**Expert knowledge and community participation in urban planning: the case of post-Olympic Hackney Wick**

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**Abstract**

This chapter discusses community participation in the planning process in post-Olympic Hackney Wick. It looks at the groups, interfaces and strategies involved, as well as the democratic implications of the process. The discussion is framed around a campaign for sustainable affordable workspace which took place in the context of the development of the new Local Plan for the area and increased private development pressure. The advocacy work of a local group, The Unit, with both the local authorities and developers, in statutory and non-statutory forums, will be discussed. The analysis considers the role of expert knowledge, the production of ‘para-democratic’ structures of participation, and the deployment of lobbying by community activists.

**Introduction**

The post-Olympic period in Hackney Wick has been characterised by the enactment of new structures of local governance, increased development pressure and sustained community advocacy. My interest in this chapter is to explore the relations between local authorities, private developers and community groups as articulated around issues of planning and development. In particular, I will focus on the issues and interfaces around which the different groups have coalesced, as well as the strategies by which community groups have tried to influence the process, especially in relation to the deployment of expert knowledge and the recourse to lobbying. The discussion is framed within the process surrounding the development of a new Local Plan for the area, and a concomitant grassroots campaign for affordable workspace. I will focus on the actions of a local group, The Unit, and describe their participation in two parallel participatory processes: the first was a series of non-statutory, informal meetings with local officials and developers; the second refers to the official mechanisms of planning consultation. These two forms of community participation, in their differences and similitudes, raise important questions about the relationship between expert knowledge and democratic politics.

 I will use the concept of ‘ecology of affordability’ to refer to the material and immaterial infrastructure that sustains access to affordable workspace[[1]](#endnote-2). This would include the availability of cheap and flexible industrial spaces; the commitment to retaining industrial use designations; and long-term leases that provide security of tenure. In addition, in the case of Hackney Wick, workspace affordability has been achieved through a rich tradition of self-building and self-managing practices aimed at tailoring large industrial spaces to the needs of the end-users. The legal status of some of the latter interventions, for instance those involving live/work conversions, is shaky to say the least: they are technically illegal, yet tolerated by landlords and authorities – or at least they were during a period in which the possibility of bigger returns on those industrial properties (for example though mix-use developments) wasn’t yet so tangible. Hackney Wick’s ecology of affordability, then, involved a wide range of factors, from government regulations regarding land uses to private lease contracts; from local authorities turning a blind eye on certain uses, to the landowner’s limited business expectations.

 A second key concept for the argument here pursued is the notion of ‘para-democratic’ structures, by which I mean instruments of community participation *adjacent to* statutory democratic mechanisms, which achieve some form of legitimacy in practice, but whose representativeness remains uncertain. The term is not intended to be derogatory, and this for two reasons: first, to the extent to which these structures represent theenactment of *actually operational* spaces of community participation, they are to be welcome. Secondly, I do not wish to imply that existing democratic procedures (such as consultation events or directly contacting your local councillor) are necessarily more properly democratic (see Maginn, 2004). The development of bottom-up para-democratic structures could, at least in principle, produce *more* and not less opportunities for local involvement in decision-making. The experience discussed in this chapter, however, shows some of the barriers for this, in particular in relation to the reliance on technical knowledge. One of the defining features of these para-democratic structures in Hackney Wick is that they take the form of ‘technical forums’ (Callon et al., 2009), in which participation – as well as the possibility of making a difference – is based around the capacity to leverage expert knowledges (i.e. limited to a few).

The chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Hackney Wick between 2011 and 2015. My involvement with the area started with a postdoctoral project looking at the role of art in the production of spaces of dissent in relation to the London 2012 Olympics. Over time, the research became a wider exploration of the politics of urban regeneration. I was actively involved in some of the processes discussed in this chapter, and details of my participation are provided below (for a more thorough discussion of the collaborative dimension of my ethnography, see Marrero-Guillamón, forthcoming).

**The fallow is over: post-Olympic Hackney Wick**

Up until the end of the 1990s Hackney Wick was a semi-secret, unregulated and cheap (post-)industrial area in East London. It attracted artists, raves, black markets, discarded white goods and burnt cars (Gill, 2007). Converted factory buildings (turned into artist studios, live/work units, lofts or performance spaces) coexisted with the remaining industries, including notably a concentration of printing and finishing businesses (muf, 2009), while poor transport connections and a network of canals and motorways isolated the area from its surroundings.

 Then, during the first half of the 2000s, a first wave of development materialised in the form of generic waterfront new builds and loft conversions. The departure of industry accelerated. Artists, makers and others seeking affordable workspace continued to settle in the area, an influx partly due to displacements from increasingly gentrified nearby areas such as Hoxton and Shoreditch (Pratt 2009). A survey conducted in 2009 found 700 artist studios, making Hackney Wick one of Europe’s largest concentration of such spaces (muf, 2009). Counterintuitively, when the Olympic bid was won in 2005 development in Hackney Wick slowed down[[2]](#endnote-3) and then came to a virtual halt following the 2008 financial crisis. This unexpected respite, or development fallow, lasted until the Games were over.

