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Minutes, Meetings and 'modes of existence': navigating the bureaucratic process of urban regeneration in East London

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Inspired by Latour's aim to restore balance to the anthropological project by exoticising the artefacts and procedures of so-called 'modern knowledge', this essay gives an ethnographic description of emergent processes of knowledge production in the context of the planning and development of urban regeneration in London. Bureaucratic meetings are described as part of the organizational infrastructure that enables the crafting of new urban futures, and it is argued that, because the making of reality is always seen to be forward moving, there is a need, as in navigation, to plot a course. The essay focuses on the subversive potential of informal meetings, and argues, more generally, that meetings are the materially social, and affectively technical, manoeuvres that make possible direction-finding, and contestation about the way forward..

Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is
dehumanized, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from
official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and
emotional elements which escape calculation.

Weber 1968: 273

The haunting: East London, November 2014

Mark looks gaunt this time: he is worn down and worn out: weary with battle. One won. One lost.

On my way to meet him, I see the evidence of his victory: an open space – bare earth, and black topsoil – in plots. Underneath darkening skies, a crop of lonely looking sheds stands out, brand-new, incongruous against the cluttered backdrop of more usual urban forms. Faded high-rise council flats, bright new apartments, and a hotchpotch of Victorian industrial buildings make a skyline for the ground. And, leading the eye away, the tangled traces of infrastructural flows – canal, railway, and road.

The significance of this – this scratch of earth – is not lost on me. As the train I am travelling on goes by, I want to stand up, cry out loud, declare Mark's victory to fellow-passengers: 'He did it; they've done it: they won. Look at the sheds! Look at the plots!' But I say nothing, and sit quietly, containing my excitement as the train passes, and I look backwards, until the space is out of sight.

When I see him, I want to celebrate with Mark, but for the moment, he thinks only of the defeat he has suffered. Trying to make sense of it, he talks it through, and we walk, in a light rain.

The minutes

Mark is meticulous: the minutes of each meeting of the Manor Garden Allotment Society are kept carefully in individual, transparent wallets, and all of them are contained, in date order, in bright Lever-Arch files whose weight substantiates the passage of time: duration marked, one gathering after another. In amongst other

business, a fight is documented: the evidence of a long struggle. Seven years, and counting ...

Mark wants me to see everything: to bear witness. Not to take sides, but to explain, and make public. He is a good secretary: exceptional, consumed by an order of business that far exceeds the administration of the day-to-day activities of the Society. Increasingly complex technicalities make it hard for Mark to keep pace with, and adapt to, the evolution of the conflict that members are engaged in, but he is relentless, determined, in a voluntary capacity, to serve the members well, manage his day job – crafting the wooden containers in which priceless works of art are transported from London galleries around the world – and, meanwhile, to tend his own plot, and make time for family life. His efforts are heroic.

To be sure, the usual, summarized account of the management of the decision-making process is there, the evidence recorded of the standardized repetition of rules that, as if by magic rite, allows the Society, comprising eighty-one members, to know itself as a single entity, a collective body, acting as if one (Schwartzman 1989). However, what strikes me is the personalization which punctuates the standardized formality of the minutes: ghosts of dead members hang about the pages, and, in between the lines, a lament about insufferable displacement from the land. For example, the spring 2015 reports: ‘A minute’s silence was held in tribute to Reg. Hawkins who passed away recently. President remarked on how Reg. had been one of MGS’ [Manor Gardens Society’s] longest standing members, and noted the excellence of his allotment gardening’. Similarly, at the Extraordinary AGM in the winter of 2013, to discuss how to respond to confirmation of the breaking of the promise by the London Borough of Waltham Forest to provide land for the allotment-holders within the Olympic Park, priority is first given to respect for deceased members:

A minute's silence was held in tribute to Pat Lemming who passed away recently. Chair remarked on how Pat had always put the Society's survival at the forefront of the agenda. Pat will be remembered for her stoic support of the Community, and for carrying the sound of laughter wherever she went. RIP Pat.

And, at the AGM, in the autumn of 2012, when first mention is made of the notification that the planning obligation may not be honoured by the London Borough of Waltham Forest to provide 2.1 hectares of allotment land at Eton Manor in the northeast of the Olympic Park, Mark notes in the minutes that the Manor Gardens Allotment Society 'had fought for five years to be relocated back into the Legacy Park as per the approved plans and through our own consultations had a Manor Gardens Society members' mandate which cited return to the Park, in 2.1 hectares as mandate'. Mark notes in the minutes that in a meeting with Waltham Forest he had 'expressed no room for negotiation', and, immediately after, he records the sad passing of Charlie Wilbourne and Ron Webb, 'both of whom will be remembered as seasoned members of our gardening community for many years. RIP'.

