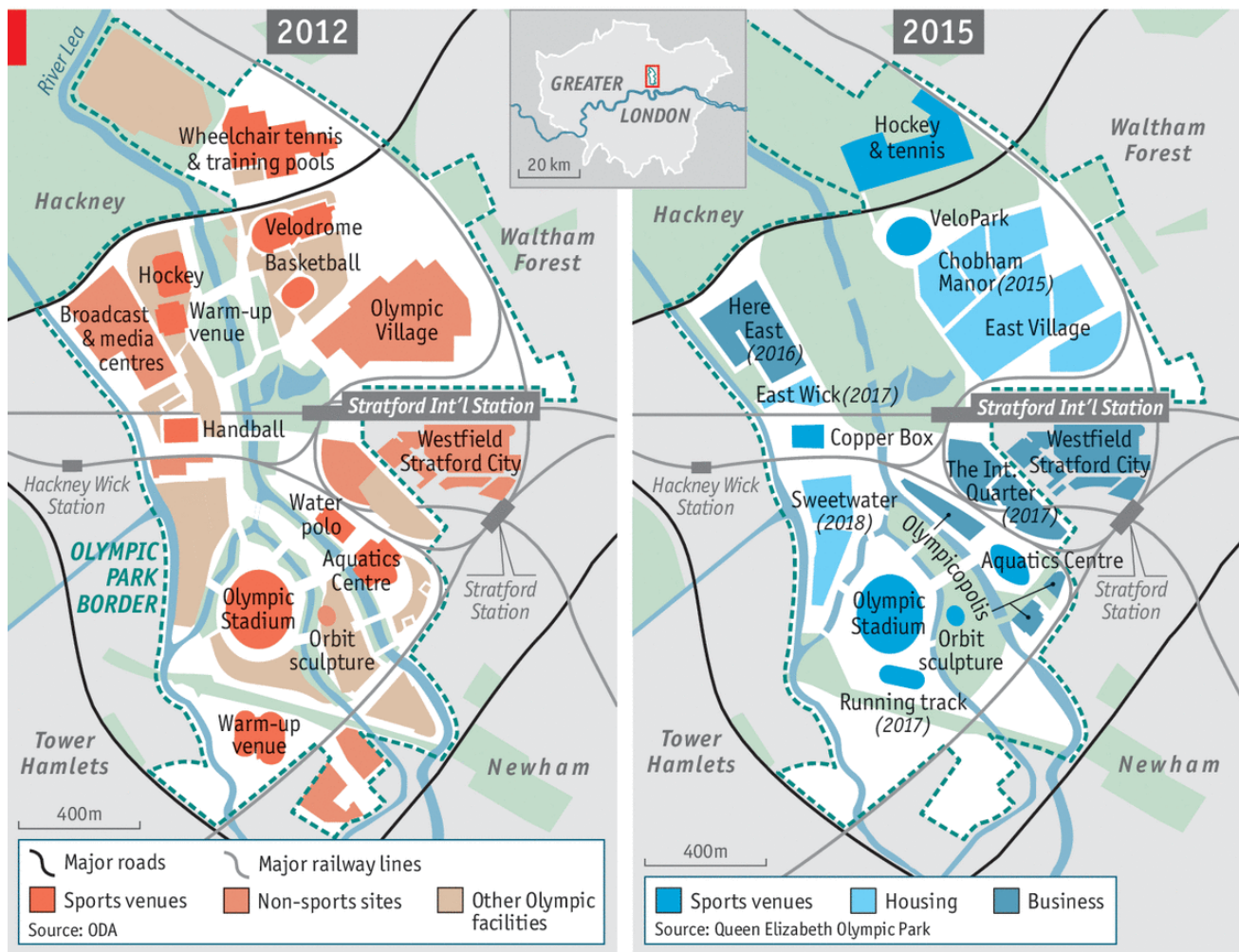


What have the Olympics done for east London?

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THREE years ago London held a huge party. From July 27th to September 9th 2012 the Olympic and then the Paralympic games took place in a brand new park in the East End. Despite the fears of many sceptics—including this newspaper—the transport system did not collapse under the influx of spectators. Even the weather was unusually bright. The events, boasted David Cameron, the prime minister, “demonstrated that you should never ever count Team GB down and out”.

