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# Seeing Olympic effects through the eyes of marginally housed youth: changing places and the gentrification of East London

JACQUELINE KENNELLY and PAUL WATT

*This paper examines the impact of the 2012 London Summer Olympics on low-income and marginally housed young people living in the London borough of Newham – one of six east London ‘Olympic boroughs’. Drawing on photo-journals created by the youth the summer before the Olympic Games were scheduled to begin (July 2011), the research makes use of photo-elicitation techniques in order to explore such Olympic-related impacts as gentrification, displacement and the loss of a sense of place for local young residents.*

## INTRODUCTION

Look, you see how it’s happening? There’s the Olympics. What’s going to happen to that one and that one and that one and that one? That’s all people live there. (Louie, Newham resident, age 18)

The Olympic Games are viewed most commonly through the eyes of spectators, either in the stadium or as part of a global television and online audience. Regarding the Olympics in this way, unsurprisingly, focuses the gaze on the physical prowess of young athletes from around the world. Perspectives on the Olympics shift, however, when viewed through the eyes of local populations. Issues of gentrification and the accompanying displacement of low-income communities come to the forefront, both of which are well-documented effects of this and other sporting mega-events (COHRE 2007; Porter et al. 2009; Watt 2012). This paper attempts to shift the lens through which the Olympics are viewed, away from the consuming spectators and towards the citizens of host cities themselves. In particular, we focus on the perspectives of low-income and marginally housed young people in the London borough of Newham – one of the six east London Olympics ‘host boroughs’ – through the use of photo-elicitation methods.

Gentrification refers to the transformation of previously working-class residential, consumption and leisure urban spaces towards an affluent middle-class usage, a process that is increasingly being driven by large-scale property development including state-led urban regeneration programmes (Smith 2002). Displacement ‘is a complex, multi-stranded phenomenon whereby residential upgrading also means low-income residents are pressurised out of their homes and neighbourhoods, either directly via housing demolitions, landlord evictions and rent increases, or indirectly via the class transformation of neighbourhood facilities such as shops’ (Watt 2012; see also Marcuse 1986; Slater 2006).

Photo-elicitation methods ‘in which the oral and the visual are used in tandem’ (Croghan et al. 2008, 345) have become an important, albeit not uncontroversial, tool in relation to research on children and young people in enhancing more traditional ethnographic methods (*inter alia* Croghan et al. 2008; Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi 2010; Yates 2010). In utilising photographs taken by youth themselves, our approach broadly follows that of Croghan et al. (2008, 347) in aiming ‘to gain insight into the young people’s perspectives, rather than imposing our preconceptions on them’. The project was not an explicit photographic-based gentrification project, unlike for example Suchar (2004), and as researchers, we did *not* direct participants to in any way ‘photograph gentrification’. Instead we simply asked them to document visually how they saw their local neighbourhood as *place*, i.e. as a ‘meaningful location’ (Cresswell 2004, 7), and what changes they thought the upcoming Olympics was bringing to this sense of place.

## CONTEXT AND RESEARCH METHODS

The east London borough of Newham has the youngest age structure in England and Wales; around 30% of

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Newham's population are children and young people under the age of 20 (LBN 2011). Newham also has the second most diverse population in the UK, with 70% of residents being non-white (ibid.). The 2008 School Census recorded 144 distinct languages spoken at home and Newham is thought to have the highest population of refugees and asylum seekers in London (ibid.). The employment rate stands at just 56.2%, the lowest of any London borough, and significantly below the London average rate of 62.7%; the unemployment rate for minority ethnic residents in the borough (14.5%) is more than double that of the white population (6.7%; ibid.). Not surprisingly, Newham has one of the highest rates of child poverty in London, and is one of the top 10 most deprived boroughs in London and nationally (ibid.).

In terms of housing, the rate of home ownership in Newham (32%) is below half the national average and renting – both social (32%) and private (35%) – is concomitantly high (2009 data; LBN and NHS Newham 2010). Demand for social housing in Newham is acute with over 31,851 households on the local authority housing waiting list in 2010, the highest figure by far for any London borough (NHF 2011). In addition, 3526 households were living in temporary accommodation, the second highest figure for any London borough (ibid.). Eight per cent of households accepted as homeless by the council during 2007–8 consisted of young people, whereas 59% of households had dependent children (LBN and NHS Newham 2010).