Because we, too, are modern subjects of the polite procedures of congregation, we all of us understand these rules, and embody the stylization of the elite about what constitutes proper conduct in social gatherings (van Vree 1999). *Of course*, people take it in turns to speak, discuss one issue at a time, hold back from personal attack, and, in formal meetings, where collective goals, and ways of achieving them, are to be decided upon, they assume, on matters about which there is disagreement, that a majority vote will be taken whose outcome is to be accepted, in good faith, as the shared will of those assembled. In this way, modern meetings, in contrast to the proceedings of the early

modern and medieval courts that preceded them (Elias 1983 [1939]), make parliamentarians and good citizens of us all. Through the cultivation of democratic processes of self-inhibition, meetings contain the time-consuming chaos of contestation, and disorganized discussion, so as to manage, non-violently, the social process of decision-making as the proper expression of a polite society organized in terms of civility and rational efficiency (van Vree 1999).

Ideally, by leaving out the personal details of who said what to whom, minutes of meetings purify the written record. Emotional content is eliminated from the description of the meeting; so, too, are the subjective vagaries of interpersonal dynamics. The record shows, instead, a summarized set of collectively agreed decisions about those specific issues which, at any time, preoccupy an assembled group whose members have in common shared goals linked to a specific environment external to the group itself, which, in this case, is the land – the plots, the garden allotments.

On this basis, anyone inspecting the minutes ought to be able to conclude not only that those assembled, through the documentation of meetings, are held accountable, retrospectively, for what they decide, but also that under the same conditions it comes to appear to be the case that any other reasonable group of people would have reached the same decisions. The meetings, then, constitute the Society – here, the Manor Gardens Allotment Society – as a collective body, a single entity, and the minutes, through a de-personalizing process of purification (Latour 1993), ideally ascribe to that entity the modern capacity to act objectively.

‘Meeting-ization’

What van Vree (1999) describes as the history, in Europe, of the ‘meeting-ization’ of society is also, then, the objectification of society; it is part of what made possible the formation of the nation-state as a certain kind of territorial amalgamation. The meeting, as the means for the standardization and formalization of what counts among citizens as appropriate decision-making behaviour, proliferated throughout an integrated territory (as the state assumed the monopoly over legitimate violence), and this enabled the regularization of procedures for the non-violent adjustment of citizens’ actions and intentions towards each other. As they learnt novel methods for the negotiation of conflict, and adapted to the conditions for the possibility of more peaceful interdependence, and coexistence, citizens came to negotiate conflict collectively, in new ways. In essence, van Vree (1999) outlines how, under conditions of nation-state formation and the democratization of the political process, words became the new weapons, meetings the new battlegrounds, and the sword and the dagger (among the general population at least) were laid to rest.

Following Thompson (1966), van Vree (1999) shows how, during industrialization in Britain, the distribution of the meeting through all classes of society, as the most effective and most acceptable means for the organization and government of collective efforts of all kinds, led to a proliferation of places for the working classes to meet and do the work of transforming politics for themselves: for example, in industrial work associations, guilds, unions, and societies of all kinds. This development of a ‘meeting class’ implied not just the ‘civilization’ of certain sections of the working classes through reform of the means for assembly, but also, overall, that citizens’ conflicts with the state itself were more likely to be civil, polite, and especially non-violent. Thus, the civilizing process (Elias 1969 [1939]) with respect to the manners cultivated in modern meetings not only militates against violent resistance

(making violence one of the most exceptional phenomena in contemporary times), but also acts to constitute society as the object of an integrated set of collective actions that, throughout the nation, are constantly in the process of being negotiated.

The case of the Manor Garden Allotment Society is illustrative of this: in its battle against the state it has behaved impeccably – too politely, some might say – and the meeting has undoubtedly been the means for the containment of the violent emotions generated by the conflict. This is true both within the Society itself, where meetings have contained the endless contestation among members about how to proceed, and without, in the meetings with state authorities whose actions towards the land of the allotments have rendered uncertain the common future towards which allotment-holders had been working for almost a century. The meeting is seen, in this light, to be a mechanism of adaptation as negotiations are made between different organizations about conflicting actions concerning the same object of concern – the land – and unequal power relations are thereby made manifest in the moment-by-moment materialization of the decision-making process.

