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Discussion Paper Series

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2016-02

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TERRAFORMING TECH CITY: PLACE BRANDING AND SPATIAL IMAGINARIES IN INNER EAST LONDON

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Abstract [91 words]

This paper performs a mixed-methods analysis of place-branding strategies developed in the 'Tech City' cluster initiative in Inner East London, drawing on ethnographic material, semi-structured interviews and visual content. Using Jessop's concept of the spatial imaginary, we explore key foundational geographies, trace the emergence of the 'Silicon Roundabout' and Tech City concepts between 2008 and 2014, then discuss Tech City's governance and progress, highlighting both day-to-day challenges and more basic tensions. We contrast this experience with that of 'Here East', a new regeneration space across the city in the Olympic Park.

Keywords: cities, clusters, spatial imaginaries, place branding, economic development, urban governance

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1/ Introduction

Q: What should a city be like?
Jane Jacobs: It should be like itself.
[Interview with Reason Magazine, 2001]

Let us take you on a journey. It starts on a wet November afternoon in late 2014. We are outside the Shoreditch Grind coffee shop, about to begin a guided tour of 'Silicon Roundabout and Tech City', Inner East London's much-feted technology cluster.[1] We cannot quite believe we are here. Our tour guide produces a map: roads around Old Street are marked as 'Silicon Roundabout', and an implausibly large area, stretching out to Bow and the Docklands, is highlighted as 'Tech City'. As we wander towards the former Foundry pub on Great Eastern St – "an important cultural institution throughout the 1990s and some of the 00s" – our guide narrates an alternative history.

In this version, "it all kicked off in 2008*."* As our guide informs us over the next two hours, it all started with Dopplr, a travel-based social network founded by Matt Jones and Matt Biddulph, who were based in the Inmarsat building on the roundabout's south-east side. They got talking and tweeted about the area. There are now 1,500 firms here, employing 50,000 people. The area accounts for 76% of Greater London's tech growth. East London contains 31% of jobs in the Flat White Economy, as opposed to just 9% in West London. More recently, she continues, the area's "overhyped cool" has left some looking for alternatives: Croydon, White City and Hackney Wick have all been suggested. Shoreditch Town Hall gone from registering births and deaths to hosting seven-day hackathons.

Some of this history is partly true, but much of it is incorrect, or confused.[2] 'Real' research findings – including some of these authors' own work – have been combined with boosterist

[1] We paid Insider London, a commercial operator, £25 per person and booked under our own names.

[2] Sentence by sentence: The cluster's roots can be dated back to the late 1990s dotcom boom, with foundational layers in 'new media', business services, art and the creative industries – and loft living – some years before this; while the Tech City initiative was launched in November 2010. Matt Biddulph is a key figure (and co-founder of

material straight from official press releases or consultants' reports. Some key physical sites are identified – Old St roundabout itself, Hoxton Square, the Foundry, the Tea Building – but others are missed (The Reliance, State51, The Old Fountain, Shoreditch Village Hall, The Shepherdess, the Moo offices). Matt Jones and Matt Biddulph *are* important protagonists in this story, but so are many others (government actors as well as foundational firms such as Moo, Mind Candy or Last FM). We're in the right place, but everything feels slightly wrong.

As we shall show in this paper, the real backstories of both 'Silicon Roundabout' and 'Tech City' are far more curious than this. But for researchers, the guided tour is fascinating for many reasons. Not least because it exists: 'Tech City' is now a powerful enough brand to merit its own tourist industry, and there is apparently enough interest in the story (from students on field trips, large corporates and potential investors) to sustain regular excursions. But also because it illustrates how public framings and narratives of an area can be dis-assembled into fact, story, policy message and foundation myth; and because the Tech City narrative highlights some of the deeper challenges in 'place branding' any area.

Place branding has been a central element in national and local policymakers' strategies to grow the East London technology ecosystem, particularly the 'Tech City' phase which ran from November 2010 to mid-2014, after which the initiative was expanded across the country and relabelled 'Tech City UK' (Tech City UK, 2015). The initial strategy had three aims: to grow the cluster; to attract outside investment; and to create economic linkages between Shoreditch and a post-Games Olympic Park, a few miles to the East. Central to this approach was the development of a 'Tech City' identity, involving intensive marketing and promotion, especially to international investors; the planning of new iconic buildings; and a spatial development strategy that terraformed the cluster into a 'policy space' stretching from Shoreditch into the Olympic Park at Stratford. It was complemented by unofficial 'land grabs', most notably LB Newham's

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Dopplr) but never worked in Inmarsat (another firm altogether). 'Silicon Roundabout' was born in a jokey conversation at a Moo.com summer party (see section 4). BSD data for 2014/15 identifies 2,805 digital economy firms in the three 'core wards' around the roundabout, employing 20,493 people. In the same period, these wards accounted for 3.72% of all digital economy jobs in Greater London; 17.3% of all jobs in these wards are in the digital economy, versus 9.6% in Greater London as a whole. Hackney Wick and Croydon have indeed been touted as technology clusters. Hackathons take place over the course of one or two days, not an entire week.

‘Tech City Plus’ strategy, which attempted to site part of the cluster even further East. Politicians and delivery agencies have claimed that this approach has been highly successful, even driving cluster growth. In a recent speech, for example, London Mayor Boris Johnson argued that:

> *Tech City, the heart of London’s tech sector, has become the biggest cluster in Europe over the last three years, growing out of east London to span the entire capital.* (Boris Johnson, March 2014)

In this paper we ask: how successful has the Tech City initiative been as a place-branding strategy? And what does this tell us about the power of place branding tools more broadly? We develop an analytical framework by combining critical work on place-branding (Kearns and Philo, 1993) and Jessop’s concept of the ‘spatial imaginary’ (Jessop, 2012). Imaginaries act as simplified mental maps, allowing economic actors to get a ‘fix’ on complex socio-economic structures and processes; branding tools are often deployed in this process, selectively leveraging key local assets including ‘resonant’ buildings and sites (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2015; Hutton, 2006). Crucially, such assemblages can be constructed from above, by policymakers, or from below, by existing protagonists. Indeed, real world clusters such as Inner East London’s technology scene have evolved as layered systems with strong pre-existing identities (Duranton, 2007; Martins, 2015). This ‘versioning’ helps the cluster’s industrial structure to evolve, and helps produce an existing sense of place among participants. However, it also implies that shifting the brand of an area, or imposing a new one on the old, may be difficult to do. More broadly, spatial imaginaries often have a tenuous relationship with physical space, since at base they often reflect (or seek to govern) networks of public and/or private actors. This can lead to on-going tensions in demarcating territory, boundaries and responsibilities. In the case of top-down policy spaces (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2015), day-to-day management face the additional challenges of co-ordination across multiple actors and levels of government.

We use a combination of ethnography, semi-structured interviews and visual materials to empirically explore these issues. We find many of these theoretical concerns borne out on the ground, notably the fundamental tension between ‘soft’ policy space and ‘harder’ territory and

economic systems. Rather than growing out of Shoreditch to encompass the whole of the capital, East London's technology scene was always one of many across the city. Silicon Roundabout was an insider joke that never sought to map a fully working cluster, yet became the basis for public policy. Tech City's spatial boundaries were unclear, and there was an attempt to create a substantial 'policy space' stretching from Shoreditch to the Olympic Park. A consciously 'loose' or 'agile' approach to managing stakeholders helped build credibility with industry partners, but this sometimes hindered effective working within government. Both Silicon Roundabout and tech City are thus near-perfect spatial imaginaries, as envisaged by Jessop: they stand in fascinating contrast to the wholly new 'Here East', a top-down regeneration space being created in the Olympic Park. Here East's creators have, in the current iteration at least - delinked the site from its previous associations with Tech City and the 2012 Games sites, emphasising instead its links to wider creative communities in Hackney and to the emergent 'maker' movement.

