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Landscape

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The exalted Lea Valley

These photographs by Jason Orton were commissioned by the AJ to record the post-industrial landscape surrounding the Olympic Park. What happens next is critical to securing a sustainable legacy

Jason Orton's evocative photographs capture the Lower Lea Valley in early spring and hint at the dramatic impending changes of the Games.

The nuanced character of the old Lea Valley is likely to be lost as the new east London emerges. At the same time, integration of the Olympic Park with the communities surrounding it is a key step in ensuring the sustainable legacy so vaunted during the planning of the Games.

5th Studio's vision for the Lea River Park, in particular the FatWalk, a three-mile footpath and cycleway linking the Olympic Park to the Thames at East India Docks, would at a single stroke go a long way to providing the connectivity and focal points needed. Commissioned by the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation (LTGDC), the Greater London Authority and the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, the first stretch from Stratford High Street to Three Mills Green is in place. A little over £3 million has been spent on it but, with the recent 'de-designation' of the LTGDC and the transfer of its powers to the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) and the GLA, the fate of the project is in limbo. It sits outside the LLDC boundary and is now officially the responsibility of the GLA.

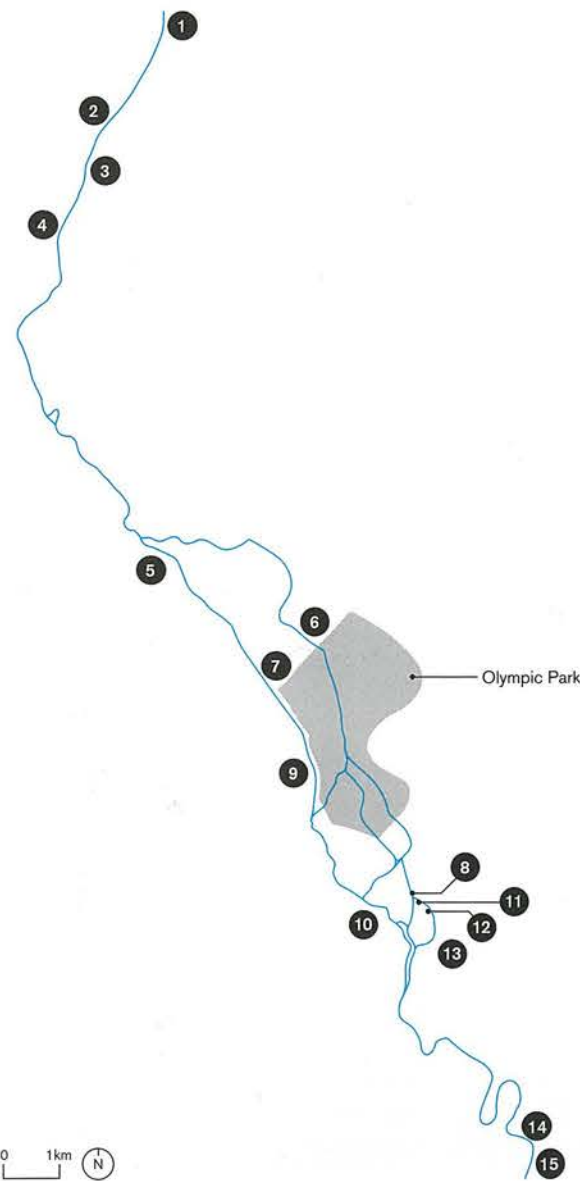
The FatWalk proposes a series of places preserving the best remaining bits of the valley's natural environment and punctuates its post-industrial

landscape with memorable events. One of London's joys is the variety of routes through it. In Camden, Regent's Canal contrasts with the bustle of Camden High Street and ducking down to the towpath, to emerge blocks away, adds delight to urban wanderings. The FatWalk would add some much-needed continuity to the fractured Lea Valley without sacrificing serendipity.

The most dramatic proposal is for a picnic hill made from Crossrail excavation spoil, overlooking the Thames at East India Docks. Imagine the view: afternoon sun on the river, the O2 opposite and the Shard beyond. It would be as much as a draw as the Orbit or Emirates Air Line. Form Associates' Northala Fields in Ealing suggests what is possible. This popular park overlooks the A40, not the Thames, but last week it was the site of a Paralympics event organised by the mayor's office. The current High Line for London ideas competition is a further sign the mayor's office recognises the regenerative power of green infrastructure.

About £13 million is required to complete the FatWalk. The GLA and Mayor of London websites are full of catchphrases such as 'transforming London' and 'making our city great'. It is crucial that the mayor and boroughs demonstrate vision and leadership by recognising the FatWalk's importance for east London and transcend institutional silos to mobilise the resources to complete the project. ■

Hattie Hartman



ALL PHOTOGRAPHY THROUGHOUT: JASON ORTON

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