



# A12 UNDERCROFT REPORT

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# Executive Summary

Over the last decade, and especially in the last four years, Hackney Wick and Fish Island has undergone rapid regeneration brought about by the neighbouring 2012 Olympic Games, and the post games legacy programme. It is expected that 33,000 homes will have been built across the whole of the Legacy Corporation area by 2036, with major residential developments in Hackney Wick, Fish Island, East Wick and Sweetwater.<sup>1</sup>

The vast majority of land in the area is privately owned.<sup>2</sup> With the Olympic regeneration, land value surged. New developments have replaced what were previously affordable workspace and community spaces, leading to a scarcity of land for accessible community use.

As an open site — albeit with development limitations — the A12 Undercroft provides an opportunity for community use and improved social capital<sup>3</sup> to counteract the impact of development and the loss of grassroots cultural infrastructure, supporting existing and increasing numbers of residents, as well as aiding in recovery from Covid-19.



Following on from the collective work of the A12 Working Group since late 2018, this report brings together historic context, prior research, and insights from interviews with members of the A12 Steering Group — a locally-led collective of stakeholders formed from within the Hackney Wick and Fish Island community to help safeguard and support the effective use of this site.

The Undercroft site has been utilised informally, by many local groups to date. It provides a cultural stage and canvas for street artists, filmmakers and dancers. Many homeless people have used the covered site as temporary shelter. Boaters use the cover to undertake essential repairs to their boats.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.queenelizabetholympicpark.co.uk/planning-authority/planning-policy/local-plan-2020-2036>  
<https://www.queenelizabetholympicpark.co.uk/planning-authority/planning-policy/local-plan-2020-2036>

<sup>2</sup> Hackney Wick & Fish Island Community Development Trust Asset Review 2021

<sup>3</sup> Social capital "is a term used to describe the extent and nature of our connections with others and the collective attitudes and behaviours between people that support a well-functioning, close-knit society."

Office for National Statistics, *Social Capital in the UK: 2020*

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/socialcapitalintheuk/2020>

Historically, the site was used as a highly successful pop-up space when Turner-prize winners Assemble created Folly for a Flyover — a nine week transformation in 2011, which turned the site into a cultural venue, cinema and café. Following this success, in 2012 the LLDC invested in permanent public realm and utilities, designed by muf architecture/art and delivered by the London Borough of Hackney, as part of the Olympic Fringe programme.



The terrazzo stage was permanently re-laid and utilities brought to the site (water and electricity) with the intention of the site being used for continued cultural activities, subject to landowner and licensing permissions. However, it has not been activated as originally intended, and there is significant opportunity for this infrastructure to be used by a broader cross-section of the local community.

Several local research projects point to the demand for the community to utilise the space more effectively. In 2018, the Wick Award conducted a survey on Marbley Green focused on the Undercroft to the west side of the waterway. *Developing the Undercroft* found that respondents were keen for the site to be activated with a wide range of activities in a participatory and inclusive way, involving local residents. In 2019, Sophie Hardcastle — an MA Situated Practice student at The Bartlett School of Architecture UCL based at the Here East campus — found that the local community had ambitions to be part of activating the site, when she interviewed passers-by whilst moored close to the Undercroft on a narrow boat as part of *Conversations on the Canal*. In 2020, the Wick Award's *Wise Wick Report* found that social isolation and loneliness is a real issue for older people of 60+ years; indicating the need to activate local spaces for older people too, to help improve their health, wellbeing and mobility.





A number of economic and cultural initiatives in the area also highlight the pressing need to bring local assets into effective use. Wick Workspaces — kicked off in 2018 by the London Borough of Hackney — is transforming council assets into temporary affordable workspace, innovative community spaces and fresh cultural facilities while major redevelopments take place nearby. In 2018, Hackney Wick and Fish Island was designated a Creative Enterprise Zone by the Mayor of London. This underlines the challenges faced by its 'at risk' community of creators, and recognises the need to support the local creative and cultural sector.

In 2020, the Hackney Wick and Fish Island Community Development Trust led a bid to secure High Streets for All funding from the Greater London Authority to reimagine the high street – the A12 Undercroft was identified as an underused space which could be brought into wider community use.

Research conducted by the London Boroughs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets in 2021 with eight local workspace operators, highlighted that affordable workspace and serviced flexible workspace have very high occupancy levels: between 95% and 100% in the 24 months prior, regardless of the Covid-19 pandemic. Providers who experienced a turnover of tenants due to the pandemic did so in summer 2020 mostly and the units were rapidly re-let. Further demonstrating the strength of local demand for workspace.

These studies and initiatives point to a high demand for local spaces – like the Undercroft – to be brought into community use.

In 2021, interviews were conducted with stakeholders who have had direct involvement with the A12 Undercroft site, membership of the A12 Steering Group or an association with it, as a part of the production of this report.

**The key insights from the stakeholder interviews are:**

1. The A12 Undercroft is a strategic gateway with unique spatial qualities.
2. The A12 Undercroft has a complex array of stakeholders, which requires careful management and permissions.
3. With traffic above, mains water below, and being adjacent to a waterway, health and safety is paramount.
4. There are safety concerns.
5. There are environmental concerns to address such as rubbish, fly tipping and noise levels.
6. Community use: beyond current site usage, there is significant potential to broaden public access so it becomes more inclusive.
7. Future activation: the site presents exciting opportunities for social and environmental impact.
8. Widespread public engagement is required to ensure there is genuine community co-authorship.
9. The A12 Steering Group requires formalisation.
10. Contextual drivers are increasing needs for community space, further increasing the site's importance and value.

**In light of these findings, a number of strategic recommendations have been made.**

**Primary recommendations:**

1. Establish terms of reference for the A12 Steering Group.
2. Draft a brief to outline principles and values the group would like the space to deliver.
3. Draft options that the group can appraise about how to operationalise/manage the site.
4. Relationship building with project partners.

**Secondary recommendations:**

5. Create an innovative process of engagement.
6. Identify resources to help drive future progress.

# Aims

## **This report focuses on the A12 Undercroft in Hackney, London E9.**

The aims of the report are to distil prior work and research conducted at the A12 Undercroft, and consider the site's importance as a social wealth asset within the wider context of Hackney Wick's changing cultural landscape.

To this end, the report intends to identify opportunities and barriers to progress at the site, inform the ambition for local community engagement, and shape future strategic directions.

This research piece arose from the regular meetings of the A12 Undercroft Steering Group and has been funded by the Canal & River Trust.



# Team



Authors:

**Cath Carver**

Founder of Colour Your City

**Neil McDonald**

Founder/Director of Civic State, Stour Space,  
Wick CNC and Hackney Wick & Fish Island Community  
Development Trust

Supporters:

**Alex Russell**

Executive Director at Hackney Wick & Fish Island  
Community Development Trust

**Dr Claire McAndrew**

Senior Research Fellow in Public Engagement at  
The Bartlett School of Architecture,  
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**Emma Harrington**

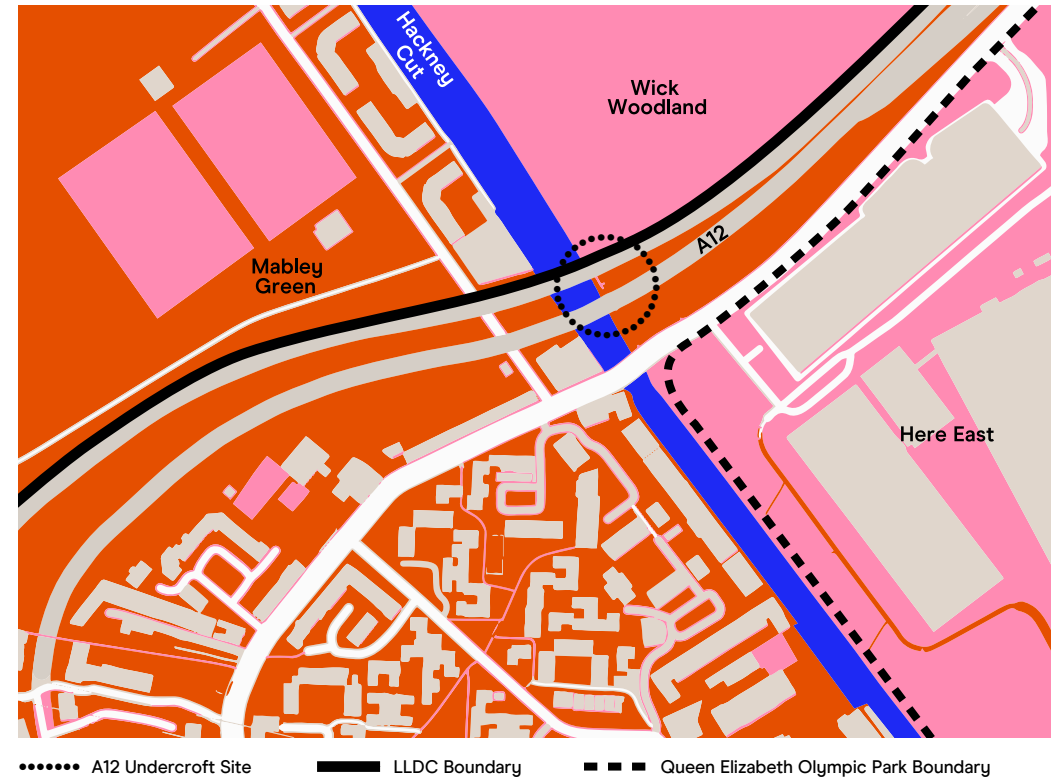
Community Engagement Manager for  
London & South East at the Canal & River Trust