Such statistics indicate the broad parameters of the material and social deprivations that exist in this particular Olympic borough. However, in order to better understand the experiences of the young people who live there, we need to turn to their own photograph-based accounts of life in Newham as the Olympics approach. The authors conducted focus groups with 21 young people between the ages of 18 and 24 who were living in temporary supported housing in the borough of Newham in July 2011, one year before the Games began. Sixteen of the original focus group participants were interviewed individually to further probe their experiences and opinions regarding their local neighbourhood and the Olympics, as well as their housing and employment histories. Thirteen young people then completed the photo-journal section of the research in which they were asked to take photographs of their local neighbourhood showing the impact they saw the Olympics having on the area and their lives.

The camera-users reflected both the ethnic diversity and deprivation characteristic of Newham. Of the

13 participants (eight males and five females), five were immigrants from African or southern European countries. The remaining eight participants had been born and raised in Newham or in nearby east London boroughs; four were from either mixed-race or Black African-Caribbean backgrounds and four were white. All came from working-class families or families facing some form of social or economic disadvantage. Only two of the participants were in paid work at the time of the interviews (one was self-employed while another worked part-time in a shop), although most had some previous employment experience. At the time of the research, the 13 young people had been living in their current temporary supported housing for various lengths of time ranging from just a few days to three years. Prior to their present accommodation, the young people's housing histories were typically characterised by leaving the family home as a result of domestic conflict, followed by periods of living in short-term, insecure accommodation, including staying with friends and relatives, as well as rough sleeping in the cases of some of the young men (May 2000). Once the photographs were completed, most put them into photo-journals with captions, and then all (except one) participated in group interviews during which they discussed the process of taking the photograph and what each was meant to convey.

There is an analytical tension in using photo-elicitation methods between how photographs provide a 'voice' for the young people and how researchers direct, constrain and ultimately *produce* the photographic representations and their associated narratives (Croghan et al. 2008; Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi 2010; Yates 2010). In the case of our own project, we explicitly directed the young people towards taking photographs of the *places* they frequented rather than of people, either of those people they knew personally or strangers in the public spaces they were photographing. This meant that the photographs were mainly of the external built environment. Furthermore, the photographic project followed on from the interviews at which the young people had expressed their views of their neighbourhoods and the Olympics, in some cases quite forcefully. In this sense, there was an established context for the photographs as embedded in the young people's prior verbal responses, which they had shared with both the researchers and each other. Having noted these potential strictures, the photographs confounded our expectations in various ways, including how some of those who had been fairly positive about the Olympics in the earlier interviews produced more circumspect photo-journals. Such unanticipated findings 'underscore that the voices [of the young people] expressed can never be *reduced* to what we might wish to



FIGURE 1. Niamh.

make of them' (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi 2010, 264; our emphasis).

In the remainder of this paper, we draw on the young people's photographs and follow-up group interviews in order to explore the dominant themes that emerged.

**'IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN STRATFORD EASTFIELD' - DISRUPTIONS AND DISLOCATIONS**

For the young people, the message contained within the various regeneration projects in Newham, often Olympic-related, was that their existing neighbourhood was in need of renewal. Probably most of the youth would agree with this assessment and they were by no means uncritical of existing public spaces such as park areas (Figure 1), as well as leisure facilities such as 'grotty pubs'. At the same time, the means and modes by which 'renewal' was undertaken was often quite different from the priorities of the young people themselves.

One of the most publicly visible and immediate effects was the inconvenience caused by the construction, not only of the facilities themselves, but by the related development of transit, apartments and high-end shops and office space to let: 'basically, all the building work, not just at the station, but just in general, is quite inconvenient, noisy and disruptive for me personally' (Niamh, age 22). Beyond being inconvenient, the youth

experienced these construction projects as an impediment to their safety within the neighbourhood. As Tiffany (age 18) comments (Figure 2):

Because of these road works the traffic lights don't work properly as you can see, so there's now temporary ones which are quite small and with dangerous drivers, the drivers always drive dangerously up and down that road, anything can happen, I could step out onto the road and get hit by a car, and stuff like that, it's really bad.