 Walking around in 2015 one could see an amalgam of vacant plots, trendy venues, graffitied walls, brand new Overground trains, Legible London maps, unfinished buildings, artist studios, light industries, abandoned factories, car mechanics, co-working spaces, vintage shops, converted factories, new residential developments, art galleries, social housing bungalows, and hardware shops. This juxtaposition would be mirrored in the kind of pedestrians one would encounter any given (work)day: older residents, creative types, skateboarders, hipsters, workers, high-school youth, men in suits, young mothers, university students on a tour of the area, and tourists. Looking at the less visible layer of land ownership would reveal a very fragmented landscape, with more than 90 plots of land, mostly owned by different private real estate companies. An analysis of planning applications would be more revealing: no less than 17 active proposals, mostly for mix-use developments in ex-industrial locations. In addition, a new Local Plan for the area, detailing land uses and development targets, was adopted in July 2015 (LLDC, 2015). Even a quick look at social media and discussion forums would show a local community concerned with the sustainability of the area as they have known it. Hackney Wick is on the verge of a great transformation, all of the above seems to indicate.

 [Fig. 1. General view of Hackney Wick from the Overground Station, 2014. Source: the author.]

 The Olympic period was characterised by a harsh separation between Hackney Wick and the Olympic Park; apart from the natural boundary provided by the canal, the authorities’ concerns with securing the Olympic site translated into the deployment of a variety of military urbanism strategies, including an electric fence, widespread CCTV surveillance, and access restrictions on roads and bridges (Fussey et al., 2011). Once the Games were over, re-connecting the Park with its surroundings – ‘stitching the fringe’ in the official lingo (Design for London, 2013) – became one of the main priorities for the authorities. Undoing this hard boundary has represented a huge urban design challenge, involving the construction of bridges, parks, public realm interventions, etc., plus numerous artistic and cultural projects designed to bridge other, more immaterial ‘gaps’.

This concern with ‘reconnection’ is closely connected to an important change in the governance of the area. The London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC)[[3]](#endnote-4) was introduced in 2012 to oversee the transformation of the Olympic Park and its surroundings and deliver the promised legacy of ‘convergence’ with the rest of the city. The LLDC is a Mayoral Development Corporation (MDC), a type of entity introduced by the Localism Act 2011, and in many respects modelled after the pioneering London Docklands Development Corporation (see Brownhill, 1999 for a critical assessment of the latter). Similarly to previous Urban Development Corporations, the mission of MDCs is to lead great transformation projects and, in theory, are temporary structures linked to delivering those. The LLDC was enacted by, and responds to, the Greater London Authority; it exists in *parallel* to local boroughs, and in issues such as planning, *above* them. The LLDC took over all urban planning responsibilities in the Olympic Park and its surroundings (previously under control of four different boroughs: Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Newham and Waltham Forest) and developed a Local Plan for the whole area (a process to which I will return below). One of the particularities of this local authority-cum-development company is that it is non-elected – its democratic accountability is at best indirect, through the GLA and the Mayor (who is the chairman of the LLDC’s Board). We may say that the ‘legal architecture of exception’ of the Olympics (Marrero-Guillamón, 2012: 22), initially justified on the grounds of temporary needs related to security and delivery, has been prolonged by the introduction of the LLDC, itself legitimated through a rhetoric of efficiency. As Mike Raco (2012, 2015) has argued, there is a widespread belief within policy circles in the idea that, free from democratic interference – i.e. provided that both the government and the wider public are kept at arm’s length – experts will ‘get the job done’ more effectively. I will return below to the question of how the reliance on the discourse and practice of expertise has interesting parallels with the way in which community groups in Hackney Wick have gone about making their case.

In parallel to this spatial and institutional restructuring led by local authorities, private developers switched gears soon after the Games were over, and starting in late 2012 a steady stream of development proposals were put forward for Hackney Wick. Most were rather predictable plans for replacing industrial buildings or vacant lots with cheaply produced, high density residential or mix-use developments

[Fig. 2. Initial proposal for Neptune Wharf (detail). Source: Neptune Group, 2012.]

The ‘development fallow’ was clearly over in the mind of developers, who undoubtedly recognised the existence of a massive ‘rent gap’ (Smith 1987) ready to be actualised: rents extracted from industrial properties, even when converted into artist studios, are indeed significantly lower than those potentially extracted with residential developments. To an extent, these proposals responded to expectations created by the Hackney Wick and Fish Island Action Area Plans (AAPs), prepared, respectively, by the LBs of Hackney (2012) and Tower Hamlets (2012) before the LLDC came into being. These documents identified the need to release land previously defined as Strategic Industrial Location and ‘promote a more flexible approach to land use… in order to assist in creating sustainable communities [and] maximise the benefits of the Olympic Legacy’ (LB Tower Hamlets, 2012: 44). This re-zoning effectively opened the way for substituting industrial venues with mixed-use and residential developments.[[4]](#endnote-5)

