



The Transformer

He turned an abandoned stretch of elevated rail tracks on Manhattan's lower West Side from an eyesore to a treasured urban amenity, and put playing fields and green space where a garbage dump taller than the Statue of Liberty once sprawled. Now Penn Design alumnus and professor James Corner is creating a modern-day pleasure garden on the site of London's Summer Olympics. **By Alyson Krueger**



For 17 days last summer, the attention of a few billion people around the globe was focused on the site of the London Olympics. There was the Grand Olympic Stadium, into which Queen Elizabeth II and James Bond appeared to parachute during the giddy opening ceremonies. In the sweeping, wave-roofed Aquatics Centre, designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Zaha Hadid, Michael Phelps swam his way to gold medals 15 through 18. Huge crowds mingled with Wenlock, the sort of creepy, sort of cute mascot that wore all five Olympic rings as bracelets. The less watched but no less inspiring Paralympic Games followed a couple of weeks later.

Next, the area will go from being a stage for the world's athletic elite to a destination where Londoners and visitors to the city can relax and enjoy themselves and that also, not coincidentally, promises to bring lasting development to a neighborhood that, until the Olympics came to town, had been in decline since the 19th century.

From the time that London put in its initial bid for the games, the idea was to use the Olympics to transform the Lower Lea Valley, a former industrial center located in London's distant East End. Hosting the Olympics on that spot brought resources to clean contaminated water and soils, build transport systems that can get Londoners to the neighborhood quickly and efficiently, and make the area an enticing place for businesses and families to make their home and for visitors to spend their money.

But while the Olympics created the conditions for the Lower Lea Valley to get a second wind, the site as it stands probably wouldn't be enough to lure visitors for more than two or three years. To create something that would be of permanent interest to Londoners, the organizers' answer was to build a modern-day pleasure garden—a park with organized entertainment such as concerts and food festivals and sporting events—that, it was hoped, would inspire people to flock to the area.

To design the public spaces in the 50-acre London Olympic Park South, where the Stadium and Aquatics Centre—as well as the ArcelorMittal Orbit, the 377-foot-tall, twisty, red-steel sculpture-cum-observation tower built for the Olympics—are located, the London Legacy Development Corporation turned to James Corner Field Operations (JCFO), headed by James Corner GFA'86 GLA'86, chair of Penn's landscape architecture program. The firm was selected from among more than 100 bidders for the project.

Corner has a long history of creating parks in unlikely places. He is best known for the design of the High Line, an elevated park with food service, water fountains, wooden chairs for sun bathing, and other amenities built on a stretch of abandoned elevated rail tracks in Lower Manhattan. In Staten Island, he crafted the master plan for transforming the massive Fresh Kills landfill—

where garbage was piled 80 feet taller than the Statue of Liberty—into the 2,200-acre Fresh Kills Park. In Memphis, he fashioned a buffalo reserve and venue for sailing, horseback riding, and jogging out of a dark and eerie penal farm.

“For many other people, they just can't imagine anything any different,” says Corner. “As a designer you have to be an incredible optimist and visionary and be able to see what [a place] can be, rather than what it is.”

Like a foster parent for neighborhoods, Corner takes areas with troubled pasts and turns them into places that are “promiscuous,” “indeterminant,” “open,” “theatrical,” “dramatic,” “edgy,” “playful,” and “fun,” to cite some of the words he uses to describe his projects. Doing so, he argues, can make a city better—often significantly better.

“Part of the real fun of living in a city is the spectacle of its public spaces,” he explains. “It's just so much fun to walk the streets, go into the different squares and plazas and the parks.”

“Now, for all of that to play out, that means the public realm needs to be designed in a very careful way to be able to endure this demand and to be able to stage rich and engaging settings for people to be in.”

