

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Recurring Dreams: Mega Events and Traces of Past Futures

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Investigating several modern ‘mega events’, including World’s Fairs and Olympic Games, this paper discusses the complex relationship such events and their sites have often had with ‘the future’. Such events are frequently associated with demonstrating progress towards future ‘utopias’ (for example ‘The World of Tomorrow’ theme of the 1939 World’s Fair in New York) or leaving a tangible positive social and economic ‘legacy’. However, other uses of mega event sites have also frequently manifested darker, more anxious ideas about that which is yet to come. In this paper I discuss three forms in which mega events’ sites relate to the idea of the future: before, during, and after they take place. In discussing these relationships, I demonstrate how traces of ‘past futures’, when investigated archaeologically, provide a diverse means by which to understand how societies have related to the idea of the future through the modern era.

Introduction

Recent heritage projects have considered preparations currently being made for ‘uncertain’ futures – for example, the long-term storage of nuclear waste and the communication of its dangerous nature millennia into the future (Harrison 2016; Heritage Futures 2019). My aim here is similarly concerned with documenting what societies do to prepare for the future, but rather than understanding this through contemporary sites and projects, I document the archaeological traces those in the past created as a means of preparing for their futures, what have been called ‘past futures’ (Lucas 2015: 20).¹ Thus, I take the term ‘future archaeologies’ literally here (in contrast to its use to denote paradigm shifts or disciplinary reflection: e.g. Mrozowski 2014) and suggest

that, in conducting a literal archaeology of the remains of preparations for *past* futures, we might yet learn something useful for our present and indeed, *our* future,

I take as my main case study for this discussion, ‘mega events’ from the last 150 years: ‘large-scale cultural [...] event[s] which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance’, (Roche 2000: 1).² This term is now short hand across a variety of fields to describe global events such as such as World’s Fairs and Olympic Games events since the 19th century specifically. Such spectacles present us with brief but rich glimpses of specific times and places where the future was placed centre stage, with organisers creating architecture, exhibits, performances and other activities that enacted visions of anticipated and hoped-for futures (e.g. in displays of new technology, opening ceremonies or legacy programs).

The study of mega events is well established and has been examined from a wide variety of perspectives including how they operate as examples of public celebrations and performances (Gold and Gold 2005, 2017; MacAloon 1984), events' architecture, design, and portrayal of the future (e.g. Murphy 2016; Rydell 1993), their wider role in power-structures connected to class, colonialism and labour relations (e.g. Greenhalgh 1988; Littler 2006; Senn 1999; Silk 2015), and how they are used as vehicles for reworking both cities and host societies (e.g. Cohen and Watt 2017; Preuss 2015; Viehoff and Poynter 2015). However, despite this wide range of work, to date few have considered the role of temporality or utilised heritage or archaeological approaches to consider such events or indeed to examine how their influence lingers long after they officially close (though see Gardner 2013; 2016; 2018; Graff 2012; 2017; Penrose 2012; Piccini 2012; 2013).

When examined through the archaeological traces they have left behind, as I attempt in the present research, these enormous spectacles (along with the uses their host sites were put to both before and after the event took place), provide detailed examples of how different groups conceptualised what the future would (or could) be like at different times. This said, as brief 'snapshots' of the future, mega events and their sites can obviously only provide a partial sense of what people in each period thought their personal or collective futures would be like. These events' visions of the future were often grounded in nationalistic and imperialistic world-views, and (arguably to this day) their organisation was based around notions of continued material and technological 'progress'. Such discourses sought to legitimise dominant political interests and expectations of never-ending economic growth or other benefits accrued from hosting such events (see, for example Falcous and Silk 2010; Graves-Brown *in press*; Hoffenberg 2001; Kihlstedt 1986; Zimbalist 2015). However, this is not to say the futures presented by such events were accepted uncritically by a pliant public, or

indeed by those that these events attempted to exploit, such as indigenous peoples in the 'human zoos' of late 19th- and early 20th-century expositions (see Littler 2006; Stephen 2013). Thus here I also attempt re-examine the more dominant narratives traditionally associated with such spectacles.

