

Production line: the White Building, a former factory in east London, houses an exhibition space, cafe/bar and artists' studios that are thrown open to the public. Will Pryce



## Two tales of the waterfront

Hackney Wick's offbeat White Building has all the hallmarks of a sensitive Olympic legacy, but the possible scrapping of the Lea River Park walkway suggests that petty politics not community is the driving force

Rowan Moore



**The White Building/  
Lea River Park**  
London E9

I'm looking at wool – lamb's wool from Wales – hung in billowing nets beneath the sloping ceiling of an old brick workshop, formerly a printer's works, before that a peppermint cream factory. Through the window is a view of the Dow-Chemicals-don't-mention-Bhopal wrapper going up on the Olympic Stadium. A few feet from the building, huge lumps of black and yellow steel have recently arrived, unannounced, along with military personnel, as part of the fortifications for the Olympic site. The steel looks as if it weighs more than the whole workshop.

I'm in the **White Building**, a new cultural centre that includes studios where artists work and places to exhibit and hold events. It's run by Space, which provides studios all over east London, but adds a new dimension to its work in that the public can be invited in. A residency programme and a schools programme, both sponsored by Bloomberg, will bring in international artists on the one hand, and on the other introduce children to the usually hidden world of artistic production.

It sits by a canal, on the border between the Games zone and the still-shabby hinterland of Hackney Wick, where large off-message graffiti says of the London 2012 project, "IMAGINE WAKING TOMORROW AND THIS SHIT HAD DISAPPEARED". The canal is a thing of emerald weeds and dankness, whose calm is interrupted by freight trains barrelling over a nearby bridge. In due course this spot will be a major point of entry to the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

The project is funded by the London Legacy Development Corporation,

which says it is a statement of intent about the hoped-for future direction of the Olympic legacy. It's conspicuously different from the major Olympic monuments which are mostly works of large international design practices built by the biggest contracting firms, using steel and concrete techniques that are essentially global, and which, following the guidelines of the International Olympic Committee, are only tangentially concerned with the pieces of earth they have landed on.

The White Building has been refurbished by contractors and fabricators from the immediate area, and makes spaces for many of the neighbourhood's artists. A local cafe is setting up a branch here, with an on-site brewery. It's almost agricultural, with hops as well as the wool. The building itself is the sort of place that could easily have been swept away in favour of stacks of luxury waterside urban living, which early masterplans for the Olympic site proposed should happen.

The decision to keep it asserts the value that apparently unexceptional buildings have for the area. Hackney Wick is a ragged but distinctive place, and without structures like this it would be almost nothing. The new chairman of the Legacy Corporation, Daniel Moylan, seems to have adopted the idea: "Obliteration is not a word in our lexicon," he says. Previously, in building works around here, it was,



A view along the intended route of 'the Fatwalk' connecting the Olympic site with the Thames. 5th Studio

The project's architect, David Kohn, aims to be led by the existing building rather than impose himself on it. He leaves its skinny red trusses exposed and paints the much-marked floor black. I'm invited to admire the pink tone of the concrete blockwork in the cafe/bar, and some slight details that try to create a softer atmosphere, and indeed they do this well. The most notable move turns out to be the wool. It is a practical way of insulating the roof, introduces an unexpected softness into a hard environment, and does nice things to the acoustic. Natural, simple and slightly humorous, it's the opposite of the highly processed plastic that Dow are putting around the stadium.

All of which is appropriate and admirable and definitely a good way to proceed, even if it also seems somewhat fragile next to the well-funded juggernauts of sport and shopping nearby. It makes the possible cancellation of another project in the area, which shows similar principles of making the best of what is there, dismaying and baffling.

This is the **Lea River Park**, designed by architects 5th Studio, a project that will enable people to walk from the Thames to the Olympic Park. It will use bridges and other means to link various bits of open space and water into a three-mile-long linear park, called "the Fatwalk". It will create water meadows and new hills made of spoil from building the Crossrail underground line. It's a serious and obviously good idea, first proposed by Lord Abercrombie's Greater London Plan of 1944. It will connect places up. It will create new open space in an area that badly needs it. It will add value to new developments.

It will help make sense of one of the mayor of London's favourite projects, the cross-Thames cable car known as the Emirates Air Line, as it will continue its path of movement northwards. It has been designed, consulted upon and granted permission, and contracts have been signed and land acquired. It was part of "London's Great Outdoors", which is "the Mayor's ambitious programme to transform the public places we live in". A few million in

public money and five years of work have been spent getting it this far.

Yet it's in danger of foundering for the boring technical reason that responsibility for it has been transferred from the wound-down London Thames Gateway Development Corporation to the Greater London Authority, and that the latter's support is now needed to complete legal work, which for some reason they don't seem particularly keen to give. In which case the whole project will unravel, collapse and be impossible to resuscitate. Nothing similar will be attempted in the foreseeable future.

Perhaps this risk of foundering is to do with some petty turf war, because its new proprietors don't feel the Lea River Park is their project. Perhaps the mayor would rather put his energies into another eye-catching, sponsor-

friendly, not particularly useful idea, such as the Orbit or the Air Line.

Whatever is true, none of these would be good enough reasons for the waste of money and effort in abandoning something of direct benefit to the impoverished districts whose betterment is so often invoked as the reason for holding the Olympics. It would also make the good intentions of the White Building seem tokenistic in the extreme – as if no one in authority really did much care what happened to the battered places around the shiny Olympic Park.

Online



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