

# A Critical Exploration of the London Olympic Park, Part One

Written by Pip Thornton

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PIP THORNTON, APR 8 2014

*“He has adopted the neighbourhood as a site for exercises in psychic landscaping, drifting and free association...”* Patrick Keiller, London (British Film Institute : 1994)

In March 2014 MSc students from Royal Holloway’s Geopolitics and Security program joined forces with Urban GIS students from the University of Cergy-Pontoise, Paris on an exercise in critical security mapping which imagined the RHUL campus as the site of an upcoming G8(7) summit.

Part of the plan for the three-day project was a visit to the London 2012 Olympic Park in Stratford, East London to get an idea of the practicalities and problems of hosting mega-events in built up areas. Having worked on the securities and vulnerabilities of the site in a former life, I was happy to be able to devise a route for a guided walk around the Park, but whilst meandering and reminiscing through and around the many physical, cultural and political layers of the East London landscape I found myself drifting...

The result: an alternative, but perhaps liberating narrative of security; a narrative which permeates the layers, exposes the ironies, questions the ubiquity and enriches the understanding of traditional sociological and cartographic representations of space. Part Ian Sinclair, part Adam Dant, but mostly (and affectionately) Patrick Keiller’s Robinson; my narrative is derivative certainly, but I hope unique in its own way and of its own time, and reflective of the alternative visualisations and expressions made possible by a critical and creative analysis of security.

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Jubilee Line Waterloo to Stratford : Exit top right. To our front is the old Stratford Shopping Centre – by day a downmarket sixties mall with its own indoor fruit, veg, knock-off clothes and electricals markets which service the majority of Newham’s ethnically diverse population. By night the mall is an unofficial dormitory for the homeless. Stratford is also home to the Theatre Royal, famous for Joan Littlewood’s 1960s production of ‘Oh What a Lovely War’, which has been revived for the centenary of the First World War and is currently showing at the theatre in Stratford’s Cultural Quarter. Littlewood was once banned by the BBC for her communist leanings, and spent much of her life under government surveillance.

Turn around and behind us –with a brand new postcode- is the new temple of consumerism: Europe’s largest urban shopping centre, Westfield Stratford City, with its casino, hotels, cinemas and galleries; a city within a city, accessed by a drawbridge style walkway over the multiple railway tracks which make Stratford one of the busiest and far reaching transport hubs in London. In the distance Canary Wharf keeps a watchful eye on its profits, while the ‘Stratford Eye’ tower block surveys us from Angel Lane. Walking through The Street, signposts point us towards the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. Once the main pedestrian route from the Tube to the Olympic Park during the Games, ‘The Street’, on busy days and sunny ones, continues to provide its retail units with the perfect bottleneck.

Into the Park. The Aquatics Centre – its wings now clipped – opened to the public last week. Tom Daley trains here,

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apparently. The Olympic Stadium too seems far less imposing now its top level structure has been taken off ready for redevelopment for athletics and West Ham Football Club. There have been lengthy and expensive battles in court over the future usage of the Stadium; critics of West Ham's tenancy fearing the Premier League side's move to a site a mile away from the home of League One side Leyton Orient will spell the end for the less affluent club. Note the waterways flowing under and around the walkways. This is where David Beckham alighted with the Olympic flame. Many of the waterways which run through the Park were diverted from the River Lee centuries ago to power now obsolete or demolished grain, gunpowder and hops mills. The lower reaches of the Aquatics Centre are stepped, grassed over and house bird boxes.

Ongoing building works mean a detour out towards Stratford High Street with its 40 metre tall Olympic Torch. To our left is the Carpenters Estate, an area of factory and mill workers housing which suffered extensive bomb damage during World War Two. Until recently the estate had been earmarked for demolition to make way for development by UCL, one of the world's most prestigious universities, who planned to build a new Centre for Culture and Heritage on the site. Much of the housing estate is now boarded up, having been run down gradually by Newham Council, who had attempted the compulsory purchase of the land, although a handful of residents still refuse to leave. The upper floors of the three residential tower blocks on the Carpenters Estate were taken over by broadcasting companies during the Games; the roofs already occupied by military snipers. Formerly a technical college and then a Polytechnic, The University of East London, which has been based in Stratford since 1892, recently opened a new campus around the corner.

Stratford High Street marks the start of the A11, one of the main arterial routes into London, and is known progressively as Bow Road, Mile End Road and Whitechapel Road before it gives up in a deadly tangle at Aldgate. This Cycle Super highway is one of the most dangerous stretches of road in London for cyclists. On the opening night of the Olympics, 182 cyclists were arrested here by the Metropolitan Police protecting the controversial Olympic Route Network which had segregated many of London's roads to facilitate the movement of athletes and VIPs. Part of the Critical Mass protest movement, only 3 of those arrested that night were charged. Despite promises from the London Legacy Development Corporation, cycle routes inside and outside the Park have been heavily criticised – some being accessible only by steps or paved with cobbles.

A cut through behind the Porsche dealership: the detritus of street robberies and drug deals rewarded with a glimpse of Abbey Mills sewage pumping station; the most beautiful building in London. Capital Towers, a new block of flats in the area, has been marketed solely to foreign investors. The area around Pudding Mill Lane DLR station is still under construction as part of the Crossrail project which will connect East London with Heathrow Airport in the West. Hidden behind the construction traffic is the ViewTube, a community based café and educational centre built from shipping containers which provides cheap bicycle hire and a much needed break...

*Read part two of this post here*

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## About the author:

**Pip Thornton** is a PhD student in Geopolitics & Cybersecurity at Royal Holloway. Her research interests are in representations, perceptions and constructions of the figure of the soldier in geopolitical and cyber spaces. She is a former police officer, reservist soldier, and poetry editor for *The Next Review*.