# Site Overview

The A12 Undercroft in Hackney, London E9, is a semi-covered public space below the dual carriageways of the A12 East Cross Route. The site is bordered by green space to the north and south, and adjacent to the Hackney Cut waterway with a towpath running along it. There is a terrazzo elevated stage, structural walls and columns, and extensive open paved areas.

The site is a strategically important northern gateway to Hackney Wick and Fish Island, and a popular thoroughfare at the intersection of a wide range of interests and communities. It acts as a green link to the Hackney Wick Woodlands, Mabley Green and the Queen Elizabeth Park; a river link to the waterways and boating communities along the River Lea; a linkage site for local residents, local enterprises (several warehouses line the west side of the river), businesses and academic institutions at nearby Here East, and an entrance to the varied and creative communities of Hackney Wick and Fish Island – an area designated as a Creative Enterprise Zone by the Mayor of London.



## The site's key stakeholders are:

- Transport for London (TfL): landowners of the space directly underneath the A12.
- Canal & River Trust: landowner and management of the towpath, canal and access to the water.
- London Borough of Hackney: landowners to the north and south of the Undercroft itself; planning authority for north of site currently, and after 2024 fully for the south side. Hackney Parks manage the green spaces surrounding the Undercroft.
- London Legacy Development Corporation: local planning authority (until December 2024), and continuing on beyond 2024 as a Mayoral Development Corporation, regeneration agency, local landowner, and manager of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.
- Thames Water: management of the water mains pipe running directly underneath the site.

## How it came together and who has been involved

In November 2018, at a Hackney Wick Town Hall community meeting, concerns were raised by Pete Bennett (Grow) about the eviction of artist Jay Filipowicz from the site. Several issues existed at the site – for a variety of reasons – such as material and rubbish build-up. Sir William Atkinson (Canal & River Trust) was invited to join the discussion table, and afterwards informed Cathryn Miles Griffiths (We Are the Wick community group).

After Jay's eviction and the removal of his sculptures, a meeting was convened by Cathryn Miles Griffiths at the Canal & River Trust's Docklands office. This meeting aimed to address sustainable management solutions, and ways to supportively address the needs of artists like Jay.

All of this activity surrounding the site's usage and issues, helped spark a collective of stakeholders within the Hackney Wick and Fish Island community to start meeting on a regular basis (the initial group membership formed of volunteers at a Hackney Wick & Fish Island Community Interest Group meeting), to help address the issues and safeguard the site as a community asset. It later emerged that the site was under threat of enclosure by TfL — due to liability concerns around ongoing safety issues.



The group has met as an organic, informal and inclusive 'open shop' community forum — welcoming of anyone who wished to join and contribute — to discuss issues pertaining to the site, exploring how the group could help keep it open for continued community use (with a focus on facilitating greater and safer use), whilst seeking to address its challenges. Meetings have been conducted on a regular basis either in-person or online, and strategic meetings organised with key stakeholders and potential partners.



Those that have contributed to the group include:

**&U Studio:** Anne Thomas

**The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL:** Dr Claire McAndrew, Prof Iain Borden, Dr James O'Leary, Sophie Hardcastle

**Canal & River Trust:** Emma Harrington, Sir William Atkinson, Sorwar Ahmed

**Creative Enterprise Zone — Hackney Wick and Fish Island:** Charli Bristow

**Colour Your City:** Cath Carver

**Elements Gallery Projects:** Rebecca Feiner

**Grow:** Pete Bennett

**Hackney Wick & Fish Island Wick Community Development Trust:** Alex Russell, Neil McDonald

**London Borough of Hackney:** Mathieu Rogers, Miranda Botcherby, Caroline Selman

**Stour Space / Civic State:** Neil McDonald, Caine Crawford

# Timeline of Milestones

November 2018

November 2016

## Earlier Conversation

Sanctuary Housing, Wick Award, London Borough of Hackney, Hackney Quest, Hub67 and ecoACTIVE meet to discuss ideas and potential uses primarily for the A12 Mabley Green Undercroft (a separate site to the west of the waterway) — prompted by a suggestion from the Mabley Green Users Group that the site be redeveloped.



## Evolution of the present group

November 2018 — At a Hackney Wick Town Hall community meeting, Pete Bennett (Grow) raised concerns about the eviction of the artist Jay Filipowicz from the A12 Undercroft (the principal site featured in this report to the east of the waterway). Several issues existed at the site — for a variety of reasons — such as material and rubbish build-up. Sir William Atkinson (Canal and River Trust) was invited to join the discussion table, and afterwards informed Cathryn Miles Griffiths (We Are the Wick community group).

After Jay's eviction and the removal of his sculptures, a meeting was convened by Cathryn Miles Griffiths at the Canal & River Trust's Docklands office. It was attended by Sir William Atkinson, Pete Bennett, Lee Wilshire of Waterways Projects and Cathryn Miles Griffiths. This meeting aimed to address sustainable management solutions, and ways to supportively address the needs of artists like Jay. Some of Jay's art was also retrieved and put on semi permanent display at the Hackney Wick Boulder Project.

January 2019

The A12 Steering Group started to organically form through the coming together of local stakeholders to coordinate its safe and continued community use, and share ideas for its future. This followed various people showing interest in helping to protect the site when the issues were raised at the Hackney Wick & Fish Island Cultural Interest Group (HWFI CIG). Regular meetings started taking place with local stakeholders represented in the A12 Steering Group providing monthly updates on developments and inviting community discussion at HWFI CIG meetings.

Later it emerged that the site was under threat of enclosure by the landowner TfL — due to liability concerns surrounding the ongoing issues. There was openness from the landowner, TfL, to allow the site to be used by the community — within the relevant parameters — and suggestions were requested from the community.

It was identified that there were key needs to be met before activities could take place at the site: for liability to be removed from TfL; for the paving to be repaired; and for annual maintenance costs to be covered. There was a strong desire for this to be led by local, civic, cultural and community organisation(s) — with ongoing interaction with the Steering Group.

## July 2019

Following a group review guided by the need for an organisation to take liability from TfL to use the site further, the group approached Neil McDonald, Founding Director of Stour Space — one of four local social enterprises to have formed the Hackney Wick and Fish Island Community Development Trust (HWFI CDT) — to support the progression as a local community organisation. At the time, the HWFI CDT was newly formed and not in a position to take on or operate the project, however Stour Space had the capacity to support in tandem with a future need to relocate its cultural activities and café on Roach Road.



## Summer 2019

— Anne Thomas (@U Studio), a local architect, was invited by Pete Bennett to help the group by creating a visualisation (Appendix 1) to show how the space could potentially be used to aid ongoing conversations about the site. The image was developed over time to help capture all the ideas discussed at various meetings, with a variety of users and local communities in mind.

— Sophie Hardcastle, a local student at The Bartlett School of Architecture (Here East) conducts a six-week interview series: exploring the canal as a platform for conversation with members of the local community from a Canal & River Trust narrowboat moored close to the A12 Undercroft.

## June 2020

After a year of meetings with stakeholders to ascertain land ownership and constraints around development on and around the site, Stour Space lays out a strategic plan of site use (see appendix 2). This included land to the north and south of the site (in an attempt to make the plan financially viable as permanent structures under the A12 itself are not permitted due to access restrictions), as well as essential infrastructure for community, cultural and civic uses.