**Community responses**

The development of the Local Plan and the surge in private development interest became parallel and tangible forces in post-Olympic Hackney Wick. At one level, legal requirements meant that public notices were disseminated and community engagement meetings organised. These formal ‘participatory devices’ produced their own responses in the form of questionnaires, comments, objections, etc. Other local initiatives, such as *The Wick* newspaper (of which I was the editor), art/architecture studio public works’ *Wick Sessions* (a series of public talks) and Richard Brown’s campaign for affordable workspace provision, *Affordable Wick*,[[5]](#endnote-6) strived to make these processes more widely public by publishing relevant articles, organising debates, explaining things in lay terms, and generally encouraging people to get involved in the area’s future.

[Fig. 3. Richard Brown’s *Affordable Wick* cabin in campaign mode, 2013. Source: courtesy of Richard Brown.]

However, rather than taking for granted the existence of a community that then mobilises against ‘external’ threats, my argument is that the urban plans and development proposals affecting the area became issues with the capacity to generate public involvement (Marres, 2007). In other words, *a* community was enacted as a *result* of coming together to tackle the proposed changes to the built environment and their perceived effects. As Noortje Marres puts it (cited in Harman 2014: 168): ‘members of political communities are not in the first instance connected by way of shared or opposing opinions and interests, but by issues’. Drawing from Deborah Martin’s (2003) work on the concept of neighbourhood, we could say that this local community was *enacted in practice* through the residents’ actions against a threat to their conditions of existence. This performative understanding of community is a long way from the use (and abuse) of the concept in policy, where it has routinely been used – both by New Labour and the Coalition Government – to denote bounded, homogeneous and consensual groups at the centre of welfare reform (see Raco and Flint, 2001; Wallace, 2010; Hancock et al., 2012).

In this section I want to focus on how one particular group was formed to give response to both the public authorities and private developers’ plans. ‘The Unit’ emerged originally out of the Cultural Interest Group (CIG), ‘an independent local networking organisation… with the aim of helping to establish a permanent, sustainable, creative community’ (Chamberlain 2013: 18). The CIG was founded in 2008 by William Chamberlain, a lawyer who had been part of the team preparing the London bid for the Olympics and who subsequently moved to the area. As he recounts:

Disillusioned by my legal career, I handed in my notice with a vague idea about wanting to be involved in helping to deliver some sort of [Olympic] legacy in East London. I was particularly interested in the idea of rewarding artists for being the pioneers of urban regeneration and felt that the best way to avoid gentrification would be to try and empower the existing community in such a way that regeneration was done by the people living there rather than having it done to them – hopefully a more sustainable inside-out approach rather than top-down. (Chamberlain, 2013: 18).

 The CIG materialises in an open, itinerant monthly meeting. Amongst its regulars one finds artists and other professionals from the cultural sector, residents, businessmen and local government representatives. The matters discussed are extremely heterogeneous: urban planning, art funding opportunities, business openings and closings, street signalling, transport issues, street safety, etc. The group perceives itself mainly as a forum for sharing relevant information, making connections, and making sure that local residents and businesses are part of the opportunities and processes taking place in the area.

For the purposes of this chapter, I’m mostly interested in the ways in which the CIG organised itself to provide a response to the development pressure in line with its remit to fight for the sustainability of the creative community. In 2012, a ‘Planning and Development Subgroup’ (subsequently rebranded as ‘The Unit’) was created. It was led by two residents with interest and experience in these issues (architect Richard Brown, mentioned above, and planner Lee Wilshere) and included a larger group of collaborators (amongst them, myself). The Unit set to articulate a local vision for Hackney Wick and lobby for it through various channels.

One such channel was a close relationship with the Design Team at the LLDC. The latter was led by a group of architects that had been working in the area since the mid 2000s with Design for London.[[6]](#endnote-7) This team, responsible for overseeing the design of the Park and its surroundings, identified in The Unit a key local actor with valuable knowledge useful for informing their guidance documents. Both the Design Team and The Unit shared a worry about the potential harm that the kind of proposals that were being put forward by developers (disproportionate, uninterested in the area’s qualities and history, and of poor architectural quality) would cause to the neighbourhood if left unchallenged. We agreed that gathering a strong evidence base highlighting the versatility of the existing building stock and its role in sustaining the local ecology of affordability was an important part of ‘steering’ development in the right direction. Moreover, the Design Team hoped to be able to influence the Local Plan from inside the LLDC. Apart from frequent communications and sharing information, the Design Team commissioned two reports, on live/work and self-build practices in the area, from The Unit’s co-chair, Richard Brown (2012; 2013).