More broadly, the study of mega events has recognised that at times they tend to be over-determined as manifestations of metanarratives such as 'modernity'; the 1851 Great Exhibition in London, for example, has often been reified as 'the' defining moment of Western European civilisation, a 'precipice in time' (see Davis, J 2007; Johansen 1996). I would suggest however that this simplification is also an opportunity – these events' temporal and spatially-bounded nature are a unique source for understanding past visions of the future, which might otherwise rarely be conceptualised as a totality. Their organisers are forthright and usually blatant in the stories they seek to tell about an event's host nation or society for example, and can present us with an insight into the minds of those who conceived, constructed, visited and criticised them, as 'residues of a dream world' (Benjamin 1999: 13).

Relatedly, mega events' visions of the future tend to be fleeting, 'ephemeral vistas' (Greenhalgh 1988): these spectacles are open for only a few weeks or months, and their venues frequently burn down, are abandoned, or are demolished (e.g. China Daily 2011; Edwards and Wyncoll 1992). Yet, even if their structures no longer remain, the events leave traces in our memories and popular culture, and thus to some extent these events' imagined futures linger both tangibly and intangibly in our present. This study could therefore be related to growing academic interest and debate around a nostalgia-for the 'lost' futures that past societies once imagined (e.g. Fisher 2014; Murphy 2016).

Though this cannot be fully considered here, clearly there is an argument to be made that the architecture and contents of past mega events – and indeed their traces today – embody an element of these predicted

futures and the societies which produced them. For example, architectural historian Douglas Murphy has suggested that an examination of the traces of an event like the Great Exhibition can provide us with an insight into the inherent 'failure' of these structures (and what they are said to have represented) to actually deliver the brighter progressive future which was 'promised' (2010: 8; Gardner 2018). In addition to this, I suggest that by considering not only mega events' operational periods (and their traces today) but also the use of their sites before and after they take place, as well as how such events continue to be 'remembered' today, we can examine not only how far these official visions were actually delivered, but also counterpose them with subaltern or alternative visions of the future which are also worthy of investigation.

The future and mega events

In studying mega events' relationship to the future, it has become clear that their visions, though often familiar – a technologically advanced paradise for example (**Figure 1**) – are counteracted by earlier or alternative ideas of what might transpire, and these visions are also contradicted by the events' remaining traces today (see e.g. Gardner 2018). This complexity of relations to the future is partially due to the history of their sites' uses and the rationale behind these sites' selection (see also Strohmayer 2013).

As I discuss below, such sites, prior to their respective mega events occurring, were often *already* used as places to deal with or mitigate specific 'uncertain futures': the possibility of the future not turning out as we would like. These past narratives are often interwoven with later, more utopian ones: for example, Robert Moses (the infamous New York city planner and 'master builder'), who was heavily involved in the preparations for the 1939 New York World's Fair, once described its site explicitly in terms of future generations looking back to a barely conceivable, unsavoury past:



Figure 1: The Skylon at the Festival of Britain, 1951. (Image uploaded by HeresyOuk – Photo taken by Bernard William Lee, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=73637584>).

'In another quarter of a century, old men and women will be telling their grandchildren what the great Corona Dump looked like in the days of F. Scott Fitzgerald, how big the rats were that ran out of it [...] and how it was all changed overnight' (1938: 12).

Such a sentiment would suggest that the past roles of these sites, though often unacknowledged, are important in their constitution as new, future, spaces and thus we must consider all periods of their use; before, during and after.

What do I mean by the future here? Mega events' displays of progress or technology and their structures or performances are often described as 'utopian', and equally their sites' previous uses have at times be seen as 'dystopian' (particularly in their description as 'wastelands': Gardner in press). These

terms however are not necessarily synonyms for the “future”.

As Paul Graves-Brown (in press) reminds us, utopias (or dystopias) are imagined *spatially* rather than temporally. Though they are physically unreachable by us, utopias remain relatively stable in time (the valley of ‘Shangri-La’ for example). In contrast, Graves-Brown argues that ‘the future’ is a *temporal* location (in press: 9), something that, potentially we can reach, given enough time and effort, but also constantly shifting according to opinions of what it *ought* to be like and how we might get there. As an ontological category the future is dependent on specific ideas of how the past was different from the present and thus, how the future *will* be different from now, hence its appeal to the progress-obsessed mega event genre. Such events are nearly always concerned with showcasing the ‘best’ of the present and presenting visions, building on this, of an ‘even better’ future which is manifested in displays of new technologies, architecture and in organisers’ plans for leaving a ‘legacy’ of social and economic improvement (see e.g. papers in Cohen and Watt 2017 on the London 2012 Games).