## September 2019

Lee Wilshire at Waterway Projects approaches TfL to discuss the site becoming a wharf for sustainable waste transport. NB: Lee had been in dialogue with Essex Flour & Grain (located across the waterway) for several years; and had proposed ideas to the Canal & River Trust to use the site for more formal boater works back in 2016.

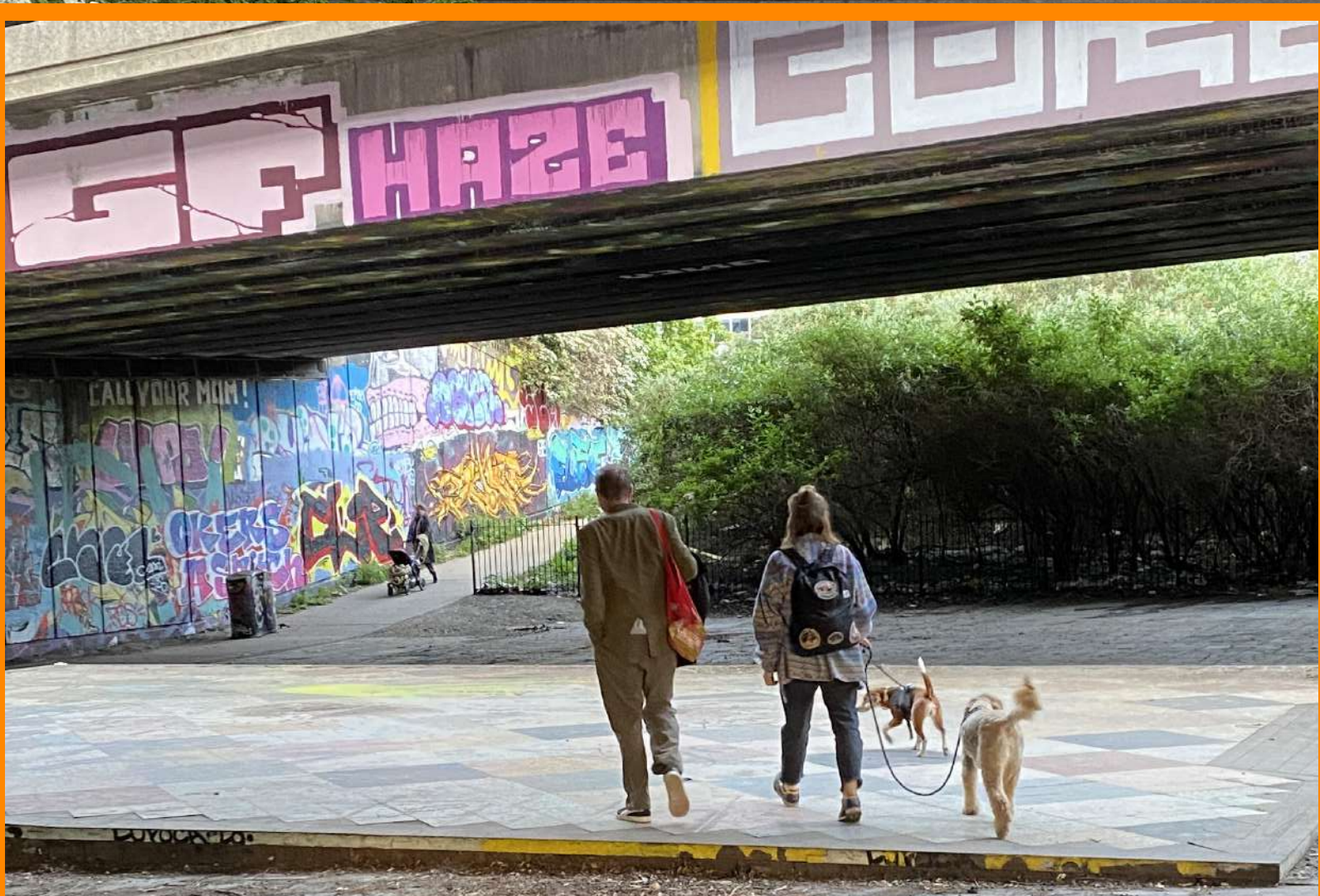
## July 2020

Alex Russell joins the group to support with TfL liaison and share experiences from the Westway Trust (where she worked at the time), which manages similar land for community use — underneath the Westway flyover in North Kensington.

## March 2021

The Canal & River Trust commission this report to consolidate historic work and future direction.

# Site Activity



*NB: It is noted that the activities featured draw together key highlights, and are by no means exhaustive.*

# Folly for a Flyover — Assemble (2011)

Folly for a Flyover took place over nine weeks in 2011, transforming the site into an arts venue, giving it a fresh lease of life as a public space. The project attracted the participation of over 40,000 local residents, artists and visitors from across London.

It was run by the multidisciplinary architecture, design and art collective Assemble, commissioned by Create London and developed in partnership with the Barbican Centre.

An extensive cultural programme of cinema, performance and plays was curated by Assemble in collaboration with the Barbican, local organisations and businesses. Activities included screenings, workshops, talks, walks, music and theatre. Days focused on the café, events and boat trips; whilst screenings took precedence at night.

The Folly was designed as a giant construction kit, allowing volunteers (in total 200 across the project's activities) to participate in the build of its inter-woven bead curtain walls.



Images: Assemble

The Folly's success demonstrated the potential of the site:

- As an in-demand space for varied cultural activities during both day and night.
- As a site of hands-on learning in participatory design practices and community construction, where volunteers could learn new skills.
- As a place for collaboration between a wide-range of organisations, businesses and the local community (the project worked with local food suppliers such as Mr Bagels and Essex Flour & Grain, to arts and community organisations such as Core Arts, the Pedro Club, Homerton Adventure Playground, the Trowbridge Centre and the Hackney Marsh User Group).
- As a site of retail activity, as evidenced by the café.
- The power of imagination and resources to change narratives about the site, demonstrating the potential for positive social use.



**“There was little publicly owned open space in Hackney Wick, because of its particular histories of use, we went looking for spaces for ad hoc uses and appropriation. When first completed it was described as a venue and what it seemed to need was an agreed set of rules and responsibilities of use. In fact it has been used in all sorts of ways from sheltered location for boat decoration to a total artwork.”**

**– Liza Fior, muf architecture/art**

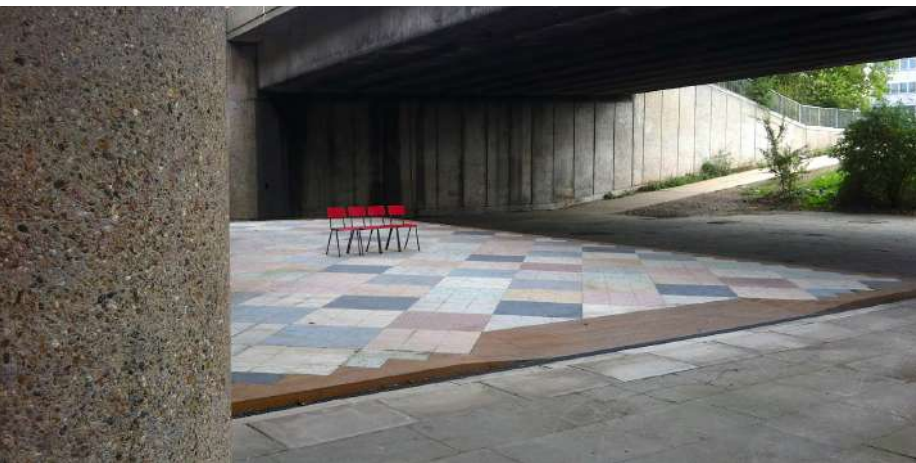


# Permanent Infrastructure

LLDC commissioned muf architecture/art and J+L Gibbons to develop a series of projects across Hackney Wick and Fish Island as part of the Olympic Fringe programme in 2011, a £12m programme of investment in communities around the Olympic Park.

The A12 Undercroft stage formed part of the Olympic Fringe series of projects, alongside Street Interrupted and Wick Green within the wider Hackney Wick and Fish Island area. LLDC developed the project in partnership with stakeholders and tested a number of uses through a programme of activation.

LLDC then invested in permanent public realm and utilities, designed by muf architecture/art and delivered by the London Borough of Hackney to enable events both ad hoc and programmed to take place at the site, subject to landowner and licensing permissions. In 2012, the terrazzo stage was permanently re-laid and utilities brought to the site (water and electricity).