Our study contributes to the small extant literature on the creative and technology industries in East London, and on 'Tech City' in particular. Given Tech City UK's expanded, nationwide remit, it is important to evaluate its early work in this way: to date, very few studies have done this (Martins, 2015; Nathan and Vandore, 2014; Foord, 2013). More broadly, place branding is a highly influential form of urban policymaking – yet is under-theorised and poorly understood in practice (Pasquinelli, 2010). This study enriches that literature by linking a real-world case study with a critical examination. It also provides an empirical complement to larger, often highly theoretical debates on relational geographies and spaces (Brenner, 2004; Massey, 1984).

Section 2 of the paper introduces the local area and sets out the key analytical building blocks. Section 3 details methods and data. Section 4 sets out a series of historical foundational geographies, or local spatial imaginaries, culminating in the emergence of 'Silicon Roundabout' in 2008. Section 5 discusses the Tech City strategy and operating principles, while Section 6 explores its effectiveness through three illustrative episodes. Section 7 concludes.

2/ Framework

2.1 / The area

The 'Tech City' ecosystem sits in Inner East London, at the boundary of Islington, Hackney, Tower Hamlets and the City financial district. Shoreditch is at its physical core, and 'Shoreditch' is often used as loose spatial shorthand (Pratt, 2009). These neighbourhoods have a rich industrial and social history (see *inter alia* Hamnett and Whitelegg (2007), Hutton (2008), Pratt (2009), Harris (2012) and Foord (2013)). Their historical development has been heavily shaped by their location outside the city, allowing them to form an 'edge' identity though attracting pariah activities – prostitution, illegal trading, 'noxious' manufacturing – outlawed in other nearby locations. The area grew rapidly during the Industrial Revolution, building workshops, developing furniture and textile industries, and hugely adding population. It was bombed heavily during World War II, and gradually declined during the post-war period. During the 1980s it experienced particularly severe de-industrialisation, opening up vacant commercial and office floorspace, some of which gradually became home to firms in the business services and creative industries, as well as early loft-dwellers. This growing residential population co-existed with a vibrant evening economy. Artists arrived in the 1990s, encouraging further creative economy businesses including 'new media' firms and dotcoms. By the early 2000s gentrification was already shifting creative practitioners further North and East, and the first wave of 'Tech City' founders and firms were starting to move in.

2.2 / Clustering in the post-industrial city

The area's hi-tech and creative firms are, loosely, part of the 'digital economy' (Department for Business Innovation and Skills and Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2009). In London, these have historically been 'digital content' businesses – firms in publishing, advertising, media or design that increasingly use ICT and online platforms, as well as a growing set of software, web services, data analytics and online financial services firms. In recent years small-scale 'neo-artisanal' manufacturing has also appeared in the mix; online tools have helped such firms cut costs and reach customers, and technologies such as 3D printing are likely to grow this market

further (Foresight Horizon Scanning Centre, 2010). East London's current digital businesses thus are layered over many earlier – but still active – 'versions' of the local economy (Boschma and Frenken, 2011).

This rich industry and product set is a structural feature of what Scott (2014) calls 'cultural-cognitive capitalism'. As with classic Marshallian industrial districts, such high-value activities tend to cluster in inner urban space (Scott, 1997; Hall, 2000), and benefit from the economies of production and consumption that large cities offer (Zukin, 1982; Hall, 1998; Glaeser et al., 2001; Duranton and Puga, 2004). In particular, digital and creative industries are knowledge-intensive with low entry barriers, featuring many small, young firms: big, economically diverse urban cores act as 'nurseries' for these businesses (Jacobs, 1969; Duranton and Puga, 2001). Workflows within firms are both very local and spatially extended (Grabher, 2002; Martins, 2015). ICTs increasingly enable work to be physically dispersed, at very low cost, to where the best (or cheapest) people are: small firms can operate as 'micro-multinationals' (Varian, 2005). But complex productive activities also require intensive face-to-face interaction; the preponderance of small firms and freelancers also places a premium on networking and information-sharing (Storper, 1997; Grabher, 2002; Charlot and Duranton, 2004), with pubs, coffee shops, members clubs and other 'ancillary' spaces acting as extensions of an office 'base' (Martins, 2015). Technology clusters are thus typically tightly drawn and physically dense (Kerr and Kominers, Forthcoming). As Martins argues, they provide 'space(s) for reproducing a (self-identified) community of like-minded people' [*ibid*, p143]. Below, we suggest these user-built geographies are a form of 'spatial imaginary' – as are the competing, top-down 'regeneration spaces' developed by policymakers. In both cases, 'resonant landmarks' (Hutton, 2006) anchor these micro-geographies: we describe some key sites in the rest of the paper.

2.3 / Place branding and other policy tools

Policymakers have used three approaches to try and support local tech ecosystems: 'ordinary' functions of central / local government; cluster strategies; and place branding approaches.

National policies on (say) skills training, infrastructure provision or access to business finance are part of a 'horizontal', non-spatial approach to industrial policy, and form an important part of the Tech City policy mix ((Nathan and Overman, 2013). 'Ordinary functions' of local government also help shape cluster characteristics, particularly those affecting land and property use (through planning and regulation of workspace), and those that shape the ancillary spaces and amenities widely used by digital businesses (via licensing and policing). As Pratt (2009) points out, in Inner East London relaxed policing of live-work rules historic played an important role in allowing creative businesses to take root in the area; boroughs such as Hackney and the City of London have since become increasingly active in shaping the supply of affordable workspace and regulating nightlife (Vandore, 2011).

By contrast, cluster strategies and place-branding approaches are 'vertical', focused on specific sectors and places. Cluster strategies seek to map and fine-tune a whole local ecosystem, by developing firm-firm interactions, local supply chains and broader upstream and downstream relationships (Porter, 2003). Such programmes have a poor track record (for a review see van der Linde (2003)). In large part this is because they emphasise positive feedback mechanisms (such as knowledge spillovers) while ignoring negative channels (such as rising office rents, greater competition between firms, or competing uses such as residential property) (Nathan and Overman, 2013).

Cluster programmes often involve a branding / marketing element, but place-branding approaches have also become an important element of local economic development in their own right. Traditionally a response to industrial decline, place branding has become re-appropriated as a means of regional competition as cities compete for investment or 'talent' (Hall and Hubbard, 1998; Short and Kim, 1998; Pratt, 2010). In this framing, places are primarily constituted as settings for symbolic consumption (Urry, 1995; Zukin, 1995) becoming sites of 'use, symbolism and experience' (Marling et al., 2009) [p870]. In policy terms, there is a 'marketing-led shift of economic development' (Greenberg, 2008) [p35], underpinned by wider neo-liberal shifts in public management (Gibson and Davidson, 2004).

At base, place branding involves combining selective attributes of an existing place together with desired futures to create an imaginary milieu for a high-value target audience or audiences. The 'brand reality' is built from formal and informal institutions – especially unusual or unique qualities – that characterize a community and places (Pike et al., 2006; Bickford-Smith, 2009). An imaginary place is developed via this selective drawing-on, and reshaping of, existing 'assets' (Kearns and Philo, 1993) coupled to some improved future state. Place branding thus involves both imaginary futures and reconstructed pasts (Lee and Yeoh, 2004); it often deploys 'transition fantasies', in which new protagonists colonise or take over old spaces, spurring regeneration (Lovering, 1995; Davidson, 2007; Christophers, 2008). Key sites and resonant spaces may thus be reclaimed and reconfigured: the 2012 proposals for redeveloping Old St roundabout are a classic instance of this (see Section 6.3).