In practice the attempt to create utopias will inevitably run up against unexpected local conditions or events and produce a hybrid form which might be seen as a *heterotopia* (Foucault 1984). In this conception, attempts to make mega events as unique or exceptional ‘cities within cities’ or otherwise somehow removed from the normality of the environment are manifestations of attempts to create utopian spaces or arrest dystopian tendencies (e.g. in processes of urban regeneration). Thus this hybridity or complexity is present in the measures mega event planners enact, the buildings they create, and other activities that come with them (e.g. the operation of legal instruments or other systems by which to regulate their spaces and legitimise their presence) and indeed the measures and materials which contest or challenge events. To some extent this complexity is also visible in the traces they leave

behind as both planned legacy and, sometimes less intentionally, in their remaining material traces (see Kassens Noor 2016).

Therefore, examining mega events and their sites’ long-term histories through their archaeological remnants (e.g. event structures and the buildings and sites those structures erased in their construction) and archival traces, serves to re-emphasise the future’s material constituency; the future ‘can be built’ – at least within the fences of the mega event itself and with the caveat that it rarely turns out as it was planned (e.g. Gardner 2013; 2018; Graff 2012; 2017).

I now wish to consider some examples of the different visions of the future that several mega events and their sites exhibited and to discuss how each vision performs particular functions. In discussing these examples, I have delineated three relationships the events and their sites have with the idea of the future: the future as envisaged *before* the mega event takes place; the framing of the future using the *past* at the mega event; and ‘the future itself’ – how mega events portray their own *planned* ‘legacies’.

The future before the mega event

This first categorisation concerns the prior usage of sites of mega events and their relationships to the future; relations that were later superseded or interrupted by the event itself. As mentioned above, this is often undertaken to mitigate against a possibly unpleasant temporal outcome: they are frequently used as dumps, military sites, or industrial zones. As discussed with examples below, there is a frequent correlation between areas that later host large scale mega events and industrial or ‘anti-social’ uses, primarily due to these sites being located on the periphery of cities or otherwise marginal land (Strohmayer 2013: 188).

An obvious example of this type of relationship to the future is found in the use of ‘pre-’ mega event sites as garbage dumps. In moving garbage away from the centre of cities societies attempt not only to protect populations from epidemics or unpleasant

pollution, they are actively managing waste materials' accumulation and their long-term effects to counter the future possibility of unmanageable quantities of trash (a scenario akin to WALL-E's Earth in the movie of the same name, see Stanton 2008). Relatedly, and more positively, in later using such dumped waste as material for landfill or landscaping—literally creating land or building up a new topography—societies create a foundation for alternative, future uses. In sum, such activities are therefore concerned with the prevention of unpleasant effects (i.e. uncertain or unwanted futures) or more positively, planning for a 'better' future use, which, in some instances, later becomes seen as a valuable future opportunity by mega event planners.

A good example of this is seen at the site of the 1939–40 New York World's Fair at Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Queens. The site of the Fair, as noted above, was then nicknamed Corona Dumps, an unstable wetland of shifting mud which was initially seen as the perfect place for the Brooklyn Ash Removal Company to begin dumping ashes and household refuse in enormous quantities from 1906 onwards.³ The c. 38 million cubic metres of dumped material here was ultimately a means of dealing with the future of waste in the rest of New York City. This quotidian function where little else could take place ultimately made the Dumps later a prime location for the World's Fair site itself. During construction vast engineering works redistributed the old materials of the Dump – which at one location was piled 30 metres high and known as Mount Corona – the compacted ash and garbage of the past providing a relatively solid foundation (Steinberg 2014: 213–214). Ultimately the ash dump's marginality and unpleasant character actually made it attractive for the mega event: its past uses and materiality could be relatively easily dispensed with, and indeed repurposed, to provide the blank slate the 'World of Tomorrow' required in order to then showcase a future 'without ashes' (Berman 1983: 304). Such conceptualisation of waste or garbage as a resource for shaping the future (and indeed

as archaeological evidence), rather than matter inherently tainted or to be permanently disposed of, complicates understandings of regimes of value on these sites both during their creation and how we use and understand them today (Hetherington 2004; Rathje and Murphy 1992). This is perhaps again in the heterotopic sense: trash is repurposed in an attempt to create a more utopian environment and this process itself leaves traces to be investigated.