The project in London provides his biggest stage yet, and Corner welcomes the challenge. “I don't know if I would be happy with a more anonymous site,” he says of designing the pleasure garden, which is scheduled to open in July 2014 as Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

The benefits of city parks are much more than aesthetic, Corner insists. “People think parks are just a pretty luxury to have, whereas in fact they are actually economic centerpieces that can help to bring a certain sense of identity and distinction to a place. So rather than just being a sort of luxury that comes afterwards, parks are now being conceived of as

very special places that help to catalyze new investments,” he says, speaking more quickly in his British accent—he grew up in the UK before coming to Penn for graduate study—as he warms to his favorite subject.

That passion—his way of talking about parks such as New York's Central Park or Hyde Park in London that actually preceded economic development around them—must have come in handy during the years Corner spent working to convince cities to use parks to revitalize their neighborhoods before it was accepted practice to do so. “For the last 20 years, Jim has been promoting a view on landscape that is more than just a scenic thing,” says Richard Kennedy, associate partner at JCFO (and a lecturer in landscape architecture at Penn Design), who is leading the design of Olympic Park for the firm.

It started when Corner was an undergraduate at Manchester Metropolitan University. “There was this thing called ‘landscape architecture,’ and I really didn't know what it was, but I got into it”—mostly because he was good at all the necessary skills:

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The design for the Olympic Park “is themed around the idea of a pleasure garden,” says Corner.



math, biology, and art. He went on to earn a master’s degree in the subject at Penn, along with a certificate in urban design, and joined the faculty in 1989. Since 2000, he’s been chair of the department of landscape architecture.

“I wasn’t really practicing design at the time,” he recalls of his early years as a professor. “I was teaching and researching and writing a couple of books, and that was a great time because ... some of the things that we are doing now, today, in practice, in terms of working in these post-industrial sites and figuring out how to theatricalize and dramatize the public realm and enrich the lives of people who live in the city—a lot of these things were developed in my early years teaching at Penn, using the school as a laboratory.”

But Corner’s theories did not really catch on until he put them into practice. In retrospect, it’s a bit shocking that the High Line—a high-profile project that has inspired numerous dreams

of urban restoration among city governments—was one of his first gigs. At the time, though, he was just an ordinary landscape architect building an ordinary park. “Even though we were optimistic that people would come, we had no idea of the sort of ... intensity of use that it carries today,” he says.

Visiting the High Line, where well-dressed couples stretch out on the wooden benches reading books while their toddlers play tag around the bushes, and sophisticates sip wine at the wine bar located within the park, it’s difficult to understand how controversial the project was. Just a few years earlier some New Yorkers were demanding that the High Line be torn down because the abandoned tracks, originally built in the 1930s to deliver freight directly to businesses along the route, were just too dangerous for their children to live near. It looked like they were going to get their wish, too—demolition was approved by then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani—when Joshua David C’84 helped

JAMES CORNER FIELD OPERATIONS

establish the nonprofit Friends of the High Line in 1999 to successfully press for the High Line's preservation and conversion to a park ["Alumni Profiles," May/June 2004].

Corner's firm was named landscape architect in 2004 and construction began in 2006. Two sections have opened so far, in 2009 and 2011, and work began on the final section this past September.

In the event, the park became popular so quickly that *New York* magazine wrote, two years before it even opened, "Someday, around a year from now, one of your friends is going to say to you, 'Let's go to the High Line.'" And a 2004 *New York Times* editorial hit the park's real value on the nail: "Once, it seemed the sure way to increase property values along the High Line was to tear it down. Now, thanks to Friends of the High Line and its supporters, the sure way to increase property values in the shadow of that railway is to keep it standing and to restore it."

The High Line completely rejuvenated this area along the Hudson. The Standard Hotel, an upscale hotel that has a beer garden and a rooftop night club with a hot tub under its roof, deliberately positioned its rooms to have a view of the park; numerous new residential complexes popped up; and property values around the area skyrocketed. In June 2011, just two years after the park opened, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg reported that the High Line had generated \$2 billion in private investment.

In the wake of the High Line's success, cities from Chicago to Shenzhen, China, have turned to Corner's firm to effect similar transitions—including, of course, London.