2.4 / Place branding as spatial imaginary

There is no formal theory of place branding (Pasquinelli, 2010), but we can usefully borrow Jessop's concept of the 'spatial imaginary' to identify some of the underlying processes and challenges. As explained by Haughton and Allmendinger, an imaginary is a 'simplified, necessarily selective 'mental map' of a supercomplex reality' (2015) (p1). In this perspective regions are ever-shifting relational entities (Massey, 1984; Brenner, 2004); spatial imaginaries help demarcate regional economic spaces by selectively drawing on existing territories, places, networks and scales (Jessop, 2012), as well as symbolic markers and sites (Dembski and Salet, 2010). For example, 'regeneration spaces' such as the Thames Gateway operate by asserting a new functional geography (the 'Gateway', and its key sites such as Canary Wharf and the deep-water port at Shell Haven[3]); by linking networks of public and private actors; and by generating new governance models around these. As Houghton and Allmendinger argue, policymakers developing such strategies 'have increasingly tended to deal with issues of brand identity as much as area identity' (*ibid*, p14), since initiatives such as the Gateway – or Tech City – are primarily aimed at government and business actors, rather than the general public.

[3] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thames_Gateway and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_Gateway, both accessed 7 October 2015.

As the primary purpose of the imaginary is to manage relational space, physical boundaries are often fuzzy or under-developed. So there is often a fundamental operating tension between the 'soft' relational space developed in the imaginary, and the 'hard' physical territory it seeks to govern (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2015). This basic tension also generates two practical challenges: managing complex networked governance arrangements, and working at multiple government scales (Jessop, *ibid*).[4]

Branding strategies face a number of similar challenges, and the place branding literature highlights others. First, as noted earlier, clusters typically evolve from earlier versions of themselves: re-branding an area with a pre-existing identity presents difficulties. As Johansson (2012) points out, developing a branding imaginary involves selecting some 'approved' characteristics while 'disrespecting or erasing' others. Second, to be successful in such a context, place branding requires buy-in from existing communities and protagonists, or at least a lack of active resistance (Lovering, 1995). Kearns and Philo (1993) argue that if local communities do not feel that they are a part of the communicated identity, they have the power to render it useless. As we shall see, many of these processes played out in Tech City's early days.

3/ Methods and data

To explore these issues, we combine several qualitative methods and data sources. First, ethnography techniques were used to explore the Silicon Roundabout-era area. Initial fieldwork was conducted in 2009 via ethnographic observation whilst embedded in four technology and design firms in the Old St Roundabout area. In addition to observational material, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were also conducted with a snowballed sample of 19 participants, including company founders, programmers, designers, and strategists. The lack of a priori data about the Old St cluster indicated that the subjects under examination may need to be

[4] In the case of the Thames Gateway, for example, there is a clear disconnect between the high-level planning concept and the lived reality of the local communities; governance of the initiative has been criticised as weak and un-joined-up.

more clearly defined in terms of the nature and structure of the industrial sector that they operate in, which the open and generative nature of qualitative methods will allow for without advanced prescription (Ritchie 2004).

Second, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with local businesses between 2011 and 2012 after the launch of the Tech City initiative. A first phase (2011) yielded 16 face to face interviews with firms and policymakers, as well as a survey of local businesses (see Vandore (2011) for details); in the second phase (2012) firms were randomly sampled from the Tech City Map, a large local business directory (see Nathan and Vandore (2014)), yielding 36 face-to-face interviews with founders and senior staff at 34 firms. We then ran semi-structured interviews with 10 policymakers: in early 2012, as the policy rolled out, and again in late 2014 / 2015 after the refocus. Participants were typically senior figures in London city government, London boroughs or delivery agencies. Finally, we combined the verbal / written material from the previous stages with visual props, including photographs and maps.

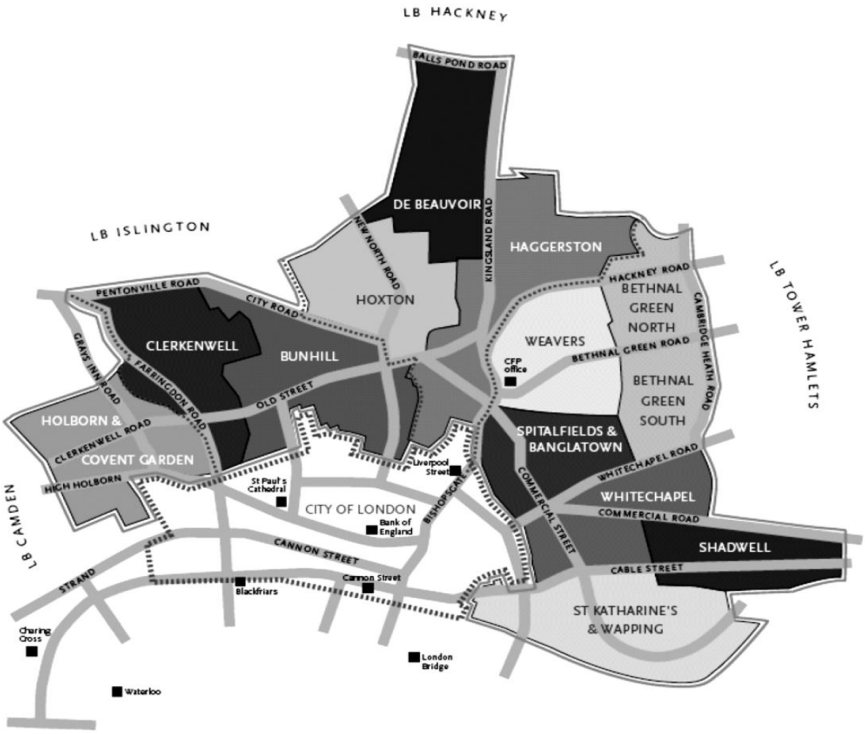
This mixed methods strategy follows a wider tradition of inductive research. Such projects often make use of ethnographic methods such as interviews and observation (Eisenhardt 1989), enabling triangulation, a stronger substantiation of constructs, and increased expressiveness of the dataset. Semi-structured interviews are a common way of collecting detailed 'generated data' (Bryman 2004: 319), with a semi-structured form allowing the structure laid down by the theoretical framework to be combined with the flexibility required to fulfil the conditions of the exploratory, iterative nature of the work; whilst also permitting greater sensitivity to the meaning surrounded by informal utterances (Lee 1993: 104). Ethnographic observation also offers heightened awareness of the social processes and relationships occurring in a space, and the opportunity to collect a large sample of useful naturally occurring data in its own social setting, rather than that specifically recounted for the research (Crang and Cook 2006); and allowing phenomena to be observed as they arise, adding to the exploratory nature of the work, and the ability to be adjustable and iterative. This type of data is of value when behaviour and interactions need to be understood in the 'real world' context, such as the understanding of a specific community or culture and the specific explicit and implicit 'rules' that govern it. (Adler and Adler 1998).

Ethnographic observation tools are also highly complementary with interviews, making practices accessible, not just accounts of practices (Flick 2006: 215). Observation techniques are thus amongst the best on which to base structured interview categories as they generate greater familiarity with experiences and meaning (Vidich and Lyman 1994).

4/ Place branding pre-histories

As Section 2 makes clear, today's digital cluster is built on past economic iterations. Similarly, we can identify a series of spatial imaginaries – foundational geographies – that policymakers and cluster participants have used to frame and brand the area.

Figure 1. The City Fringe.



Source: Bagwell (2008) from City Fringe Partnership (2003).

Inner East London's post-industrial potential was first picked up by policymakers in the late 1990s and early 2003 through the 'City Fringe' initiative (Bagwell, 2008). This acknowledged the nascent back office, creative industries and 'new media' presence emerging in the area, and attempted to position the area as an arc of economic opportunity, offering proximity to the City, Soho / West End and Docklands, but at much lower operating cost (Figure 1). Although ineffective as a policy (Pratt and Jeffcut, 2009) it nevertheless marks a first explicit positioning of the area. It also built on the promotional tactics of some creative industry players, notably the YBAs, and on some canny marketing by local estate agents (see Harris (2012) for discussion).