Another, starker example of anxiously preparing for the future occurred on the site that would later become part of the 2012 Olympic/Paralympic Park in Stratford, east London, with the construction and operation of a Civil Defence Corps training facility from 1953 to 1968 at Bully Fen (now close to the former Olympic Velodrome, **Figure 2**).

Like Flushing Meadows, Bully Fen had been a dump until the late 1930s, when it was converted into an anti-aircraft gun emplacement. Following its use during the Second World War, the Civil Defence Ground was built here to enable civilian volunteers to practice rescuing people from 'ruined' buildings in post-nuclear attack simulations. Hidden amongst marshes and still-extant rubbish heaps, the Ground saw an entire 'fake' village constructed (including houses and factories in various stages of collapse) as a place of preparation for an apocalyptic future.⁴ Arguably such practice, though professionally organised and well-meant, failed to recognise the true power of nuclear weapons (given that survival, let alone rescue, would be all but impossible after a nuclear attack on London) and thus, the reality such a future would actually entail. Such a site (there were several other training 'villages' throughout London and across the UK until 1968) was not only a place of practice for dealing with an anticipated future nuclear Armageddon, but perhaps even more so, acted as a location where the *appearance* of preparedness for the future was of key importance in order to legitimate the UK's (costly and controversial) policy of independent nuclear deterrence to both its own population, and its enemies (see Grant



Figure 2: Volunteers practicing rescue from a simulated nuclear attack at Bully Fen Civil Defence Corps Rescue Training Ground in the Civil Defence Competition Finals in 1964. The site today is now close to the former London 2012 Olympic Velodrome. Reproduced with permission © London Metropolitan Archives (City of London): Bully Fen – Civil Defence Comp Finals Class 62.8. SC/PHL/02/1259 (Photo 64/3479) – detail.

2010). Such sites' constructed ruination and the frequent exercises held there functioned as a means to 'prove' that this uncertain future *could* be countered, and *could* be survivable in spite of the evidence (Smith 2009), and relied upon a mass-volunteerism that saw thousands of ordinary citizens work as Civil Defence rescuers, coming together to plan and practice for the worst (Davis T 2007).

The site's simulations of the future were curtailed with its closure in 1968 due to budget cuts and the acknowledgement of the futility of such preparations alongside widespread popular anti-nuclear sentiment. By the time of the Olympic redevelopment 40 years later, little of the site remained intact having been buried by the local park authority, and though its WWII usage was acknowledged during the Olympic archaeological investigations, its counter-apocalyptic function appears to have been forgotten (Robertson 2008; Thrale 2009).

As I have discussed elsewhere (Gardner 2013; in press), much recent history of the pre-Olympic Park, was frequently dismissed by organisers and the media as 'industrial wasteland' or '[a] barrier to urban development' both during construction and in the legacy period (OPLC 2012: 3). Such narratives ignored most of its post-WWII history and uses, and more importantly the thousands of workers and residents who had to leave in advance of construction, with the successful legacy of the event itself presented as a *fait accompli* and the only possible future (in contrast, see Davies, Davis and Rapp 2017; Gardner in press).

Both the New York and London examples discussed here highlight how sites that later became home to mega events (and their utopian-fixated legacies) often have an earlier use that was also explicitly about dealing with the future, albeit in different, more anxious ways. Such unloved or unnoticed uses appears to have made these sites' choice as

mega events locations more likely, becoming vulnerable to the reshaping of both their topographies and histories and as 'blank spaces' cartographically, ultimately legitimating the future visions proposed and constructed by the spectacles themselves.

Framing the future using the past

In their period of operation mega events frequently directly present visions of what the future will look and feel like in displays of new products or services, or other innovations. Somewhat surprisingly however, a further means of promoting such visions of the future is found in events' use of narratives about the past and temporality more generally. In this formulation, the future is articulated in relation to an idealised past, either as a warning or 'lesson from history' (in order to ensure the future transpires correctly), or, more commonly, to facilitate an origin myth and provide a locus of continuity from which to move progressively forward in time.

