

'CLEANSING THE SILICON ROUNDABOUT'

This essay is an accompaniment to the documentary short of the same name.

Christopher Daniel Jack.

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Since Margaret Thatcher's initial drive to privatisation nearly 30 years ago, the social-housing landscape of the UK has changed immensely. In London these changes continue at a rapid rate at the same time that the UK capital grows into an increasingly important physical interface to the surging global digital - financial and creative - network epitomised by firms such as Google, who have recently set up shop in the heart of London's East-end 'Tech City'.

Recent boosts to development of this node of the new economy have come in the form of unequivocal support from Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne who, having sited East London's potential to be "one of the most dynamic working environments in the World", are committed to £200million funding for "Technology and Innovation Centres" in the area frequently referred to as Silicon Roundabout. [1]

This recent injection to a decade-plus era of investment ensures that opportunities for people to make a living in 21st century digital disciplines will continue to rise in an

area which has popularly been claimed to house more artists per square mile than anywhere else in Europe.

While the influx of tech-investment pours into this corner of London, the ability for those on average and below-average incomes to remain in the area becomes increasingly harder. The picture across central parts of London is familiar, with swathes of genuinely accessible social-housing making way for homes that are misleadingly branded 'affordable'. Billions of pounds dished out to Housing Associations across the capital are being put to use in building new social-housing schemes that will require a household income of between £33,375 - £44,500 a year to be able to afford. The median income in inner London is £31,379. [2, 3]

Additionally, now that the Government's universal credit cap system has come into force, the capacity for social-renting families to keep up with 'market value' has become yet further diminished. As highlighted by reports from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2004 [4] and the London Tenants' Federation in 2011 [2], it is clear that many people on lower incomes are being priced out of the area.

Cultural Clash

But what of the trickle-down effects of the industrial investment in East London? Despite massive regeneration of the historically disreputable quarter of the city over the last fifteen years or so, the 2004 report for the DCMS found such regeneration had little positive social or economic impact upon the pre-existing demographic of

the area. In the terms laid out by the report, regeneration was said to be divisive, even harmful to the local population.

The official Tech City map shows a cluster around the old street area spreading outward into Islington, Hackney, Tower Hamlets, and even with companies in Newham, home of the Olympics 2012 site. These four boroughs rank amongst the UK's top ten most deprived. [5]

Local resident-backed campaigns to keep perfectly healthy small businesses in the area do very little in the face of powerful housing associations bullying their way to the construction of huge apartment blocks on what is now deemed prime real-estate. The expulsion of businesses from, and part demolition of, the historical Rosemary Works building in N1 to make way for a 5-storey complex of so-called 'affordable housing' is one such example. [6]

In 2010 David Cameron spoke of providing a "place for startup companies and the local community to come together and become the next generation of entrepreneurs." [1]

But which community is it that Cameron refers to?

Orator Robin Bale outlines the subtle shift in use of the word 'public' to pre-define what kind of people might be allowed in community areas such as local parks and gardens. Bale takes the 'Designated Public Places' – previously and historically always 'public' – to now be literally a tool for designating the preferred public. He outlined this with his 'drinking walks', taking an audience on a just-legal tour along the perimeter of Hackney Council's 2009 no-drinking zone around the Old Street

area. These tours are now practically defunct; as the anti-drinking legislation has been extended to the whole borough, yet further highlighting Bale's point. [7]

Housing too expensive for the average to afford.

Overlooking the Rosemary Works - less than a mile from Old Street roundabout - is the similarly fated Colville Estate which, though scheduled to be 'regenerated' starting winter 2011-2012, has since been in limbo due to the protestations of a small number of long-term leaseholders. Reports from the stubbornly remaining local authority tenants of their resident's association's complicity with the regeneration scheme are now confirmed by the public touting of the involvement of such groups, as a very recent article in Hackney Council's newspaper, Hackney Today, reads: "Resident involvement is key to the success of the regeneration plans, which is why the Colville Estate Tenants and Residents Association (CETRA) has been involved at every stage." [8]

Yet the angry residents explain how, following a number of years of obviously purposeful neglect of the estate, in the autumn of 2011 they were informed by the resident's association that demolition would begin by that Christmas and that they were strongly advised to take up the alternative accommodation on offer. [9]

Such apparent bullying tactics are part and parcel of the campaign executed by organistaions like ShOW (shoreditch our way), described as a 'property company ... run as a charity', who are known for buying up property — sometimes evicting community users in the process — and selling it to developers. [10]

The replacement of recently adequate social housing with 'affordable homes' is not quite so clear-cut. The 2011 report by the London Tenants Federation, titled 'The Affordable Housing Con', found the terminology used to be purposefully misleading, and that "most of it isn't actually affordable".

