

Introduction

The Cities Programme

The Cities Programme at the London School of Economics is an innovative centre for graduate teaching and research on urban issues. The Programme focuses on the relation between the physical and social structuring of cities and urban space. We see design as a mode of research and practice that shapes urban environments, responds to urban problems, and connects social and material forms in the city. We take a multi-disciplinary approach to these issues, drawing on expertise and insights from the social sciences, architecture, urban design, engineering, planning and other fields. The faculty team includes social scientists and political theorists, architects and urban designers, transport and environmental experts. Our MSc City Design and Social Science aims to foster critical and committed urbanists who can engage across these disciplinary boundaries, and have a positive impact on the making of cities in the future. The City Design Research Studio is the centrepiece of the Master's programme, linking theoretical issues and research debates with the detailed analysis of problems of city design and original proposals for urban intervention. It promotes an understanding of the city as a social as well as a built environment, and of the complexities of urban design and development processes.

In 2009-10, the Studio went to London's 'Olympic fringe'. In the long run-up to 2012, our concern has been with the uneven impact of the Olympic development on local areas along its borders. Tracing a line from Hackney Wick in the west to Leyton in the east, we encountered quite different local conditions, populations, opportunities and pressures. Set against the tendency of the mega-event to homogenise or even deaden space, the students aimed to valorise local resources, to identify both specific challenges and particular qualities. At the same time the Studio took seriously – as well as critically – the broader aspirations of the Olympic development to bring physical and socio-economic benefit to this part of East London. Students worked together in interdisciplinary groups to analyse each local site, and to propose inventive urban strategies. Their analyses and propositions form the basis of this publication.

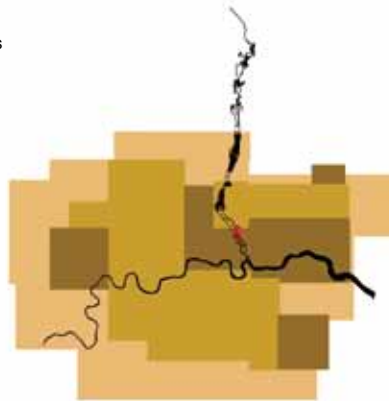
Fran Tonkiss
Director, Cities Programme

Olympic Fringe: a studio exploration of urban seams

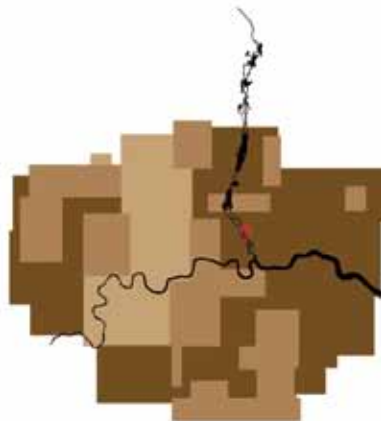
Our studio exploration is focused on the seams between an immensely large development initiative, and small, local pockets of existing daily life. The ambition of the Olympic Games and Legacy programmes brings significant capital, the promise of prosperity and equity, and a vision of an alternative urban future. The location, in the Lower Lea Valley in the east of London, brings other realities. These include a broad area in which people live and work that is officially defined as highly deprived, and a collection of traditions, economies and ways of life that have accrued over centuries of settlement.

Spatialising the Indices of Deprivation

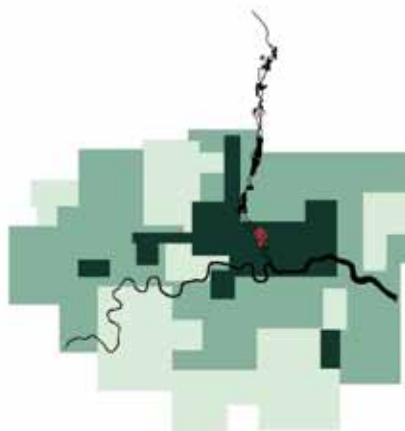
Diagram indicating comparative deprivation scores, EDAW, KCAP & Allies and Morrison, Legacy Masterplan Framework Output C, February 2009