The Manor Garden allotments

I am amazed and tell Mark, straight away, about my interest in the souls of the dead that inhabit the pages of the minutes. I have no intention of undermining his skills as secretary, but there is no denying it: the minutes are suffused with emotion. The lament for the land is inescapable; it creeps through the lines like ivy through concrete, and makes of the minutes a surreal exercise in rational accounting.

Impressing upon me the degree of connection to place that has been forged

through three generations of devoted cultivation and participation in the social life of the gardens, Mark explains that deceased allotment-holders' ashes were often scattered on the land. A lifetime of dedicated cultivation and involvement in an intimate community of 'diggers' meant that the very substance of the gardeners – as persons – became inseparable from the soil. Unsurprisingly, many of the 'old timers' had chosen the allotment, and, more specifically, their own plot, as their final resting-place.

It is no surprise either that the displacement of the Society from the land of the Manor Gardens to make way for the construction of London's Olympic Park in the East End of London, and the fight to hold the authorities to their political promise to reinstate the allotments after the Games, have been experienced by the gardeners as a deeply traumatic and disorientating series of events. A gardening couple, now restaurateurs, described their impending loss, in 2007, as follows:

We needed courage to find our allotment for the first time. The vast area of Victoria Park has a dusty bleakness, unusual for London. If bicycling there, we have to keep away from the kerb, to avoid broken glass and rusty metal. The smell of burnt cow hair from the meat processing plant adds to the atmosphere. The only clue that there is any gardening life in the area is the wild rocket pushing out of the cracks in the pavement. Beside the bus depot, out of sight of the road, is a barbed rusty gate, behind which things change dramatically.

You can't help but gasp when you open the gate and find yourself standing at the foot of a 70-metre bridge high over the river, looking across to a bank of wild plums, elderflower and blackberries. There is not a building in sight, just the odd proud shed. Here are the

land and the community that have been so important to us over the past seven years.

When we think of our first season on the allotment, we are reminded of cooking for friends and family when we were young. Bright-eyed, eager, we spent vast amounts of time preparing food, with very mixed results. In our modern lives, whether growing our own vegetables or cooking elaborate meals, it just doesn't add up. It's irrational. But why does it give us so much damn pleasure?

The first person we met was our neighbour Hassan: kind Mr Charisma, who was to become our friend and mentor. He introduced us to other people on the allotment – Cypriots, Kurds and Turks. We soon realized that we were among special people who thought differently about growing and could teach us much about cooking too. Our eyes were opened to things such as frying green tomatoes, cooking artichoke leaves, braising wild poppy leaves, and much more. The Eastern Mediterranean was alive in Hackney Wick, [East London].

Last year our crops suffered an unusual amount of damage from rabbits. We were puzzled as to the reason, but then it clicked: the Olympics were coming. Like a scene from *Watership Down*, the bulldozers were encroaching and the rabbits were escaping and settling where they could. By the time you hear about this our century-old allotment will have been replaced by a vast, concrete pathway. We will have been moved on ...

So now we must start afresh, scratching around in a new patch

of earth (Clark & Clark 2007: vi).

Sparkling a fierce resistance in the gardeners, the imperative for them to move was first fought in spectacular fashion: Friends of the Earth made global the local support for a campaign called Life Island. The fight was taken to the High Court, and the argument was made that the gardeners had every right to remain on the land, because the soil they worked was given to them as a gift.¹ The land was inalienable, and, therefore, not to be bought at any price. That is to say, the allotments were not translatable in commodity terms: the gardeners were, literally, in their persons inseparable from their plots. It is no surprise, then, that the emotional traces of the violent upheaval to their lives caused by displacement from the land could not reasonably be purified from the minutes, or that, in general, decisions pertaining to inalienable objects, land and materials, do not lend themselves easily to bureaucratic procedure, which depends on ‘calculable rules without regard to persons’ (Weber 1968: 269).

Finally, after a protracted and high-profile battle against eviction, it was agreed that the allotments would be destroyed, but they had to be reinstated somewhere in the Olympic Park after the Games were over. The promise, materialized and made law as a planning obligation, was that after temporary removal, during the Games, to a site north of the Olympic Park called Marsh Lane, all the plot-holders would be re-allocated, by December 2014, to a new, larger plot on 2.1 hectares of land inside the boundary of the Olympic Park. As time went on, the 2.1 hectares was divided into plans for two separate allotment sites, one in the south and one in the north of the park, at Eton Manor, a site significant to many of the diggers because land here was also gifted to them, at the beginning of the twentieth century, for sporting facilities, playing fields,

and club houses.

