

We are the Ovaltownies...

This summer's London Festival of Architecture test-drove some ideas for a planning "Zone of Tolerance" in Tower Hamlets at The Oval, a run-down patch off Bethnal Green Road. Welcome to "Ovaltown", writes Lee Mallett

Eight firms of architects advised by four developers teamed up for an urban design critique to explore the concept of a "zone of tolerance" – a place where subject to minimal constraints, planning consent might not be required.

The aim was to encourage uses and forms that the team thought people might most like to see developed in this neglected, but potentially fantastic, piece of London's East End. This site is sandwiched between trendy Broadway Market and London Fields to the north-west, Regents Canal on its northern border, the art galleries of Vyner Street to the east and Columbia Road flower market to the south west. A perfect spot for regeneration adorned by Victorian gasometers and an eclectic collection of rundown industrial buildings, which has so far escaped redevelopment and antiseptic gentrification. The notion of "zones of tolerance" is not new – see enterprise zones, and Canary Wharf – but the idea has been given a new lease of life with recession and an increased interest in "mean-while uses".

Organised by developer Solid Space, regeneration adviser Urbik, and sponsored by engineers Alan Baxter Associates and RIBA London Region, the half-day charrette showcased architectural talent and suggested alternative ways of looking at the future of the Oval, rather than the predictable house-builder/ RSL/ affordable housing solution – which like Domestos kills all known unique characteristics.

If we want to avoid the homogenisation of parts of the City that people love, or which have characteristics worth preserving, perhaps it might be useful to allow more flexibility and less regulation? That's the premise behind a zone of tolerance – or as former GLA head of regeneration, Peter Bishop, puts it in his and Lesley Williams' book *The Temporary City*: "Perhaps...21st century cities need small and responsive 'zones of tolerance' scattered throughout their neighbourhoods. They could catalyze and nurture temporary activities and new enterprise, and offer stimulation and delight. They would be the twenty-first century city's 'erogenous zones'." In the Ovaltown zone of tolerance the organizers proposed no control of use provided the users promoted the functions of "well-being, living, learning, growing/eating, performing, working and waterfront uses". The exercise is also intended as a provocation to Tower Hamlets planners to start thinking a bit more creatively about what might happen to The Oval – a fantastic, forgotten piece of the East End.

KickOn – by Ash Sakula Architects, with Baylight Properties

Additional storeys, like annular rings in trees, are added when required to these perpetually growing structures – a form of low-cost organic development, using mass viral fund-raising, curated by a famous art gallery, with units in the scheme being awarded by community trustees. Like a tree, the forms grow

from the base upwards, with the whole structure being slowly jacked up, at a rate that might vary according to demand, and economic or cultural trends. Flexible, large floor areas can accommodate the gamut of East End uses, while a new footbridge increases footfall. "The Oval will change all by itself and within a few years will have gone from a largely monocultural light industrial and storage zone to a neighbourhood of jobs, homes, shops, restaurants and bars. Locals will be proud and visitors will be attracted in droves."

Sculpting the Void – by Mossessian & Partners and Solid Space

If Sir Christopher Wren had had his way after the Great Fire London "would be more like Paris, frozen in time and not the dynamic environment defined by people, owners and builders..." that it is. "The unit of all owners, as a collective, won over the King's rational architect vision by simply having their property rebuilt as it was, and allowing the next generation to add, subtract, amend as required."

Mossessian's plan assumes a similar response from existing owners, but collectively distributes what are currently "voids" found around the whole site into new development forms that accommodate appropriate uses, satisfying owners and collective requirements simultaneously – rather like the planning system is supposed to. By "sculpting" or measuring the voids and incorporating them into the development equation as potential amenity or useful space, these elements can be used to redistribute use and public amenity and have a more valuable presence, rather than being ignored.