"When a site has interesting characteristics [in] its features and its history, when there are heritage elements to build in and work into the project, it makes for a much more interesting problem," says Corner's colleague Richard Kennedy.

On that scale, Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park certainly qualifies as interesting. The Lower Lea Valley has been an industrial area since the age of Henry VIII, producing—as detailed in a pamphlet put out by English Heritage, which champions UK history—everything from flour to bacon to gin, gunpowder to petrol to "Parkesine," proclaimed the "first plastic in the world" on a memorial plaque reproduced in the brochure and used to make "pens, knife handles, combs and buttons." The "world's first seagoing ironclad battle cruiser," the HMS *Warrior*, was built there, as were railway engines, matches,

furniture, and textiles. While most of the factories have long since closed, the toxins they produced still contaminated the soil and water until right before the Olympics. To make matters worse, during World War II the valley was bombed heavily in the Blitz. The area was already so desolate that the government never did a full cleanup of the damage.

As a stark indication of the area's continuing troubles with poverty and pollution, an article on the Olympic-site planning process in the June 2012 issue of AIA's magazine, *Architect*, noted that "Olympics organizers commonly point out that for every station one takes east on the London underground, the life expectancy of the surrounding neighborhood drops by one year."

Corner calls it a "hopeless part of the city," and Susie Barson, a senior architectural investigator with English Heritage who wrote the materials on the Lower Lea's past, says that when she was visiting the area it was just sad. "Oh, there was such waste! The kids were so bored and kicking around."

Another big disadvantage was the area's distance from Central London. With few transport options, it was hard to leave—or visit. Even taking a tour of the grounds a week before the Olympics began, when the grounds were opened to visitors in advance of the Games, it was still easy to feel the area's isolation. I met my tour guide at Bromley-by-Bow, a tube station that I had never even passed through in the three and a half years I lived in London because it was just too far east. There were families shopping in the huge Tesco (a UK grocery store), speaking a variety of languages and with large gaggles of kids in tow, but the store seemed overwhelmed by the number of foreign visitors asking to use the restrooms before starting their own tour, as if no one had ever visited in the past.

To prepare the site for the Olympics, the city fished out 9,000 grocery carts from the canals and spent years purifying and testing the water and soil. In the unruly fields it planted baby trees, public sculptures, and Ping-Pong tables. The city convinced businesses, such as Ikea, to build outlets in the vicinity and signed contracts with developers to create residential centers. And it constructed a new high-speed train, appropriately named the Javelin, that linked the Olympic site to Central London in a mere seven minutes. On the whole, the city allocated 75 percent of its entire funds for the Olympics to these long-lasting "legacy" projects, as they are called.

"It's one thing to imagine that certain portions of the site can be turned into housing," says Kennedy. "It's another thing to provide water, power, transit, local amenities, that make it an attractive address."

ENGLISH HERITAGE



While Barson is pleased with the overall amount of consideration given to the area's history, she mourns the loss of a few historically interesting Victorian printing works that were torn down in the construction, and the displacement of the people and local businesses that had made the area their home when no one else would go close. "Café owners wrote to the Olympic organizers to say could we still carry on serving chips and things like that," Barson recalls. "They said, 'No, We're going to have Coca-Cola and other sort of big franchises.'"

Other aspects of the area's past, however, were less movable and provided challenges to Corner and Kennedy in designing the new park. "Things like the locks and the canals and the river, you can't just wipe them away," Barson notes. "The bridges are there as well as the new bridges. There are pumping stations ... there are gasholders. There are still an awful lot of industrial buildings on the site."

Also factoring into the development are the artistic and ethnic populations who live very close to the park and want to have a voice in its use. Not to mention the reality that—while they now have an easy way to reach the Lower Lea Valley—Londoners are still not used to traveling to this part of the city in search of recreation.

"Because we are designing this park in a sort of blown-out neighborhood context, it's not obvious why in the early years anybody would come use the park," says Corner. "So there's a need to make this park have a special program, and its program is themed around the idea of a pleasure garden."