The area's 'new media' community, which had grown rapidly during the first dotcom boom, took a hit when the sector crashed in 2001. In the following years, however, a small, tightly-knit community of tech firms re-emerged in the area, many helmed by dotcom survivors. Other common links and communities of interest included the Haddock mailing list, participation in the early UK blogging scene, and in some cases, spells working in the BBC (members of the team who built the Corporation's first website went on to establish key London firms such as Dopplr and Berg). Despite this, protagonists had sometimes stumbled into the area by accident:

> *"So we … [found] literally a room above a pub … spent £50 on the cheapest possible IKEA furniture, and moved in there. … [We] just more or less stumbled on the fact that this was a really good part of town to be in. … [By] word of mouth, other friends ended up renting other rooms… and you started to have that tiny network effect" (Firm 1)*

Physical proximity and co-location were essential features of the scene, as much from necessity as design. For example, by 2008 'Bash Studios' in Scrutton Street was occupied by an eclectic mix of businesses including Schulze & Webb, Really Interesting Group, Tinker London, Red Monk, and small fashion companies. The outside of the building was decorated with constantly changing graffiti; the inside was described by one occupant as 'like IBM in the 1980s' [Firm 2], with erratic Internet and lighting connections (prompting the #shitoffice hashtag on Twitter). This hyperlocality created positive and negative agglomeration effects for the young firms. One founder explained that 'I am literally round the corner from everyone'; another found an employee in a local pub, 10 metres from the office, being interviewed by a rival company.

Informal subletting was regularly used to fill space and to convene like-minded operations (or friends). For example, Moo moved into a large block overlooking Old St roundabout in 2007, subletting space to then-tiny Dopplr, AMEE and TweetDeck. This building, with a well-used roof terrace, was the site of the now-infamous Moo summer party in 2008 that gave birth to the area's key moniker. Matt Biddulph's jokey remark about 'Silicon Roundabout' was initially made to his office colleagues, and tweeted – at 7:12 am (Figure 2).

Figure 2. 'Silicon Roundabout' is born.

Source: https://twitter.com/mattb, accessed 25 November 2015.

Figure 3. Silicon Roundabout, version 1.

Source: Cities Institute (2011)

The following day, Biddulph mentioned it to the *Financial Times'* new digital correspondent, Tim Bradshaw. Bradshaw picked up the story, and chased Biddulph for further information; pressed to elaborate, Biddulph named 15 companies in the area who were 'mostly friends' (Figure 3). The tag was picked up by the London *Evening Standard* who, in contrast to the *Financial Times'* cautious query, "Is this the heart of the UK's new dotcom boom?" led with the rather more bombastic headline, "Roundabout is London's answer to Silicon Valley."

In early 2009 *Wired UK* ran a large feature featuring 42 companies identified through a mix of crowdsourcing and personal contacts (Figure 4). (Disclosure: one of these authors worked on the piece and led the map development.)

Figure 4. Silicon Roundabout, version 2.

Source: Cities Institute (2011)

Several things stand out here. First, while the City Fringe place branding was aspirational and policy-driven, it failed to catch: in part because of co-ordination failures among the policy community, but also because it arrived at a time when economic activity in the area was at a low.

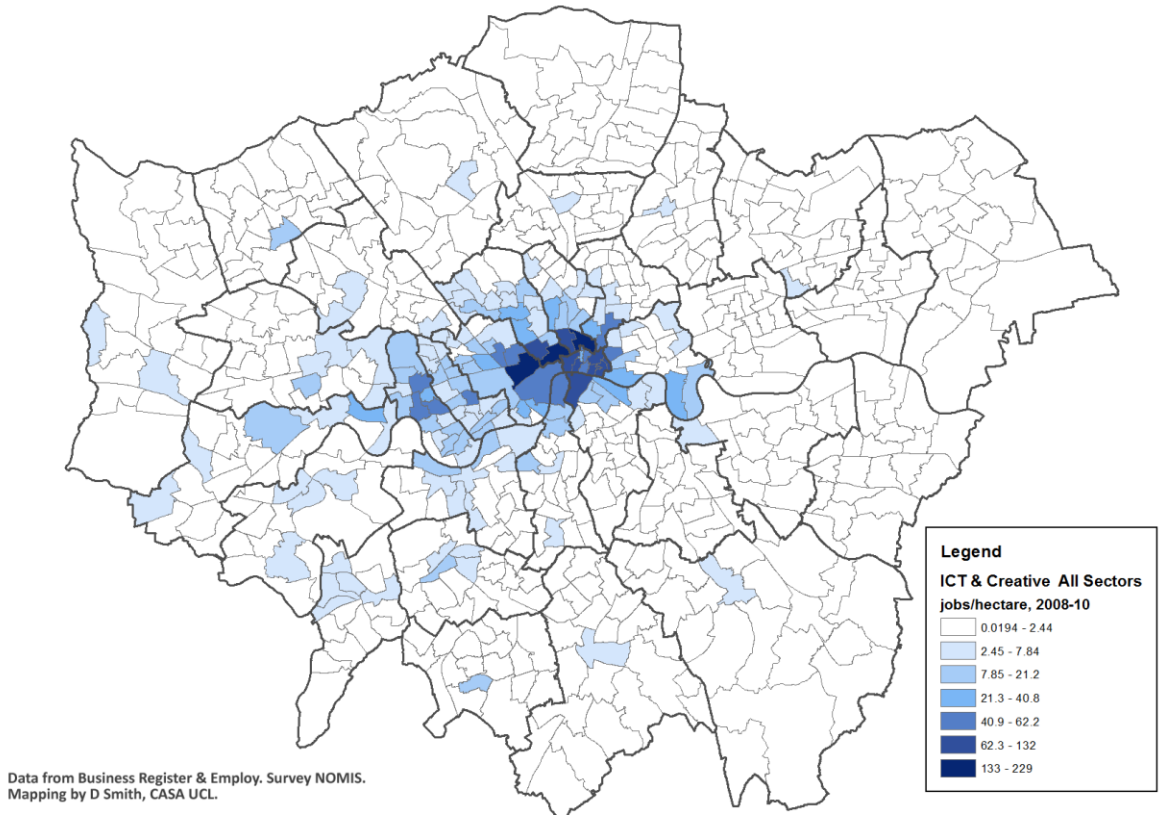
Second, while 'Silicon Roundabout' arrived, in a boom period for London, it was place-branding from below. Originated by a small group of powerful industry insiders, it was intentionally self-deprecating and ironic, but on the back of mainstream media attention, was taken more seriously by outsiders than its creators intended – Ben Hammersley, commissioner of the second 'Silicon Roundabout' map when editor of *Wired UK*, was even made 'Ambassador to Tech City' by David Cameron in 2012.

Third, all of these mappings are partial and incomplete. The 'City Fringe' picked up on many of the structural forces affecting the area but did not follow these through. It denoted territory and place, but failed to engage public or private networks. 'Silicon Roundabout' is a classical spatial imaginary, describing the social/professional networks of a small, well-connected group, with

heavy use of a key site to delineate physical territory but no clear sense of boundaries, and no attempt to map the larger physical territory and scales described by the earlier, policy-led framing.

Strikingly, Figures 3 and 4 show firms present in the mental geographies of Silicon Roundabout's inhabitants, but which are physically distant – on the Western edges of the City Fringe, or in one case, even on the South bank of the Thames. Crucially, then, neither of these foundational geographies engages with the larger system of ICT or creative industries production across London, of which firms in Shoreditch are just a part. To illustrate, Figure 5 maps the employment density of ICT activity across the capital at ward level. We can see the Inner East London core forms part of a hot corridor of ICT jobs, stretching back into the West End; equally, there are other hot spots, in Westminster, Docklands and the North and West of the city.

Figure 5. ICT and creative industries employment density in Greater London, 2008-10.



Spatial imaginaries are designed as 'fixes' rather than definitive mappings, and this city-wide patterning of ICT sector activity highlights the difficulty of drawing more local boundaries for City Fringe or Silicon Roundabout 'space', and in co-ordinating the relevant actors. None of these foundational geographies thus provides a stable or reliable basis for the policy initiative that came next.

