

BROADEN YOUR HORIZONS

We braved the fixie riders and vintage moustaches to head east and find out how an intersection on the edge of the City has spawned London's liveliest new events scene

WORDS TOBIAS GOURLAY

In the beginning, there was Silicon Roundabout. Records of it go all the way back to 2008, when there were just 15 or so startups clustered around the grubby interchange of City Road and Old Street. Frozen out of other areas by ludicrous rents, they huddled together around some of the city's fastest broadband and rode out the economic crisis. Then, in 2010, the government got involved and branded the burgeoning digital economy from Old Street to the half-built Olympic Park as Tech City.

The driving force behind the boom is a new approach to doing business. Instead of grey suits talking about marginal gains, there are dressed-down young gunslingers shooting for the moon.

Fuelled by flat whites, craft beer and office ping pong, they're thinking big.

The events scene that has sprung up in the area embraces this no-tie attitude, and there's a new breed of venues offering hip, tech-teeming environments to do business in. In the name of creativity, conferences have gone interactive, networking's got a bit tipsy and even the boardrooms have got a pizza delivery firm on speed dial.

One sunny Friday in early autumn, we headed over to get ourselves a piece of the action and get you the lowdown on the venues that are helping event organisers mix work and play to mind-expanding effect. >>

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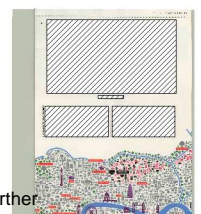
Bang in the thick of it, we start on Shoreditch High Street, at **Ace Hotel London** (020 7613 9800, squaremeal.co.uk/ace) which has just celebrated its first birthday. There's no sign of the previous night's naked poetry readings in the

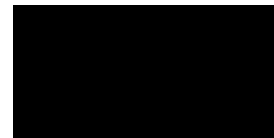
basement, but what we can see for the first time is the hotel's seventh-floor events space, which launched this summer.

A rooftop terrace runs almost the length of the building and there are further options to do a bit of alfresco business on the floor below, where a trio of suites – each with its

own smaller terrace – are decked out with guitars, turntables and Smeg fridges. My word, the old Crowne Plaza's got some swagger now.

And it'll need it to fend off the incoming competition: the Hoxton Hotel already serves up laid-back meetings and house parties in its Soho House-designed event space





The Apartment (020 7739 9111, squaremeal.co.uk/apartment), while Amsterdam-based PPHE group is preparing to land an **Art'otel** – expect gallery space for creative events – at the top of Great Eastern Street. A five-star **M by Montcalm** (with event space for 250) and a food-focused hotel from restaurant giant **Nobu** are also in the pipeline.

Just across the road, social workspace **Forge & Co** (020 7729 0007) will soon open up its rooftop. For the moment, the old motorcycle shop has got a basement event space and a couple of floors of co-working and meeting spaces. The ground-floor Lounge is an especially natty public meeting spot. Co-owner Cymon Eckel, who also co-founded nearby nightclub XOYO, knows exactly how to blur the line between work and play. His old mucker – and famous music producer – Andrew Weatherall soundtracks the week, then on Thursday, Friday and Saturday there are live DJs.

'Holding a meeting here, among some of London's most progressive professional minds, is bound to stimulate the creative juices,' promises Eckel. The spirits cabinet, full of local tipples like Sipsmith gin and Stellacello (dare we say Bethnal Green's finest limoncello producer), might help too.

A minute or so from the station is **Rich Mix** (020 7613 7495, squaremeal.co.uk/richmix), a sizeable venue that also supports charitable work and social enterprise. The Tech City organisation itself celebrated a birthday there recently. There's a new café, and superfast Wi-Fi now whistles through the whole building. Put something on in one of the three screening rooms or two blank-canvas spaces and you'll see your corporate coins put to good use, as financial backing for arts events aimed at the local community.

Seven years since it first renovated its turn-of-the-century warehouse home, **Village Underground** (020 7422 7505) remains at the beating

heart of all that's Shoreditch. Sitting high above Great Eastern Street, its collection of tube carriages recycled as creative studios are a local landmark, but it's the bare-brick, blank-canvas spaces within its Victorian facility that shout 'big opportunity' at event organisers.

Thinking of things Victorian, even the loft above the old railway station – on the corner of Kingsland Road and Old Street – has been reclaimed as a boutique event space. This one belongs to the **Jaguar Shoes Collective** (020 7729 5830), which last year installed one of the nation's first Bitcoin ATMs in the on-site coffee shop. Only in EC2.

Round the back of Spitalfields market, the **Old Truman Brewery** (020 7770 6001) is overrun by shops, galleries, bars and eateries. Entire weekends could be lost in the place. Check out the **Boiler House**: with an original tiled floor and large courtyard, it's up for anything from trade shows to gala dinners.

A few minutes away on New Inn Yard, Amnesty International's **Human Rights Action Centre** (020 7033 1500, squaremeal.co.uk/amnestyuk) is another of the area's conscience-calming options. A regular stop-off for architecture-focused walking tours – a possible breakout activity right there – the converted furniture factory opened as a venue to profit chasers at the start of last year. Among the options are meeting rooms, an exhibition room and there's a new coffee shop you can take over.

On the same road, **Canvas Studios** (020 7269 7935, squaremeal.co.uk/c-studios) is all about freedom: the freedom to host a bespoke event, to grab branding opportunities, and to choose between 10 approved caterers. The java's good too – there's a coffee shop in the adjacent studio that the caffeine-hungry can co-opt for the day.