Area of high crime



Area of high unemployment



Index of multiple deprivation

The darker areas indicate the higher rates of occurrence

The site

The valley of the River Lea stretches from north to south, dividing north London and creating distinctly inner and outer portions of the East End. Dense urban development in the Lower Lea Valley – residues of heavy industry and manufacturing, structures associated with water and gas supply and with railways – gradually disperses as you move north to produce a patchwork landscape, in which urban and rural forms and uses – parklands, wildlife sanctuaries, small scale contemporary industries, sewage treatment works, allotments, sports facilities, huge reservoirs, warehouses, are spliced and dovetailed together.

Within the valley, the River Lea splits into a series of tributaries, used variously in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for bringing in raw materials and shipping out finished goods from industries – then including tanneries and soap works, dye works and confectioners – as well as for their water supply and as conduits for waste. With the gradual collapse of industry following World War II, plans to revitalise the post-industrial valley

The Lower Lea Valley

Diagram illustrating the location of the Olympic site and the Lea Valley in relation to Greater London, Juliet Davis, 2009.



led initially to the creation of the Lea Valley Regional Park in 1967. The Lower Lea Valley has become the focus of regeneration and development plans in the east end over the last ten years in particular as it has been seen to hold potential to accommodate a significant portion of London's future growth. The prospect of growth and development has simultaneously been viewed as an opportunity to address long-standing issues of social and economic deprivation relating to post-industrialisation and associated urban change. A number of mechanisms are in place for steering development including metropolitan level policy, and site-specific planning frameworks and strategies. A Lower Lea Valley (LLV) Regeneration Strategy covering the whole stretch of the valley from Stratford to the Thames was first issued by the Greater London Authority in 2006.

The Olympic and Legacy Park, at the northern end of the Lower Lea Valley is the largest redevelopment project currently underway in Europe. It forms one in a series of strategic development sites or 'Opportunity Areas' currently being developed in line with current urban policy to address London's housing shortfall. After the Olympics in 2012, which has been dubbed the 'Regeneration Games', it is intended that urban development will proceed in the interstitial spaces between the newly created park and residual sporting venues to create a mixed environment that reattaches the sides of the current 'seam' rates of occurrence formed by the conditions of the valley between Hackney and Bow to the west, Leyton and Stratford to the east.

The studio exploration

The purpose of the studio is to analyse, interpret and intervene in the social and spatial seams between the Olympic projects and the variegated life and spaces on its edges. The studio-based exploration occurred over two terms, and students from diverse professional and cultural backgrounds worked together in small groups, each group having been allocated one of six sites adjacent to the Olympic site.