Planning Committee 0 – Ovaltown locals 1, by Karakusevic Carson Architects and Urbik

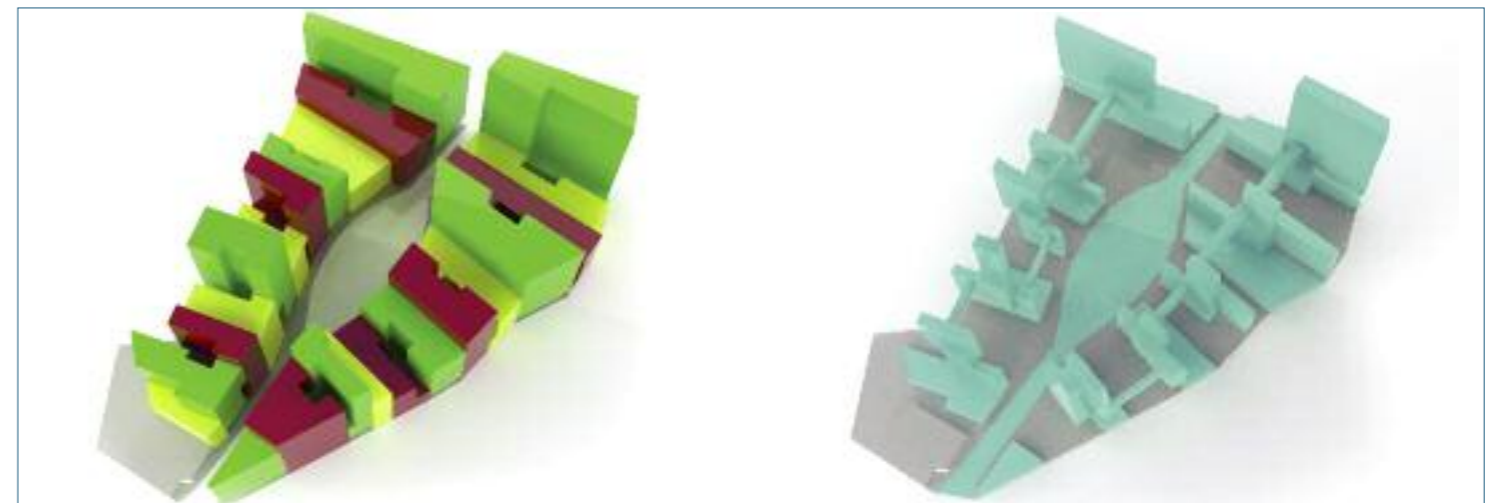
For more than 15 years the Oval has constantly been tested by developers and housing associations who wish to turn the light industrial site into a profitable development. Various constraints have made this difficult – notably the gasholders. The creative vibe of this part of town though has seen some of the spaces at the Oval start to be reinhabited.

This proposal cranks up this trend to create a new hub to rival those of already overcrowded Broadway Market and Shoreditch. New routes are established through the site, with existing buildings refurbished and new small scale interventions made to preserve the best and insert new businesses – but the big stuff that pays for all of this is major development on nearby sites to the west which are at present relatively underused and low density light industrial uses.

The creative infill uses, like retail pods, a micro-brewery, cafes, a market, are given the breathing space they need to mature without eradicating what's good about the Oval's form and its characterful buildings. It needs a more collective approach to landownership.



THIS IMAGE: KickOn – by Ash Sakula Architects, with Baylight Properties
BELOW: Sculpting the Void – by Mossessian & Partners and Solid Space
BOTTOM: The Moot Room – by Rogers Stirk Harbour with Baylight



The Moot Room – by Rogers Stirk Harbour with Baylight

This is not a scheme. It is an idea about how the local community could fund its own decisions about its own future. It is inspired by the Moot Hall, a neutral setting providing a platform for the debate of local issues.

The materials for such a facility have been delivered to the centre of the public space at the heart of the Oval and it is up to locals to get on with it –

a not wholly unrealistic interpretation of the new Localism Act's intent in establishing the means for local to create their own Neighbourhood Forums, and plans.

"Our Zone of Tolerance is one in which local people can decide their own future, rather than have it decided for them traditional regeneration – a process which kills with its embrace". Indeed. >>>





Ovaltown Zone of Tolerance – by 5th Studio and Urban Splash

Part of Ovaltown’s fascination is because it is a significant spot that remains available to plan, a part of town onto which a potential future can be projected. But the danger is that with the decommissioning of the gasholders an “entropic slide” results in the aforesaid tedious housing monoculture, and land ownership “atomised into a thousand mortgage securities”. Well perhaps not quite that many – but minute individual ownerships do tend to preclude change in future, and herald a long-lasting stasis.

Well here’s an idea: what land ownership mechanisms might prevent an alternative to entropy and stasis? What about the sui generis precedent of the institution or precinct that might allow a university, for example, to develop a range of built fabric – from a new home for the Household Cavalry, a power station, an “Albert Square”, and a massive creative industries undercroft, all set within a new inhabited ‘wall’ surrounding the scheme. A new, walled mini-city within a city. Hey, isn’t that the Barbican...?