From the point of view of The Unit, collaborating with the LLDC was a welcome opportunity to influence those in charge of planning the future of the area. But it wasn’t the only available strategy. We were also interested in the new possibilities for community-led planning that the Localism Act 2011 had opened. Forming a neighbourhood forum and pursuing a locally-grounded vision for the area through a neighbourhood plan seemed a potentially worthwhile project, as well as a strategy that would guarantee autonomy from local authorities (see Sturzaker and Shaw, 2015). In the end, however, it was decided that taking into account the limited time and resources available to the group, it was wiser to use the good rapport with the Design Team to try to influence the Local Plan – in many ways the single most important document for the future of the area.

*Informal meetings*

It was around that time that the collaboration with the Design Team took a new turn, as the latter started to point at The Unit as key local interlocutors in their conversations with potential developers. The Unit accepted to meet face to face with them, and indeed showed a great capacity to provide useful feedback and criticism to development proposals – as well as to use those meetings to introduce issues that weren’t necessarily on the agenda, such as affordable workspace or live/work. These meetings gained notable traction, to the point that after a while it became almost standard practice for developers to contact The Unit and meetings moved forward to the pre-submission stage – that is, before the proposal is official and public. Arguably, The Unit was becoming an ‘obligatory passage point’ (Callon 1986), that is, a necessary mediation between actors, a negotiation space interested parties cannot afford to bypass. To be sure, the emergence of this space was aided by the difficulties developers were encountering in having their plans approved. The LLDC had rejected most of the applications it had received on the basis that they ignored existing regulations (e.g. maximum building height) and didn’t respect the area’s character (e.g. its industrial architecture features). This news must have run like wildfire among developers: resubmitting an application is expensive; anticipating problems is cost-effective.

As a collaborator of The Unit, I attended several of these meetings, in which the developers’ team (mainly architects) would explain their proposal, aided by plans and images, and members of The Unit (and others they had invited) would respond with questions, feedback and comments. One of the things I found most surprising was the ductility of the proposals during the process. I will provide an example. The initial, pre-application proposal for a site known as 415 Wick Lane consisted on two large blocks of flats between 7 and 13 stories. In the first meeting with The Unit, the height, massing, orientation and design of these blocks was severely criticised: they blocked the view of a historic industrial chimney, they didn’t respect the preferred pedestrian route to the Greenway, and their relation to the street was questioned. Models of affordable workspace and live/work provision were also discussed. Some of these comments were quite readily taken on by the developers, who said that there was room to move buildings around and rethink their connection to the immediate environment. The issue of height was peculiar: the then current Action Area Plan was clear that the maximum height was 6 stories, and yet the developers were ignoring that on the basis that Tower Hamlets had allowed taller student housing buildings. They hoped that the provision of affordable housing and workspace could be used to ‘negotiate’ the extra height.

Several months later, the same parties met again to discuss the fourth iteration of the project. The whole development was now between 6 and 8 stories, the orientation of the blocks had changed, and the connection with the Greenway reworked via a passageway leading up to it. Affordable workspace was part of the proposal too – it occupied the ground floor of both blocks and there was a preliminary agreement with artist Gavin Turk, who would take most of it. The developers said they were also aiming to include ‘as much affordable housing as possible’ (i.e. without affecting their target profit) taking into account the new limitations they were working with (meaning the reduced height)[[7]](#endnote-8). Most of the discussion during the meeting centred around the workspace component, and in particular on its ‘active frontage’ (i.e. shopfront) design. It became apparent that this wasn’t the kind of artist workspace most in the room had in mind. The architects responded that the full height windows facing the street could be rethought to let light in but also allow privacy. Anna Harding, from Space Studios[[8]](#endnote-9), questioned the soundness of the plan, arguing that there were plenty of empty shopfronts in the area: artist studios required a different approach, and a provider capable of successfully managing them. The developers and Turk, however, seemed less worried about this. The former, in particular, insisted the design could be tweaked to accommodate Turk’s studio needs.

A number of things happened in these meetings. Developers seemed to go into them looking to test the grounds and/or legitimise their projects. My impression is that they perceived The Unit to be *representative* of the area’s ‘sensibility’, and therefore able to quickly flag up an application’s shortcomings or the conflicts it may cause in the community. Developers encountered in them a local group with the technical expertise to examine, and occasionally challenge, their designs. For The Unit, the meetings were an opportunity to inspect the quality of the proposals, but also to lobby for certain issues. As I showed above, there is a surprising amount of room for change at this stage: buildings may contract, move or change orientation; use allocations reconsidered; boundaries between public and private areas redrawn; alternative workspace management models discussed. My impression is that as long as their bottom line was preserved, developers were quite ready to accept changes, and that the speed and smoothness of the planning application process was more valuable to them that any design principle. Far from immobile objects, buildings are, at this stage, extremely ‘elastic’ – their imprint being a dynamic reflection of the diffused authorship at play, and the changing relations between the actors (Weizman 2007).