November 2014: Pudding Mill Lane

Following the curve of the path around the Olympic Stadium, commenting, without malice, on the creative planting of the borders and canal sides, and the tasteful preservation of an old iron bridge over the canal, Mark is ready to take shelter from the rain. Over coffee, he finally speaks of his victory, a victory of sorts for the Society. First, he pays homage to the diggers, the old timers:

These guys, they'll turn up a piece of land alongside a railway to grow their spuds, you know, they accommodate, and that's one of the great things about allotments: they're kind of marginalized lands, but people make good value from it. They will recover a piece of land and make something really good from it, and that's kind of like, you know, an old cockney kind of thing: all the old fellas are saying, you know, give us a bit of land to scratch around in and we'll make it work, we'll make it great.]/ex[

Dedicated to these 'old fellas', and determined to make good on the bitter disappointment of their displacement, Mark describes the positive experience of collaborative design at the new allotment site, called Pudding Mill Lane, just inside the southern perimeter of the Olympic Park. He describes, in joyful terms, the outcome of his long-term liaison with Vincent Bartlett, a planner from the Olympic Park Legacy Company (OPLC), which was the organization tasked by city and central government

with planning and delivering an Olympic legacy for London from the 2012 Games. Mark's account complicates the typical story of a straightforward Olympic land grab, and the intimate life of the state (Bernstein & Mertz 2011) is revealed in the articulation between allotment society and city government, which transforms the local scale of allotment cultivation into a larger story about London's economic growth.

Once they [the OPLC] had come up with the first designs I went back to them, and I set out a plan of action, and sent it to Vincent, saying, 'We've done really well so far and we're really pleased especially with ...', you know, it was still up in the air, they didn't want to talk about Eton Manor, but Pudding Mill Lane they wanted to talk about, and I said, 'We were really pleased that we seemed to be moving in a direction that's really positive, people are starting to get excited about it. I've got this idea of making it even better', and I told them the results of my survey and I had a plan of how they could incorporate that information into making things better.

Vincent immediately arranged for me, and Pat Burcham [one of the old timers], to go down and meet with him. I cleared that at our AGM with the broader Society. They all felt that was a really good idea. I said that I would take it forward and they agreed to that. I went to the designers and the main guy that was doing the design, this German fella, Christof Brintrop [from LDA Design, the landscape architects commissioned by the Olympic Delivery Authority], really good listening designer, I explained to him what I'd done and he was so excited about it, and he was saying, kind of like, 'the raw material that you have to design something like a set of

allotments”” which he’s never done before, he said, ‘it suddenly realized some kind of clarity for him, because he’s got real data to work with’.

I gave him the information, I talked to them about percentages and land use and stuff, they went away, they came back and they put all of those changes in, they changed the plots’ sizes, they put bends in the path to give it more character, just subtle little things that I know make a big difference, so I was really pleased with that. And when we went back to the meeting, where they had begun to incorporate those ideas into the designs, I can remember a guy from the Olympic Park Legacy Company Parks Design team said, ‘You can’t change the spine path at Pudding Mill Lane’, and Pat said, ‘It’s ok, it’s not that bit we want to change, it’s what’s going on around it’. The guy from Park Design said, ‘That’s fine’. Pat then said, out of interest, ‘Why can’t you change that, is it to do with some kind of planning regulation about what’s on the plans?’ And he said, ‘No it’s cos they’ve already built it’.

We had no idea they’d already started construction at this point, and me and Pat looked at each other and Pat said to them, ‘You mean you’ve started it?’ They said, ‘Yeah’. We said, ‘Well, what have you done?’ And they said, ‘Well, we’ve put the footprint in, we’ve put the hard standing in, and’, he said, ‘we’ve dug down, we’ve put the path in’. And, it was just so lovely: Pat Burcham, who is this big bruising East End boy he’s one of those guys that’s got a silent laugh, and it’s all in his body kind of thing, and there were tears coming down his face, just the joy, seeing this realization. That year his grandfather had died; he was the guy, he’s on the plot next to mine, and last year there would have been his grandfather,

his mum and dad, him, his brother, his brothers' kids, four generations working the plot, so for someone like him ... He was the guy who used to play rugby for the major, Arthur Villiers, for Eton Manor and stuff like that, so it was such a big deal for him, so joyful.]/ex[

Here, Mark describes how profound cynicism about the intentions of the city government and the Olympic planners turned to delight among the allotment-holders as it became clear that at least part of the promise – not just to reinstate, but to increase allotment provision, and for it to be resituated within the boundary of the Olympic Park – was seen to be coming to fruition. Not only was part of the land being made available, as promised, but the planning and design of the site were being carried out in a genuinely collaborative way, through informal meetings, with plenty of scope for reflection and the expression of emotion. And the diggers themselves, and their spokesperson, Mark, were treated as experts, with the German designer acknowledging his own inexperience, and Vincent, the government planner, fulfilling his commitment to the allotment-holders, working with them to realize their vision of twenty-first-century allotments to be proud of.

