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COMMUNITY-LED URBANISM



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East London: old meets new in Hackney Wick – a view across Hackney Wick and Fish Island area

The Hackney Wick Model

Tom Kihl and William Chamberlain describe the ground-breaking approach which has established a new blueprint for creative-led regeneration

Back in 2005 when London won its bid to host the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the artist community based in Hackney Wick and Fish Island feared the worst. Promises of a vast, decades-long regeneration project on their doorstep looked certain to result in the usual urban displacement storyline. Their beloved and highly functional live-work warehouses seemed condemned, to be razed in favour of expensive luxury apartments; another delicate creative ecosystem broken up and moved on, just as it had been in nearby Shoreditch and countless other artist-friendly enclaves the world over.

Yet the story hasn't played out that way. Instead, a cluster of socially-minded community interest companies, trusts, purpose-driven for-profit entities,

and an indefatigable activist community inserted themselves into the narrative, working together towards a single shared goal: a permanent, sustainable, creative economy in Hackney Wick and Fish Island.

Context

The meeting of waterways (the navigable River Lea and the Hertford Union Canal) along with the arrival of the railways saw this part of East London become a centre of heavy industry from the mid-19th century, with extensive factories, warehouses and yards. The area is significant in industrial history – both petrol and plastic were invented in Hackney Wick. Eugene Carless pioneered the production of highly refined petrol in the UK at

his factory in Hackney Wick and is credited with introducing the term petrol, whilst Alexander Parkes developed the first man-made plastic at his Parkesine Works on Wallis Road in 1868. While the Olympic masterplan saw the neighbouring post-industrial land adjacent to Stratford swallowed up into the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, Hackney Wick and Fish Island were earmarked for the phased delivery of thousands of new homes.

Legacy was the key objective of the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) which had the primary planning powers. With four different London boroughs falling within the Park boundaries, and the Olympic Bid promise that the communities surrounding the Park would benefit from the Games, there was always the potential for innovation

within the usual development processes. Yet the financial realities of the property market still exert their muscle on any situation – no matter the possibilities, or the best intentions.

So how did Hackney Wick manage to preserve its artistic community in the face of such a major regeneration project, and ensure it continues to thrive into the future? And could the methodology be a blueprint for other areas looking to achieve a creative-led regeneration success story of their own?

The Hackney Wick Model that has emerged is based on three areas of strategic focus: connection, communication and community ownership.

Connection

The connection aspect is the focus for the monthly Cultural Interest Group (CIG) meeting. This is an open-to-all gathering, now in its 16th year, which brings stakeholders of all sizes together in the same room. The aim is to build a strong network of personal relationships whilst connecting and informing the local creative sector and encouraging collaborative working. The shared vision is to demonstrate that supporting creativity makes places better simply by increasing levels of community cohesion and resilience. The CIG is a trusted local network that offers free, open and equal access to all local residents, businesses, artists, entrepreneurs, cultural and education institutions, local authority elected councillors and officers, as well as the development sector. Through persistent advocacy by the CIG over many years, the area achieved recognition by the Mayor of London as one of the capital's first official Creative Enterprise Zones.



The Cultural Interest Group meetings are an opportunity for those working and living in the area to connect

Communication

In today's attention economy, local forms of communication need to find ways to cut through the global noise of continuous digital media. The original local *Wick* newspaper was first published as an annual activist title in 2011 and called for an innovative solution to the usual cycle of displacement and gentrification. Revitalised in 2020 as a joint venture between Creative Wick (the community interest company behind the CIG meetings) and The Loco (a specialist hyper-local media publisher), *The Wick* was re-established as a quarterly print newspaper and a weekly email newsletter. The print edition is stocked in over 200 local businesses, doctor surgeries, community hubs and more. It is supported by advertising and sponsorship, and is therefore available free to the whole community, and is often praised for being a welcome break from phone-based content.