— muf architecture/art,  
LLDC & London Borough  
of Hackney (2011 — 2012)



Images: muf architecture/art

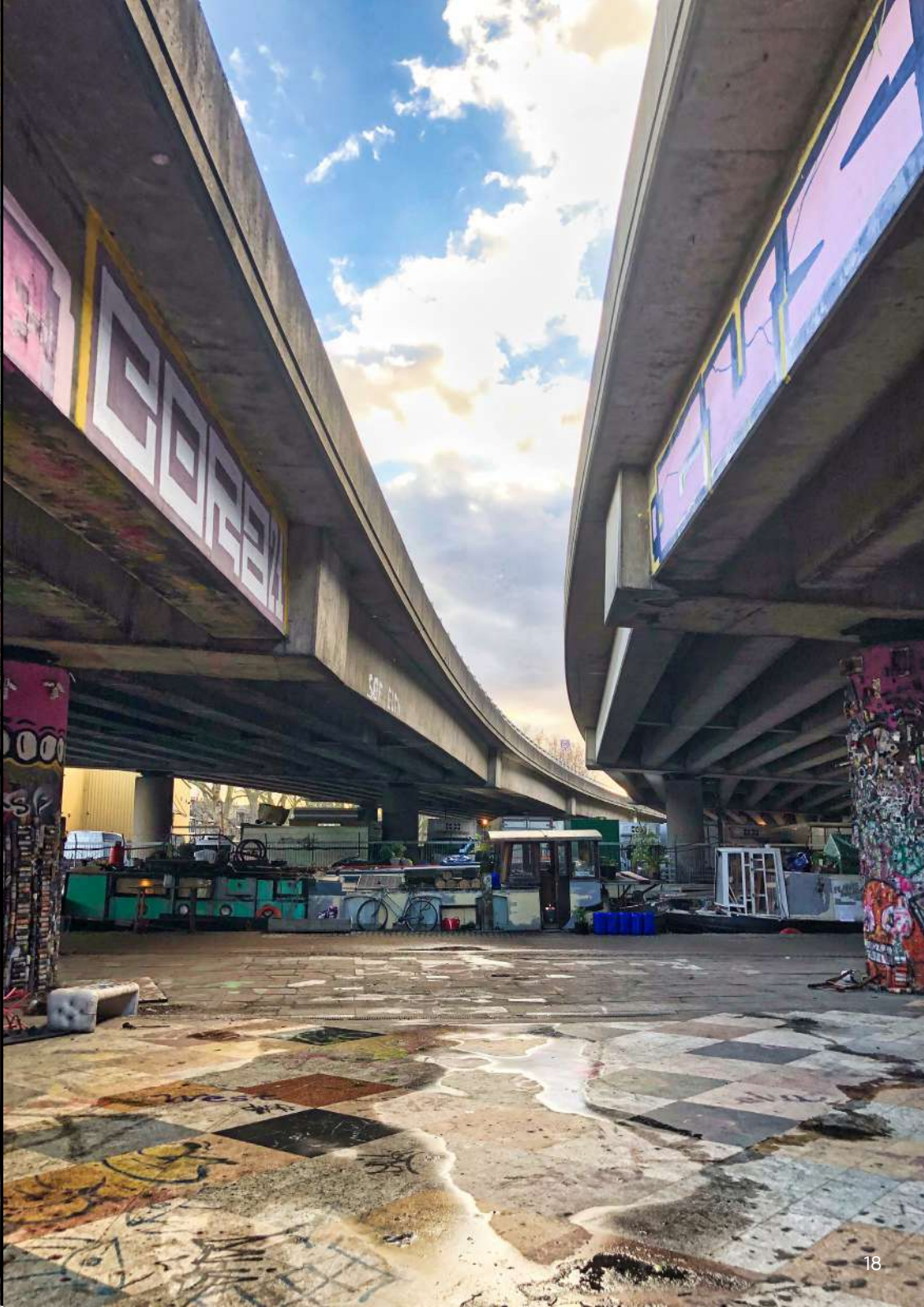
The infrastructure has not been used for activities such as local maker markets, as originally intended, perhaps due to a lack of resources/programmes to support new initiatives. It can safely be said that the site has not (yet) realised its full potential.

muf had always envisaged further capital projects would take place, and are keen to engage in this work with the A12 Steering Group.

It should be noted that the utilities require reassessment and will likely need repair, as advised in late 2021 by the London Borough of Hackney.

**“It’d be good if a community group could actually make use of that infrastructure. Hopefully we can learn from the past.”**

— Garry Morris, London Borough of Hackney



# Occupants (2016 — present)

As an unmanaged, open site, there has been little official oversight. As such, it has provided temporary refuge to many people, especially those dealing with homelessness, because it is dry and large enough for a small group of people to dwell. There are occasional tents in the wooded area to the north of the site, as well as a changing collection of vehicles.

Between 2016 — 2018, sculptor and painter Jay Filipowicz used the site as an open-air gallery for his sculptures — often made of wood and/or upcycled rubbish and materials found locally, as well as a workshop space that was used by several other local artists. Jay has a long history of finding underused sites often filled with rubbish: cleaning the area to make it safer and attractive to passersby, and reusing the debris to create sculptures. He does not lay claim to the land, instead preferring to make it more available and accessible for others to interact with, and welcoming other uses by the public.



Image: Jay Filipowicz

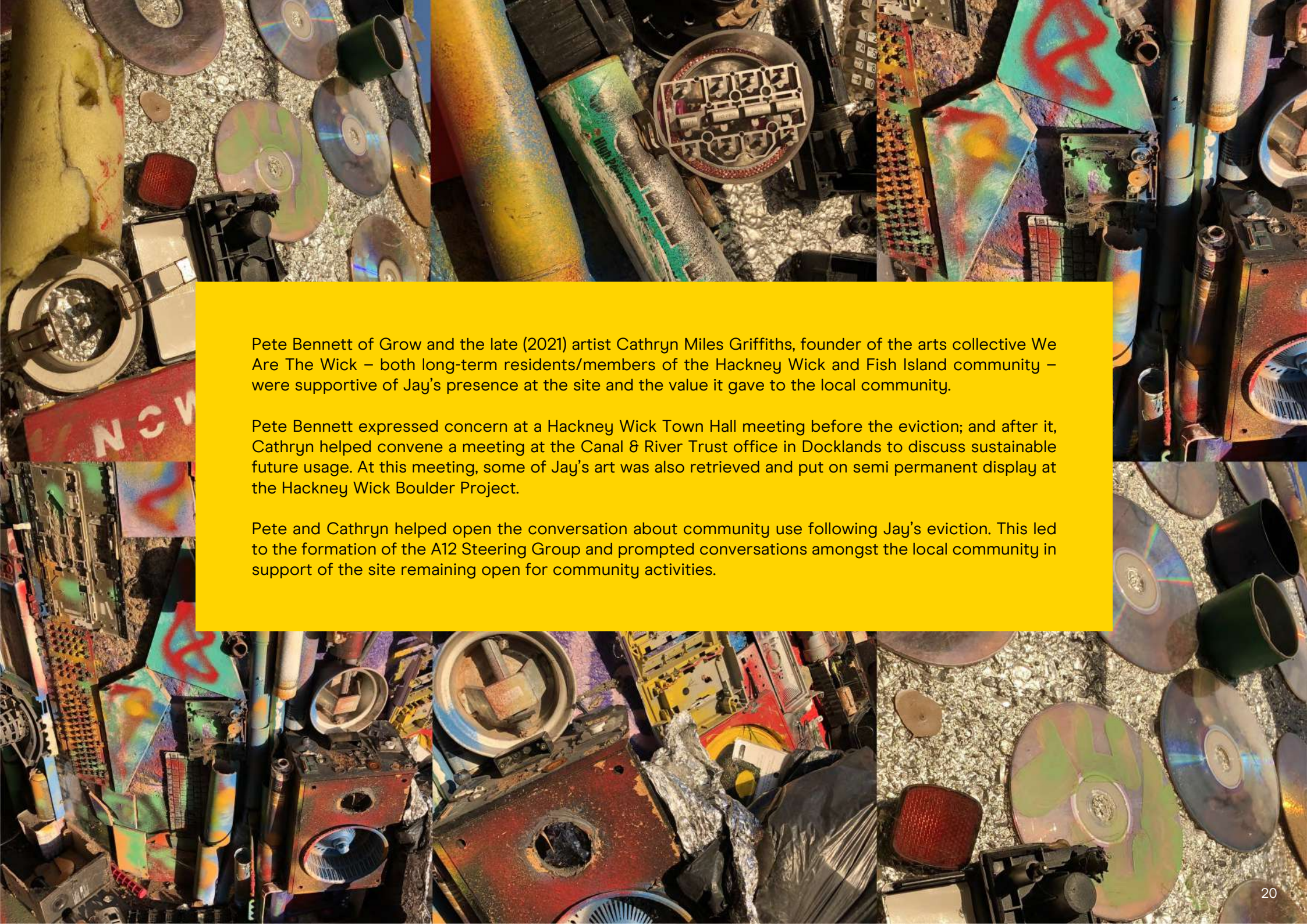


Image: Jan Bernet



Image: Jan Bernet

At the end of October 2018, Jay was evicted by the landowner TfL due to safety concerns at the site.



