, weddings, fundraisers and the like, providing an income stream that contributes to Thames Water's upkeep of the pumping station and grounds. The majority of the time it would be a leisure space for cyclists and passersby on the Greenway, as well as the growing local residential community. The space could be in place to serve the heightened activity around the Olympics or could target the reopening of the stadium for West Ham Football Club in 2014.





### Case Study: Three Mills Wall River Edges

The Three Mills Wall River runs south from Stratford High Street, dividing Landprop's planned development in Sugar House Lane from the older Abbey Lane residential neighborhood. The towpath along the eastern edge is poorly used and unsafe, and the houses that back onto it have constructed high fences. This case study provides an example of how river edges could assume the functions of the deconstructed high street. Both edges here would be made publicly accessible, creating new primary movement corridors through the site. Developers and owners are encouraged to open their properties out onto the canal as part of a policy to make the waterway an active social space instead of a backyard. New developments are encouraged to reduce monotony by limiting building footprints along the water and using varied designs. The ground floor contains flexible spaces that can be sold as residential units or converted to small-scale commercial spaces. The placement of buildings creates unexpected social spaces by mirroring the historic patterns of the warehouse moorings. These 'inlets' are planted with mature trees that extend the natural qualities of the waterway inwards to the developed core. Canal edges are planted with hanging trees and lined with trellises to promote development of waterway ecologies. These changes would be led by British Waterways, working with the developers of new projects as they are planned along the canals.



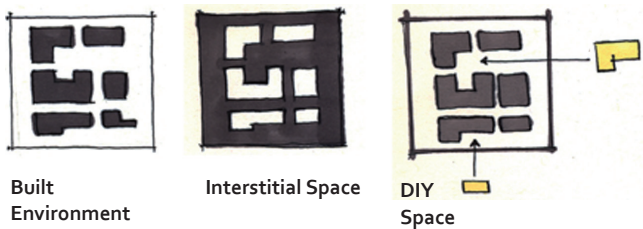


### Case Study: DIY Spaces

The network of edges is replete with forgotten and residual spaces, deriving from the unplanned heritage of the area. In the face of new developments bringing larger scales of building and more optimised spatial planning approaches, these spaces represent a unique inheritance that we believe should be captured and turned over to the local community before they disappear. These case studies examine temporary, flexible interventions that capture these spaces, preserve their value and promote their use.

The west-facing wall of the Three Mills Studio represents a large visual and physical barrier next to one of the area's most important historical assets (The Mill House), and is easily visible from the District Line or across the Lea River. We propose that it becomes a canvas for creative activities: a space for artwork, for creative guerilla advertising, for film projections. These activities would benefit the local community either directly through participation or indirectly through subsidising other activities. Three Mills Studio and the GLA, who own the site, would partner with members of the local community to execute the project.

Unused barges are moored along the eastern edge of the Lea River near Sugar House Lane. These would become flexible, floating community spaces, reconfigurable for use as agricultural allotments, floating cafés or water-borne musical performances. British Waterways is actively involved in donating land for allotments. By making these barges into moveable spaces they could bring their activities to different parts of the network.



Filtering out the residual space – Ensuring small scale spaces for community activity