5/ The emergence of 'Tech City'

David Cameron launched the 'East London Tech City' initiative in November 2010. In that speech, held at the Tech Hub incubator in Old St, the Prime Minister laid out the Government's thinking. We deliberately quote at length:

> *I know you've heard this many times before. Governments all over the world have tried to create their own Silicon Valley - but it never seems to happen. So why here in East London and why now with this Government? Let me start with the 'why here'. Something is stirring in East London. Only three years ago, there were just fifteen technology start-ups around Old Street and Shoreditch … Fast forward to today, and there are now over one hundred high-tech companies in the area … combine that with the possibilities of the Olympic Park just a few tube stops away … [a]nd it's clear that in East London, we have the potential to create one of the most dynamic working environments in the world.*
>
> *And I believe we can really turn this vision into a reality. We understand where previous governments have gone wrong. They believed that they could design and create a technology cluster from on-high. But the lessons from Silicon Valley are instructive. There was no grand centralised plan. … so much of Silicon Valley's growth was organic … This teaches government some simple things. Go with the grain of what is already there. Don't interfere so much that you smother. But do help out wherever you can … Our ambition is to bring together the creativity and energy of Shoreditch and the incredible possibilities of the Olympic Park to help make East London one of the world's great technology centres."* (Cameron, 2010)

Cameron went on to highlight a series of policy measures: a package of public support for early stage finance; help for foreign investors; opening up government procurement to SMEs; a 'new' visa for entrepreneurs; and a review of UK IP laws. Central to all of this was the creation of a 'Tech City' spatial imaginary, knitting together public and private sector participants in industry and at varying levels of government, and a series of (desired) locations in the city. This section explores how the policy and resulting place brand took shape.

5.1 / Origins

Cameron's speech stressed that the policy had come together after only a "few weeks and months" of holding "dozens of meetings with technology companies and venture capital investors from across the world." Our interviews shed light on this rapid prototyping:

> *I somehow got an invite to go on a trade mission to India, organised by Cameron, via a special adviser to the PM. … Probably because I'd appeared in a list of influential tech people in Wired UK. As a small company. And they didn't have many small companies represented ... when I was out on this trip I made a point of talking to as many people as I could, about this thing in East London which was happening already, called Silicon Roundabout, and what could they do to support it. ... eventually this special advisor who'd got me invited, said "you should come and talk to [the then Science Minister] David Willetts". So I went ... and I said, uh, I don't know what you can do, but do something. And we talked about it a bit and he said attention might be just about the right thing to do, you know, so not tax and not legislation. And I was like "that's exactly it". … And he remembered that. And then a few months later there was the Tech City initiative, and [the advisor] dropped me a note, and was "this is a continuation of that conversation we started in India".* [Firm 3]

Another interviewee highlighted a local visit from the same No 10 adviser:

> *It started off when No 10 first came here … [the adviser] was doing a tour of some tech start-ups and he came here. . I told him about some of the difficulties we'd had,*

> *particularly the difficulty I spoke of was supplying software to the government … They said that's a really interesting issue. That's something the government could help [sic]. So they asked me to speak at the launch of Tech City so I actually got to give a little talk to David Cameron and Boris directly at the launch which was fun. I got accused of waving my finger at David Cameron, which I didn't intend to do, but it went down quite well.* [F4]

Both quotes highlight the prominence of place branding in the policy mix. They also sum up a flexible, 'loose policy' approach, which we discuss in more detail below. Less charitably, the quotes suggest a haphazard process some way from the evidence-based policy most governments claim to want to achieve (Hallsworth et al., 2011).

Notably, these conversations came at a time when London was preparing to host the 2012 Olympic Games, and when public opinion was becoming increasing critical of what was seen as an expensive folly. There was huge pressure on the government – and the Olympic Park Legacy Company, a public body charged with planning the area's future post-2012 – to ensure that there were no 'white elephants' of the kind that had plagued previous Games. Of particular concern were the International Broadcast Centre and Media centre in a remote corner of the park: the two buildings housed 91,000 square metres of business space, with good road access but poorly served by public transport. Awareness of a growing technology cluster relatively close by created a tactical opportunity to link the two in the public mind, and thus to attract potential investors to the Park [Policymaker 1].

5.2 / Implementation

Tech City was deliberately positioned as a 'vision' but without a 'grand centralised plan', where government would 'go with the grain' of existing activity. Place branding was central. Officials involved in delivery characterised their job as 'shining a light on Shoreditch' and 'making the world know what Tech City is doing': one of the first actions was to hire a PR firm [P2]. Implementation was rapid, borrowing from 'disruptive' tech sector practices: 'do it first and apologise later' [P2]. This was deemed necessary given both the fast-moving nature of the tech

industry, and the need to demonstrate that policymakers could hear and adapt to feedback from firms on the ground (who themselves practised 'agile' behaviour and expected it from others). As such, we can see it as a natural response to the conceptual and practical challenges raised by Jessop and others in section 2.

In practice, though, this consciously loose approach raised multiple difficulties of its own. On the one hand, the physical borders of 'Tech City' were kept deliberately vague. One interviewee described to us 'the foolishness of boundaries ... [it is] not an area, it's an attitude of mind' [PX]. Another argued that:

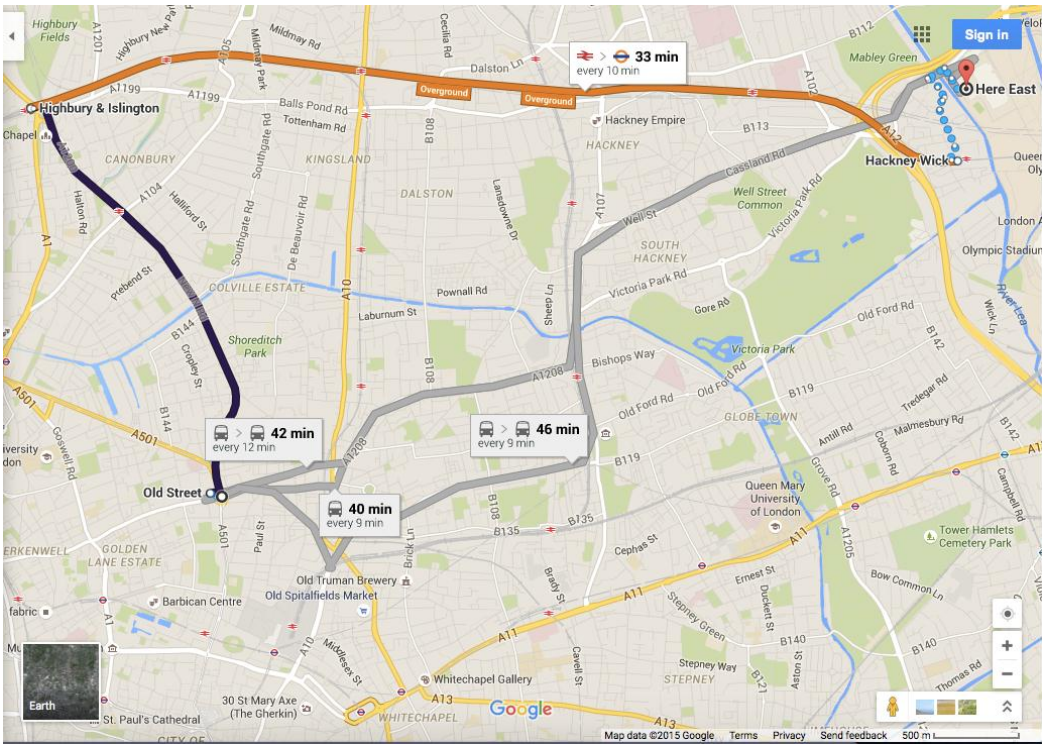
> *I have real trouble putting a line around [Tech City] because for me it's an idea. Like I see Silicon Valley from this distance, I have no idea where Silicon Valley is. I couldn't draw a line around it. ...The geography of it will be very porous and actually quite dynamic over time because it will grow ... Tech City is actually where the companies which are part of it decide where they want it to be.* [July 2011, PY].

