

# Meet the driving force behind the Here East innovation centre

The boss of Here East, Gavin Poole, tells **Andy Martin** about the ethos – it's all about creative cross-pollination



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They call it the Hackney Riviera... what used to be the London Olympics Media Centre in Stratford, east London, is now Here East – the “innovation centre”, not a “science park”, as Gavin Poole, its chief executive and driving force, emphasises. People come here to dream up the future.

The ethos of this place is all about creative cross-pollination and osmosis. Poole says: “The value is in being there.” Over the course of the past year or so, it never closed but it has, inevitably, been under-populated. At the lowest point of the pandemic, there were a maximum of 63 people on the site. On the sunny day I went, the numbers were back up to 1,500. In the autumn, 3,000 are expected.

The restaurants (vegan, veggie and the defiantly carnivorous Randy's Wing Bar) along the banks of the canal were all open and buzzing when I was there. As were the spa and the barber's shop and the 1980s-themed video arcade.

Gavin Poole doesn't come from around here. He was born in Lincolnshire and was inspired by the sight of Harrier jets flying over his childhood home and joined the RAF at 18. He did an MA in War Studies at King's College, London, and served in Kosovo, the Gulf and Afghanistan, retiring as a Wing Commander in 2009.

He went on to join the Centre for Social Justice, an independent think tank, and contributed to the policy initiative that became the Modern-Day Slavery Act. He bid for Here East before the 2012 Games had even begun. Poole wears his 50-odd years lightly and retains a boyish enthusiasm. His military background comes in handy for marshalling all the disparate forces at work and keeping up morale while under attack from Covid-19.

He says: "Despite everything, last year was our second most successful year in terms of new tenants." Eighty-eight per cent of the whole site is now let.

It has big corporations – Sega, BT, and Ford, to name a few – but there are 128 medium-sized and up-and-coming companies. Here East also accommodates two universities, Loughborough and UCL, and the V&A National Collection and Research Centre.

Its area is vast, about 1.2 million sq ft. One of the buildings is 600,000 sq ft. There are huge spaces that remind me of the Turbine Hall at the Tate. Here, beneath what may be the most gigantic lampshades I've ever come across, you may run into a robotic da Vinci Surgical System or pot-hole filling drones. Poole says: "Big spaces allow for big ideas." The lifts are massive too, which is convenient for the purpose of social distancing.

But on the higher-level Gantry, looking out over the Velodrome, there are more compact, studio-style spaces too, accommodating local start-ups. And there are scattered allusions to the industrial heritage of east London. Different styles of cladding recall some of our major contributions to the culture of the world: Trebor Refreshers, for example, with multi-coloured stripes. I was amazed to discover that perforated toilet paper was invented right here in Hackney Wick. Poole says: "It's an eclectic mix. We've been able to take our time and choose the right people. The big, the small and the different. You end up with a lovely community."

On another highly practical note, there are lawyers and finance-fixers and branding specialists and film-makers. Just about everything you might conceivably need in your quest for world domination. And when you need a break there are game-makers or Fiit.tv for the daily workout.

Here East companies grow from tiny to titans. Bidstack, for example, which offers to integrate advertising into gaming, went from nine staff to 90 and from a single office to a mezzanine.

As you would expect, there are co-working spaces scattered throughout the site. Creative sparks fly as inventors of autonomous vehicles rub shoulders (not literally) with cyber security warriors and refugees from the Shard who find a home alongside e-skateboard makers. Architects are drawing, dancers from the dance studio are dancing, engineers are engineering. Poole says:

“This is the first ex-Olympic venue to do anything like this. Look at Beijing...it just built another tower block.”

Here East is constantly evolving and shape-shifting. It’s like an immense film set which is forever being deconstructed and reconstructed. Forget the metaphor: one of the spaces actually is a film set. One of Poole’s Here East colleagues came from one end of the main building for a meeting and when he attempted to go back someone had installed a new locked door in his way in the meantime and he had to completely reroute. Lecture theatres morph into workshops and test-beds. As Poole says, “you can’t get this in Bloomsbury”.

There are international conferences and festivals on a regular basis (Covid-19 permitting). “Post-grads” flock here and West Ham fans congregate in the canal-side bars before matches at the nearby London Stadium. Here East is like a microcosm of London. It’s a global village with e-skateboards. The next time I go back, like Michael J Fox in *Back to the Future*, I expect to cruise around on a hoverboard.