Pete Bennett of Grow and the late (2021) artist Cathryn Miles Griffiths, founder of the arts collective We Are The Wick – both long-term residents/members of the Hackney Wick and Fish Island community – were supportive of Jay’s presence at the site and the value it gave to the local community.

Pete Bennett expressed concern at a Hackney Wick Town Hall meeting before the eviction; and after it, Cathryn helped convene a meeting at the Canal & River Trust office in Docklands to discuss sustainable future usage. At this meeting, some of Jay’s art was also retrieved and put on semi permanent display at the Hackney Wick Boulder Project.

Pete and Cathryn helped open the conversation about community use following Jay’s eviction. This led to the formation of the A12 Steering Group and prompted conversations amongst the local community in support of the site remaining open for community activities.

**“It's a wonderful spot – a place where everybody can be and express themselves. It should be kept forever because there is no other spot like this in the neighbourhood. It's a perfect gallery and people should use the stage to share their talent.**

**It's also a living site and gift from nature with creatures all around. It's important to listen to nature, to flow with the energy of the forest and water, and be in harmony and balance with all.”**

**— Jay Filipowicz**

# Local Research



# Developing the Undercroft Survey — Wick Award (2018)

On the opposite west side of the waterway, at the edge of Mabley Green (a popular green space), exists another Undercroft below the A12. An informal BMX/skate park operates and the site has several concrete table tennis tables. The Wick Award — a Big Local organisation funded by the National Lottery — identified the site as having potential to be further opened-up for use by local residents.

In July 2018, the Wick Award interviewed approximately thirty local residents during a funday on Mabley Green, to find out local perspectives on community use of the space and what kind of activities were needed.

Respondents were keen for the space to be activated in a participatory and inclusive way involving the people in the surrounding estates.

Potential uses of the site identified by local residents during the Wick Award process included: skate/bike park (which since gained traction), sheltered training area, informal youth venue, outside learning space, dance/yoga class space, community arts projects, performance and environmental projects.

The community response to the *Developing the Undercroft* survey demonstrated the local demand for inclusive outdoor space to host a wide range of activities involving local residents.





# Conversations on the Canal

In 2019, student Sophie Hardcastle explored the canal as a platform for community engagement as part of a Situated Practice MA at The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London (based at the Here East Campus, which is adjacent to the Undercroft).

*Conversations on the Canal*<sup>4</sup> was a six-week interview series based on a Canal & River Trust narrowboat moored close to the A12 Undercroft. It sought to explore a conversational approach to researching, retaining and reclaiming this space for public use. Sophie's work engaged with several communities: academic, incidental users and established locals through small talk, boat rides, group walk<sup>5</sup> (an experiment in structuring conversation as a ceremony), urban foraging, tea drinking, kayaking, sandwich eating and incessant waving to passing boats. This is documented within a book and is accompanied by the short film *Fixed and Fluid*<sup>6</sup> exploring the juxtapositions of the canal as a site of both connection and separation, reflection and transformation, stillness and displacement.



Images: Sophie Hardcastle

## — Sophie Hardcastle (2019)

Sophie's key takeaways from her research series were that the site was well used, and people in the local estate opposite definitely had an ambition to be part of anything that took place there: the canal provides a prominent margin, a boundary and a border between the area's historic past and its recently formed present and future. Yet it also provides a connection, a vein and a vessel, moving between and amongst communities, creating links and forming ties. Whilst her work exposes the messy, mis-aligned and fragmentary nature of contributions made by this diverse local community, it evidences community interest in engagement with the site, and an appetite for further activation to the benefit of Hackney Wick and Fish Island.

Sophie's research project is also a signpost to the future where more students from locally based academic institutions — such as those at Here East and soon to open at East Bank — actively engage with the site and community in experimental and innovative ways. Sophie's is a prime example of site-specific research conducted in an experimental and situated way, working with the site's unique characteristics and context.



<sup>4</sup> <https://sophie-hardcastle.com/Conversations-on-the-Canal-2019>

<sup>5</sup> <https://sophie-hardcastle.com/Site-Specific-Conversations-2019>

<sup>6</sup> <https://sophie-hardcastle.com/Fixed-and-Fluid-2019>

# Wise Wick

## — Wick Award (2020)

In 2018, research conducted by Age UK identified that over-65s in Hackney Wick, experience comparatively high levels of loneliness. In 2019 and 2020, community researchers interviewed older people of 60+ years around Hackney Wick for the Wick Award.

The *Wise Wick Report* found that social isolation and loneliness is a real issue for older Hackney Wick residents. This negatively impacts their health, wellbeing and quality of life (including mobility); and deprives Hackney Wick of their potential to contribute knowledge and skills.

This indicates the need to activate local space for older people in the area too: to help combat social isolation and improve quality of life, and encourage social cohesion with inter-generational interaction.



Images: Wick Award



# Local Initiatives



# Wick Workspaces

(2018 — present)

In 2018, the London Borough of Hackney selected local operators to help deliver Wick Workspaces: a temporary project to deal with the immediate loss of affordable local space due to major redevelopments, by transforming council assets in Hackney Wick into temporary affordable work and community spaces in response to the needs of local people and businesses. Many organisations across sectors and industries (including artists, creatives, voluntary organisations, social enterprises and SMEs) have faced eviction and the need to relocate due to new development in the area. The Hackney Wick Central masterplan delivers over 8,400 sqm<sup>7</sup> of affordable workspace in perpetuity, so the local authorities are trying to keep the quantum of local affordable space while redevelopment takes place.

Through refurbishing buildings and creating facilities, a variety of services, amenities and opportunities have been made available to residents and businesses including: workspace and training opportunities, music and arts facilities, food growing and horticulture areas, cafés and event spaces, and a multi-use sports facility for young people.

The sites are located at The Baths — operated by Stour Space, The Depot — operated by Core Arts, and Trowbridge Gardens — operated by Arbeit Projects. In 2019, the buildings started to be occupied. In February 2022, Eastway opened — a sports facility operated by Young Hackney, the Council's Early Help service for young people.



Wick Workspaces further demonstrates the pressing need to bring local assets into use to provide affordable workspace, exciting community spaces and fresh cultural facilities.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.queenelizabetholympicpark.co.uk/media/press-releases/lldc-planning-approve-hackney-wick-central-masterplan>

# Creative Entreprise Zone (2018 — present)

In 2018, Hackney Wick and Fish Island was designated a Creative Enterprise Zone (CEZ) by the Mayor of London. This Mayoral initiative is designed to support areas of London where artists and creative businesses can find permanent affordable space to work; are supported to start-up and grow; and where local people are helped to learn creative sector skills and find new jobs.

The Hackney Wick and Fish Island Creative Enterprise Zone (HWFI CEZ) area designation demonstrates the importance of the creative and cultural sector locally, and underlines the challenges it faces as an 'at risk' community of creators.

These artists, makers, designers and performers working across the cultural, creative, digital and tech industries require real support and space to flourish. They require local spaces to be activated for the benefit of showcasing work and economic activity. For instance, CEZ funded projects have so far included markets.

The Undercroft sits on the periphery of the CEZ, and there is also a desire to soften the barriers and bring different communities together by activating these peripheral areas.



Images: Hackney Wick and Fish Island Creative Enterprise Zone

**“Space is at a premium. If we've got something that we can bring into use, that'd be really, really valuable to a lot of people. Particularly there's such a need for outside space under Covid-19. It's a really exciting opportunity.”**

— Charli Bristow, Hackney Wick & Fish Island  
Creative Enterprise Zone

# High Streets for All (2020 — present)



In 2020, the Hackney Wick and Fish Island Community Development Trust (HWFI CDT) led a bid to secure funding from the Greater London Authority (GLA) to reimagine the high street. The HWFI CDT engaged with 30 plus businesses, civic organisations, community groups and local institutions, and devised a circular high street to link the economic and social areas of the place together and bring underused sites into wider use. HWFI CDT has mapped underused buildings and spaces in the area, and included the A12 Undercroft in the mapped list.