The Wick's weekly email newsletter provides a platform for local businesses to promote themselves to over 8,000 contacts every week. It is a guide to what's on as well as information on the latest grants, jobs, training initiatives



The Wick newspaper has been re-established as a quarterly print newspaper available free to the whole community



The Community Development Trust is running an innovative circular economy hub called The Loop at the Wallis Road site as a meanwhile use on a peppercorn rent, pending its redevelopment.

The area achieved recognition by the Mayor of London as one of the capital's first official Creative Enterprise Zones

and other support available, and helps to keep money circulating locally by giving a platform to smaller independent businesses.

Community ownership

Community ownership is the vital third element of the Hackney Wick Model, as pioneered by the Hackney Wick and Fish Island Community Development Trust (CDT). Through the strong, long-term relationships forged at the CIG meetings, a series of innovative partnerships with

developers see buildings transferred into the stewardship of the CDT, either for meanwhile use, or ideally, through offering long leases at peppercorn rents.

This community asset transfer locks in key buildings and spaces for community benefit, ensuring secure, long-term affordability for their creative use. This proactive approach gives the community a direct stake in the area's future, preventing displacement due to unchecked market forces.

The CDT have worked with Halcyon Development Partners on a warehouse site earmarked for the development of Hackney's first co-living building. The CDT established a circular economy hub, known as The Loop, on the site to test and demonstrate what can be achieved. The hub is currently home to 17 businesses, ranging from plastics recycling educators Are You Mad, to a fermentation factory run by local zero-waste restaurant Silo. With the support of the CDT, Halcyon's redevelopment proposal for the site was unanimously granted planning permission early this year. The CDT and Halcyon were able to announce a groundbreaking partnership to deliver affordable ground floor workspace units under a 99-year lease, guaranteeing workspace for circular economy ventures and other creative entrepreneurs for generations to come.

Partnerships

The power of the monthly CIG meetings and *The Wick* media platform to showcase best practice can also be seen in the successful Community Investment Programme, launched by Infinite Partners as part of their planning application to build a 101-room boutique hotel. By engaging with local groups, including Hackney Wick Football Club, the community was offered genuine

early engagement and participation in decision-making on the project, as well as agreeing public access to the building. This level of engagement provided the basis for unanimous approval of the application at committee. This community-led approach not only benefits the community, but it also reduces the developer's risk, saving time and money to allow the developer to give back in return for planning certainty.

These partnerships respect the significant cultural and economic value that existing communities bring to their areas, acknowledging that regeneration should not mean total reinvention. The raw creativity of Hackney Wick's street art scene is regularly used as a selling point in the marketing materials for new residential developments, so it makes sense to these more visionary developers to take measures to protect it. These partnerships do not solve everything. They require a long-term open dialogue, mutual respect, and a willingness from both sides to understand each other's needs and constraints. Many promises of affordable workspace in early proposals have not aligned with the financial realities of artists operating in London. But, as the CDT partnerships are beginning to demonstrate, a transfer of assets may well be the best route to the vibrant mixed use neighbourhoods that are most desired.

Community asset transfers like those achieved in Hackney Wick offer a promising blueprint for other locations grappling with similar issues. Innovative partnerships that simply recognise the intrinsic value of existing creative communities are a good start. The Hackney Wick Model is gaining traction because it offers a long-term pathway towards success. It creates a space for genuine relationship building via the CIG, and holds stakeholders account, ensuring they honour the



The partnership between Halcyon and the Community Development Trust will deliver long-term affordable workspace as part of the proposed Wallis Road development. Copyright Halcyon/ Morris & Company



A community event in the meanwhile space used by the CDT, pending the redevelopment of the Wallis Road site

promises made. It also actively builds the asset ecosystem for the community rather than seeing it lost in the name of progress and short-sighted profiteering. It is a work in progress, still fraught with significant challenges, but an optimistic example of thinking, doing and planning differently. ●

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