

Richard Brown

...London



1 Work-live unit in Fish Island (2014)

While the Olympic Park itself may be considered to be a cultural void, reliant on from-scratch placemaking, the adjacent territories of Hackney Wick and Fish Island (HWFI) are already place-made, culturally rich and endangered.

The creative community of HWFI is facing a series of material, social and economic changes during this post-Olympic legacy period that parts of London are experiencing. To sustain the distinctive culture of a place such as HWFI, in planning and development terms, there are many implications.

Culture in HWFI is grown bottom-up, between landowners,

tenants and residents, as opposed to the top-down processes proposed within the Olympic Park itself. Complex history and incremental cultural growth have made HWFI a neighbourhood typified by perceived illegitimacy, informality and dysfunction. Its identity might best be defined by affordable workspace, live/work typologies, and a material landscape of post-industrial decline.

Three major conditions with implications for the critically needed cultural conservation could perhaps be boiled down to the following categories: cheapness, clandestinity and



2 Roofs of various warehouses around Hackney Wick station

dirt. These implications are a challenge for both developers and the local authority: currently the LLDC are drafting the all-encompassing strategic policies for the entire legacy area, known as the local plan. The local plan recognises and means to support 'cultural and creative industry' and 'community'. The LLDC's local plan poses six strategic policies in and around the park, spanning business and economics, to infrastructure, housing and the natural environment.¹

However these policies do not, and perhaps cannot, touch on underlying structures that define the identity of places of cultural value. Supposedly, the culture of a place, its identity and its community, is wrapped up within some of these outlines. But these strategies are undermined by how community and cultural value incrementally appear in the city over time.

Affordability – creative workspace and low land-value industries

Low land values are perhaps the key functions in the catalytic process of grassroots development in the city as a whole.² Low rents turn the city into a level playing field where almost anyone has a chance to take on some space to live, work or to pursue one's dreams.

In HWFI it is apparent that this one-time relative affordability has attracted such a range of disciplines, industries and eccentric characters. The average £15 per square foot industrial unit is seen as a typology for a multitude of uses; we see collective 'unofficial live-work' units with as many as twenty people in each

[1]. We see small alternative drinks manufacturers⁴ such as Butler's Gin, Re-Juice, and Dalston Cola, manually making their latest batches of brew day and night. We also see evangelical churches side by side with a swingers' club on gritty industrial estates attracting an altogether different kind of community to congregate while enjoying the area's free parking.

This 'he who dares' attitude to grabbing affordable space to fit one's purposes, means there is both a diversity of inhabitants, but at the same time a common attitude or sense of entrepreneurship with mutual socio-cultural sensibilities.

Affordability itself has strong links and connotations with temporality, as it is the case, and is expected to be the case, that cheap rents will always become expensive rents, and it is just a matter of time until either you cannot afford it any more, or market forces bring on the advent of high-density residential development.

The awareness of the temporary state of affordability, as opposed to a fixed state, is an incentive for young enterprises to take their chances. It seems to have the effect of making young practitioners either enjoy the low rent while it lasts and make the most of it, or try hard to make their ideas succeed financially, and to then be able to take on the rent increases. Whichever way communities make their circumstances affordable, be it work-live typologies, or through charitable studio providers, it is clear that it creates time and space for innovation to exist where it did not before, and this is a critical element of HWFI culture.

But why is affordability difficult to replicate or conserve?

Although affordability (cheap rent) is and always has been a critical factor in the occurrence of grassroots culture, it is difficult to sustain or re-provide for many reasons. First, market rents drift upwards, and it is at the landlord's discretion as to what the rent increases will be. This is problematic as affordable spaces quickly bring higher demand, pushing up rents and making what may be affordable to one group an unaffordable proposition to another. This raises the second issue, which is the idea of re-provision of workspace in new-build developments. The problem with this model is that new-build developments bear an embedded build cost which existing buildings do not. Therefore, with new-builds, workspace can only be made affordable through cross subsidy, within the confines of dense residential blocks which then raises two further issues. First, the subsidised space is considered very fortunate and precious, so there are set criteria and various rules and regulations regarding its specific use. This tends to exclude much of the diverse practices we see in the existing warehouses, particularly those that are light industrial and to local authorities are not considered 'artistic' practices offering 'active frontages' creating cultural 'well-being' to citizens. Second, it rules out different types of affordable space such as live-work units, because there is no council-led policy to define their terms of use.

The blind eye – elusive management and clandestinity

The second aspect of existing HWFI culture is the surreptitious three-way relationship between residents, landlords and local authorities – the 'blind eye' cast upon one another. This goes hand in hand with methods of affordability, particularly in terms of unlawful use of space. It is important because for communities to take to an area and hit the ground running, there needs to be an 'act now, ask questions later' mentality. The elusive landlords are the most important party in this situation, as they often do not attempt to manage or police the use of their buildings beyond receiving rent. This is controversial; because the unlawful part-residential use

of industrial units for live-work practices often prices out the existing industrial businesses and eventually changes the use for good.

However, the non-regulated use of the spaces means that management is left to the various occupants of the factory complexes to work together and communicate their way around the practicalities of juxtaposed uses side by side. This is how we can see bedrooms, cabarets and workshops in such close proximity, because it is all negotiated and self-policed at the ground level between residents. This does not always work, but it does mean that residents quickly get to know one another and form communities as a necessity.

