East End divided as 'regeneration' fails to win local hearts and minds

The Games promised to change the area but some residents are still waiting, writes **Martin Fletcher**

The Olympics? "They're just a thorn in the side which we have to put up with," said an unemployed East Londoner called Michael.

In the circumstances, it was a startling statement. Michael, 60, was standing on a path along the top of the Northern Outfall Sewer, built in Victorian times to carry London's effluent away through its unlovely backyard.

A few years ago, looking north, he would have surveyed 500 acres of industrial dereliction — disused factories, scrapyards, fridge mountains, polluted waterways and marshland.

Today the 2012 Olympic Park rises spectacularly from that old dumping ground — the coroneted Olympic Stadium, a 377 ft viewing tower that is Britain's tallest sculpture, the aquatics centre with its sensuously curved roof, the Pringle-shaped velodrome and bubble-wrapped basketball arena.

Cleaned-up waterways weave between the stadia. Four thousand trees have been planted in detoxified soil. On the eastern edge Westfield Stratford City, Europe's biggest urban shopping mall, opened in September alongside a sparkling new railway station capable of disgorging 20,000 passengers an hour.

Almost-finished yuppie apartment blocks and hotels line Stratford High Street. Urban landscapers are beautifying pavements and precincts.

All this is taking place in one of the most deprived areas of Britain — mile upon square mile of mean terraced homes, dilapidated council high-rises and tatty shops that belie the romantic image of the old, cockney East End with its rhyming slang and jellied eels.

About 150 languages are spoken in the host borough of Newham, scarcely half the workforce is employed and the average wage is £100 less than London's. From Westminster to Canning Town on the Jubilee Line, it is said, life expectancy drops a year at every station.

Locals are not against the dramatic development, or the prospect of hosting the world's biggest sporting festival. "If something comes along as big as this, of course it lifts you," said Pat Holland, 69, a member of Newham's all-Labour council whose husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather worked in the area's defunct docks.

But you might expect people to be a little more thrilled than they are. Michael's gripe was that hardly any locals had been employed on the park's construction. "I'm sure Boris [Johnson] and Seb [Coe] can come forward with lots to statistics to show that's not the case, but it is," he said.



Ronald Harvey and Robert Chilvers, who says locals won't use the facilities

He has a point. The Olympic authorities claim that 20 per cent of the workforce comes from the six host boroughs. Sir Robin Wales, the Mayor of Newham, said that many workers simply took local lodgings, and was "disappointed" that a greater effort was not made to employ genuine locals.

On the park's south-western corner is Fish Island, an enclave hemmed in by the A12 and the Lea River Navigation Canal whose former warehouses are said to contain Europe's largest community of artists. Neil McDonald, 27, who runs a gallery-cum-café called the Stour Centre, said that this unique community was endangered by soaring rents. "Landlords know they can charge whatever they want because the Olympics are coming," he said.

Others are angry that no tickets have been set aside for local communities despite the years of upheaval; that the marathon route has been redrawn to avoid the unsightly East End; and that their main roads will be closed to all but VIPs during the games. The Olympic Park has its own postcode (E20). It is ringed by high fencing. Its futuristic magnificence contrasts starkly with its dingy surroundings, reinforcing a sense that it is in, but not of, the East End. "More and more [it] seems like a gigantic shimmering *Star Wars* entity which ordinary East Enders can see but cannot touch," Diane Abbott, a local MP, complained recently.



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On his whelk and mussels stall in Stratford market, Robert Chilvers, 39, chuckles at the thought of locals using the Olympic pool, Velodrome and other world-class sporting facilities when the Games are over. "They're not them sort of people," he said.

The bigger issue, however, is whether the Games' legacy will live up to its billing. At the heart of London's Olympic bid was the promise that it would spark "one of the boldest urban transformations in the world".

The Olympic Park Legacy Company (OPLC) has a 25-year plan that envisages up to 11,000 new homes with nurseries, schools and health centres. It foresees the creation of at least 8,000 jobs — many in a new "employment hub" in the media centre. The Olympic site will be London's first new park in 150 years. West Ham hopes to play in the stadium, and Newham Council wants school sports days held there.

It is an impressive vision, and the OPLC is the first such organisation ever set up in advance of the Games, but how much of it materialises remains to be seen. Too many previous Olympic parks have become white elephants, and even if London's vision is realised it could simply create an island of prosperity in a sea of deprivation.

Of the 11,000 new homes the OPLC hopes that "up to 35 per cent" will be "affordable". The OPLC and Newham Council want local people to get their fair share of the new jobs, and are working hard and imaginatively to make that happen. But there can be no quotas, and Newham's jobseekers have serious handicaps. A third speaks little or no English. Fifteen per cent have no qualifications. Many are long-term unemployed who have lost confidence or suffer from mental health problems.

All but the most menial new jobs could go to outsiders using Stratford's excellent rail connections. Sir Robin contends that the £1.45 billion Westfield Stratford City project, whose shops, hotels, cinemas and casino could eventually create 18,000 jobs, is a "bigger prize" than the Olympics.

Sometimes "regeneration' simply sweeps communities away. Guiseppe Cifonelli, 75, a barber in one of the few original buildings left on Stratford High Street, said his customers vanished as businesses were demolished for the Olympic Park. "I'm the last one standing," he said. "The old people have moved away. It's progress, I suppose, but it's not good for everyone."

Who are the athletes that you expect to be the British stars?



If it's a success who should be praised?

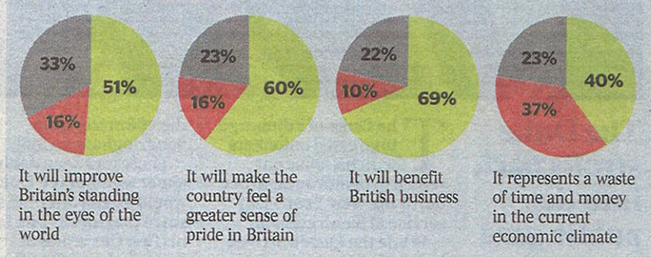
- Sebastian Coe 44%
- Boris Johnson 9%
- David Cameron 4%
- Ken Livingstone 2%
- Tony Blair 2%

If it's not, who should be blamed?

Sebastian Coe 21%
David Cameron 15%
Boris Johnson 9%
Tony Blair 6%
Tessa Jowell 2%

Attitudes to the Olympics

Here is a list of statements about the Summer Olympics being held in London this coming summer. How far do you agree or disagree with each of them?



Populus interviewed a random sample of 2,052 adults aged 18+ online between December 16-28, 2011