These meetings acted, quite literally, as interfaces between the actors, as spaces of negotiation. And yet, there is the peculiarity that, strictly speaking, they are only informal meetings: they aren’t a procedure recognised as part of the consultation process, and The Unit has no legal status or mandate to represent the community. Even so, the meetings carry some form of legitimacy-in-practice, inasmuch as the decisions taken in them are then carried forward. Compared to the rigidness and limited scope of formal consultation, this ‘para-democratic’ interface has become a productive space of negotiation, a flexible protocol tactically convenient for those involved and capable of making divergent interests converge around the table.

At the same time as these meetings were taking place, The Unit was also busy advocating for wider public involvement in key planning issues: using Brown’s *Affordable Wick* as the main platform (both online through its web and offline through the roaming cabin), the group was campaigning for the extension of the conservation zones in Hackney Wick and Fish Island, and making public the developers’ planning proposals and their comments on them. Local Facebook groups were also used to this end. This work was an important counterbalance to the small-group, close-doors dynamic of the meetings with the developers, and in my opinion speaks highly of The Unit’s commitment to use their access to these spaces of negotiation for making things more widely public.

*The Local Plan*

The LLDC published the first draft of the Local Plan in December 2013 (LLDC, 2013). Rather than looking at the entirety of this long and complex document, I will focus here on The Unit’s response to the section on Hackney Wick, as it provides a good opportunity for evaluating the impact that the collaboration with the Design Team had had in the Plan itself. The response was a collective effort, with contributions from several members of The Unit and colse collaborators (including myself). It opened with the following statement:

We believe that the development of the Local Plan provides an excellent opportunity to foster a creative, affordable and sustainable neighbourhood. As detailed below, we think the current Draft does not appropriately address some of the key issues concerning the future of the area. We would like to see greater emphasis in policies that work towards the sustainability of an affordable ecology that over the years has allowed the development of a thriving artistic and cultural scene spanning several generations of practitioners. Supporting such community-led regeneration, we believe, could provide a blueprint for similar scenarios across Britain and the world – one which feeds from, rather than overtakes, grassroots dynamism. (Unit, 2014: 1)

The response articulated three main areas of criticism. Firstly, it highlighted the insufficiency of the valorisation, protection and support for existing spatial and social dynamics. The omission of live/work was openly criticised: it was an open secret that many of the area’s factories had been unofficially converted into live/work units, and that they were a key component of Hackney Wick’s ecology of affordability. Moreover, the LLDC had commissioned a report on this very practice from Richard Brown – that evidence needed to be integrated into the Plan, and a new use designation for live/work introduced.

A second area of critique was affordable and managed workspace. First, it was demanded that the policy in question that the Plan introduced (BEE.6) was applied to all areas with Hackney Wick, and not limited to larger studio providers. The Unit also demanded that the workspace provision strategy became a planning requirement in order to ensure appropriate design and costing, as opposed to an aspect left to be detailed via later Section 106 agreements.[[9]](#endnote-10) Special emphasis was put on the importance of appropriate management schemes for these spaces, and the necessity of creating flexible structures that allowed collectives to self-build their space, as had happened informally in the area for years.

A third area of concern had to do with a more general question, the lack of emphasis the plan put on the existing social fabric. It was demanded that an explicit recognition of the local community’s vitality was introduced, as well as a consideration of how future development would contribute to its sustainability. For example, it was highlighted that the area had built its success as a creative hub based on a diverse mix of uses and spatial adjacencies – it was important that the impact of residential development on this ecology was addressed.

On the positive side, The Unit was pleased to see explicit mention of the particularity and value of the industrial architecture of the area, and the idea that it should inform future proposals. In this sense, the plan to extend the conservation area to include more recent buildings (some without great architectural merit) was welcomed, particularly as it pointed towards the protection of the material base of the area’s ecology, rather than the singling out of singular buildings.

These comments, variations of which were submitted by many individuals who were enlisted to the cause by The Unit during their advocacy campaign, were part of the materials that had to inform the second draft of the local plan, the Publication Version, which went through consultation between August and October 2014. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to precisely gauge the extent to which The Unit’s response informed this second draft, which obviously had to address a much wider set of comments. Nonetheless, it is interesting to discuss the differences between the two versions in relation to the demands mentioned above.

The overarching emphasis of the Local Plan’s approach to Hackney Wick continued to be on developing a ‘balanced’ mix of uses and creating better connections within the area, and between the area and its surroundings. However, the Area Priorities included, at the top of the list, the following two: ‘Heritage-led regeneration and high-quality design: Ensuring that proposals for development are designed to respond to heritage assets, and where possible, restore and reuse those assets in a way that reinforces and celebrates their historic significance’; and ‘Creative and productive employment: Protecting creative and cultural industrial uses that support the continuation of Hackney Wick and Fish Island’s entrepreneurial and enterprising work culture’. This was connected to the introduction of two entirely new policies. Policy 1.1, ‘Managing change in Hackney Wick and Fish Island’, was introduced ‘to protect the exiting industrial and economic base of the Sub Area’, and established that proposals for development would be acceptable when they maintained ‘the overall amount of existing employment floorspace… including that used by creative and cultural industries and operating as low-cost and managed workspace.’ (LLDC 2014, 151). Policy 1.2, ‘Promoting Hackney Wick and Fish Island’s unique identity and appearance’, argued that development proposals should ‘reference and reinforce [the area’s] local distinctiveness and use it as a driver for economic, environmental and heritage-led regeneration. The overall aim is to deliver place-specific development that is well designed for its context’ (LLDC 2014, 152).