One of the most prominent developments in the Stratford area is Westfield Stratford City, a high-end shopping mega-mall, which will form the *de facto* entrance to the 2012 Olympics for 70% of visitors to the London Games (Addley 2011). Although not opened at the time of the research, Westfield Stratford City was a source of comment for the youth; two even described it as 'beautiful' (Angela and Louie, albeit the latter somewhat ironically). There was also considerable bewilderment on the part of the participants who did not understand why their neighbourhood, which they knew to be one of the poorest in London, needed such a large, expensive shopping centre.

Furthermore, the name of the new mega-mall seemed to suggest a re-branding of their east London neighbourhood after the more affluent image of west London (an existing Westfield London mall was opened

in west London in 2008). This humorous conversation took place in one of the focus groups.

- Isaac: This is what I said. It should have been Stratford *East*field. It should have been Eastfield. That's the next thing. I'd soon turn that W this way, you know [indicating turning the W on its side to make an E] [group laughter].
- Labaan: It doesn't make sense. [Eastfield] makes sense. Eastfield, East London. It doesn't make sense, Westfield.
- Isaac: They hear Westfield, they'll think same old, Shepherds Bush [west London, yeah]. Westfield? What Westfield? The other one or in Stratford? [group laughter].

**'WHERE'S MY JOB?' - NON-EMPLOYMENT**

One of the claims made by Olympic boosters is that an Olympic Games will provide enhanced employment opportunities for local people. The development of the Westfield Stratford City mall has similarly been

promoted in this light, albeit with figures varying from 10,000 permanent new jobs being created, according to the Chairman of the Westfield Group, up to 18,000 predicted by London Mayor Boris Johnson (Kirka 2011). Newham Council has similarly emphasised how Westfield will benefit local residents in terms of providing employment and that 'it is set to exceed its target of securing 2000 jobs for local long-term unemployed' at the Westfield mall (Prynn 2011, 1). Nearly all of the participants in our photo-study were unemployed and several had applied for positions at Westfield. Although some were still waiting to hear at the time of the interviews, the results were generally negative, as illustrated by Jessica (Figure 3). As Freddie (age 20) said in an interview, 'they [Westfield] say they're hiring but several people in the focus group haven't heard and applied for them, is it a joke or something to look good through, are they actually hiring because I don't see no one getting a job that's tried'. Such cynicism that the 'promise' of jobs was essentially a public relations campaign is understandable given the scale of over-subscription for the available Westfield vacancies with, for example, 12,000 people interested in 800 John



no matter where  
in stratford we  
looked there was  
road works, Buildings  
and Shopping Centres  
having maintance.



FIGURE 2. Tiffany.



Huge new stores are opening in Westfield and are meant to offer many job vacancies. After applying voluntarily 3 times, wheres my job?

FIGURE 3. Jessica.



This is a small kiosk located in Stratford Station. Question is will it still be here for the Olympics or will it fall into the Poverty Trap like many others.

FIGURE 4. Jessica.

Lewis positions, 10,000 people applying for 550 Marks and Spencer's jobs, and 1400 applications for 150 Waitrose vacancies (Prynn 2011, 6).

In relation to employment, Isaac (age 24) took a photograph of his local Job Centre: 'this is where they give me the money [ . . . ] the Job Centre now, they've never offered a job'. This prompted a discussion about the jobs on offer in the area:

- Interviewer: What kinds of jobs do they advertise there?
- Isaac: They don't. There's not much job. Every week, it's the same old, same old. [ . . . ]
- Dumaka: You go to Job Centre. They promise you, maybe, a job. Now they're promising everyone a job in Westfield. So they make you do some course like retail, SIA [security guard certification], something. So you do that. You devote your time to that, get top grades, come out and they're like, 'sorry, now you've got to do some other stuff'. And maybe they ignore you for some time.