This self-management at the grass roots level is both exploitative and liberating for the tenant. The normal rules of planning in the built environment do not apply here. The creative classes take charge of how the area develops from the inside out from behind the innocuous brick walls and asbestos roofs of the labyrinth-like warehouse complexes [2]. They build rooms, knock through new windows and bring street art to the walls. The local authority does not enforce against these uses, because there are no complaints, and even if there were, they are usually too under-resourced for the task of unearthing this clandestine neighbourhood. Landlords are happy as long as there are no delays in rent payments.

This absence of authority in HWFI is crucial for creating the illusion or sense of ownership that fuels the communities' socio-cultural investment in the area. There is a critical sense that 'this is our neighbourhood' because residents have the power to rejuvenate derelict spaces.

But how can the blind-eye effect be re-provided or replicated?

It seems like a fairly simple principle, that if you give a community what it needs, then leave them to it unregulated, and do not ask questions, that this will lead to a semi-lawless (certainly in planning terms) but vibrant and culturally rich neighbourhood. The issue is that this conflicts with planning process that needs to define use programmatically and within strict use classes, which does not allow the spontaneity of incrementally grown neighbourhoods.

Dirt – built environment and identity

The dereliction and dirt of HWFI, with the addition of the informality of its numerous recent alterations, play a qualitative role in the cultural identity of the place. The spatial configurations, heritage and status of the buildings in HWFI are important for giving a sense of ownership, variation, close proximity, density and generosity.

The factory complexes here are steeped in history and innovation, being built and developed over the Victorian period at various times with various landowners and industrial uses shaping the urban fabric. This means each factory complex looks and feels completely different with seemingly arbitrary changes in height, fenestration and texture. So the communities in these buildings feel a sense of belonging and identity.

The existing building fabric provides for many liberating aspects of life in Hackney Wick. The industrial buildings are simply robust and generous, which has encouraged tenants to self-build in a largely unrestricted way. We see imaginative new uses being forged within the interiors of old warehouse sheds, ranging from towering studio blocks to circus and cabaret performance spaces. These new uses not only create new socio-economic opportunities in the city, but they also bring about a sense of ownership for its inhabitants, who have taken great pleasure in creating something valuable out of something which was previously unwanted.

While the interior of the neighbourhood undergoes

exuberant change from within, the outward-facing elevations are yet still innocuous, unassuming and derelict as seen by outsiders. They are seemingly defensive, enshrined in graffiti and street art, which are visible hints of the struggle for, or illusion of, ownership [3].

At the larger scale this theme continues, the unruly street plan of the area is informal in its layout and streetscape, there is no high street, or central avenue for its community, instead a scattering of yards, car parks and loading bays.³ It is an urban environment that works only once it has been explored. It certainly does not offer itself readily for consumption; in order to find one of the area's hidden destinations (be it a theatre or hair salon), one is forced to engage out of curiosity with its labyrinth of yards and alleyways either by trial and error, or by asking local residents for directions. As a curious incident, it is a place where disarray brings about a charm around chance discovery and memory in a decentralised and fragmented neighbourhood.

Why it is difficult to replicate or conserve or reproduce

Dysfunction and disarray are not terms that one would expect local authorities to be adopting; it is unlikely that a waste management site might be considered valuable because it keeps the area dirty [4]. Instead, policy refers to 'integration' and 'connectivity', so we see new-build developments use the typical courtyard block in favour of efficiency and density. Replication of the tight and juxtaposed adjacencies as seen in



3 Entrance to studio complex (2011)



4 Waste Management Site in Hackney Wick (2013)

HWFI, might pose considerable issues around overlooking and means of escape. However, the main problem with the idea of conserving a cityscape of contradictions is that of the pressures of sales values: any new development will inevitably be justified by the potential market value of residential units. The reality is that the current and forthcoming developments are simply not for this type of community as they are exclusive to those who can afford to buy.

There is no allowance for ideas around grit and crudeness, because developers are focused on another kind of housing consumer: the buy to let, or the foreign investor, or the city-working professional. There are already instances of this kind of development which tends to sit as large fortress-like private residential block, whose inhabitants access through private gates and do not engage with, or contribute culturally to the area. Instead these owner-occupiers are more concerned with the current value of their assets. They do not need the illusion or sense of ownership, instead they *have* ownership.

Retention of existing buildings is a clear way to retain these qualities of informality and diversity of activity in a neighbourhood. However, the pressure for housing development and the lack of protection for industrial buildings and their uses means that much of this distinctive, gloriously dysfunctional cityscape is at risk.

The potential role of the grass-roots community during the legacy

Despite these implications being evidently complex, they do serve to illustrate the capacity of grass-roots communities to shape places of value. If their ability to place-make is driven by a *sense* or *illusion* of ownership, can this not be supported by local authorities encouraging elements of *actual* ownership?

In HWFI, we are beginning to see new forms of relationships between creative/cultural communities and developers, be it via section 106 agreements or community land trusts. This empowerment of the community as stakeholders may well be the only way to retain a careful level informality and productive dysfunction, but probably not illegitimacy.

Notes

1. London Legacy Development Corporation, 'Draft Local Plan Consultation Document' (LLDC, 2013), p. 39.
2. Richard Brown, *Made in HWFI: The Live Work Collectives* (LLDC, 2012).
3. Richard Brown, *HWFI Creative Factories* (LLDC, 2013).
4. We Made That, *LLDC Local Economy Study, Part C Qualitative Research* (LLDC, 2014).

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Author's biography

Richard Brown is the founder of AffordableWick, a local research and design-based campaign for affordable workspace and sustainable communities. He has authored and supported many research reports with particular interest in Hackney Wick and Fish Island, including *HWFI Live-Work Collectives* (2013), and *HWFI Creative Factories* (2014) for the London Legacy Development Corporation.

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