This seeming rapprochement of views between the two parties (the live/work issue notwithstanding), was partly confirmed by The Unit’s response to the Draft. Rather than questioning the overall approach, it suggested partial amendments, such as the affordability criteria specifications. It was also a more technical document, prepared with the support of the London Tenants Federation and Just Space[[10]](#endnote-11), which had organised several workshops with local groups to help them prepare their responses. These comments were submitted during the consultation period, and added to the evidence to be considered during the Plan’s independent examination by a designated Planning Inspector. The latter’s report set the parameters of the public hearing which took place in March 2015; it established, based on all the evidence submitted, the issues to be discussed and, based on the latter, the parties that were invited to speak.

The hearing took place over two weeks at the LLDC offices in Stratford. The Planning Inspector presided the meeting, sat on her own at one end of the table and surrounded by piles of documents. To her right sat the representatives from the LLDC and the developers; to her left were the community groups. Opposite the Inspector, completing the square arrangement, there were further seats, allocated to developers and/or community groups if needed. Only those sat around the table had the right to speak, which is awarded based on having submitted a written response during the consultation. The audience sat in rows of seats at the other end of the room, facing the Inspector. The hearing is a public event, anybody can attend – yet, there were never more than 10 people in the two days I was there. Hard copies of the Plan and the documents it referred to, amounting to several thousand of pages, were available for consultation on a table by the window.

[Fig. 4. The LLDC’s Draft Local Plan and supporting evidence, as seen at the public hearing. Source: the author.]

Each day was organised in morning and afternoon sessions, in which the questions raised by the Inspector in her Examination Report were addressed. As she explained on the first day, the aim of the hearing was to test whether the plan was ‘sound’,[[11]](#endnote-12) i.e. compliant with the regulations. This greatly delimited the scope of the discussion, which as I will show below was overall rather technical. In addition, only those parties whose comments had been selected by the Inspector had the right to sit on the table. I will provide an example that illustrates the dynamic, the discussion around Policy B.4, on affordable workspace.

Policy B.4: Providing low-cost and managed workspace (LLDC, 2014: 34)

Existing managed and low-cost workspace shall be retained where viable and where it complements wider plans for the area. New managed workspace and/or low-cost workspace will be acceptable where it:

1. Is flexible and able to meet the needs of various end users within B Use Classes;
2. Includes an appropriate management scheme secured through Section 106 Agreements; and
3. Does not result in a net loss of employment.

Low-cost provision will be supported and secured through Section 106 where:

1. Rents are up to 75 per cent of historic market rent for the previous year for the equivalent floorspace in the same area for an equivalent B Class Use;
2. It is secured at the current market rate for cultural or creative purposes;
3. It is subsidised to reduce the cost to the user for charitable purposes; or
4. It establishes robust management links with a registered workspace provider.

First to speak was Daniel Watney, representing local landowners and developers Roypark and Newstates Ltd. He argued that the policy wasn’t sound: first, it wasn’t clear how historic rent was calculated or what counted as workspace. Second, the demands placed on developers in terms of providing affordable workspace *and* affordable housing were simply too great – it was ‘impossible’ to do both, with the difference that good indicators existed for the latter, as well as a tried and tested methodology for delivering it. Hence, it was preferable that the Plan stuck to affordable housing in terms of planning requirements.

A Space Studios spokesperson made clear that they were in support of the policy, but with some questions. They wanted to suggest changes to the wording: ‘where viable’ and ‘acceptable where’ should be removed; instead, the onus should be on the developers to justify why workspace should not be retained. Point 3 should be amended and read ‘loss of employment *space*’ instead. The rent review should be conducted through an external expert, and not include office space. Space Studios also questioned the 75% of historic rent affordability criteria; they used 50% in their business model. Also the time period under consideration should be longer, 3-5 years, to minimise the risk of distortions. The policy didn’t currently address the question of the length of leases, but it was fundamental that the provision of affordable workspace was tied to longer contracts, no less than 20 years. Finally, links with established providers should be strengthened.

These comments and suggestions were echoed by representatives from ACME Studios, Mother Studios[[12]](#endnote-13), and Just Space. They spoke of great difficulties in securing longer leases, and the need to retain *existing* affordable workspaces – new built ‘affordable’ workspace was always 20-40% more expensive. Just Space also highlighted that the wording of points 4-7 was unclear: were these either/or criteria? If so, a loophole was being created, in which proposal could go through meeting only partially the criteria for affordability.

Watney spoke again, and argued that there was ‘a cost’ to this policy; there needed to be subsidies if it was to succeed. He also reiterated that the requirement should be to provide *either* affordable workspace or affordable housing in areas such as Hackney Wick.