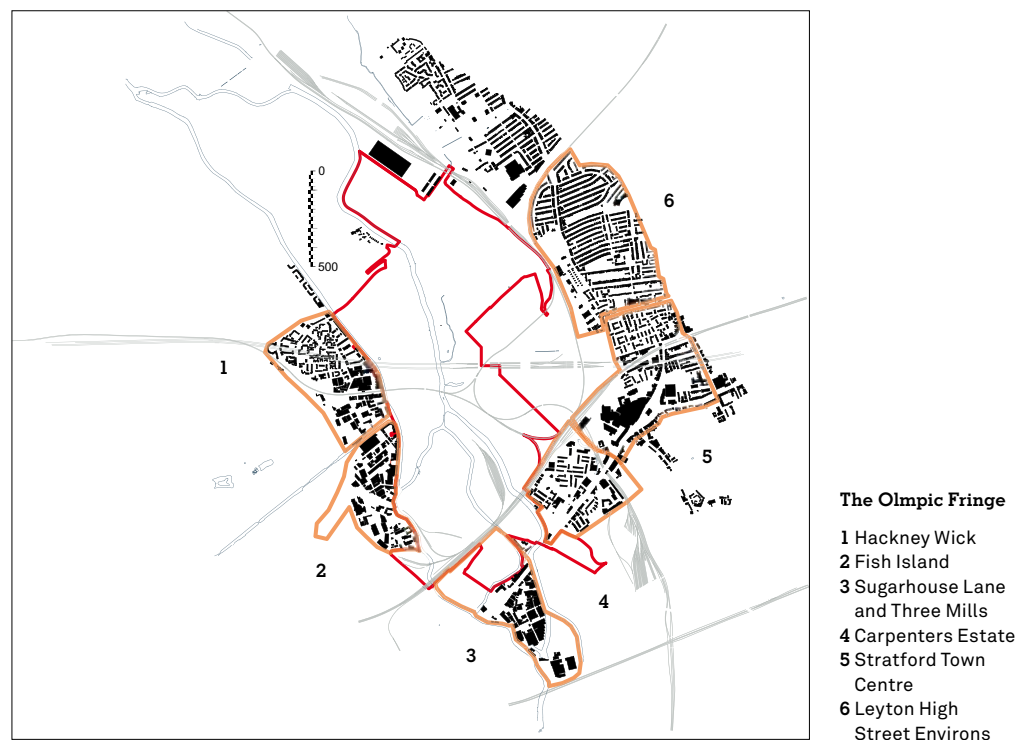
As an entry point to the social and spatial complexity of each of the fringe sites, students were asked to interpret the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) for their area, interrogating both the substantive findings and the methods used to represent these places. At the same time, they were encouraged to find other ways of looking at the site, including archival research and in situ observations.

From the varied perspective of different lenses, students began to establish the role of the site, drawing on the relationship to the Olympic Project, the local Indices of Deprivation, and their fine-grained knowledge of their areas. Each group adopted a strategic position, both an approach and attitude to focus their interventions.

Given the fragility of the economic climate to which urban regeneration responds with litmus accuracy, groups were asked to explore short to long-term projects and programmes. In particular students particularly emphasised what role small, local projects and initiatives might have in the growth and change of the Olympic Fringe sites.

Studio interpretation

Over the six proceeding sections, the reader will be exposed to six Olympic Fringe interventions, each with a particular emphasis on the spatial and social approaches to urban growth and change.



1 Stitch the Wick, Hackney Wick:

explores how to engage with existing residents and workers and a with a process of change through a sequence of interventions with different impacts and durations.

2 Urban Ecotones, Fish Island:

where the ecotone acts as a transition zone between industrial activity and residential growth.

- 3 Urban Archipelago, Sugarhouse Lane:
explores how to retain the particularity of urban pockets,
alongside connections between the pockets.
- 4 Common Ground, Carpenter's Estate:
focuses on the range of public spaces required to
support dense development.
- 5 Partial Policy Vacuum, Stratford Town Centre:
is an explicit commitment to local, small scale
entrepreneurial spaces and activities.
- 6 Urban Co-production, Leyton:
recognises the urban potential of the rhythms and roles
of ordinary people in their daily life.

On reviewing these studio explorations three definitive aspects run through the diverse projects. First, there is an explicit emphasis on immersing oneself in the site, a process of acquiring knowledge through walking, talking to people and observing the rhythms of daily life. This method, traditionally closer to the disciplines of sociology and anthropology as opposed to architecture and planning, has generated a regard for finer-grained, if more variegated, understandings of people and place. Second, the creative and interpretive possibilities of mixing methods, lenses, data sets, and perspectives, have directly influenced the acts of design and intervention. The projects reflect a range of different modes of drawing, from loose sketches to photographs, to tables, to precise computer renderings. The translation into intervention has allowed for a more expansive understanding of design; processes of communicating analysis, qualifying a brief, and selecting a direction for action all become part of purposeful imagination and evocative proposition. Finally, in recognising the value of what and who is already in place, the projects suggest a shift away from highly detailed, comprehensive masterplans, into the looser terrain of suggestive spatial frameworks and socially activated programmes. With the design of more pro-visional conclusions, the challenge is how to provide sufficient direction to engage those across the spectrum of users, designers, policy makers, developers, and managers.