On the other hand, the strategy already contained a spatial 'grand plan' – the desire to 'connect' key sites in the Olympic Park to the Shoreditch cluster. This top down, terraforming strand of policy was not only the exact opposite of the promised bottom-up approach, it also required engaging with actual geography. In turn, this brought out the tensions between desired policy space and real-world urban grain.

For example, Cameron's speech highlighted that the Olympic Park was only "a few tube stops away" from Shoreditch, and also cited access to City Airport, St Pancras International railway station and the Stratford transport hub. The reality was less clear (Figure 6). Although the two areas are geographically close (5.6 kilometres), the quickest tube journey between Old Street and the International Broadcast and Media Centre takes 33 minutes and involves seven stops, one change plus a 10-minute walk at the end.[5]

[5] As calculated by TFL Journeyplanner, 21 August 2015, 12:45pm. As alternatives, Journeyplanner gives a 42 minute bus journey (involving a change of bus), a 29 minute bike ride (at 'moderate speed') or a 40 minute journey using a TFL hire bike. // http://bit.ly/1K9XPlQ

Figure 6. From Old Street to the Olympic Park.



Source: Google Maps, accessed 8 December 2015.

Figure 7. Tech City policy space.

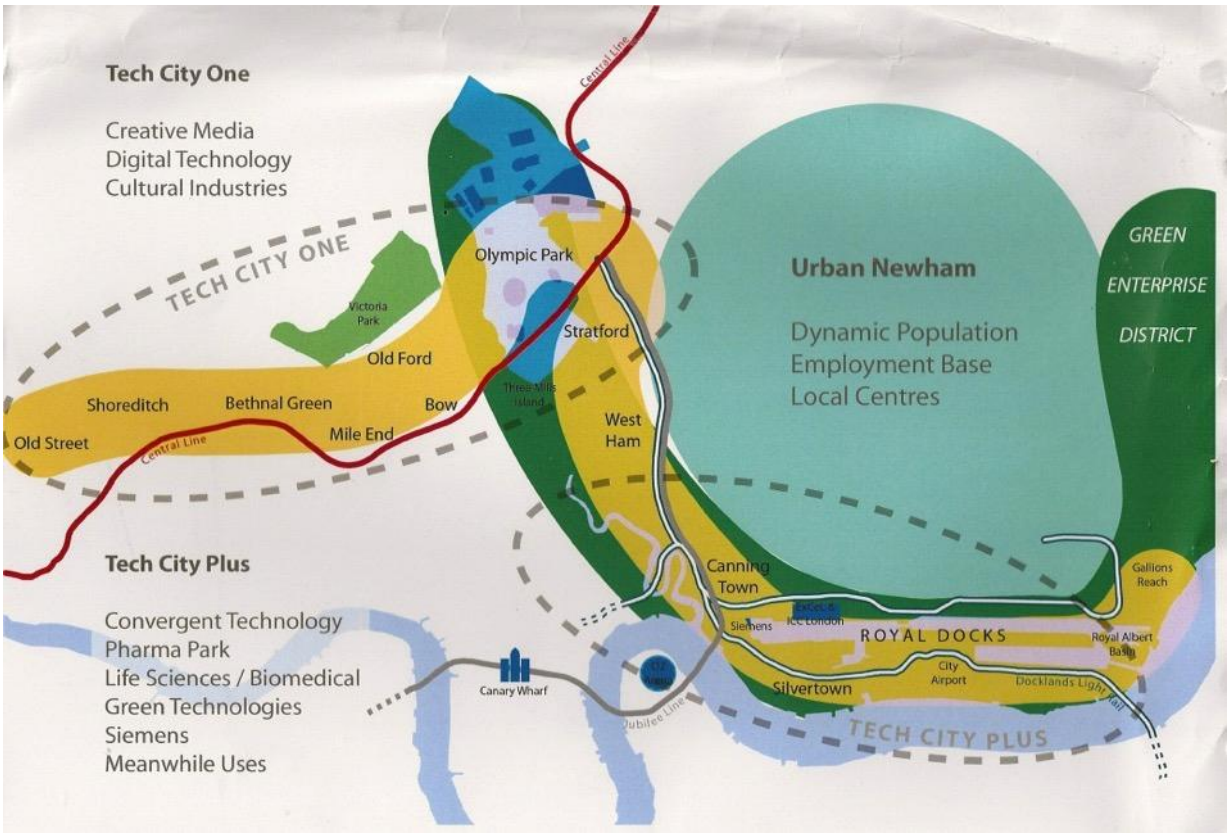
Source: TCIO (2011).

Similarly, publicity material at the time presented ‘Tech City’ as a cohesive zone stretching from Shoreditch out to the Stratford Park, obscuring real distances, shrinking major roads (such as the A12), and omitting both the River Lea and the substantial amount of housing between the two neighbourhoods (Figure 7).

‘Loose’ policy also created some governance challenges. Many different organisations were involved, each with their own agendas. The policy originated with the Prime Minister’s advisers, who continued to take an active interest even after handing over the initiative to UK Trade and Investment (UKTI), the government agency charged with attracting FDI, which in 2011 set up the Tech City Investment Organisation (TCIO). Several other departments were also involved. Regular monthly breakfast meetings were held at 10 Downing St with around 50-60 participants [P3-P7] including local businesses, universities, officials from government, the Greater London Authority (GLA), the Olympic Park Legacy Company (OPLC), the four London boroughs, as well as property owners and service providers. These were chaired alternately by Cameron’s policy advisor Rohan Silva, and Eric Van Der Kleij, the first head of TCIO. Interest from Downing St meant other levels of government are 'all desperately keen to be a part of it,' so the set-up 'is more disorganised than normal' [P8]. Another described it as 'the biggest mess of governance I’ve ever seen both in this country and internationally.' [P3] Alongside this structural complexity were major differences in attitude and approach. Some spending departments would 'see 100 reasons why not to' do something. By contrast, the Downing St 'attitude was make it happen, why not faster. Who do you want the PM to call?' [P1].

Multiple scales of governance also created complications. The GLA’s priority was digital enterprise across all of London; the OPLC was responsible only for the Olympic Park; while each of the London Boroughs had their own priorities, with the City of London, Hackney (Shoreditch) and Newham (Stratford) particularly keen to extend the cluster into their respective patches. Newham was even able to develop its own ‘Tech City Plus’ vision (Figure 8), which involved not only the ‘core zone’ from Shoreditch to Stratford, but also a second zone of development centred on the Royal Docks site close to Canary Wharf.

Figure 8. Tech City Plus.



Source: LB Newham, 2011.

These spatial and governance tensions hampered attempts to brand and sell both area and policy, right down to the choice of name. Cameron's speech used the phrase 'East London Tech City': but between November 2010 and mid-2014 the area was variously branded Tech City East, Tech City UK (covering only London), Tech City and Tech City UK (covering the UK). As one interviewee put it:

> *The first thing I did when I joined was to say 'tell me about all the different branding' because there's so many. I'm consolidating everything down to a single brand, which will be Tech City UK. [P2]*

This labelling was designed to convey the international economic significance of the area, and to stress that its physical boundaries were not restricted. However, given that the underlying governance structure and resources were then focused on East London, the 'UK' branding led to

objections from local policymakers in other parts of the country so was not officially used until 2014, as the initiative shifted from East London to UK-wide.

6/ The brand on the ground

This section explores how the Tech City place brand was received by local businesses and the wider technology community. We do this through three 'cases': immediate reactions from local firms; the redevelopment of sites in the Olympic Park; and proposals for the redevelopment of the Old St Roundabout.