In contrast to the earlier mass mobilizations of the Society, Mark's success at Pudding Mill Lane marks a new kind of political action. It takes the form of years of painstaking work, of cultivating a behind-the-scenes, informal relationship with the planner inside the OPLC. The dramatic material transition in the gardeners' tools of trade, and particularly Mark, as secretary/spokesperson/activist, could not be more pronounced: from spade and hoe to documentary and diplomatic tools, Mark has acquired a differentiated set of skills essential to the cultivation of successful political manoeuvres in the complex context of urban planning in London.

The personable relationship between Mark and Vincent allows for a properly collaborative process, one that recognizes the emotive context in which the OPLC is operating and that arrives at an effective decision for all concerned precisely because the process of planning through relationship-building has led to an affective and therefore meaningful outcome. This is not to say that relations between Mark and Vincent have always been harmonious: Mark is the first to admit that Vincent has, in his dealings with the allotment-holders, soaked up his fair share of anger, resentment, and frustration. What matters is that Mark met in Vincent a planner capable of and interested in listening to, properly consulting with, and defending the interests of the Society. Here, Vincent is to planning and the state what Mark is to gardening and the Society: a leading figure with a genuine sense of personal responsibility and a strong sense of public service duty. It is this mirroring of intention (Robbins 2012) that has allowed for the productive articulation of the two organizations, and the successful forging of a relationship between two men, who are now responsible for growing a new piece of city together.

The effectiveness here of the informal meeting is significant: decisions about the future are still being made, conflict resolution is still happening, but there is the potential, outside of official protocol and consequent documentation, for the outcome of the meeting to be something other than a rationally calculable, ‘objective’ determination; it is, rather, in this case, the obviously relational product of an ongoing, intersubjective, highly emotive, but nevertheless non-violent negotiation about the best course of action to take. This more experimental and innovative way of working says something, too, about the Olympic Park Legacy Company as a new kind of governance organization, one that is both committed to relationship-building with ‘local communities’, and genuinely, in some work teams, like Vincent’s, interested in urban

‘regeneration’ not as simply ‘top-down’ or ‘trickle-down’, but as a potentially transformative tool for change in post-industrial neighbourhoods. Perhaps it is because it stands outside of the usual bureaucratic structures of public sector governance that the OPLC is able to occupy a transitional space – somewhere between an anti-bureaucratic private sector disinterest, and the procedural obsessiveness common to newly formed organizations – and individuals like Vincent are able to manoeuvre in the interstices between what is in the Company’s best interest and what is for the public good. Others in the organization describe this kind of manoeuvring with some pride as being able to operate like ‘ghosts in the machine’.

Eton Manor

Reflecting with Mark on why he has not enjoyed the same kind of success with the second allotment site in the north of the Olympic Park at Eton Manor, in relation to which he feels utterly defeated, I suggest to him that the explanation might partly be to do with the lack of development of any personable relationship with key players behind a very different set of city government scenes. Moreover, I argue, the loss of global attention to and support for their cause since the original mass mobilization with Friends of the Earth must also have been significant to the Society.

I ask Mark to explain what has gone wrong at Eton Manor, and he relates how the complicated issue of land ownership has got in the way: the Olympic Park Legacy Company does not own the land in the north of the park where the second allotment site was always supposed to be located. Lea Valley Regional Park is the owner, and the land is located in the London borough of Waltham Forest. Out of all the four host

Olympic boroughs – Newham, Hackney, Tower Hamlets, and Waltham Forest – Waltham Forest always felt short-changed by the legacy plans, and, so it seems, was never properly supportive of the idea of hosting half of the re-located allotments. As time went on, the powers-that-be at Waltham Forest began to make clear that they did not want their small legacy gain to be compromised by having to yield land, now growing in monetary value, to community purpose. On the contrary, the stated aim became to create a globally significant Olympic legacy in Waltham Forest, with a focus on sports provision centred on the elite provision of cycling facilities at the Velodrome. And so, without also irreparably damaging their relations with the Olympic Park Legacy Company, who were all the time pressuring Waltham Forest and Lea Valley Regional Park to ‘meet their planning obligations’, the planners at Waltham Forest quietly began to alienate the allotment Society from the proposed site.

