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Cultural Quarters and Mega-Events: Will Regeneration Kill or Foster Creativity in Stratford?

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Title: Cultural Quarters and Mega-Events: Will Regeneration Kill or Foster Creativity in Stratford?

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Abstract:

Long-term legacies are expected to play a crucial part in the process of bidding and delivering a mega-event. Strict deadlines for delivery of Olympic infrastructure give authorities and developers a license to push urban regeneration plans through to approval with minimal consultation. As a result, all too often, local communities pay the price for the host city's long-term vision. For example, in Beijing, 1.5 million people were displaced to make space for Olympic venues (Pohlisch, 2015), while in Rio, thousands of favela dwellers experienced violent evictions (*The Guardian*, 2015). Similarly, but somehow less famously, the Olympic Park developments for London 2012 involved the largest programme of legally enforced evictions in England (Raco & Tunney, 2010). As part of this large-scale regeneration programme, plans are now under way to develop a 'world class education and cultural district' in the Olympic Park, which will accommodate internationally renowned cultural and educational institutions. This project is part of a wider cultural legacy strategy for the Olympic Park 'centered around developing east London as a creative destination with an international reputation' (LLDC, 2014, p. 34). However, the area close to Stratford in Hackney is already home to established creative quarters, which were largely alienated during the London 2012 Games and four-year long cultural programme (Pappalepore & Duignan, 2016). Drawing on qualitative evidence, this paper will explore the development of the new cultural quarter in Stratford (east London) as a result of Olympic-led regeneration, and discuss the impact this is having on the existing local creative communities in Hackney Wick and Fish Island. The discussion will be based on primary research (participant observation and interviews) conducted in summer/autumn 2016. It will also draw on previous research conducted between 2010 and 2015. Whilst the first phase of research (2010–2015) highlighted a clear gap between Olympic rhetoric and local reality, preliminary results from the second phase (2016–present) outline a more complex picture. Qualitative data point at the increasing vulnerability of the local creative communities in Hackney Wick and Fish Island, while also revealing stories of creative resistance and collaborations between new, established cultural organisations and local artists. Based on the results of this research, recommendations for public policy and for future Olympic host cities are provided.

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