A clear example of this latter, 'origin-myth' based future can be seen in the exhibitionary narrative of the 1951 Festival of Britain's centrepiece, the South Bank Exhibition in London, a post-war celebration of UK culture and resilience at a time of economic and political turmoil (Hillier 1976). Though like other large expositions it partly presented technologies and ideas for the future of society, the South Bank Exhibition focussed heavily on where the British had 'come from', and especially their relationship to their islands' ancient landscape under a theme of 'The Land and The People'. This narrative frame was intended as a means to demonstrate the roots of British cultural uniqueness and thus provide a firm foundation for the next era (Atkinson 2012).

As part of this, an idealized British past was presented in the 'People of Britain' pavilion, where dioramas and archaeological artefacts were used to suggest that repeated waves of immigration to the nation had created a unique national character that continued to endure (**Figure 3**). This narrative, created by archaeologist

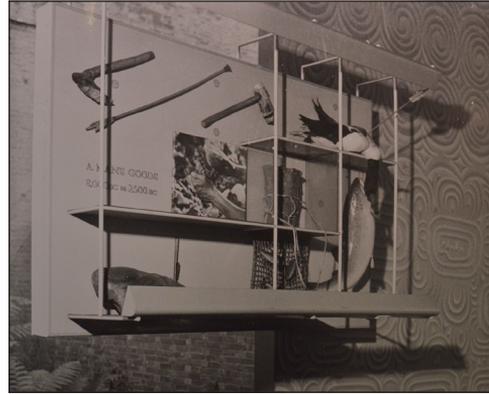


Figure 3: 'A Man's Goods 8000BC to 2500BC' display in the People of Britain Pavilion at the Festival of Britain's South Bank Exhibition in 1951. The display was one of several portraying different material culture through British history including hunting through British history including hunting implements like these. Reproduced with permission: © The National Archives, ref. WORK25/216 (5272).

Jacquetta Hawkes, was progress-driven, setting up the displays of the present and the future as a continuation of the 'Island Story' begun in the 'primitive' prehistoric past. It was also inherently particularised and exclusionary, with for example, no references to immigration that occurred after 1066AD, Britain's (by then crumbling) Empire, or even the recent War. After viewing 'the past' both human and 'natural' (in displays on mineral resources and agriculture in 'The Land' pavilion), the visitor moved to exhibits showing contemporary British culture and technology to see how these foundations would be built upon. Such events more generally are heavily reliant on being seen to demonstrate both technological and social progress through such exhibits and events like opening ceremonies (see Duranti 2006 for example), though 1951 appears to be unique in its overtly archaeological emphasis.

Even in the presentation of mega events that are less explicitly exhibition-focussed like the modern Olympic Games, we also witness the frequent use of idealised pasts to frame

the spectacular national story that its organisers are promoting, most notably in the use of traditional or historic art forms in opening ceremonies or branding (e.g. at Athens 2004 see Simandiraki 2005; at Vancouver 2010 see Piccini 2012, 2013). Often mega events are also explicitly held to commemorate important national historical events; for example, the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris celebrated the 100th anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. Relatedly, and though not a mega event *per se*, the planned 2022 post-Brexit Festival in the United Kingdom is intended as a celebration of post-EU British renewal and its 'new future', and explicitly draws upon references to the 1851 Great Exhibition and 1951 Festival of Britain as national heritage (May in Buchan 2018). Thus the reinterpretation of the past is crucial to the constitution of the future as conceived of in the present (Harrison 2011), and, where such a past is seen to help cement a sense of national identity, it is particularly encouraged in mega events.

The future itself

This brings me to the last categorisation of how these events relate to the idea of the future: the way they are intentionally planned to leave a 'legacy', as well as the more unintentional traces they leave behind.

In terms of planned legacies, the progressive narratives promoted by these spectacles (and in their frequent elision of what occurred previously on their sites) are intended to last beyond the few weeks of their operation, to ensure that the future, whether conceived of as long-term technological advancement, or smaller scale and localised changes, will be realised. Modern mega events are often merely a preview to much larger long-term goals for the future; examples might include the aftermath of the Great Exhibition, where its Crystal Palace building reopened in Sydenham (south London) to operate as an educational 'Palace of the People', or the planned 30 year 'regeneration' of a major part of east London following the 2012 Olympic/Paralympic Games (Gardner 2018;

Piggott 2004). The latter is currently also seeing a 'culture and education district' taking shape with University College London and the V&A museum as anchor institutions amongst others. This venture was originally nick named 'Olympicopolis', in homage to the district of museums and educational institutions named 'Albertopolis' which emerged in South Kensington (themselves a legacy of the 1851 Great Exhibition) and thus illustrating clearly the long-lived influence of 'temporary' mega events.