Atop of all this London authorities are found to be consistently under-delivering on minimum suggested social housing requirements:

"Evidence of need for social-rented homes in London is consistently unmet. From 2007-10 only 15,083 social-rented homes were delivered – meeting only 21% of the evidenced need identified in the GLA [Greater London Authority – Ed.] 2008 study. 14,806 intermediate homes were delivered, for which there was little or no evidence of need and 50,272 market homes were delivered, some 165% of the assessed need".

[2]

Hackney, at the foot of which lies Silicon Roundabout, ranks the number 1 most deprived borough in England in terms of living environment. [11]

Creation Generation.

Thanks to the continued investment in East London since the late 1990's a highly-skilled young creative workforce has found a node in the global digital network to call home. For many youngsters growing up in Britain and wanting to work in the 'creative industries', East London is the premier place to come and demonstrate their skills.

The virtual networks of the global digital culture have physical nodes at which they ground themselves and attract the labours of many young creatives. London is one such node and the various facets of this node take many different forms.

At the one end of the scale are the tech-investments and startups as a pop-fashionable face to advertise the innovations and achievements of those living in the node, placed alongside multinational firms like Google – one of the most technologically exciting companies in the World.

Intrinsically linked to the young startup firms, but positioned facing a different direction and somewhat politically agitated is the London Hackspace. Itself a physical node in the somewhat undefined international network of user-orchestrated, do-it-yourself, social, political and, perhaps above all else, technical discourse, hackerspaces are the stomping ground of the technically equipped and politically mobile young digital creative, or 'hacker'. As has been seen in the US though, with US Government DARPA military research funding of hackerspaces [12], the political gulf can begin to seem rather narrow given certain incentive – namely that of financial aid to technological progress.

The London Hackspace, in line with the wider hackerspace community, remains decidedly open(source). The staple gatherings and events of hackerspaces – the hackday and the hackathon – have long been appropriated by tech-firms as a way of generating quick ideas from free labour and are now even being used in the world of corporate finance. Touted as an opportunity to “imagine, invent, impress” and offering in return “free food and energy drinks around the clock” [13], the labour of technological creativity is being rewarded the same as the music industry long has

done with its frontline workforce. Do your best, hope you get noticed, hope you get remunerated. This is the message. This is the dynamic. In Benedict Seymour's words: the "contemporary equivalent of feudalism's great chain of being" [14].

Of course, those coming to this part of the world to seek work in the creative sector can find more such opportunities than their waking hours allow them to fulfill. Work that didn't exist a decade ago is allowing a youthful workforce the chance to make professional links across a global network of artistic and technical excellence. With it spreads the rapid proliferation of ideas, designs, and culture. The advertisement doesn't lie. Come to London's Tech City and you will find plenty of opportunity. Only expect to work long hours and certainly don't assume that you will be paid for it – as exemplified in the stance of the creative industries' internship culture [15].

Conclusion.

Between the 2004 DCMS report damning the lack of social success of the regeneration around Shoreditch and David Cameron and George Osborne appearing in East London in 2010 to proclaim the bright future of the area, one has to ask: what has changed?

If anything the 2004 report served only to act as official moratorium to the idea that the indigenous should be accommodated at all. Since then yet more estates have been sold off, demolished and abandoned, leaving less and less really affordable housing in the area as ex-social-tenants are turned to the expensive private rented sector, and without the state support they once received.

Is the planned “largest civic space in Europe” [1] going to be the temple of the new order in East(central) London, following what Seymour calls “the creative destruction of the inner-city” [14].

Perhaps yet the “disquiet at the lack of connection between the incoming wealth and facilities for the remaining local community” [4] can be addressed by Cameron and Osborne’s recent promises.

And, with “higher levels of over-crowding in both the social- and private-rented sector”, is the remaining social-housing destined to become, as one council tenant put it, the slums of the future. [2]

It seems that concepts of ‘affordable’ and ‘public’ will prove crucial to the nature of rapid advancement of digital culture in East London.

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