

RAF MAN AT THE CONTROLS AS EAST LONDON TECH HUB GAINS ALTITUDE

Publication Evening Standard
Date 31 August 2018

BUSINESS INTERVIEW

GAVIN POOLE
HERE EAST

RAF man at the controls as east London tech hub gains altitude

Former Olympic broadcasting centre switches channel under forces engineer

Russell Lynch
Deputy City Editor



ALMOST exactly six years on from the Olympics, we're sitting on the spot where 20,000 journalists beamed the heroics of Mo Farah and Jess Ennis around the world when the greatest show on Earth rolled into east London.

The media circus involved with every Games calls for a vast international broadcasting centre, but the headache for most host cities has been what to do with it afterwards. London's has been reincarnated as a bustling tech and innovation base, known as Here East.

Around 3000 people are already down here, working for a range of players from multinationals such as Ford, experimenting with cutting-edge smart technology for cars, to award-winning choreographer Wayne McGregor and his company of dancers.

There's a real buzz around the place too, although Gavin Poole, the chief executive of Here East, tells me it's quieter than usual "because the students

aren't about".

The curator of this motley mix is a tall, clipped ex-military man with a touch of Daniel Craig in his appearance. He's been involved with the project since working on the original bid for it seven years ago, when private developer **Delancey**, which also owns the Olympic village, and its joint venture partner Infinity SDC took it on, beating a host of competitors for the space.

There's a huge amount to fill too, some 1.2 million square foot: enough to lay Canary Wharf's One Canada Square tower on its side in the building and still have 60 metres of room to spare.

But oddly, the sense of the scale of the place comes more from being inside it than out: the exterior is decked in the "dazzle pattern" chevrons used by the Royal Navy in the First World War to disguise the size of ships. It's also a nod to the heritage of the area as the dazzle camouflage was originally dreamed up a century ago by a team of designers who lived in east London.

Despite being at the "wrong end" of the park near Hackney Wick — you need to get a five-minute shuttle bus from Stratford International to get to it — Here East is filling up fast, with around 80% of the space let. Only this

month the hub sealed its latest tenant

as the Victoria & Albert Museum plans to open a new research centre, complementing another site in Stratford.

Elsewhere on the campus other recent additions range from builder Barratt London to Sports Interactive — the Sega-owned firms behind the Football Manager series — and disability charity Scope. The thread linking them is the desire to change their business with technology and Poole's job is "getting them to have conversations with each other".

Potential tenants virtually "self-select". "You either want to come here or you don't. We have said 'no' to a lot of people. It is not just about pure tech-based companies. Otherwise you wouldn't have Scope based here or Barratt. People are using technology but using it in a way that they are beginning to disrupt the sectors they are working in... Scope could have gone anywhere, but they're on a journey to ask 'how can we use the power of technology to become the most technology-savvy charity, supporting disabled people, in the world?'"

Cheap rents also help, ranging from around £20 to £40 a square foot. That's much cheaper than the original Silicon

RAF MAN AT THE CONTROLS AS EAST LONDON TECH HUB GAINS ALTITUDE

Publication Evening Standard
Date 31 August 2018

Roundabout in Old Street, where the best space can cost above £80. But the techie community buzz — around 2000 workers turned out for big-screen showings of England's World Cup games — is still the draw.

Delancey “could easily have got cold feet” and given the space to safe-bet back-office bank workers and the like after Brexit, but stuck to the vision. “I would take proposals to them with a recommendation that we don't do this because it is going to destroy the value,” says Poole.

Property grandee Sir John Ritblat, chairman of Delancey's advisory board (and father of Delancey's boss Jamie), says: “I had been involved with the Olympics on the oversight committee so I knew how well built and designed the thing was. You can get 150-170 full-size tennis courts in there and it was hard to envisage an occupier. The Mayor [Boris Johnson] wanted to knock it down. Delancey bought it for a nominal fee and spent £100 million-plus on it... There is no question we were quite brave, but we were building in a part of London with some of the best transport links in Europe.”

Following the early momentum given by occupiers such as BT Sport and Loughborough university's London campus, Here East is held up as a beacon by the International Olympic Committee, unlike the press centre in Brazil, which is “in ruins now like sadly the rest of the infrastructure”.

The whole thing was finished in 2016 but it could have been open much sooner with a different approach. His tip for future hosts is “turn the story around — build it for its future use and then back-fit for the Games”.

Poole's not an east London man himself — he lives in Wimbledon — but his background gives him an ideal grounding for his job. He grew up near RAF Wittering in Cambridgeshire, watching from the garden as the A-10 Tankbuster planes flew back and forth from the bombing ranges as a youngster, and he recalls a birthday party as a nine-year-old on the base where he met an RAF engineer and sat in a Harrier jet: from then on he was hooked and wasn't going to do anything else except join the air force.

There was a bit of previous there; he had one great-uncle who was a tail-gunner

in a Lancaster bomber — “he was shot out three times” — and another who flew Spitfires.

Poole signed up at 18 but was an engineer rather than a pilot, qualifying from Sandhurst with a degree in mechanical engineering and embarking on a career in the RAF of more than 20 years. In the Iraq war in 2003 as a senior engineering officer his team would work around the clock, stripping down Harriers, finding faults, rebuilding them and sending them back to combat within days.

Later at Wittering he was responsible for four squadrons and involved in bomb disposal work, ranging from defusing First World War hand grenades found by the local potato farmer to UK counter-terrorism work he won't speak about.

HIS final defence-related job was working for defence ministers including Derek Twigg and Bob Ainsworth in the dying days of the last Labour administration before joining the Centre for Social Justice, a centre-Right think-tank founded by former Tory leader and another ex-military man, Iain Duncan Smith. The idea of the CSJ, which he led from 2010, was to “reach out across the divide” to build cross-party support for policies. “Most of the people I had work-

ing for me were Blairites, as was I.” Ask him whether he's a Brexiteer like IDS, though, and you get the strongest reaction. “Do I agree with Brexiteers? No I don't. Do I think it was a strategically damaging decision built on lies? Yes I do. The nation will rue the day it voted as it did.”

He goes even further, saying Leavers could end up being “pariahs of our nation for ever” and adds that if the UK is “fortunate enough” to get a second vote “I will absolutely get involved. We were all a bit ‘laissez-faire’ [in 2016]. The summer after the vote he recalls holidaying with his wife and two children with French friends and “they kept on calling me ‘little Britain’, which I found incredibly irritating”.

As for his tenants, they're being “quite pragmatic” as skills shortages, particu-

larly in tech areas, will not be addressed overnight and nobody is jumping ship so far. “They trust in the fact that it will be sorted because if it is not, it will be so damaging for Europe and it will be so damaging for the UK.”

Hence he's optimistic on the prospects for his tech hub and the “absolutely unprecedented” transformation of the area. Brexit or no, it looks like Here East won't be going west on Poole's watch.

@russ_lynch



Hard Brexiteers could end up being “pariahs of our nation for ever” if the UK leaves without a deal

RAF MAN AT THE CONTROLS AS EAST LONDON TECH HUB GAINS ALTITUDE

Publication Evening Standard
Date 31 August 2018

