

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Naturally There Has Been a Backlash

Doug Gillen · Wednesday, February 17th, 2016

“How are you finding the area?” a wolf asks me as he pokes his head through my bedroom door. All I can muster is a mumbled combination of affirmative words tied into a simple grunt. My generally enthusiastic and positive demeanor has taken a back seat for this encounter, this is not the first wolf with an interest in the house of sticks in which I currently reside. With an asking price of £500,000 my modest income leaves me at the trough with the rest of the little piggies while the wolves prepare for bacon.

Overlooking the newly constructed Olympic stadium, my landlord bought the two- bed flat in Hackney Wick, East London, back in 2008 for a cool £200,000, his decision to sell eight years later is clearly a calculated one. This former graveyard of abandoned warehouse space is now, stop me if you’ve heard this one before, fiercely “up-and-coming.”

It seemed the Second World War and a wave of international outsourcing proved too much and this once vibrant network of factories and production mills became neglected. This hollowed out carcass, repulsive to the majority, was a rare opportunity for affordable live-in studio space in what would, arguably, grow to form Europe’s largest creative community. Naturally carrying with it all the textbooks signifiers of such an area: artists and musician studios, pop-up events, coffee shops, 4 day parties and every square inch of wall space covered in art.

In 2005, London won the bid to host the 2012 Olympics and the east end was never to be the same again.



Fireworks at Olympic stadium and The Orbit during London Olympics opening ceremony (2012-07-27). Used from Wikimedia Commons.

Geographically “the east” is any easterly point beyond the boundary of the old city of London. Cross a single road and 50-story glass monsters are replaced with old brick buildings, fallen textile factories and bustling markets. The close proximity of these two worlds has sealed the fate for cultural Spitalfields, Brick Lane and Shoreditch.

The former fruit and veg market of 18th century, Old Spitalfields is now home to a growing number of high-end eateries, wine bars and clothing stores. Brick Lane, a mile-long stretch of narrow road that carries evidence of revolutions, World Wars and more murder than most would care to imagine, sits right at the heart of this cultural melting pot. The UK’s oldest ethnic supermarket, Bangladeshi barbers, hipster barbers, neon signs, food stalls, vintage stores, independent fashion designers and about 50 various curry houses all hand in hand and all under threat.



Old Spitalfields. from Wikipedia

One of Brick Lane's offshoots, Sclater St, is one of many hubs for Sunday trading. Dating back to the 19th century the market formerly specialized in the trade of exotic birds and animals. Parrots and parakeets imported from faraway lands were marvels to be witnessed. Indeed the illicit reputation of the market runs deep, sales of lion and tiger cubs are rumored to have taken place on this very cobbled street. In recent years, however, you'd be more likely to spend the morning buying back the bike an aspiring entrepreneur had stolen off you a few days prior. The area's character as present as ever.

The market space today is an investment Mecca for foreign money. Replacing the center of the market, a 30-story complex of luxury flats is currently well under construction. Bookending the far side of the street, proposals are in place to create six more similar 17- to 38-story complexes in a project known as the Bishopsgate Goodsynd. Physically and socially this landscape will soon become unrecognizable.

Naturally there has been a backlash. Community members from all backgrounds, creeds and ages have banded together to make their voices heard. In summer of 2015, Hackney mayor Jules Pipe announced that he feared for the future of the area. Unfortunately, it would seem his fears came much too late. The Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, a true wolf in sheep's clothing, has on more than one occasion removed all planning powers from the locally elected council members and placed it into the hands of his friends in Cityhall. The London Fruit & Wool Exchange, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital for Children, the Bishopsgate Goodsynd and more recently the historical site of Norton Folgate have all been victims of this new wave of "regeneration."

In the last eight years more than 50% of London's late-night venues have closed, several institutions, such as the world-renowned Fabric nightclub, face an endless stream of scrutiny from local councils to have their licenses revoked. Late-night ketamine and disco fuelled debauchery of gay bars such as the Joiners' Arms and the George & Dragon are today hoarding protected sites of "up-scale cool living."

Of course this culture versus commerce battle is nothing new. In the '60s it was King's Road in Chelsea, which in turn became Carnaby St, then through to Camden in the '80s. The notion of change is the one certainty you expect from a city, but what's happening in London today is far more than natural progression. The scale of today's change is the result of several different factors, one of which dates back to the 1980s.

One year into her first term in 1980, former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher unveiled one of the most divisive pieces of legislation to ever hit the UK's housing market. The "Right-to-Buy" scheme would allow socially housed tenants the opportunity to buy their property back off the government at a heavily discounted rate. The only precondition being that they had to have lived in that property for at least three years.

For the tenants this was a once in a lifetime offer to, in the words of Thatcher herself, "turn their house into a home." By 1982 more than 400,000 people had bought their council homes (mainly flats) in the UK in what was regarded as the biggest ever transfer of state assets into the hands of the private sector.

The idea was sold to the public with the understanding that all offset flats and houses would be rebuilt in order to accommodate the large numbers of those not fortunate enough to be able to seize the opportunity. Promises were not fulfilled, annual targets became nothing more than a token gesture and the UK's social housing has been in decline ever since.

With one in four children living on the street and one in two living below the poverty line, Tower Hamlets, the borough hosting Brick Lane, Bethnal Green and half of Hackney Wick, is currently the third poorest in London. Previously state owned property is rapidly falling into the hands of foreign investment. In turn allowing those pesky low-income families hogging up premium real estate to be swept under the rug and forced out once again, in some cases out of London all

together.

Another major contributor to this perfect storm of change comes in the shape of £27 billion (and counting) rail service Crossrail. Extending the reach for the London commuter, this new 118km network will radically change the shape of Greater London when it fully opens in 2019. Areas previously out of reach for the average daily work trip are set to become more accessible than ever. Areas of the greater city once over-looked are now seeing their value skyrocket.



The River Lea in Hackney Wick. from Wikipedia

Today in Hackney Wick studio space is more expensive than ever and long-term contracts are a search for a needle in a haystack, an air of uncertainty is present among the local artists in residence. The post-Olympic surge in allure means even the formally affordable commune living of warehouse spaces are out of control. One space consisting of upwards of twenty bedrooms can be charging over £600 a month in rent alone. This ranges from space to space but with many now living on a monthly rolling contract it seems the fate is sealed for this lifestyle, not only in Hackney Wick but for much of the city.

Behind much of the area's regeneration is the London Legacy Corporation (LLC). Set up in 2012 to cater to the post-Olympic site of east London, their 10-year plan details the change they are pushing for in Hackney Wick and neighboring Stratford. "Transformation change" and "new economic opportunities" lie ahead for the local residents, aside from the sea of towering, Saudi-funded housing blocks, a new University Campus and a sister to the V&A Museum are to be built, which will open up a wave of new jobs in the area. For the artists, however, the term "affordable" is a much overused and a rarely defined term. Already stretched to the limit, the once bohemian lifestyle is making way for the established and the fortunate.

Centuries of immigration and cultural influence carry a weight of authenticity that cannot be replaced by cheap imitations. This process of gentrification exists today not just in the east end but all over London, the natural evolution of change is now flat-packed and ready to spring into life with the first whiff of a Dirty Burger and pop-up event space. Throw in a global sporting event and you can create enough of an impact to reinvent the fundamental character of an area. As one door closes another opens and for many this will simply be the start of their journey with the east end and for those now moving out a new journey awaits

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