Mark describes how, without a significant ally behind the scenes at Waltham Forest, he was drawn into and, eventually, lost in the labyrinth of planning decisions. Isolated and exhausted, he felt powerless in the face of legal technicalities, and frustrated by the endlessly evasive manoeuvres of the authorities. I suggest, too, that Waltham Forest has been successful in its campaign against the Society precisely because it has been able to use the bureaucratic process of official meetings to make its planning decisions appear to be objective. Over time, the minutes have effectively erased from the record the original legal obligation to the allotment-holders; the long history of their emotive resistance to the subtle shifts in the urban planning field of play; and the trauma caused to the Society by the unjust collusion of all parties in their alienation from the land promised to members.

Working ethnographically with meetings and minutes is, then, anti-modern: it means attempting to restore to the written record the full history of disorder, to

reincorporate the emotionally charged, chaotic contestation of inter-subjective dynamics and material manoeuvres; to purposely contaminate apparently objective decisions with impolite objections to the civilized production of matters of fact.

The contrast between the two cases, one victory, one defeat, suggests that in the very act of planning and organizing place-based projects, the categories of community and state are mutually constituted in highly specific and unpredictable ways (Robertson 1984). This helps us to understand, firstly, that the state exists objectively only in the endlessly emerging moments of contested articulation between government, territory, and population (Bourdieu 2014), and, secondly, that ethnography is perhaps the only method that allows us to study these processes of articulation as they emerge, so that we can speak critically and constructively to the practice of state craft in contemporary times (Bernstein & Mertz 2011).

Acts of enclosure

Polanyi (1944) taught us long ago that wherever we see a new enforced enclosure of land, we ought to expect an articulation of market forces with state intervention. Confronted with the extraction of value to which the creation of a market in land potentially gives rise, the local populace rail against their exclusion and/or displacement from this value-creation process. In the light of a long history of land enclosure in Britain, the government has to work hard to convince the public that it is working in the interests of the greater good. This is especially the case in the East End of London, because the last major act of enclosure, in the 1980s, was Canary Wharf, a new financial district formed out of

the post-industrial docklands, which became notorious for employing 90,000 prospering white-collar workers, whilst on the surrounding housing estates unemployment rose steadily through the period of construction and development, and these neighbourhoods remain, today, some of the most disadvantaged in the country.

Tsing (2005), writing about the creation of a market for land and other commodities at the frontier of logging and metal extraction in Indonesia, describes as ‘haunting’ the troubling of market forces with alternative ideas of value. She shows how attracting global capital flows to new sites of development requires both a spectacular drama, a fantastical ‘economy of appearances’, and cultivation of the false idea that the new frontiers of capital expansion, in any time and place, are formed by the heroic conquering of wild places and wastelands devoid of human history. Psychogeographer Iain Sinclair (2012) describes as ‘ghost milk’ the urban planners’ fantastical imaginations of a post-Olympic Games future in the East End of London, visions of an imagined time and place that, he argues, similarly rely on the notion of a wasteland and bear no relation to, and have no respect for, the historical significance of what has been displaced from the Lower Lea Valley to make way for the Olympic Park.

Crying out against the imposition of the grand projects of a state oblivious to the cultural histories of small-scale, historically specific, and locally meaningful action, Sinclair echoes James Scott’s concerns (1999) about what it is for a state to act. In a sense, I think he is right, but it is not at all straightforward. On the one hand, the displacement and improper treatment of groups like the Manor Garden Allotment Society by Waltham Forest and the Lea Valley Regional Parks Authority will haunt the Olympic legacy for a long time to come. This should be

understood, especially after the 2008 financial crisis, in terms of the critique of a market-driven notion of society where global aspirations for city competitiveness eclipse and evacuate the lived experience of people inhabiting diverse urban environments. On the other hand, however, the ethnographic problem in the post-industrial urban neighbourhoods of Britain and elsewhere in the world, in cities like Detroit in the United States, is precisely to do with the question of how to seduce capital to flow back to cities in decline, and then how to irrigate that flow for particular productive purposes. The commercial imperative cannot be ignored, and the success of the process of regeneration depends, therefore, on the effective articulation of government projects of urban transformation with commercial and community interest, which brings our attention, as anthropologists, to what I have described above, which is the ethnographic details of what, in practice, effective articulation might look like.