Such events, at a more practical level clearly require material and immaterial components to operate both during and after the event: infrastructure, venues, branding, organisations, operating procedures, audiences, or legal instruments to name but a few, fragments of which often linger for years afterwards. In particular material traces, though perhaps often seen to be disposable, also may be kept or collected, providing yet another source in which their 'legacy' at least in some form is maintained (e.g. **Figure 4**).

To see the totality of these events' future-orientation, we must also study their less publicised anxieties about their immediate futures – their security measures against terrorism, their contingencies for extreme weather, disaster or financial failure whilst they are still open (e.g. Coaffee 2014; Gardner 2013). These measures also encompass measures to deal with a site's previous uses (such as the previous future mitigation strategies discussed above) lest these spill out into the present as industrial contamination, unexploded ordnance, or legal disputes (e.g. London 2012's 'remediation strategy', see O'Hare 2011). Such immediate unpleasant legacies, if not avoided, might otherwise be remembered as a failure of planning, or at least prove controversial for years to come.

Conclusion

This brief and necessarily partial survey of several mega events' presentations of their respective futures has attempted to



Figure 4: Traces of London 2012. Left: A promotional plastic Heineken Pint Glass used by the author on 31st July 2012 from a stand inside the Olympic Park (£4.80 a pint). Right: A ticket and protest flyer from the Games. Photographs: © Jonathan Gardner.

demonstrate that, as well as through future-oriented content or activities in their operational periods, they and their sites have a much more complex relationship to temporality and how times yet to come are to be 'dealt with'. Study of all stages of mega event site histories reveals that an event's occurrence itself cannot be seen as a foregone conclusion or as the 'correct' or only possible future of that place and time. The aftermath of mega events reveal the difficulties in attempting to plan for the future or predict how it will development, and arguably events' investigation can aid us in considering why the world today does not match these promised futures (Gelernter 1995).

The idea of legacy can therefore play out in very different ways: in searching for its traces, we could be excavating ruins of mega event themselves (e.g. the Crystal Palace, Gardner 2018; MoLAS 2007) or tracking down the dispersal of those displaced by their construction (e.g. COHRE 2007). In either case we see that visions of the future portrayed by mega events are ultimately only partial: whilst in

some cases some of the futuristic visions these events promoted did come to pass (e.g. the 1939 World's Fair prediction of mass automobile use in the United States), other futures also clearly failed to occur or played out very differently. In studying how mega events' past futures were portrayed, 'created' or failed, we ultimately gain a deeper insight into the often-questionable worth of hosting such spectacles and are also reminded of just how hard it can be to predict the future.

Notes

- ¹ The term 'past futures' has been used a by a variety of scholars across disciplines but in contemporary archaeology this is particularly around the idea of 'recapturing' or reassessing past understandings of the future as I use it here. Relatedly 'futures past' has been used to describe a re-conception of traditional regimes of temporality and the imagining of a variety of possible futures as a result by Europeans in the modern era by Koselleck (2004).

- ² This paper derives from my wider doctoral research which considered the past, present, and future of three London-based mega events; the 1851 Great Exhibition, the 1951 Festival of Britain's South Bank Exhibition, and the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, along with the 1939–40 New York World's Fair as an international comparator (Gardner 2017).
- ³ See: 'Why the Fair?', May 13th, 1937. Box 9, File 19, New York World's Fair 1939 and 1940 Incorporated Records 1935–1945, Mss Col 2233. Manuscripts and Archives Division, (The New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations). For images of the World's Fair site as the Corona Dumps/ the 'Valley of Ashes' see: <https://ephemeralnewyork.wordpress.com/2010/11/15/the-valley-of-ashes-in-a-1920s-queens-dump/>.
- ⁴ See: London Metropolitan Archives: GLC/AR/DS/06/495 Bully Fen Civil Defence Training Ground, Temple mill Road, Hackney LB: Building Act case file (Civil Defence Centres); LCC/CL/CD/05/109 Official Opening of 'Bully Fen'.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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