

The Redevelopment of Olympia, London

Mark Hempshell reports

Mention Olympia in London's West Kensington and you will most likely struggle to find anyone, at least in the UK, who doesn't immediately recognise the building and the brand. The name has national if not global recognition as an events venue. It is synonymous with major music and sporting events, such as the long running Olympia Horse Show, plus a long list of both well-known trade events and exhibitions and many more quite obscure ones.

Little wonder then, that such an iconic venue – which hosts over 200 events a year – is now the subject of a redevelopment plan to prepare it for the future and further exploit its potential. In this report we will look at what the project involves and what it might mean for both the venue and the area.

The current Olympia London was first built and opened as the National Agricultural Hall in 1886. It has undergone a number of renovations and expansions since, although most of these have been quite modest. The site was bought by current owners Deutsche Finance International (DFI) and Yoo Capital for £296m in 2017.

The latest redevelopment project, which was first proposed almost two years ago, and is designed by Heatherwick Studio and SPPARC, has an overall £1bn development value and can be described as truly ambitious. Far from just being a renovation it is a complete regeneration and redevelopment to better use and exploit the well-known and highly accessible location. The aim is to turn Olympia London into what is being called a 'world leading arts, events, entertainment and experiential district fit for the next 100 years plus'.

The present owners have suggested that they believe some event organisers 'look down' on the current facilities at Olympia. They anticipate that the redevelopment to world class standards will enable the venue to win back exhibitions and events which



have gone elsewhere in recent times, and attract new events that would not previously have considered the venue, such as the London Motor Show.

Interestingly, the developers are also suggesting that the redevelopment will mean that the Olympia site has a full-time, year round purpose and utilisation rather than being one which is only substantially occupied during events as at present.

Now to look at the actual plan for the new Olympia: From the point of view of the existing facilities, the project will revamp the existing exhibition halls. The historic façades of the exhibition centre on Olympia Way will be fully restored and spaces, such as the historic Pillar Hall, will be opened to the public.

In addition to the existing exhibition and event space, however, there will be new uses for the site: There will be 670,000 sq ft of what is being described as 'creative office space', including new co-working space across the site. The new development will also house a four screen arthouse cinema, a 1,000 seat

performing arts space, a 1,500 seat theatre, 900sqm of performance and rehearsal space and a new jazz club style restaurant and venue. There will also be new shops, cafés and two new hotels. The scheme also introduces new public space including pedestrianised squares and a sky garden.

As regards the commercial space development, the scheme means that Olympia will become one of the largest office schemes in west London, and it is said that it will have more office space than The Shard.

On the timetable for the redevelopment, the plans received planning permission from Hammersmith & Fulham Council in January. There were, however, over 100 objections mainly from local residents who were concerned about the size of the development and its impact on the local infrastructure. Others supported the scheme, commenting that it was preferable to a retail or residential development and also anticipating that it will bring more foot-fall for local businesses.

Laing O'Rourke recently won the bid to carry out the construction work. Enabling



works are due to start very shortly, with the main construction work starting in the first quarter of 2020. The aim is that the current exhibition and events programme will not be disrupted by the development. It is anticipated that the first new tenants will move in during 2023.

Multi-disciplinary engineering consultancy, Pell Frischmann, has been appointed as structural engineers for the project. Mike Hitchens, director of Structural and Civil Engineering, offers some thoughts on the ambition behind the scheme. He comments: "We are excited to be working on the redevelopment of the Olympia estate, with its many challenges it is a real opportunity for us to show what we can do.

"The site has a rich history and is an important landmark for UK industry and the local community – and the project will create the latest go-to destination in the capital with not just an exhibition centre but a wealth of public realm and creative facilities."

The project is expected to create more than 3,000 new construction jobs over five years, together with an estimated 5,400 new jobs across the local area upon completion.

Lloyd Lee, managing partner at YOO Capital, the investors and developers behind the Olympia project, tells us about his vision for the new Olympia – and particularly what it is about the scheme that makes it more than just a redevelopment of the land. He explains: "Olympia London has been a special place for over 130 years. We now have a long term strategy to invest and build a genuine community in arts, entertainment and exhibitions. All of YOO Capital's

investments are about ensuring long term financial viability by putting in place sustainable, bona fide mixed uses that have real underlying occupational demand."

He suggests that the scheme could have a wider impact, both on the surrounding area and London, rather than just Olympia itself: "We see this as a £1bn investment into west London and London more broadly, contributing greatly to the ongoing regeneration of the whole city, not just Olympia. Traditional developers build, lease and sell; however, we are long term investors who think 10, 20 or even 50 years down the road."

Lee explains how the redevelopment is expected to grow the Olympia brand, and make the site more of a destination beyond its events and exhibition uses. He says: "Our events programme is already extremely varied, and we believe will continue to offer a wide range of shows for all people to come, learn and experience.

"Olympia London will grow as a showcase to the world for all manner of brands, companies, organisers and attendees. We see 130,000 SMEs every year in our halls, and we hope that will grow.

"Olympia will become even more of a destination for all people – food, drink, music – and the exhibitions will remain an incredibly unique draw as part of this broadening story."

Both the theatre and performing arts spaces and the office space are totally new departures from Olympia's long established core business, and Lee outlines the company's plans for developing these: "This (the theatre and performing arts space) is an

entirely new space for Olympia London and we are really excited about its potential to attract thrilling and varied acts and entertainers. We are already working closely in the community with groups like Stagecoach Performing Arts to create permanent programmes and spaces."

On the commercial office space he says: "Those who visit Olympia London will be engaging with the future – innovative exhibitions, technology-led retail space and progressive entertainment. This is one of the main appeals to companies looking to stay at Olympia, not just to visit a few times a year. Olympia London has been home to innovation since 1886 (for example, the 1919 Cycle & Motorcycle Show), and many brands, and other like-minded groups, are speaking to us about finding a permanent home at Olympia."

Obviously a major scheme such as this involves some risks, particularly with the uncertain impact of Brexit, but Lee says that the brand of London as a city is strong enough to weather this. He comments: "European investors are keen to invest in London so we don't believe Brexit will have a major impact on Olympia. The exhibition centre will remain open throughout construction, keeping the heartbeat of Olympia London (the exhibitions) going as the rest of the development is built around it."

Lastly, it is interesting to note the previous owners of Olympia London were Capital and Counties Properties, or Capco, which bought the site in 2009. Capco is also the owner, along with TfL, of the nearby former Earl's Court Exhibition Centre site. The also once-iconic exhibition centre closed in 2014 and has subsequently been mostly demolished. A £12bn plan to redevelop the site with up to 8,000 homes and potentially a new exhibition centre first proposed in 2010 seems to have floundered due to a dispute with the local authority.

Capco said, in its latest half yearly results, that the value of its interest in the Earl's Court site had almost halved in four years. The site's value has fallen from £803m in 2015 to £412m this year, partly due to rising development costs and the fall in the value of the London property market.

Yoo Capital will no doubt be confident that its plans for Olympia London will forge ahead without similar problems and that it will enable it to fill the void left by Earl's Court which was, at one time, Olympia's larger and generally more prestigious competitor.