As Dumaka's comment indicates, rather than opportunities for employment the youth in our study encountered pressure to undergo constant training and re-training. Such engagement in training opportunities was linked to receiving social

housing, where the youth who appeared to be 'helping themselves' through taking up government training opportunities were more likely to be placed in scarce social housing. Ironically, these training opportunities did not seem directly linked to actual employment. As Paul Willis (1977, 127) noted over 30 years ago: 'It may well be argued that . . . the proliferation of various certificates for working class occupants is more about obscuring the meaningless nature of work and constructing false hierarchies and binding people into them ideologically, than it is about creating or reflecting the growth of more demanding jobs.' The experiences of participants suggest that Willis' analysis may still be relevant.

#### 'IT WAS SOMETHING LIKE £1.35 FOR A CHIP ROLL' - MARGINALISED CONSUMPTION

The closure of local shops (Figure 4) including in the older and much smaller Stratford Centre mall adjacent to the new Westfield mega-mall figured prominently in many of the photo-journals. The Stratford Centre mall contains inexpensive grocery and clothing stalls and discount shops as well as chain stores, and as such represented affordable shopping suited to the low incomes of the majority of Newham residents. The 'old' Stratford mall was a local haunt for the youth in our study and the sales signs and recent closures of some of its shops featured in interviews. As Jessica (age 19) said:

They probably are shutting down before the Olympics starts in Stratford as well, ever since they've been open the whole shop has been on a sale, you can buy anything in the whole shop for £10 or less. It's shutting down because it's not getting enough money.

The prevalence of cheap fast food places in the Stratford area and their importance for local youth emerged in the interviews and photo-journals (Figure 5). As Isaac mentioned, these places were emblematic of this part of east London ('endz' – a slang term for urban neighbourhood).

This is a chip shop where we go, literally like, that's affordable. Wings and chips £1.60, strip burger £1.20 with cheese. Do you know what I'm saying? This is east endz, I just took a picture.

Besides the loss of affordable shopping, the youth highlighted how other local shops and food outlets were being refurbished in anticipation of the Olympics' arrival with a concomitant increase in prices. As noted by Michael (age 19) even the local fast food outlets were not exempt from price inflation (Figure 6).

The participants discussed the degree to which prices had changed in the following exchange:

Michael: there's a fish and chip shop on the other side which used to be affordable but now it's expensive. [. . .] It used to be two separate shops, there used to be a cafe on one side, like a sandwich bar and on the other side it was a fish and chip shop, and they just knocked it all down it was under construction for a really long time and they re-opened and it's got a new name and new owners, new menu, new prices, I don't like, I ate from there and I really, really didn't like that. Before when it was cheaper the food was lovely I used to go in there and get chips, just chip rolls all the time, just their cod, sandwiches all the time the other side, even though they were separate shops, separate owners, they were both really nice shops and now it's really bad, really bad. It's not nice.



FIGURE 5. Isaac.



this is a cafe that has been reformed for the olympics this place used to be affordable for people on a low budget. Just one of many shops that are to expensive to go to.

FIGURE 6. Michael.

Interviewer: How much did the fish and chips used to be?

Michael: It was something like 1.35 for a chip roll, like chips in a roll.

Jessica: Yeah, for a chip roll it was like 1.35, it was really chip, saveloy and chips was about £1.99 for just saveloy and chips and it was something like £3.50 for cod and chips. Where usually we'd go somewhere like this place now and it's like £5.60 and you're like 'what?', do you know what I'm saying – £6.30 for cod and chips!

**'WOW, WHY DON'T THEY ALLOW US TO LIVE IN SOMETHING LIKE THAT?' – HOUSING**

The increase in prices of food and consumer goods is mirrored in an anticipated hike in housing costs. This would subsequently have an impact on who is able to

remain in the neighbourhood, pushing out those residents who cannot afford the increased rents.

As Jessica said:

Because if they [housing services] do find you a place in Stratford now, we're not going to be able to afford the rent because there's going to be a lot of tourists and that coming to stay for the whole period of the Olympics and then go, and so for that time I reckon rent is going to be high, hotel prices are going to go up and all that, so when we move out [of supported housing], if we move into Stratford, Plaistow or Maryland or any of the areas that are really close, it's going to be really expensive rent-wise, do you know what I mean?