]p1[Conducting fieldwork within the Olympic Park Legacy Company itself, I also had the opportunity to participate in and observe the struggle to make of bureaucratic process a practice of effective articulation. Over a period of three years, I bore witness to the endless determination of Vincent's like-minded colleagues, such as Emma, Senior Manager of the OPLC's Community Engagement Team as she fought to stay true to public service ideals, and maintain her allegiance to local community interests as the priorities of the Company shifted, too heavily, over time, and at the expense of community interests, towards the commercial imperative. I show below how at a time of perceived crisis and instability in the OPLC, Emma and her immediate colleagues in the Community Engagement Team, attached increased significance to their 'team meeting'. This, too, like Mark's artful resistance from below, was a subtle

and effective form of political action, one that revealed to me the radical potential of the informal meeting to act as an effective strategy for skilful subversion, especially when the way ahead has become uncertain.

Regeneration: Coming Back to Life, September 2009

Emma leads one of the four sub-groups, including Public Relations, Press, and Marketing, which make up the Communications Team (Comms) in the Olympic Park Legacy Company. Overall, the role of the Comms Team is to maintain and manage communications both internally, within the Company itself (across its various work streams, and with its parent organization the London Development Agency (LDA), and ‘owners’ – the Mayor of London, the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport, and the Department of Communities and Local Government), and externally, with the general public, media, politicians, stakeholders, and community groups in East London, about how London’s Olympic legacy is being planned.

In material terms, this means crafting the ‘messages’: coming up with ‘lines’ and designing the ‘look and feel’ of a rhetoric that, from one week to the next, produces and stabilizes a persuasive narrative to the OPLC and the world about the existence and purpose of the Company. Through the production of a surface impression of itself (Evans 2012b; 2014), the Olympic Park Legacy Company convinces itself and the world that it exists as a viable entity, and in so doing, it grows in confidence as a new organization and begins to develop and sustain a network of relations with important allies (Latour 1993 – adherents, if you like – whose belief in the Company

lends momentum to the cause. These allies have to be ‘kept on board’ and careful communication is critical to this task.

Emma leads the weekly ‘team catch-up’ meeting. Clearly worried, she explains that the board of the LDA at their last meeting, refused to sign off on the transfer of Olympic land and associated debt to the newly formed OPLC. Emma’s small team of four (including myself) knows full well that the refusal to transfer Olympic park lands and associated debts means that the Company, in the process of being formed at this time, would become a toothless tiger, a ‘useless entity’ not to be taken seriously by investors or property developers, and doomed, therefore, to fail: the whole legacy project would be jeopardized.

Emma explains that the formation of the Olympic Park Legacy Company itself, out of the Legacy Directorate that preceded it as part of the LDA signifies a new legacy direction of travel, away from former Mayor Ken Livingstone’s left-wing communities-focused view of regeneration, and towards the more commercially focused, property and enterprise development perspective of the new Conservative Mayor, Boris Johnson.. An atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty hangs over the meeting. Rebecca, Emma’s second in command, protests and says that, meanwhile, during this transitional hiatus, the team has ‘run out of messages’, ‘run out of story’, and there is no sense of what the new narrative about legacy will be for the new company under the newly appointed Chief Executive. Rebecca wonders how they can go on doing their jobs, and, by implication, how the momentum of the Olympic legacy can be sustained. She worries that the most important political stakeholders – the Olympic host boroughs in the East End of London – have no idea yet about who the new Chief Executive is, and what it is he has to say about ‘the direction of travel’. If there is no ‘message’, how will the Comms. Team keep the host boroughs ‘on board’?

Emma agrees with Rebecca that they have nothing to go on, and no sense of direction while new priorities are worked out from above. She warns that it is going to be an awkward few months. She then explains that they have been told to start working with the Marketing Team to also engage with ‘international business communities’ and no longer focus solely on ‘local communities’ in the East End. At this, Samantha, Emma’s second assistant, despairs, saying simply, ‘how disappointing’: Samantha knows full well, like her close colleagues in the Community Engagement Team, that years of invaluable effort have already been put into building relationships of trust and open communication with stakeholders and local communities in the East End, and that it will be a serious threat to the project if that trust is broken. With an air of futility, she says that their work is beginning to feel like what she had always imagined and dreaded government bureaucracy to be, which is ‘layers and layers of uselessness’.

Emma then reassures her team that the new idea is to use the excitement from the Games, and the development of each permanent sporting venue left on the park after the Games, as well as an ‘events’ strategy, to ‘buy people into the Park’ and ‘build community up’. Meanwhile, while the new Chief Executive works out what his new ‘top line’ messages about the Olympic legacy are going to be, Emma suggests that by producing a ‘core presentation’ for him to use in his public engagements, they can surreptitiously attempt to align what he says in the world with their existing understandings of what is considered to be important about the Company’s work streams.