In that sense, it recreates an old London tradition. In the 18th century, pleasure gardens in various parts of London—though not in this location—entertained visitors with a sensual and exotic experience. An entry on the History Channel's website captures what it was like to enter one of these venues:

Long before the invention of Disneyland, Georgian Londoners enjoyed their own type of amusement park: the pleasure garden. For a modest entry fee, people from all walks of life could escape the noise and squalor of London's streets for a diverting evening of al fresco entertainment, socializing, romance—or even scandal ... Pleasure gardens featured every sort of attraction, from the sedate to the salacious. There were manicured walks and impressive fountain displays, light refreshments, classical concerts, exotic street entertainers and even fireworks. Away from the prying eyes of polite society, they were ideal places for romantic trysts. Their darker corners were also rife with prostitution ...

Corner and Kennedy's park will most certainly be rated PG. But it will seek to spur the same sense of fun and excitement that one visitor, the playwright and wit Oliver Goldsmith, felt on his 1760 visit to a pleasure garden: "The illuminations began before we arrived, and I must confess that, upon entering the gardens, I found every sense overpaid with more than expected pleasure."

The challenge of eliciting that type of emotion from such an unpromising site was both a big challenge and a key attraction for Corner and Kennedy. "The brief of creating a contemporary pleasure garden ... was a really compelling problem," says Kennedy. "To take this kind of industrial and Olympic-

scale project and make it something fresh and new and provocative and surprising was what seduced us."

As released so far, the plans for the park call for a promenade on one side extending the length of the site, where visitors can stroll on a paved path shadowed by looming trees. The renderings make this feature look like something straight out of a Victorian painting. It is easy to imagine fashionable Londoners meandering arm-in-arm with loved ones or pushing strollers on a leisurely day out.

The rest of the site is less restful, and resembles a theme park. Visitors can get lost in a tall labyrinth, cool off in a water splash pad, and test out their skills in a climbing forest. They can try out different kinds of snacks in the food market, marvel over public art, or listen to music in the concert hall. While some of the activities are permanent, like the maze, there is room for temporary exhibitions and programs. A series of food and music festivals and educational programs has already been scheduled for when the park finally opens.

Some remnants of the Olympics will also remain in the park. A scaled-down version of the Aquatics Center will remain, as well as the Orbit tower, which is designed for visitors to climb up to get views of the area.

Perhaps most important, while this pleasure garden will be something fresh and new for London, it does not seek to stamp out the area's culture or past, but rather incorporate them in interesting ways. New plants will grow out of and around leftover ironwork that simply can't be moved. The promenade will weave around the rivers and locks and canals and bridges that were built during the area's years as a working industrial center. The food stalls will offer South Asian food and other locally popular cuisine. Great efforts are being made to draw in local artists who can make permanent and temporary exhibitions for the site and to allocate space for use by local community and children's groups.

After all, says Corner, the park is only valuable if it is used and beloved by the people who live nearby and visitors alike.

"If in five years if we go back and there are dozens or hundreds of people walking along [the] promenade, and some of them are playing and some of them are eating and some of them are strolling and some of them are sitting and some of them are running, that will be great," he says. "And it would be great if those people are comprised of local cultures as well as the visitors, and you get that mix and you get the synergism ... No matter how beautiful it is, if there are no people there, it's no good."

It will be two years before it's known how Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park will be received, and even longer to assess whether it has done its job in revitalizing the surrounding area. But the fact that London is even trying to use a landscape to transform the character of one of its neighborhoods is another step forward for Corner and his mission to use parks to change cities.

"To be able to have a project like the High Line or like London—and we have one now on the waterfront in Hong Kong—these are just extraordinary sites," he says. "You're thankful that this is the type of site you are responsible for." ♦

Alyson Kruger C'07 is a freelance writer. She profiled Fr. James Martin W'82, in the Mar/Apr 2012 issue.