

Chobham Harris Academy: the lynch-pin of London's Olympic legacy

Blog Admin

Ricky Burdett examines the revitalisation project of East London through the viewing lens of the newly built Chobham Harris Academy. The school is expected to play an incommensurately significant role as part of the wider regeneration project for London.



The Chobham Harris Academy feels like a school. It doesn't smell like one yet, but I'm sure it's well on its way. This is quite an achievement for a building that has not had a 'proper' educational client and will not hear the shrieks of five-year olds or the growls of teenagers for another year and a half. Yet, the building resonates with institutional gravitas even though its first incarnation will be as a gym and offices for some of the 17,000 athletes who will be occupying the Athletes' Village this summer for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The school is literally and metaphorically a lynch-pin between the Olympic site and its social and spatial hinterland. Located on the eastern edge of Europe's largest regeneration project in the Lower Lea Valley, it is close to Leyton and Stratford where mixed communities have for generations inhabited East London's unremarkable neighbourhoods of three-storeyed terraced streets and concrete housing estates. At the same time it occupies pole position in the rigid grid of superblocks that defines the Athletes' Village, a five-minute walk from the mammoth Westfield Shopping Centre and Stratford International Station.

Recently re-baptised as the more catchy 'East Village' by its new suitably global owners Qatari Diar – the Village was originally funded by the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) – by late 2013 the development will be inhabited by an 'instant' community of social and private tenants who will live in the first 2700 homes. Many of these will be four-bedroom townhouses for families with children, and nearly 40 per cent of the units are owned by East Thames housing association. Up to 8,000 homes are to follow as the Olympic Legacy masterplan fills out across the wider site, establishing the catchment area for this vital component of the emerging piece of city.

The academy is not a single institution but a campus of three distinct components: an infant school, an upper school and a specialism building for arts, performance and sports. The 'all-through' campus will accommodate 1,800 kids from the ages of five to eighteen (from pre-school to sixth form), creating the sort of mixed economy that could generate a more vibrant dynamic than the traditional primary or high school. In terms of programme, this particular academy harks back to the 1967 Plowden Report (*Children and their Primary Schools*) which called for more experiential learning, increased parental involvement, universal pre-school education and social priority zones to boost opportunities for the less privileged.

While it is unlikely that 21st century neo-con political culture in the UK will embrace such ideals, the multi-dimensional campus has the ingredients to create a far more integrated learning environment than most idiosyncratic academic buildings of recent times. The mere fact that parents and pupils of all ages and diverse backgrounds will come to the buildings at different times of day or the week, to collect toddlers, meet friends or use the non-academic facilities on a 24/7 basis for weddings and receptions will, I suspect, contribute to a very different sense of place. The building and its edges will have to accommodate everything from pram congestion to hooded/unhooded youths 'creeping unwilling to school', smoking joints, exchanging twitter messages or simply 'hanging out' outside the school gates.

The building, therefore, has a significant urban vocation as well as an educational one. AHMM were ideally placed to respond to this multi-faceted brief, given their dual role as advisers to the masterplan

for the Athletes' Village (for the ODA and Lend Lease) and their undoubted expertise in school design celebrated in recent buildings like the Stirling Prize shortlisted Westminster Academy. It is therefore *both* an intrinsically urban building, Janus-like, facing the emerging urban landscape of the Olympic park *and* an intimately scaled environment for a transient population, some of them less than a metre high.

Placed on axis with a major landscaped boulevard that opens out towards the Olympic Park – elegantly landscaped by Vogt – the view from the upper floors of the Chobham Academy takes in Anish Kapoor's Orbit as well as Norman Foster's Gherkin and Renzo Piano's Shard in the distance. Such a classic urban planning device confers the building a civic status that transcends the scale and function of the building. A century ago, one might have expected a grand cathedral or public library to inhabit such a lofty urban location. Yet, today the building is dwarfed by the 8-10 storey apartment blocks that surround it, and within a decade could be further affected by the 20-plus storey structures that have already been granted planning permission, all within a stone's throw of the school's front gates. During the design process, the architects often complained that there was not enough 'programme' to make the building sit up and be noticed – its brief only adds up to a five-storey building with two-storey extensions!

The Chobham Harris Academy will, I believe, work well as a school. It will play an incommensurately significant role as part of the wider regeneration project for London. Over time, it has the potential to act a social condenser for both existing and new communities in the area – a litmus test of the entire Olympic project to become an integrated part of East London or stand as an isolated ghetto. It inhabits the frontier zone between Stratford's past and future. If the school succeeds in becoming 'home' to parents and children from these areas as well as the new generations of inhabitants who will occupy the Olympic site, the wider project will, to my mind, succeed. If it doesn't, it will fail. I suspect that AHMM's architecture will help the Olympic Legacy on its way, marking its transition from adolescence to adulthood.

This is an edited version of an article that was originally published in [Architecture Today](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

Ricky Burdett is Professor of Urban Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and director of LSE Cities and the Urban Age programme. He is a Global Distinguished Professor at New York University. He was Chief Adviser on Architecture and Urbanism for the London 2012 Olympics and now advises the Olympic Legacy Park Company. He was architectural adviser to the Mayor of London from 2001 to 2006.

You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):

1. [London 2012 seems to be following the pattern of past Games in which the promised legacy becomes lost in the budget calculations \(29.6\)](#)
2. [The impact of the Olympics: making or breaking communities in East London \(14.4\)](#)