

Olympic billions turn junkyard into meadows

But the full benefits won't be felt for years

James S Russell

CAN SEE a bit of the London Olympic Stadium as traffic roars next to me along the busy Stratford High Street. I'm in a neighbourhood that is supposed to benefit from London's R120bn investment in the Games, which open on July 27. It has a way to go.

London hasn't built a showy assortment of stadiums and arenas. It has created "a piece of city" on the 80 hectare main games site, according to Richard Burdett, a former adviser to the Olympic Delivery Authority that directs the London School of Economics' Cities programme.

Organisers targeted London's games investment to unleash a wave of growth in largely poor, isolated east London neighbourhoods.

The London Legacy Development Corporation takes charge when the Games end. For all the cash, success is hardly assured.

I learn that on my walk along the busy street with Jamie Hodge, the communications manager of the Stratford Renaissance Partnership.

Amid worn social housing towers and empty storefronts, you can already see new residential developments that offer views to what will become the lush meadows and waterways of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

Developers are also drawn by transportation investments that now bring nine tube and regional-rail lines to the Olympic park's main entrance at Stratford.

Trains whisk people from central London's St Pancras station in less than 10 minutes.

Unfortunately, spectators will first encounter the needlessly fortress-like Westfield Stratford City mall. It won't be easy to get them to venture into the neighbourhood.

A nearby 10.5ha site covered with derelict industrial buildings has greater revitalising potential.

LandProp, an investment arm of the Ikea home-furnishings chain, has begun renovating historic buildings for housing and commercial space designed to attract tech firms

and designers. The Copenhagen urban designer Jan Gehl, known for helping to make New York City streets friendly to pedestrians, is a consultant.

Hodge guides me along winding streets to a 1776 mill driven by the tidal waters of Bow Creek and a restored peaked-roof early 19th-century distillery.

This part of London cradled the industrial revolution and industry has shaped the area ever since.

To prepare the site, organisers dismantled an enormous rail yard, removed piles of spare tyres and cleaned polluted soils (where an unexploded bomb from World War II was found).

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Of capital investment will serve subsequent uses, the Olympic Delivery Authority estimates.

A portion of the future park has been prepared for the Games. It could be as alluring as any in London's impressive portfolio.

Landscape architect George Hargreaves has brought meadows, lines of low forest and water-loving shrubs right to the edge of the Lea River and tributary waterways that lace the park.

After the Games, the permanent venues will remain as landmarks amid greenery while bands of new commercial and residential development will extend like fingers into the park from surrounding neighbourhoods.

I don't see the drooping tubular-steel ArcelorMittal Orbit by Anish Kapoor becoming the hoped-for visitor magnet.

The Olympic Delivery Authority estimates that 75 percent of its capital investment will serve subsequent uses.

A walk through Fish Island and Hackney Wick, neighbourhoods just to the west of the games site, offer a glimmer of the future.

Brick industrial buildings are getting makeovers for clubs and artists' studios.

Trees gracefully overhang a peaceful biking and walking trail along a canal that edges the Games site. It had long been an industrial sewer. The Olympics makeover will extend the publicly accessible waterways to six kilometres.

The canals and railway lines will be spanned by some 30 new bike and vehicular bridges. They will link the neighbourhoods to development sites, one of which is the massive Olympics broadcast centre. It may house studios or tech startups.

The organisers prepared 80ha for private development, which makes me wonder if it will become a chic realm unto itself (like the massive mall), rather than spurring growth beyond the site.

I visit a commercial street in Leyton, historically short of good jobs, where storefront signs hawk goods in a dizzying variety of scripts and languages.

A couple of cross streets lead toward the 2 800 apartments of the athletes' village.

The development is supposed to link Leyton to the luscious parklands, but the mediocre apartment building design and ennui-inducing streetscape is not the way to lure locals, nor draw a projected total of nine million annual visitors.

While Hodge spoke of promised additional investments in education and social services, those may be hard to maintain with Britain's economy still strapped.

Success can't fairly be measured for years, Burdett told me.

Many will be watching. Urban revitalisation on this scale and with this cash is all but unknown.

James S Russell writes on architecture for Muse, the arts and culture section of Bloomberg News. He is the author of *The Agile City*. The opinions expressed are his own.



The skyline of Stratford in east London, bordering the Games sites. The social housing high rise in the centre is joined by new speculative development that will open after the event and improve transportation connections.



A view of a commercial street in east London's Leyton neighbourhood, also bordering the Olympics sites. Planners have added streets across once derelict rail yards to reduce the isolation of jobs-poor Leyton and enhance access to employment at new commercial developments.