## IMPLEMENTATION

### Stewardship and Maintenance

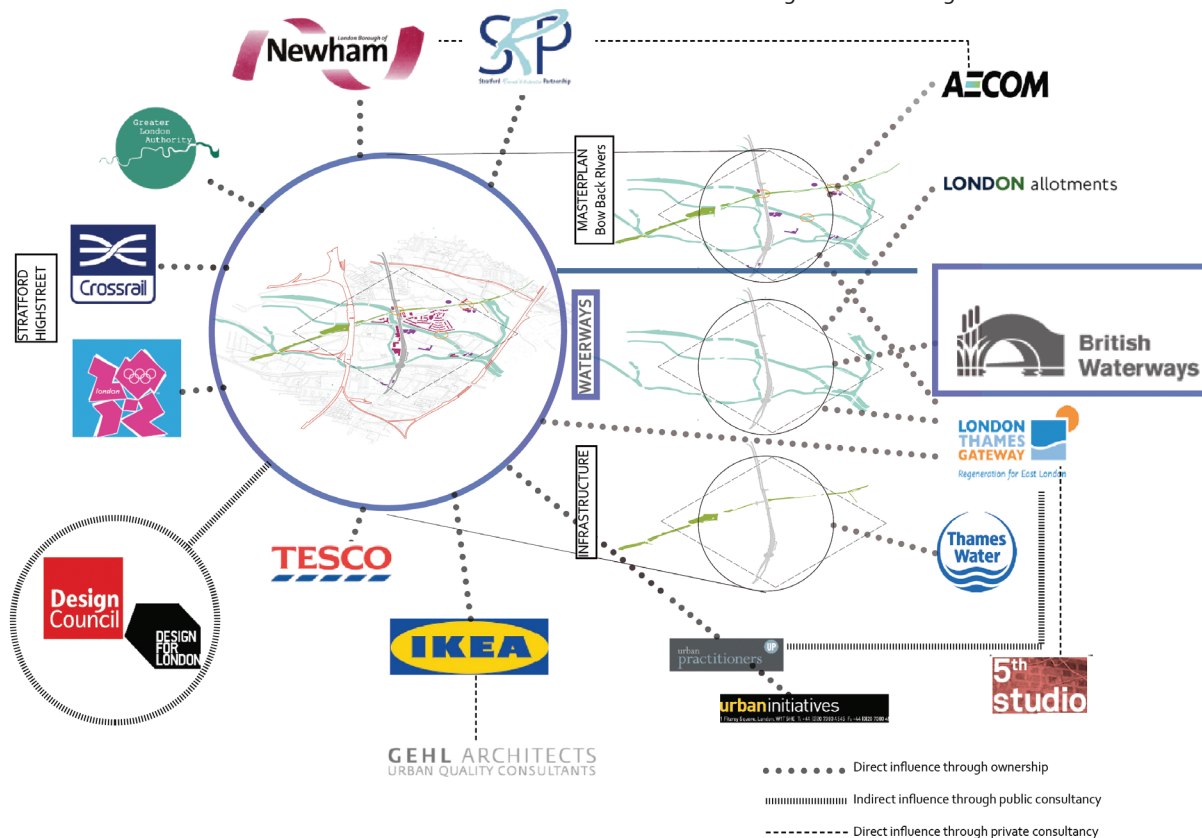
As CABE (2005b) has argued in the case of parks, waterways and their edges need on-site stewardship. They also require ongoing maintenance, social engagement and facilitation of projects as well as on-site leadership and long-term funding. British Waterways is well placed to play this role. Their shift from public body to charitable trust enables them to play a more extended role, as well as access new forms of funding, such as charitable donations and the new infrastructure levy.

A 2009 study by British Waterways shows that a well-managed waterway environment creates a land value premium of between 14%-17% over that of a poorly managed one (Fisher, 2009). This creates a strong incentive for developers and landowners to collaborate with British Waterways through shared waterfront development goals and the funding mechanism of the new infrastructure levy allowing British Waterways to expand its stewardship activities. We also suggest that British Waterways adopts a model similar to English Heritage in this area, becoming stronger stakeholders and widening their existing urbanism and small business teams to offer consultation and community support. They already have an excellent model of co-operation with London's allotment societies, offering waterside land to tenants in return for its up-keep.

The role of a 'keeper of the waterways' dates back as far as the waterways have been navigated. As the waterways were canalised, this evolved into lock-keepers, but with digitisation of the lock system their roles have been phased out, and many of London's lock-keeper's cottages sold off. The Bow Back Rivers currently have two non-resident and one resident lock-keepers, known within the community and who were much more so before the sale of the on-site lock keepers cottage. We propose that a new lock-keepers cottage be established (through a section 106 agreement) to house a lock-keeper and their family. We believe this individual could be a community leader who is networked socially, has expert local knowledge from daily work on-site, and can act as a direct channel between institutional stewards and community members.

### Negotiation

This proposal is intended to support negotiation between stakeholders as changes unfold gradually in the area. The vision it sets forth – of an economically successful regeneration that creates an identifiable community in the Bow Back Rivers area – is intended to communicate the potential value of utilising the network of edges as an alternative high street. While this proposal lays out a design strategy for the area, it recognises the cumulative nature of change and attempts to offer a pragmatic structure based on mutual best interest, and commitment to common goals for the long-term success of the community.



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