6.1 / Brand reactions

In our interviews with local companies in early 2012, awareness of Tech City was surprisingly low: a third of interviewees had not heard of the initiative. Of those that had, we found roughly equal counts of positive and negative reactions. Most of these focused on the brand and spatial identity. More recent entrants typically welcomed the rebranding:

> *Tech City's great. I think all of this helps to push the ecosystem generally, because it gets into people's minds … [F5]*

More established firms were more sceptical, with some citing earlier 'Silicon Roundabout' terminology in preference:

> *Tech City is what government people call it. I don't think I've heard anyone call it Tech City without sort of air quotes. [F1]*

> *My personal perception of Tech City is very much a government jumping on the bandwagon, and sticking a label on it. [F6]*

Related to this, we found some confusion and worry about governance. For example:

CFL *Okay. And who do you see as the main driver behind the Tech City initiative?*

A *What's the guy called? [B. Eric]. Eric. Yeah, and thingy.*

B *I don't know who I'd see as the main driver, I don't think I'd say it was him. I know he gets quoted the most. Never met him.*

A *I'd say it's Cameron's baby, isn't it?*

B *I'd say the people I've seen the most is UKTI. I'd put it down to them.*

A *Is Eric not UKTI?*

B *I don't know. [F7]*

By contrast, the brand was enthusiastically taken up by the property sector (Savills, 2012; Cushman & Wakefield, 2013). This is consistent with local estate agents' historic role in Hoxton (Harris, 2012). As one interviewee put it, the real estate sector 'has a long tradition of inventing brands and names for places … that's how they enhance value.' [P9]

6.2 / The Olympic Park

As we have already discussed, there were serious conceptual problems with policymakers' attempts to spatially rebrand the cluster as a single zone running from Inner East London core out to the Olympic Park. This terraforming 'spatial stretch' was not considered credible by the Shoreditch businesses we interviewed in 2011 and 2012. This response was typical:

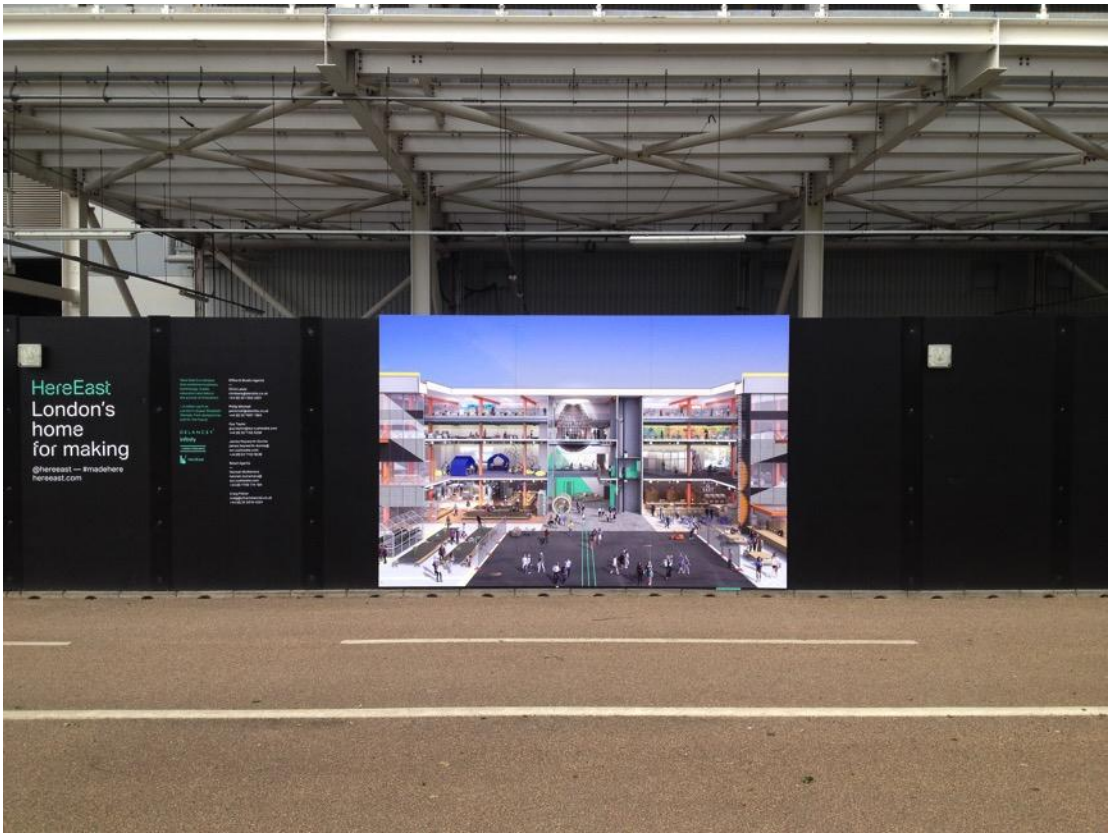
> *I think it is the government's way to get more money into the Olympic Park without saying "we're putting more money into the Olympic Park". [F9]*

Reflecting the physically tight microclustering we found within the Shoreditch core (Nathan and Vandore 2014 REF), Stratford and the Olympic Park were perceived as much further away (and less economically active) than they were at the time. Mental geographies (Lynch, 1960) were more powerful than place branding ambitions:

There'd be a worry that you would be moving out onto a tumbleweed strewn cul-de-sac, … cut off from the vibrancy, etc. associated with this particular area. [F10]

Since then, the Broadcast and Media Centre site in the Park has been developed along very different lines, leading up to its formal launch in May 2016 (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Here East.



Source: author's own.

Initially dubbed 'iCity', with heavy emphasis on the Stratford / Olympics location, it has now been rechristened 'Here East' and is marketed as being in Hackney. This is both technically correct[6] and has the effect of shifting the site closer to culturally vibrant neighbourhoods in Hackney Wick, across the river. Here East is also developing a distinct and self-contained

[6] The eastern boundary of the site is about 300m from the borough boundary. See https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=zCjjtivf8-IA.kKUoSc7W-OvA&hl=en_US, accessed 13 October 2015.

economic offer focused on 'makers' in product development and design (based on the large spaces available for building and prototyping), as well as TV / media (reflecting the broadcast centre facilities and very fast internet connections). The marketing material inverts the invented aspects of the development, making a virtue of the new 'ecosystem which we're curating … a new community is being forged'.[7]

'Here East' is thus a brand new 'policy space', provided more or less *tabula rasa* (albeit after substantial initial public investment).[8] It is a spatial imaginary that plays with territory, but also reframes the site's relationships to other neighbourhoods and delineates a new set of economic actors. The developers explicitly hope to work with shifting mental geographies – both post-Olympics, and the increased public profile of eastern Hackney. In the process, they have also jettisoned any attempt to link the site to the original Shoreditch cluster: in fact, the hope is that the rental 'price implosion' around Old St will help 'price in' firms to the development [P1].

6.3 / Old St Roundabout redevelopment

The Old St Roundabout is the physical heart of Tech City, and provides a resonant visual symbol of the cluster. The roundabout is not conventionally photogenic but there is little sign that it discourages business from locating in the area. Indeed, streetscape improvements were the *lowest* priority identified by local firms surveyed in 2012 (Nathan and Vandore, 2014). Nevertheless, in December the same year, David Cameron and Boris Johnson unveiled surprise proposals for a radical redevelopment of the roundabout, featuring a multi-storey, architecturally iconic hub for startups and the local community – 'Europe's largest indoor civic space' – and extensive surrounding pedestrianisation and streetscaping.[9] The only visual detail was provided in renderings (Figure 8), leading The Register to dub the development 'The £50m THING'.[10]

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[7] Here East. 'The Here East Vision', promotional video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCfTXIvULdQ, accessed 26 August 2015.

[8] The development of the Olympic Park was part of the £9bn overall budget for the Games infrastructure. The 2012 Legacy Company own the site, and Here East has a 200 year lease.

