

The river that London forgot

For years it has been the city's back yard, a place of fridge mountains, distilleries and scrapyards, but now there's a fresh plan to turn this ancient valley back into a green playground. **Oliver Wainwright** walks the newly opened Leaway

A bright yellow beacon pokes up above a road bridge in east London, festooned with strange nautical markers like the mast of a fishing trawler run aground. This cheery totem signals a momentous point in the Lea valley, where the river Lea meets Bow Creek and the Limehouse Cut in a knotted tangle of waterways, rail lines and roads, a fertile ground for the gasworks, distilleries and waste recycling plants that have long made this edge-land their home. Not that you would know any of this when you're hurtling down the A12 dual carriageway nearby.

"I was born and raised here and I didn't know the river existed for most of my life," says Paul Brickell, director of regeneration at the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC), the body charged with fulfilling the 2012 Olympic promises of bringing social, economic and environmental improvements to the East End. "The Thames might be known as the 'lifeline of London', but we're keen to get more people to explore the hidden and overlooked Lea, a place home to centuries of invention and production, a bucolic ribbon right on their doorstep."

The yellow masthead marks the top of a new pedestrian ramp that leads

Clockwise from main picture: the towpath at Twelvetrees Bridge, Bow; the site from the air; early ideas included a jungle habitat in old gasholders

people down from the street to the towpath for the first time, allowing people from the nearby Bromley-by-Bow tube station and pupils of Bow School to access the riverside. It is one of several humble but crucial new interventions that go some way to finally achieving a plan to turn this scruffy industrial valley into what postwar planner Patrick Abercrombie described as "a great playground for Londoners" - a project that's been 74 years in the making.

Abercrombie's Greater London Plan of 1944 might be most famous for setting out the principles of the green belt, but he also envisioned a "green wedge" running for 26 miles down the Lea valley from Hertfordshire to the Thames, with "every piece of land welded into a great regional reservation". The principle was established by an act of parliament in 1967, which created the Lee Valley Park (known by an earlier spelling), a green lung of 10,000 acres that has long been a place of leisure along its upper reaches, with horse-riding, fishing, golf and boating, and "more open water than the Norfolk Broads" as its website proudly informs.

The Lower Lea, on the other hand, "has always been about keeping people out," according to Tom Holbrook of 5th Studio, the architects who have been working for the last 10 years to realise



the final chunk of Abercrombie's vision. "It's a landscape of fences for obvious reasons," he says, "as a place of sewerage pumping, gasworks, high-voltage cabling, car-crushing and food processing. It's a problem-solving landscape, a place invented by engineers. Which, by definition, makes it a difficult place to access."

The 2012 Olympic Games was predicated in a large part on opening up this inaccessible valley, on linking together long-severed neighbourhoods, and "cleaning up" what was framed as a toxic wasteland. But the site was also attractive to the Olympic planners precisely because of its natural severance, a secure island conveniently bounded by infrastructural gullies of road, rail and water, with few points of access. "The

studios and waste recyclers, taxi depots and the bleak "fulfilment centres" of Amazon and Sainsbury's, unlikely fragments still clinging on despite the eastward march of Berkeley Homes.

It is the special qualities of this rugged landscape that 5th Studio's strategy has been focussed on exposing. In a process of strategic surgery - or "landscape homeopathy" as Holbrook half-jokingly calls it - new stretches of previously inaccessible riverside path have been created, with chunky benches made from off-the-peg concrete U-sections and hefty lengths of timber usually used for river wharves.

While the Olympic Park's paraphernalia of furniture and lighting did its best to lay a fresh carpet over an area of shagginess, 5th Studio's work feels more like the kind of infrastructure that might have always been here. The planting, designed by landscape architect Jonathan Cook, is equally thoughtful, with scented climbers trained on a fence to help ameliorate the aromas of a council bin-washing depot, and edible hedgerows and fruit trees, keeping alive the tradition of foraging along the Lea.

It is a fragment of what was originally intended. Holbrook's plan

for the Lea River Park was first commissioned in 2006, with a budget of £38m, and intended to be completed before the Olympics. The meandering linear route, now known as the Leaway, would connect six new park spaces, from a thrilling jungle inside the redundant Twelvetrees gasholders, to a mound formed by Crossrail tunneling spoil, inspired by how the summit of Primrose Hill was created by the spoil of digging the Regent's Canal. But as time went on, the project was sidelined as energies were focused on the Olympic park. When the original client, the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation, was axed in 2010 in the coalition's bonfire of the quangos, the money evaporated, along with the political will to make it happen.

"We've had to become jiu-jitsu landscape designers since then," says Holbrook, describing a process of working tactically to keep the project alive, using what is already there, augmented with light-touch interventions. With a total budget of just £4m so far, the architects have cleverly made use of granite left over from repaving Stratford High Street and excess trees over-ordered for the Olympic park. And the work has been legal and political as much as aesthetic: it took three years of negotiations with one landowner to open up just 20 metres of towpath.

With the LLDC's efforts now focused on the promise of 7,000 homes and a new cultural quarter, it is passing the baton to Tower Hamlets and Newham boroughs, and there is a real danger that momentum will once again be lost. Brickell insists local plans specify that whatever development comes forward will have to deliver chunks of park and infrastructure. But it needs strong leadership and a real commitment from the mayor of London to ensure that the final pieces in the jigsaw of Abercrombie's great green playground don't take another generation to happen.

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It's the cradle of plastic and gunpowder, India pale ale and Buffalo Bill's camp

Lower Lea has always been a place that things back on to," says Holbrook. "It's the back of two boroughs, London's back yard, the political buffer between Anglo-Saxon England and Danelaw."

Documented in the poetic drifts of Iain Sinclair and his band of psycho-geographic wanderers, the Lea has an extraordinary history as a place of invention. It is the cradle of plastic and gunpowder, flight, fridge mountains, India pale ale and Buffalo Bill's camp, a wild east where subversive things could happen undetected, beyond the fold in the map. Walking the newly joined-up route with Holbrook, we pass car-breaking yards, former distilleries, film

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