By putting their ‘lines’ into his mouth, the Comms Team attempts to exert its influence over the new Chief Executive. It is no surprise, therefore, that the new Interim Director of Communications for the Olympic Park Legacy Company is extremely wary of the existing Comms Team. She worries that their lines and messages

speak of what she calls ‘The Old World’, and she emphasizes at every opportunity that she is trying to usher in a new world with different priorities. However, neither she nor the new Chief Executive knows anything about the East End, and with no project knowledge at all, they are, in the end, at the mercy of Emma and her team, who prove to be indispensable, because they are the only ones who have the necessary expertise to chart the existing terrain.

Navigational techniques

The meeting that I focus on above took place at a time of serious uncertainty in the planning of London’s Olympic legacy. Not surprisingly, the transfer of precious political cargo from one organizational vehicle to another caused a great deal of anxiety for people like Emma and her team, who, with considerable dedication, had already been working on and driving the project forward for several years.

I focus on uncertain times to make a more general point, which is that all organizational forms are inherently unstable. This has important implications for the analysis of organizational practice, not least because the formal meeting can then be understood in a number of ways as a stabilization device. You could say that the bureaucratic meeting is the organizational means for distributing cognition (Hutchinson 1995) about navigational matters.

In the uncertain world of state-funded urban regeneration, where political and economic currents are extremely treacherous, it is no surprise to me that before it was ever called the Olympic Park Legacy Company, the organization designed by government to take over the sole task of planning and delivering the Olympic legacy

was called an SPV, a Special Purpose Vehicle. The metaphor of motion suggests that for a new reality to come into being, the idea of it has to be given organizational form and moved forward, which requires a clear and strong sense of direction as well as effective mechanisms for navigation. One such mechanism, I suggest, is the bureaucratic meeting: it is the means for steering the course towards a common future, and for plotting how to proceed, especially in moments when the way forward is unclear.

The never-ending array of meetings at the Olympic Park Legacy Company function to constitute the new organization as a continuously articulated whole, a viable entity with a particular purpose, and the meetings allow for the adaptation of work teams internally, so that each member's actions are aligned with the overall purpose of the team, and then the teams' actions are aligned with each other. What is most interesting about this taken-for-granted organizational infrastructure, however, is how at times when there is a sense of mutinous subversion, when disputes arise from within about which direction the Company ought to be taking, managers lower down the hierarchy, like Emma, who have all the expertise, but none of the authority, can, through the possibilities provided by informal, undocumented meetings, exert their power and influence surreptitiously, manoeuvring to gradually force adjustments to be made to the direction of travel even at the very top of the organization.

Either way, formally or informally, the negotiations of the bureaucratic meeting aim expertly towards a steadying of the ship through a continuously contested decision-making process about what needs to be done to hold or change course. Here, what Tsing (2005) describes as the 'about to be present' emerges in relation to protracted battles about the vision of the future which the projects of the state substantiate, in this case in the post-industrial East End of London. The ethnography reveals that the future

of East London is not crafted by any easy equation between government and capital, or characterized by a straightforward dichotomy of insurmountable difference between the bureaucratic process of governance and what counts as community interest. Indeed, it is heartening to have witnessed that inside the bureaucracies of urban government there are warriors, people who are prepared to use each and every meeting as the place to (non-violently) do battle for a public service version of the common good. This endless struggle, over a number of years, to define what urban regeneration means, in terms of transformation for people living in relative poverty, exhausted Emma and her colleagues down, but led, ultimately, to the appointment of a new Director of Regeneration, with the necessary experience of local, community-led planning. He was able to take up the challenge, from more junior colleagues, and redouble the efforts of the team to steer the course towards, a transformative Olympic legacy for the people of post-industrial East London.

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NOTE

[1] Established in 1900, the 1.8 hectares of land for the allotments was gifted to the East End by Major Arthur Villiers, an old Etonian, son of the seventh Earl of Jersey, a descendant of the Duke of Buckingham, and director of Barings Bank, the oldest merchant bank in London. The gift of land was a philanthropic act to provide small parcels of land for working-class people living local to that area to grow vegetables and, in the face of real deprivation, obtain a degree of self-sufficiency and improved quality of life. The land was bequeathed ‘in perpetuity’, and allotments flourished by the River Lea, in Hackney.

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