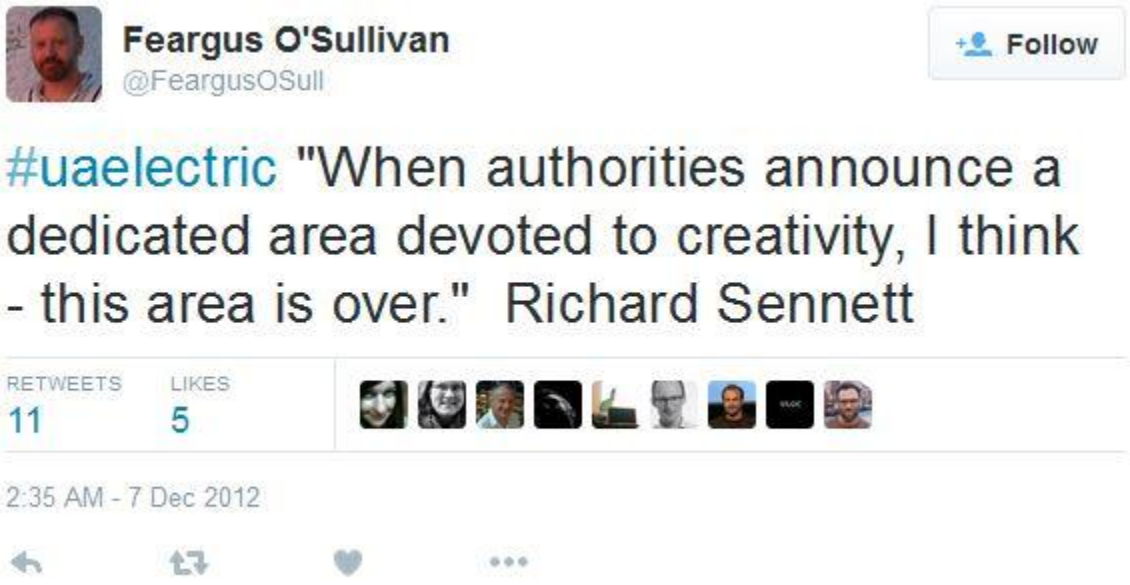
[9] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-announces-50m-funding-to-regenerate-old-street-roundabout, accessed 9 September 2015.

[10] http://www.theregister.co.uk/2012/12/11/silicon_roundabout_thing/, accessed 9 September 2015.

Figure 8. Old St Roundabout proposals.

Source: Architecture 00, 2012

Figure 9. Reaction to the Old St Roundabout redevelopment.



Source: https://twitter.com/FeargusOSull, accessed 25 November 2015

The THING makes sense as part of a branding-led strategy, in which visual identity and messages of transformation and change are central. However, as a concrete proposal it suffered from three major problems. First, the actual delivery of the proposals was unfortunate: they were presented by the politicians to a room full of local technology firms and critical urbanists, many of whom immediately took to social media to air their reactions (Figure 9).

Second, the proposals lacked credibility: it was a further example of a top-down attempt to terraform the area, and as such was immediately in tension with the PM's stated desire to 'go with the grain' and 'help where we can' (Cameron, 2010). Worse, there was no evidence of any real local demand for the proposals: rather, as discussed in Section 2, this was a classic instance of selectively co-opting an existing asset and repackaging it for an outside audience of investors and developers. Third, and most prosaically, the plans turned out to be impossible to deliver: Transport for London objected that the proposals placed too much physical weight on the tube station below.[11] That this basic issue was not picked up pre-announcement is another example of the limits to the 'loose' approach to policy.

7/ Conclusions

This paper performs a mixed-methods analysis of place-branding strategies developed in the 'Tech City' cluster initiative in Inner East London. Using Jessop's concept of the spatial imaginary as an organising concept, we have explored a series of 'foundational geographies' in the area, traced the emergence of the Tech City policy agenda, and discussed both its mode of governance and its successes and failures on the ground.

Spatial imaginaries act as spatial 'fixes', allowing economic actors to co-ordinate activity by selectively focusing on key processes, physical assets and networks of protagonists; regeneration spaces such as Tech City do so with economic development goals in mind, working with public-

[11] http://www.techworld.com/news/startups/hackney-councillor-sheds-light-on-what-happened-50m-tech-city-fund-3612087/, accessed 9 September 2015.

private networks of government departments, delivery agencies and local firms. Place branding tools and approaches are central to operationalizing such an approach. However, place brands and their underlying relational structures come with challenges: handling fuzzy spatial boundaries, co-ordinating disparate collections of participants and operating over multiple governance scales.

Our empirical examination of the Tech City strategy reveals many of these dynamics in play. The policy's rushed emergence, desire to stretch the physical boundaries of the cluster, and consciously 'loose' approach to strategy created a number of implementation challenges. The 'loose' approach was rationalised as learning from 'agile' modes of operation in the tech industry, and by a desire to visibly echo such modes to build credibility with industry players. To an extent this was successful, but at the cost of generating separate tensions within public sector organisations unused to working this way.

More broadly, the area's multiple prehistories, existing 'anti-brand' of Silicon Roundabout and disruption from some high-profile actors also generated difficulties. At the most basic level, tensions between relational and territorial space were never reconciled: the boundaries of the cluster were never satisfactorily defined, and crucially, even at the time of policy creation, the area was just one of many tech hotspots in London (and the rest of the UK). As if to emphasise this, Tech City UK deliberately relocates to a different office space around the capital every few months [P10]. Thus there is an element of foundation myth here: rather than '*growing out of east London to span the entire capital'* (Boris Johnson REF), both Silicon Roundabout and Tech City were selective samplings of a wider ecosystem, representing specific socio-professional networks, economic and physical assets. In that sense they are near-perfect spatial imaginaries, as envisaged by Jessop.

Tech City stands in clear contrast to Here East, a new 'regeneration space' in the Olympic Park. Here again, a spatial imaginary is being constructed using place branding tools, but this time from scratch, delinking the site from earlier policy space, and establishing a distinctive economic and physical positioning that reflects wider changes in the profile and fortunes of East London as a whole. Here East is ambitious, and the level of planning and detail is highly impressive. It is

also a giant policy experiment – in place branding and in concrete economic development.[12] At the same time, it faces real functional challenges in developing from a planning concept to a live community. The management team emphasise 'curation', both setting the mix of firms and other actors, and in encouraging interaction between the different protagonists on sites. There are many examples of successful mixed-use planning, and of science parks which appear to help firms to innovate (Helmers and Overman, 2013; Helmers, 2010). But there are real limits to 'injecting vitality' from the top, especially if combined with assertive management of public space (Minton, 2012). Similarly, the site's physical grain is much less flexible than a 'real' neighbourhood, and it is unclear how the industry mix would adjust if the current bet on 'makers' does not succeed.

This case study approach highlights many of the practical challenges faced by those who seek to use place branding as an economic development strategy; in doing so, it confirms many of the points made in the critical literature on place branding. It also echoes many of the findings in empirical work on spatial imaginaries such as Haughton and Allmendinger (2015), in their analysis of the Thames Gateway and other 'regeneration spaces'.

Our analysis also points to some areas of further research. First, while Tech City was driven by central government, local government actors (both at Greater London level and at Borough level) have also played important roles, particularly in providing (or enabling) affordable spaces and amenities (such as Google Campus, Hackney House or Bl-nk). Further work could productively explore their independent role, as well as central-metropolitan-local interactions. Second, we focus on economic communities of firms and entrepreneurs: we do not look at economic outcomes for residents, or at the ways in which the economic changes described here feed through into wider processes of neighbourhood change, gentrification and displacement. Third, and related to this, the Shoreditch system is situated in a set of highly desirable central

[12] Here East has many assets: an increasingly desirable location, large modular buildings, very fast internet, an interesting set of anchor tenants (the Infinity Data Centre, BT Sport, plus branches of Loughborough University and Hackney Community College). It will also include a large incubator with managed and co-working space for SMEs and start-ups, a large theatre with events programme, food and retail, plus a public square.

neighbourhoods, which have historically seen competition between business and residential uses (Hamnett and Whitelegg, 2007). Space for small businesses is an important element in the mix, with rapid recent change : Central London's flexible / serviced office space market doubled between 2005 and 2015 (Ramidus Consulting, 2015). Recent national changes to permitted development rights allow office space to be converted to residential use without formally shifting use classes; to protect the supply of workspace, the GLA has secured an on-going exemption to these rules in the Central London Activity Zone (CAZ), which includes the Tech City core. More research is needed into the structural interplay between different business and residential uses in this continually evolving slice of urban space.

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