The young people in the project were nominally permitted to stay in the temporary supported housing in which they lived for two years, although there were



several instances of people staying longer. They were only too well aware of the acute difficulties they faced in trying to access permanent social rental housing upon leaving temporary accommodation. Some directly reflected upon how the massive office, retail and residential developments in the local area – much of it Olympics-related – had no visible impact upon alleviating *their* housing needs (Figure 7). As Freddie said in another caption, ‘all these to let/sale offices could be affordable housing, “less homeless”’.

The large number of upmarket private housing developments in the area was a topic of considerable concern and contrasted strongly with their own straightened circumstances. Particularly striking for the young people was the degree to which the building of luxury flats reflected priorities that were not their own and from which they could gather no benefit, as Olu commented on a photograph of an advertisement for apartments: ‘this advertisement goes a long way from [existing] residents because it is simply unaffordable’.

Participants’ frustration is made palpable in light of 2009 statistics that note fully half (50%) of the social housing stock in Newham was designated as below Decent Homes Standard (LBN 2011).

As Olu commented further:

So I carried on walking and again seeing all these new apartments. They were really good looking, really good looking. I wish I was living in there. Like you see, this one’s all colourful. The contrast between where we live and this kind of building, you look at it and you’re like, ‘wow, why don’t they allow us to live in something like that?’ That could be a new block of flats for young people.

Several participants took photographs of their own living conditions (which we do not include here in order to protect confidentiality). They noted the distinction between the small rooms in which they lived and the spacious private flats being built for those who could

# HOW THE OLYMPIC'S AFFECTS MY AREA...

WHY NOT  
Rented  
Houseing

No rented  
Houseing  
More  
Homeless.



FIGURE 7. Freddie.



FIGURE 8. Olu.

I had to turn round to find a way into the park. Beyond me stood a series of new builds which seemed like a new city, beautiful to look at but far from the local resident's reality

afford them. As part of this contrast, the presence of untended rubbish in the area around where they lived was a prominent theme:

Louie: if you've got money for these [new developments], how come there's people still living like this [in their own housing]? And look at that? That's just disgusting. That's our house. That's our block of flats. But they've millions to spend on these. And when did they say they were going to the other bits? 2005. Well, they've got money to spend on these, but they can't improve even a little bit our houses.

## CONCLUSION

The young people's photo-journals illustrate how the Stratford area of Newham, near to the site of the 2012 Games, was visibly changing in ways that threatened to exclude them. The 'old Stratford' places that they were attached to, including shops in the small Stratford mall and the cheap fast food outlets, were closing down, relocating and upgrading; changes which threatened their minimal capacity to consume alongside their sense of rootedness. The 'new Stratford' places, in the shape of the Westfield mega-mall and the upmarket private apartments, spoke to an incoming population of 'the rich' and as such had little to do with their lives: they could not get any of the jobs on offer and had no hope of

ever being able to buy or rent the new private flats. Instead, they waited in a state of limbo for an offer of scarce social housing.

Unsurprisingly not a single interviewee used the term 'gentrification' (and nor did we as researchers). Nevertheless, their photo-journals illustrate the gentrification occurring in their local area under the aegis of the Olympics regeneration mega-programme as well as other Newham regeneration projects. It is worth remembering that 'sweeping statements about the winners and losers of gentrification are [. . .] difficult to make' (Davidson 2008, 2401), and certainly some of the young people in our study spoke about the changes in their area in a variety of ways including welcoming 'renewal' and associated increased 'opportunities'. At the same time, they discussed the prospect of being physically displaced via the increasing unaffordability of property, as well as what Davidson (2008, 2392) refers to as 'neighbourhood resource displacement' which involves shifts in neighbourhood resources, such as shops, and 'the increasing "out-of-placeness" of existing residents'. This indirect form of *displacement* is what Marcuse (1986, 157) describes as 'displacement pressure', which occurs 'when a family sees its neighborhood changing dramatically, when all their friends are leaving, when stores are going out of business and new stores for other clientele are taking their place [. . .], when changes in public facilities, transportation

patterns, support services, are all making the area less and less livable'. For the multiply deprived youth in our study, the displacement pressure circumstances that Marcuse describes were happening such that they were struggling to feel that the local area was still 'their place'. As Olu's photograph and caption shows (Figure 8), 'a new city, beautiful to look at' was being built, but that city was 'far from the local resident's reality'.

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