Ovaltown Roulette – Platform 5 Architects with Urban Splash

Plot the city’s lifecycle in section on a graph and what do you see? A Golden Age of creative urban regeneration towards the beginning of the gentrification time-line (towards the left on the graph) – think Shoreditch in the late 1980s, early 1990s. Young, groovy people reinvent forgotten space before putting down roots, then moving on to be replaced by gentrifiers and media businesses and a different generation of developers and investors, from another part of town.

This roulette proposal investigates a system for perpetuating the Golden Age, one that actively discourages market-led development and avoids the stagnation caused by the Use Classes Order. Allowing the “brave, transient community to invent, innovate and play”. Hooray!!!

Land and buildings are ‘taken into socially-minded ownership’, then segmented into small bite-sized bits. Random uses are allocated, then let to users and residents. After three years, the uses change randomly and it’s all change.

The wheel has spun! Fait vos jeux, Mesdames et Messieurs!

Democratic Republic of Ovaltown – McDowell+Benedetti with Urbik

High values that drive regeneration also kill unique character, drive out locals and replace multi-uses with large-scale single use, and often poor design and materials. The character of places like Ovaltown depends on their ability to constantly change and adapt.

But individual owners only currently have two choices; develop their own plots, or sell up to a bigger developer. Value however comes from adding density, so how can smaller developers, who bring diversity, tap into the returns of big development?

Multiple existing owners could combine to form a development trust that overall could benefit from higher density with stakeholders buying air-plots, or a share in the trust. Stakeholders collectively could decided on the



ABOVE: Ovaltown Zone of Tolerance – by 5th Studio and Urban Splash

amount of spaces and uses.

Stakeholders – the community neighbourhood forum – could negotiate the overall scale with planners, a tolerant framework, but the community-led approach might lead to an overall increase in density and flexibility of uses that might not otherwise have arisen. All for one, and one for all.

Oval Space @ Ovaltown – by ORMS and Solidspace

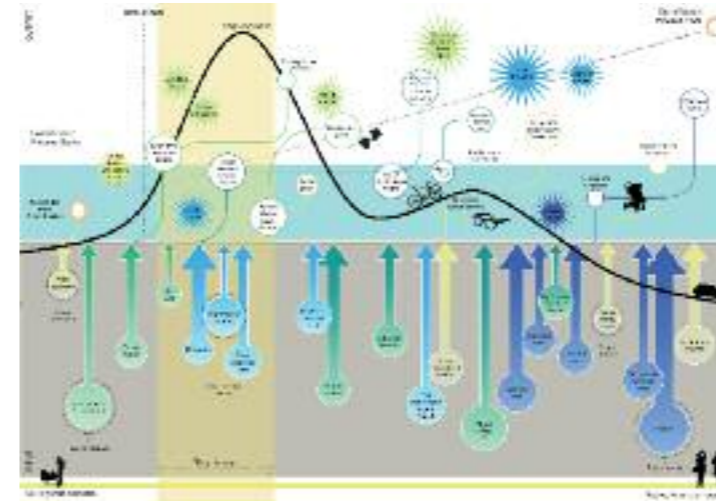
The imminent de-commissioning of the gasholders frees up the wider site for development, perhaps in the way originally intended and indicated by the The Oval’s community-inspired, inclusive form.

Oval Space retains the buildings on the site’s perimeter and introduces new cultural and community uses at its heart, with some key sites identified for new commercial development within that framework.

A limited number of buildings will be demolished, the oval form is reinterpreted at varying scales by the intersecting circles of the Oval and the gasholders, three new spaces house a pop-up events arena, a theatre in the round and new public space.

Perimeter sites can be more intensively developed to satisfy commercial demand and protect the heart of the site, while subsidising new affordable housing.

New ingredients for an enhanced community could include an expanded canalboat basin, infill of left over spaces for local business use, allotments, opportunities for co-operative housing. A new city quarter. ■



TOP: Ovaltown Roulette – Platform 5 Architects with Urban Splash
 ABOVE: Democratic Republic of Ovaltown – McDowell+Benedetti with Urbik
 LEFT & BELOW: Oval Space @ Ovaltown – by ORMS and Solidspace