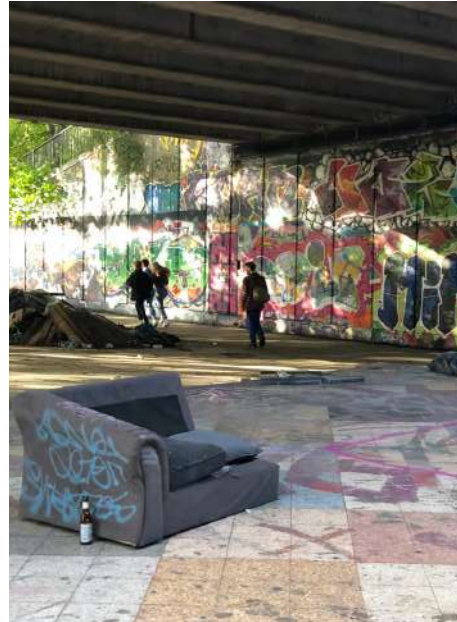
In 2022, HWFI CDT secured funding from the Greater London Authority (GLA) to bring some of the underused sites identified in the area into use with circular economy activities and to create a circular high street. As part of this project, HWFI CDT is working with the local boroughs to plan improvements to the public realm. Activating the public realm space around the A12 Undercroft may be included in this work.

**“It’s an important gateway into Hackney Wick from Homerton and the marshes. There’s an opportunity to provide an arrival point with an exciting and interesting entrance to the area. We need to find a way for it to be used as a platform for cultural and community activity.”**

— Alex Russell, Hackney Wick & Fish Island  
Community Development Trust



# Stakeholder Interview Findings



Interviews were primarily conducted in 2021 with people who have had direct involvement with the site, membership of the A12 Steering Group or an association with it:

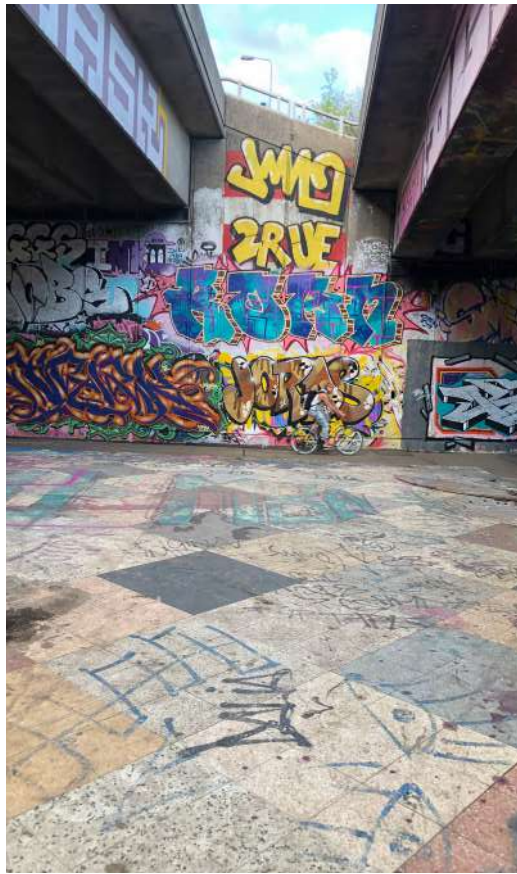
- **8U Studio:** Anne Thomas
- **The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL:** Dr Claire McAndrew, Prof Iain Borden
- **Canal & River Trust:** Emma Harrington, Sir William Atkinson
- **Civic State, Stour Space, Wick CNC:** Neil McDonald
- **Colour Your City:** Cath Carver
- **Grow:** Pete Bennett
- **Hackney Wick & Fish Island Community Development Trust:** Alex Russell, Neil McDonald
- **Hackney Wick & Fish Island Creative Enterprise Zone:** Charli Bristow
- **Jay Filipowicz**
- **London Borough of Hackney:** Mathieu Rogers, Garry Morris
- **London Legacy Development Corporation:** Hannah Lambert
- **muf art/architecture:** Liza Fior
- **Studio Bark, U-Build:** Nick Newman
- **Transport for London:** Mark Adams



The following sums up the key themes and responses:

## The A12 Undercroft is a strategic gateway with unique spatial qualities.

As a visible and popular thoroughfare for many people, the Undercroft acts as a strategic gateway to multiple natural and urban areas with both green space and river links — especially as a gateway to Here East and the wider Hackney Wick and Fish Island community. It sits as the intersection of a wide range of communities including local residents, creatives, business and academic communities; plus a wide array of recreational, creative and practical activities.



The Undercroft's spatial qualities also make it uniquely valuable:

- **Covered:** much of the site is covered, providing shelter from the elements.
- **Scale:** there is potential for imaginative and performative use.
- **Canvas:** the walls and columns plus the unregulated nature of the site render it a blank canvas for artists and creatives.
- **Gritty and unsanitised urban character:** this forms part of its appeal — especially in light of public spaces becoming increasingly controlled — and it will be important not to overly sanitise (or programme) the space, so it retains this unique character.
- **Outdoor:** especially valuable since Covid-19, safe and activated outdoor spaces are vital to public health.

Whilst the values of the site were said to be: open, accessible, free, inclusive, fluid, sense of discovery, care, civic.

The site has the potential to provide accessible space and support local cohesion between the various communities surrounding the site.



**“It is a linking site, a public thoroughfare and a place of shelter and play. A public ‘living room’ for many. It is important that as the space evolves it is safeguarded as a community asset, owned and stewarded by the local community.”**

— Anne Thomas, &UStudio

## Constraints

**The Undercroft has a complex array of stakeholders, which requires careful management and permissions.**

There is a need to align and collaborate with the stakeholders to further activate the site for community use, address its challenges, and create a model of sustainable operation. These include:

- **Transport for London** as landowners of the dual carriageway
- **London Borough of Hackney** as the planning and licensing authority
- **London Legacy Development Corporation:** local planning authority (until December 2024), and continuing on beyond 2024 as a Mayoral Development Corporation, regeneration agency, local landowner, and manager of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.
- **Canal and River Trust** as landowners of the towpath and guardians of access to the waterways
- **Thames Water** for their mains water pipe running underneath the site



TfL would require liability to be transferred to another organisation to enable more significant and longer-term activities to take place.

**With traffic above, mains water below, and being adjacent to a waterway, health and safety is paramount.**

Due to the site being below live traffic flow, the Undercroft must be kept safe for road users above and vice versa. The site also sits directly above a 42" mains water pipe which runs in parallel to the canal. Therefore, no building up or down of fixed permanent structures is allowed. Fire hazards are not permitted. Access must be available at all times. The bollards installed by the council at the top of the ramp leading down to the site from the road require occasional reinforcement or replacement.

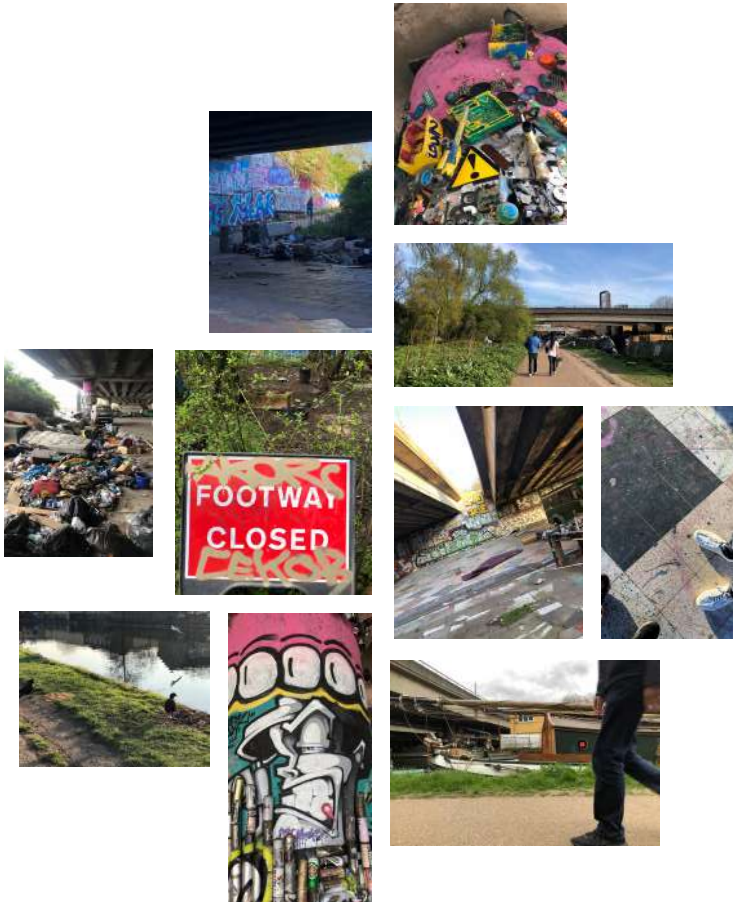
Whatever takes place at the site in future, must work within these constraints. Whilst for some community groups, the environmental impact of being under a motorway makes the site unsuitable for use.