 The LLDC responded that they considered the policy was sound and needed no changes. The representatives briefly addressed some of the comments above, first by emphasising that the role of this policy was to create ‘favourable conditions’ for the provision of affordable workspace. The inclusion of ‘where viable’ was a recognition that there would be circumstances in which retaining workspace would not be possible. Points 4-7 were indeed designed to provide flexibility of delivery. And with regards to the length of the leases, this was not something that the Local Plan had the remit to address.

Just Space responded that it was within the remit of the plan to consider how the proposed rezoning affected existing uses, and the length of leases clearly fell within this. Furthermore, the many caveats on the policy had the risk of raising expectations in terms of mix-use developments. Point 4 could not be optional; it had to be clear that it had to apply to all schemes.

The LLDC then reiterated that there was nothing they could do legally to address the length of leases – they were not in a position to dictate the terms of these private contracts. However, it would be possible to negotiate this with a willing developer through Section 106 agreements. Regarding the possible negative impacts produced by the policy’s flexibility, they wanted to highlight that this policy referred back to Policy B1 on the protection of employment – therefore, there was no such risk.

A thorough analysis of the public hearing is outside the scope of this paper, but I will offer some analytic observations to end this section. The main dynamic I observed during the hearing was the LLDC’s reluctance to engage with any of the arguments presented by either developers or community groups. As far as they were concerned, the Draft Plan was ‘sound’ and required no substantial changes. The other parties’ attempts to steer the document in the direction of their interests were by and large unsuccessful. This meant that the public hearing was not a space of negotiation, but rather a staging of disagreements. It was left to the Planning Inspector to decide, in her final report, whether any changes were needed.

Also of interest are the conditions of ‘participation’ in the public hearing. Not only there was hardly any public; more fundamentally, the right to participate was limited to those whose comments to the draft Plan had been selected as worthy of further discussion by the Inspector. Moreover, once on the table, successful ‘participation’ depended on being able to understand and deploy a highly technical language. Indeed, most of the people around the table had some kind of training that facilitated this: lawyers and planning consultants in the case of the developers and the LLDC; architects, community organisers or urban studies scholars in the case of the community groups[[13]](#endnote-14). It is a fact well documented in the planning literature that the very nature of certain of participatory mechanisms is exclusionary along class, gender and ethnic lines, clearly favouring the ‘habitus’ of well-educated professionals (see Imrie and Raco, 2003; Maginn, 2004; Dillon and Fanning, 2011). The ‘quasi-judicial’ (Raco and Flint, 2001) nature of both planning documents and the public hearing itself acted as a huge barrier to inclusive participation. As a participatory device, it was clearly a very limited exercise.

Following the public hearing, the Planning Inspector wrote her final report, in which only minor changes and clarifications were demanded of the LLDC. The Local Plan was subsequently adopted in July 2015. Policy B.4 was included without any changes.

**Conclusion: on the expertification of participation**

I will conclude by briefly teasing out some of the wider implications of the processes described above in relation to democratic politics. Community participation in the planning process has been led in Hackney Wick by The Unit, a self-appointed group (part of a larger interest group, the CIG) whose leverage has relied on their technical expertise and local knowledge. The Unit is not a representative entity and doesn’t aspire to become one (there are no elected members, for instance, or mechanisms to gauge how shared their ‘vision’ is amongst non-members). It is rather a group structured around common *interests* (in this case, broadly speaking, the sustainability of the cultural sector in the area), the defence of which takes the form of advocacy and lobbying*.* The Unit’s ‘successes’ in terms of, for example, changing the design of buildings, or introducing certain ideas in local planning policy, have depended on its capacity to convince others through expert discourse. It was their situated knowledge, as both local residents and architects/planners, that enabled the emergence of certain informal spaces of dialogue with the authorities and developers in the first place, and the defining quality that made them tactically convenient for those involved. To reiterate, in these technical forums the Unit did not speak on behalf of the local community, but rather advocated for a particular idea for the area they had developed and promoted. This is not to say that The Unit is entirely without legitimacy. I would argue that it has indeed developed a form of authority in practice, which emanates from its ability to articulate a ‘vision’ for the area, gather support for it, and use this to exert pressure on influential others. The ‘para-democratic’ structures generated in the process have, to be sure, contributed to steering both the discussion and actual development in Hackney Wick in a more community-oriented direction in relation to the goal of sustaining the area’s ‘ecology of affordability’. The Unit has indeed shown remarkable effectiveness as a kind of lobby. Furthermore, inasmuch as the ‘local community’ cannot be said to pre-exist the issues that brings it together, it can be argued that through its advocacy, The Unit has contributed to the enactment of *a* Hackney Wick community – ‘imagined’ (Anderson, 2006) or otherwise.

