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Olympicopolis architects on their £1.3 billion vision for E20

The Olympicopolis scheme will see outposts of the V&A, Sadler's Wells and Washington DC's Smithsonian line up alongside new university campuses. The architects talk through their £1.3 billion vision for the Olympic Park

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Building blocks: the Stratford Waterfront plan

Olympicopolis is an ugly name for a beautiful idea – the creation of a museum and education complex at the south end of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. The name derives from Albertopolis – the nickname given to Prince Albert’s grand vision for South Kensington in the wake of the Great Exhibition of 1851 that saw the building of grand edifices including the Natural History Museum, the Albert Hall and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The 21st-century version for east London, in plans seen for the first time by the Standard, promises to deliver a string of architectural pearls along Stratford Waterfront (fronting the River Lea just south of the stadium) that are of a scale and unity of conception not seen in London for generations. It will, in contrast to formal South Ken, see cultural institutions in brick and steel where the public will be encouraged to roam through perforated ground floors and along linking riverside terraces with outdoor performance and exhibition spaces.

Outposts of the V&A, Sadler’s Wells and Washington DC’s mammoth Smithsonian museum complex will line up alongside a new home for the relocating UAL’s 5,000 London College of Fashion students and 500 staff and two 30- to 40-storey residential towers. Around a nearby bend in the river a second campus for University College London – UCL East – promises to embed its 3,000 students and staff in the local community.

Dublin architects O’Donnell & Tuomey and London-based Allies & Morrison are shaping the £1.3 billion vision. The Government is



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Corporation and the Greater London Authority a further 2150 million. The institutions themselves and private sector funding will contribute £789 million and a further £180 million is being fundraised philanthropically. A planning application is expected by the end of the year. O’Donnell & Tuomey is designing the V&A and Sadler’s Wells, Allies & Morrison the flats, the fashion college and the Smithsonian. A competition to design UCL East has just been launched.



How the development fits into the Olympic Park

Both practices are combining their talents with the landscapers on the surrounding public realm that is an integral part of the vision. They have enviable pedigrees, most notably O'Donnell & Tuomey's wonderful perforated brick cliff at the Saw Swee Hock Student Centre for the London School of Economics and the complex warmth of the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. Allies & Morrison was responsible for enlivening the Festival Hall and the recent Rambert dance company building nearby.

And it is the South Bank rather more than South Ken that provides an approximate precursor, with its riverfront promenade, the multifunctional, free roaming foyer of the Festival Hall and the cohesive sweep of Brutalist culture boxes from the Queen Elizabeth Hall to the National Theatre.

The Stratford Waterfront images show a suite of cantilevering forms that form a familial cluster (set) on a podium above the terraces. The V&A bridge, flanked by Sadler's Wells and UAL's London Fashion, with the Smithsonian jutting forward towards the water.

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The area will be approached from the bridge from the Westfield

Centre (entrance through the gift shop?) and past the stadium. Further south, beyond the cultural precinct, is the International Quarter – an office and commercial zone that includes the new headquarters for Transport for London by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners.



Bob Allies, architect Allies & Morrison with John Tuomey and Sheila O'Donnell, architects from O'Donnell & Tuomey who are collaborating on the Olympicopolis project

O'Donnell & Tuomey cite the towers enclosing New York's Central Park, pieces on a chessboard and the still life forms in the paintings of Italian artist Giorgio Morandi as inspiration. "The effect is to move the city closer to the stadium and the park," says John Tuomey, 61. "It will intensify the urban grain and make the stadium and park feel more special."

Sheila O'Donnell, 62, points out that the site is trickier to manage than first appears, with an 8m drop between the Westfield bridge and the water: "We set up the idea of the podium, ramped promenades, dips, pockets and places between the buildings for programmed and un-programmed spaces."

People will be encouraged to take a shortcut though the V&A from the bridge to the waterfront, for example.

“Everything has two entrances so you can walk through at ground level,” adds Bob Allies, 63. “The assumption is that [stylistic] diversity is a good thing, but I’m interested in how the buildings can be more like each other. Diversity is easy – unity is more difficult.”

Close collaboration on the composition of the building forms is essential, says O’Donnell, “so it doesn’t end up as lots of different things on a tray”.

The shift to east London will also be marked by an emphasis on making as much as consuming culture – Sadler’s Wells, for example, will incorporate a choreography school and hip hop academy as well as a 600-seat theatre. The V&A East will emphasise design, architecture, art and performance and will encourage public participation. The new Design Museum opening in Kensington later this year will face stiff competition when Stratford Waterfront is completed at the end of the decade.

"Olympicopolis will intensify the urban grain and make the stadium and park feel more special"

While the buildings’ frontages will face south to the sun and the Lea, their rears on Carpenters Road will also be lively, with conservation workshops and the like, akin to similar areas in New York’s Chelsea. O’Donnell is also a fan of the special character of pockets of the West End where you come across the stage door of a theatre and a largely blank façade punctuated by small dressing room windows. It’s part of the physical complexity and unexpected pleasures of a metropolis.

Each institution will not only have its own architectural individuality within this brick-faced family photo but will form separate elements of the podium so that each can be altered or redeveloped separately over time. A common failing of many contemporary large developments is that they masquerade as

distinct buildings above ground but are conjoined megastructures below, which are difficult to adapt over time.

All very promising – as long as the architects' vision is not compromised. The Olympic site's history is patchy in this respect: witness the Athletes' Village, which looks like something thrown up for workers at a mobile phone factory in Guangzhou.

For Stratford Waterfront, the LLDC has the role of both development promoter and planning authority and even the presence of internal "Chinese walls" makes this a less than satisfactory arrangement. But at least being a quasi-public body should mean that the cultural precinct's squares and terraces will eventually form part of a genuine public realm.

Now can we just do something about the awful Olympicopolis name, please?

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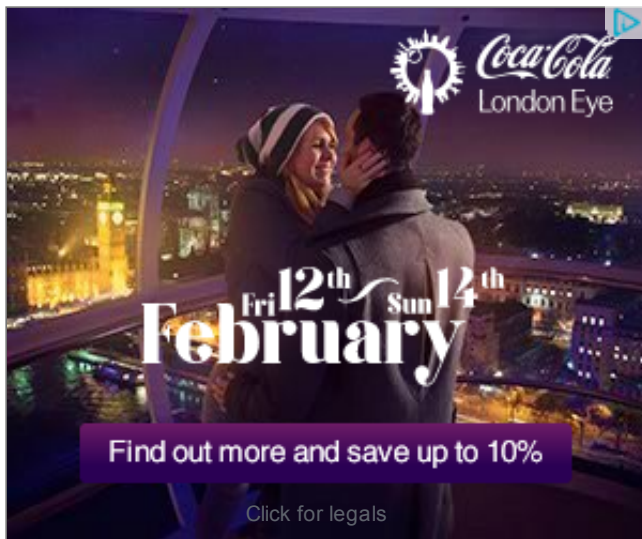
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