The uneven broken paving is also another source of health and safety concern. TfL noted in 2022 that they are able to make good the existing paving and ensure it remains fit for purpose.

**“TfL are open to suggestions for the site’s future use by the community that work safely with the site’s unique constraints and parameters.”**

— Mark Adams, Transport for London

## How people feel about the site



### **There are safety concerns.**

There is a need to address safety at the site, especially following spates of muggings along this stretch of canal. At night the site is very dark. However any attempts to address security — such as installing lighting — must also respect the needs of ecology and biodiversity. For example, bats use river routes along the Hackney Cut to Fish Island at night. Solar or green powered ambient lighting could also be considered.

Further activating the site — with a regular operator such as a café — will help provide more natural surveillance from ‘eyes on the street’, whilst retaining the site’s core values.

### **There are environmental concerns to address such as rubbish, fly tipping and noise levels.**

The site is often clogged with rubbish — both from regular build-up and fly tipping, which presents health and safety risks such as hygiene issues and vermin, as well as making the site unsightly and prompting complaints to the council and the Canal & River Trust. The ‘broken window theory’ suggests that this can lead to further disrespectful treatment of the site, as opposed to encouraging considerate use. There is an immediate need to clean up the rubbish, and put in place a sustainable ongoing maintenance strategy to keep levels in check, and avert costly and complex ad hoc large-scale clearances. Attempting to enclose the site could waste resources and focus, which could be better placed addressing issues at the site constructively.

Due to the site’s proximity to residential areas, activity levels need to be balanced so they do not negatively impact on the quality of life of local residents and ecology. For example, noise levels during music amplification.

There is a need to make it an appealing place to be, whilst managing potential anti-social behaviour. Sensitive liaison with the current occupants is required. Facility-wise there is a lack of toilets to handle larger numbers of the public.

“If you have these spaces, where people can exist in an informal way, yeah, there’s some annoyances, but what you get out of it is just so much greater in value. It seems like everything’s been privatised. This site has the very rare opportunity of being something else.”

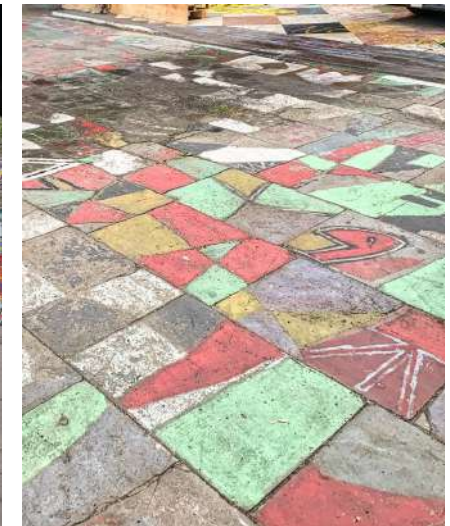
— Nick Newman, Studio Bark & U-Build

**Community use: beyond current site usage, there is significant potential to broaden public access so it becomes more inclusive.**

It is important to keep the site open and not enclose it because it is already in use. It is also vital to ensure that there is greater public access so the site becomes inclusive for a broader cross-section of the community.

Current uses include:

- Art and creative expression: the site acts as an informal gallery which is a significant attractor to the site, from street art and graffiti to assemblage and sculpture.
- Shoot location: for filmmakers and photographers.
- Sports: skateboarding, BMX, cycling, running, walking, plus watersports such as rowing and canoeing.
- Boater repairs and retail business boats.
- A refuge for the marginalised, and homeless living.
- Dancers and party goers (NB: historically this has been problematic for some, and a controlled behaviour order was placed on the area).
- Nature and wildlife inhabitants.
- Hang out spot.
- Space for experimentation with student design and research projects.





**“We’re always on the lookout for interesting places where our students might be able to do installations, measurement and public outreach. A space like the A12 Undercroft is perfect for that. The last thing I’d want is to see it becoming too sanitised. I like the idea of it staying gritty and robust, having that character.”**

— Prof Iain Borden, The Bartlett School of  
Architecture

# Stakeholder Interview Findings

**Future activation: the site presents exciting opportunities for social and environmental impact.**

Significant opportunities to further activate the site were identified, including:

Café / temporary food & beverage offers to help provide revenue to fund cultural programming.

Environmental initiatives such as community gardens, sustainability classes and activities that connect to the Hackney Wick Woodlands and green spaces.

A bridge site of exchange to help dissolve barriers and create conversations between the various communities within the area: established residential communities, creatives and artists, new arrivals in the new builds, and the academic institutions and businesses at Here East. As well as a site for intergenerational activities.

Outdoor gallery and events with cultural, creative and educational programming to provide on-going engagement and regular opportunities for fresh activity. Many people mentioned installations, exhibitions, performance art, music, theatre, screenings, lectures, and training programmes. As well as building on the arts at the site, such as with regular artist commissions to paint the columns.

Providing training and upskilling opportunities for local people as a result of engagement with projects at the site.

Caretaking: does the site need an agreed set of rules and responsibilities of use, and could boaters (for instance) help play a temporary caretaker role during their mooring.

Water sports activity hub, e.g. as a canoeing and paddling equipment store for common usage.

A robust testing ground for student ideas and projects: students often want sites that are not too precious, preferring 'rough and ready' character.

Scope the potential to place structures on the land to the north alongside the Wick Woodlands, such as modular build systems that can be taken up and down easily. This could open up the area for wider uses such as affordable studios and food outlets.

“The space has a unique and dramatic character. Alongside continued artistic expression and varied other use, it would be interesting to see innovative and creative solutions trialled here, such as lighting powered by sustainable energy like solar, wind or kinetic. I would love to see the site treated with respect and care – really valued whilst staying open and free.”

— Cath Carver, Colour Your City

**“We need to find new methodologies and processes that are rooted in the site and situation. How can we do things differently and explore potential? It’s also about skill sharing, bringing people together, and stitching the communities together in a different way.”**

— Dr Claire McAndrew, The Bartlett School of  
Architecture

## Widespread public engagement is required to ensure there is genuine community co-authorship.

Wide ranging community engagement — both digital and in-person — is required to help shape the site's future. This engagement should address consultation fatigue in the local area, by using innovative and situated methodologies (such as those displayed by student Sophie Hardcastle) which promote cohesion amongst all local communities. A multiplicity of visions for the site must then be reconciled. There is an opportunity for an innovative community-led approach to be adopted, perhaps even a new and groundbreaking kind.



## The A12 Steering Group requires formalisation.

There is work to be done to clarify the role of the A12 Steering Group going forwards:

- Clarify the role and purpose of the group, what skills and expertise are required for membership, and establish Terms of Reference.
- Ensure that the group reflects the diversity of the area.

## Contextual drivers are increasing needs for community space, further increasing the site's importance and value.

These pertinent drivers include:

- **Affordable, inclusive and diverse community space:** there is high demand from community groups for low cost or free space for cultural activity, in parallel with the loss of civic spaces due to significant development in the area. With local population levels rising, there is increased pressure on cultural services and civic spaces.
- **Spatial gold:** with Covid-19 there has been even more pressure put on local spaces, and outside space is highly valued to facilitate social activity.
- **Health outcomes:** the London Borough of Hackney's transport strategy encourages people to walk and cycle everywhere to improve public health.
- **Increasing popularity with boats:** moorings have vastly increased since 2012 along this stretch of water, placing further emphasis on the need for safe use by the boating community and indeed other water-users, such as rowers.
- **Wall space:** the loss of wall space for street art due to new developments. This is a key part of the area's character and appeal.