Compared with previous Olympic games in Athens and Montreal, where budgets overran wildly and stadiums were left to fester afterwards, the events in London were

a success. Although the final budget, at £9.3 billion (\$14.5 billion), was more than double the original bid, the building works were finished on time and just about within the revised budget. But aside from being a tremendous spectacle—the opening and closing ceremonies included J.K. Rowling, The Who and hundreds of dancing nurses—the Olympics were meant to boost sport and to transform part of London.

The first aim has not been achieved: according to Sport England, a quango, the number of Britons exerting themselves at least once a week fell by 200,000 between 2012 and 2014. Partly this is down to government cuts to sports centres and the like. The second aim is more realistic. The Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, as it is now known, has been repurposed, with further plans in the works (see maps).

The site of the park was once full of industrial sheds; much of the land was pockmarked by pylons, discarded fridges and burnt-out cars. Now 2,800 flats, formerly housing the Olympic athletes, stand at the edge of Stratford International station. Another 7,000 or so will be built at the park over the next two decades, and many more nearby. Next year West Ham United, a local football team, will move into the Olympic Stadium, and what used to be the media centre will re-open as “Here East”, a tech-startup hub. Two new office blocks will be finished in 2017. The following year several museums, including America’s Smithsonian Institution, will move into a new “Olympicopolis” part of the site, along with University College London and the London College of Fashion.

With London’s extraordinary growth, the area would have been developed eventually in a piecemeal way, Olympics or not. Many of the site’s transport links, including the Jubilee Tube line and London City Airport, were already in place; Westfield, a large shopping mall, had put in a planning application before the Olympic bid. But the games sped the development up and gave “an oomph, a wow factor”, says Sir Robin Wales, the mayor of Newham, one of the boroughs at the edge of the park.

In the East Village, the first few blocks of flats, gleaming streets with bright names such as Sunrise Close and Cheering Lane are starting to feel less empty. On a weekday afternoon, two boys play football in a square; at a restaurant nearby, mothers sit with their children. When people first started to move in it felt like a “ghost town”, says Anna, who is staying in her friend’s apartment. Now cafés and a few shops have opened, she says, and it is busier.

The additional housing is needed in east London: Newham and Tower Hamlets, a borough to the park’s south-west, have seen the fastest population growth in the city, rising by 39% and 45% between 2001 and 2015. Both are also among the poorest local authorities in the country.

But the way the housing has been developed has annoyed politicians in the area. Rushanara Ali, the Labour MP for Bethnal Green and Bow, points out that the waiting list for social housing in Tower Hamlets is 22,000 long. Although the East Village is split equally between social and private housing, the other developments are mainly private: in Chobham Manor, a cluster of three-bedroom family houses, only 28% of homes will be “affordable”. And as the government’s definition of affordable has risen to 80% of the market rent, few locals will be able to stump up the cash. Earlier plans for the site included far more densely packed housing, says Juliet Davis of Cardiff University. In theory, some 2,000 more homes could have been built on the park, she thinks.

The games did provide a boost for local jobs, if mostly temporary ones, according to Helen Seraphin at Workplace, a job centre funded by Newham Council. But not all boroughs felt the same effects. “There has been no notable related legacy in terms of jobs,” says Ms Ali. Although the unemployment rate has fallen in both boroughs, from about 13% in 2012 to 9% now, it is still higher than London’s as a whole.

At the finish line

Without the games, the development would have been much slower. An immovable deadline meant politicians could not prevaricate or delay, and gave some certainty to developers. This came at a price: along with the £9 billion of public money for the games, around £250m has been pumped into renovating the stadium, and the government has pledged another £141m to the Olympicopolis. Despite the transformation of the park since 2012, the full effect of it all may still take ten or 15 years to be felt, says Bent Flyvbjerg, of the Saïd Business School at Oxford University. In the end, creating an “Olympic legacy” is still more of a marathon than a sprint.

From the print edition: Britain^[2]

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