The dynamics within these ‘para-democratic’ structures stand in sharp contrast with the statuary participatory process associated with the Local Plan. Here, as described above, the involvement of the The Unit and other local organisations was mostly reactive and increasingly narrow. They had to respond to specific documents, and do it in the latter’s own terms. The scope of the consultation became more and more limited in each step of the process - to the point that, during the public hearing, the discussion of the Plan’s ‘soundness’ translated mostly into disagreements about phrasings and percentages. The ‘quasi-judicial’ (Raco and Flint, 2001) character of participation was apparent: in the trial-like mise-en-scène; in the division between those with the right to speak on one side of the room and a mute audience on the other; and in the expectation that the parties will adhere to a technical and precise language. In this sense, the official democratic participatory process proved to be more rigid and restricted than the informal, para-democratic structures mentioned above.

If, following Jacques Rancière (2014), we define democracy as ‘the government of anyone and everyone’, and understand that the democratic process is triggered when those who aren’t entitled to be part of public life (because they are not considered citizens, or because their concerns aren’t considered legitimate) demonstrate the arbitrariness of this partition and partake in what they have no part in, then the participatory process surrounding the Local Plan in Hackney Wick has been anything but democratic. On the one hand, The Unit’s reliance on expert knowledge and semi-closed meetings is, in and of itself, an inscription of entitlement and a barrier for incorporating ‘the part with no part’ (Rancière, 2014). On the other hand, the official democratic structures of participation, in theory open to all, are in fact effectively limited to those with the necessary expertise to navigate them.

The situation is no doubt tricky: by deploying technical expertise The Unit has been able to put itself in a position to make a difference – although at the cost of perpetuating the performance of politics as the domain of experts. Without their lobbying tactics, however, local residents and groups would be relegated to official participatory devices, which are extremely limited in scope and impact (see Dinham, 2005). Moreover, the ‘expertification’ of the participatory process I have observed in Hackney Wick seems to mirror the ongoing redefinition of local democracy in the area, apparent in the governance structures introduced to deliver the Olympic legacy (namely the LLDC). In both cases, traditional democratic concerns with representativeness, accountability and inclusion are secondary to notions such as effectiveness and efficiency (Raco, 2015).

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1. One of the particularities of the Hackney Wick context is that the discussion around affordability does not revolve mainly around housing, as it is most often the case, but around workspace. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. It is difficult to explain why the development of the Olympic Park hindered, rather that promoted, developers’ interest in Hackney Wick at this early stage. One hypothesis is that developers expected even bigger returns could be got after the Park was completed and the area possibly re-zoned. Or perhaps the demand for high-end housing was not strong enough yet to justify the risk. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. This is the latest in a series of QUANGOs specifically created to manage the urban transformation of the area in relation to the Olympics. The LLDC replaces the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) and the Olympic Park Legacy Company (OPLC), and also inherits the functions (and properties) of the London Thames Gateway Development Corporation (LTGDC), an experimental body introduced for the acceleration and coordination of the development of this part of East London. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. These AAPs were replaced in July 2015 by the LLDC’s Local Plan. The latter, however, was developed in continuity, rather than rupture, with previous planning legislation (LLDC, 2013: 32). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Originally his final project for an MA in Architecture at the RCA, *Affordable Wick* took the form of a 3 sq metre cabin, or ‘roaming workspace’, and a website. Through both outlets, current development proposals were made public and explained, as well as Brown’s own proposals for a grassroots model of development based on existing self build practices in the area. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Design for London was an experiment of the Labour GLA, which tried to introduce the idea of strategies and principles of design in the fragmented landscape of urban regeneration in London. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. I have, on various occasions, heard developers wield variations of this argument, according to which planning restrictions (e.g. maximum height) are directly responsible for the lack of affordable housing provision. The idea of developers spontaneously self-regulating in the interest of the common good seems to me to be, at the very least, implausible. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Space Studios, established in 1968, are one of the biggest artist studio providers in London. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Section 106 of the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act refers to planning obligations linked to a planning application decision. For instance, it may require a proportion of affordable housing, or a compensation for loss of open space. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. The London Tenants Federation is an umbrella organisation of social housing tenants associations. It sends delegates and provides support in many planning consultations and examinations (see http://www.londontenants.org/). Just Space ‘is an informal alliance of community groups, campaigns and concerned independent organisations’. Its aim is ‘to improve public participation in planning to ensure that policy is fairer towards communities’ (see http://justspace.org.uk/). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. The National Planning Policy Framework establishes that to be sound, a Local Plan should be ‘positively prepared’; ‘justified’; ‘effective’ and ‘consistent with national policy’ (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012: 43). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. ACME Studios and Mother Studios both run artist studio spaces in Hackney Wick. The former was established in 1972 and is one of the largest providers in London, together with Space Studios. Mother Studios is an independent organisation and runs one building in the area since 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. As a further, if anecdotal, example of this, I had to sit in for The Unit in one of the sessions and found it impossible to actually intervene. After hearing the articulate presentation of a Just Space colleague, in particular, I felt there was nothing I could possibly contribute to the discussion of a rather technical aspect of the Plan. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)