**“It’s a very popular stretch of water; moorings have vastly increased since 2012. There’s an opportunity for it to be well used by boaters and bring in a range of other people to enjoy the site.”**

**— Emma Harrington, Canal & River Trust**

**“This site should be refreshingly different.  
Ask the community what they want  
from the space and respond to that.”**

— Pete Bennett, Grow

**“It is a really visible and popular route for many people coming from the marshes and down into the parks.”**

— Hannah Lambert, London Legacy Development Corporation



# Local context and the importance of bringing the A12 Undercroft into community use



The A12 Undercroft is an informally organised cultural space. It is well used and exists — on its own rules somewhat — as an open space used by a wide variety of users, below and above its thick carriageways and watery canal artery. The scale and character of the site make it an interesting space for creative and cultural usage. Offering a gritty stage to E9, below a thudding dual carriageway.

## Social Wealth

The site has immense potential value for further developing social wealth within the community. Social wealth building seeks to nurture and measure types of ‘wealth’ beyond merely economic — such as knowledge, social and natural capital. Social capital is about having access to resources and relational networks which meet collective needs. Social connection is seen as the basic currency of social wealth. Social wealth ‘assets’ are therefore those buildings and resources which purposely provide accessible, safe spaces and circumstances for these connections to take place.

The fact that the A12 Undercroft is an open space allows for accessible and inclusive use, with the site creating continuous social wealth due to its incidental use. It is not a social wealth asset in and of itself at the moment, because it is not organised and consistent.



The social wealth that has informally emerged (and in some instances been lost) in the A12 Undercroft includes:

- Space for expression, play, art, sport, creativity and culture.
- Space for connection, bringing communities together through cultural usage and incidental use.
- Providing shelter for marginalised members of society.

Inclusive and accessible civic space is increasingly important against the backdrop of fading social and cultural assets in Hackney Wick and Fish Island more generally.

**“There’s so much land that has been developed and lost to communities, like Stour Space that saw over 100,000 people a year. Community space that is really accessible and inclusive, no matter your price, background or other, is so important. This is a really good opportunity to set a real example of how we recover from Covid-19 and the immense capitalisation of land; to have an environmental impact; and to showcase what is possible when communities come together.”**

— Neil McDonald, Civic State, Stour, Wick CNC, Hackney Wick & Fish Island Community Development Trust



Land  
Acquired

# Local context and the importance of bringing the A12 Undercroft into community use

## Population Pressures

As an area undergoing massive redevelopment, especially since the 2012 Olympics, there has been a huge increase in the local population, with a resulting squeeze on cultural resources as big demands are placed upon them.

In 2016, the Hackney Wick Ward population was estimated at 12,900; by 2028 the projected population will be 17,400 — the highest rate of growth in the borough<sup>8</sup>.

There are, however, believed to be much higher numbers living in the area than officially counted. Research from the Hackney Wick Renters Union using Valuation Office Agency data (April 2020) found that 4,500 in live/work units in Hackney Wick and Fish Island were not accounted for due to their lack of residential status.

<sup>8</sup> The City and Hackney Joint Strategic Needs Assessment – Hackney Wick Health & Wellbeing Profile 2016  
<https://hackneyjsna.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Hackney-Wick-ward.pdf>

# In conclusion

In light of all this, the need to retain the A12 Undercroft as an open site for the community is essential. The site is not without its challenges — notably rubbish build-up and maintenance — but it is deemed that such nuisances are surmountable and worthy of addressing, rather than attempting to circumnavigate them with site enclosure. There is potential to evolve the site sustainably and build on its use and legacy.

It is clear that the A12 Undercroft needs to remain in community use to support a local social infrastructure — which meets the needs of the diverse communities who dwell locally, including young people who need diverse activities, recreational facilities, and opportunities to learn new skills and have local employment, as well as older people who need opportunities to help them combat social isolation and loneliness — as found in the Wick Award's research; and creatives who require economic opportunities to thrive such as markets (as funded by the CEZ) and ways to share their work — such as gallery space.

In short, the A12 Undercroft represents a powerful opportunity to address local needs for social cohesion, creative expression, public health, enterprise and employment.



**“We’ve already proved the A12 Undercroft’s huge potential with Folly for a Flyover. Now is the time to really seize this opportunity to create a real destination location for the people of Hackney Wick.”**

— Mathieu Rogers, London Borough of Hackney

# Recommendations

## *Primary recommendations:*

### **1. Establish terms of reference for the A12 Steering Group.**

To include:

- a. Aims of the group.
- b. Determine who is needed in the group.
- c. Be clear about group (and individual) roles and responsibilities.
- d. Formalise a structure for interested community groups and local organisations to interface with the work.

This work could be done in a workshop with the wider A12 Steering Group and moderated by an external facilitator.

### **2. Draft a brief to outline what principles and values the group would like the space to deliver.**

To include:

- a. Spatial parameters and area footprint.
- b. Practical constraints due to the nature of the site.
- c. Principles and values.
- d. Beneficiaries and intended impact.

### **3. Draft options that the group can appraise about how to operationalise/manage the site.**

Outline a set of optimum operational models.

### **4. Relationship building with project partners.**

There is a piece of work to be done around relationship building with key stakeholders, with whom there is a need to work with to make this happen.

## *Secondary recommendations:*

### **5. Create an innovative process of engagement.**

A further piece of work is required to identify a comprehensive engagement strategy, involving local residents, charities and outreach programs, community groups, business and academic institutions. This should not be considered 'consultation', but a process of engagement. Designed to be innovative and creative, it ought to be a process that is situated and developed with local communities, enabling the process of engagement to be valuable in itself.

### **6. Identify resources to help drive future progress.**

A variety of sources and a conglomerate of funds are to be explored, such as capital work grants, Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding and crowdfunding.

**“We can’t leave it as it is, something needs to be done. It’s a missed opportunity.**

**It could be a great asset for the community. One of the great values of this is to try and bring all sections of the community together and provide benefit over time for all, from the senior citizens all the way down to young folk in the area.**

**The potential benefits are to aid communication, create something people can enjoy, get involved in, be skilled up, and have their lives made better in the community.”**

**— Sir William Atkinson, Canal & River Trust**



## 1. &U Studio Visualisation

Through ongoing meetings of the A12 Steering Group, many ideas came forward for how the site could be used. In 2019, architect and local community member Anne Thomas of &U Studio was invited to help create concept visuals to illustrate potential uses of the site. The visualisations were not intended to dictate direction (they were not informed by any programme of community engagement), but they were designed to provide accessible entry points for stakeholders into contemplation about the potential future of the site as the group opened up dialogue with them.







## 2. Stour Outline

Following a period of research and work by Neil McDonald in 2019/20, scoping Stour's potential involvement in the site, a speculative strategic plan was produced to distil thinking and intention up to that point, to support contemplation with stakeholders about the potential future of the site.

### A12 UNDERCROFT

The A12 Undercroft is much loved public space and through a collaborative approach with local stakeholders over the past few years, Stour proposes to take on management of this & the adjacent land to the north & south to activate this site forming an accessible and safe outdoor public space supporting cultural activity at this northern gateway to the Hackney Wick & Fish Island Creative Enterprise Zone.

The land under the A12 (Yellow) is owned by TfL who have proposed a peppercorn rent to a suitable occupier who can bring community use, safety and insure them from liability. There are restrictions on building structure under the A12 and so to navigate this we intend to also utilise and activate the areas to the north and south.

The Land to the north (Red) and south (Green) is owned by Hackney who desire to improve green spaces in Hackney.

We aim to construct sustainable, modular and environmentally fitting structures at the land to the north (Red) as pictured in the photo, to the right using a local firm (Wick CNC - a LBH partner project) to manufacture them. In the first instance we would intend to place a cafe in close proximity to the A12 to ensure surveillance, provide refreshments and contribute financially to the cultural programming so that this can be proceed on an ongoing basis without reliance on funding, a model what Stour has developed over the last 11 years. Depending upon finance and permission we would like to build additional spaces along the canal to the north to provide affordable workspace inline with CEZ objectives and local need as well as educational space in partnership with UCL and other local institutions.

To the South (Green) we would intend to create and manage a green space as a community garden similar to that at Barge East pictured to the right to encourage social cohesion, education and cross generational interaction as well as supply some ingredients to the cafe.

Under the A12 itself we aim to run a continuous program of cultural activity from projected exhibitions such as at the Van Gough Museum (<https://youtu.be/5og-MibgoDU>) and pictured) as well as performances of theatre, poetry, music and live art in a safe and accessible way as well as hosting open air lectures and temporary events by local groups.

### Credits

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**Canal &  
River Trust**

Making life better by water

Report funded by the Canal & River Trust

With in-kind contributions from Cath Carver, Neil McDonald, Alex Russell and Dr Claire McAndrew

Design: Mona Sharif