Onwards to the Tramperry. This particular social enterprise operates

a few sites across the eastern edge of town. We've come to its **Bevenden Street workspace** (020 7253 6959). 'Beautiful working environments' is the aim and this one's plush enough to have entertained Prince Andrew on the first royal visit to the local tech industry.

In and around the East End, the group has transformed a few Victorian and Edwardian sites, but its latest venture is due to open above a supermarket close to Old Street station in October. The event space will be 'large'. Until then, you'll have to go out to the river Lea near Hackney Wick, where **Fish Island Labs** (020 3111 9886) – a fixed-term collaboration with Barbican – is flooded with natural light and just the ticket for a small conference.

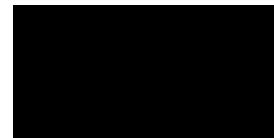
We were headed further east anyway, but not before a mention of **BL-NK** (020 3289 7859). Look past the S-LLY name and there's a young venue lending a hand to local small businesses and charities through special rates. The main space can take 400 and you can even park a street food truck in the courtyard.

For a slightly slicker warehouse space, check out the refurbished **Yard** (020 7739 0272) on Worship Street. It's a regular showroom for the fashion and PR firms in the same building, so all of the lighting and AV you'd need is already here. Even the concrete floor's a bit glossier than most.

Need a slightly smaller warehouse-style space? Dive into **Concrete** (020 7749 1883, squaremeal.co.uk/concrete) beneath Pizza East at the bottom of the Tea Building. A nightclub on the weekend – so the AV kit's top drawer – it moonlights during the week as an event space for up to 275 standing guests. >>

FROM HOXTON TO HACKNEY

Motel Studios (0800 014 8674) is seconds from the Hoxton Overground station – that's the one up from Shoreditch High Street. Among the flash bulbs and reflectors of this photographers' playground, you'll find the exposed brickwork,



buffed concrete floors and high ceilings of a serious events space. The lighting, of course, is second to none. You can even project onto its massive white wall and turn the place into a cinema.

The next stop on the line is Haggerston, where you'll find the canal-side **Proud Archivist** (020 7749 6850, squaremeal.co.uk/arch). Aiming to recapture the stimulating atmosphere of London's grand coffeehouses of yore, it has 5,000sq ft of event space across the restaurant, terrace, mezzanine and beyond. Summer events might be best held among the ducks and table football on the outdoor terrace.

Aim for the disused gasworks on the horizon and, just before you reach Cambridge Heath station, you'll hit **Oval Space** (020 7033 9932, squaremeal.co.uk/oval-s). There's nothing egg-shaped about it, though: the name comes from the road it's on. Set around the hangar-style 1,000-capacity main space, there are terraces for BBQs and drinks receptions, if the weather's holding up. The vibe is laid back, and that's how it was even when Red Bull hosted a get-together up here.

A little further up Mare Street, there's **Netil House** (020 3095 0900):

social work space by day; social play space by night. There's a 10-seater meeting room on the roof where you can look across to Canary Wharf and the City, and reminisce about why catch-ups were such a drag in those parts of town. Take over the entire rooftop terrace if you really want to

celebrate your liberation.

Still on Mare Street, but really near the top now, **Hackney Town Hall** (020 8356 5505, squaremeal.co.uk/hackney-th) spruced itself up last year and brings a bit of art-deco grandeur to the area. Original 1930s lights sit alongside the latest LED uplighting, but it's the natural light flooding in through the huge arch windows of its 550-capacity Assembly Hall that's best of all.

We're close to the heart of Hackney now. Food and beer pairing nights, guided tours, music festivals: the adjoining railway arches, airy conservatory and sun-trapping courtyard of the **London Fields Brewery's Brewhouse** (020 7254 7174) has hosted them all. As well as the freshest ales in town, there's an outdoor pizza oven that makes a winning centrepiece for anything from relaxed teambuilding events to straight-up corporate parties. >>

...AND BEYOND

Follow the Regent's Canal east for a couple of miles, turn left at Victoria Park and you'll reach Hackney Wick. We're approaching the outer limits of Tech City now, but its spirit endures. The architect-refurbished White Building is right on the water. You'll find working artists within its four walls, as well as the **Crate Brewery**, which has welcomed up to 150 for beer and pizza nights in its Brewshed (020 8533 3331). **Space** (020 8525 4343) hires out a separate blank-canvas floor for 120, the proceeds of which go towards supporting the aspiring Rembrandts in the next room.

The river Lee laps at the bottom of **No 90** (020 8986 4874) too.

Within the former dye cutting factory – now a four-storey multimedia events space and gallery with its own bar and open kitchen – there's just about room for private affairs in between the shared breakfasts, burger and movie nights, visiting farmers markets and showcases for local bands.

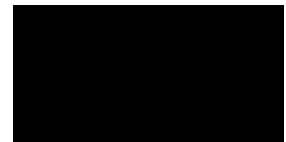
A five-minute meander south along the Lee, there's **Stour Space** (020 8985 7827), a not-for-profit helping locals get creative enterprises

off the ground. In and around the industrious community of more than 40 tenants in its studios, there's a function room and gallery space available for private hire, while the café – which looks out over the river – suits breakout sessions or more informal gatherings.

Legacy, you'll remember, was the buzzword when London successfully pitched for the Olympics. Step into Queen Elizabeth Park in 2014 and you'll see it in action in Unity Kitchen, Café & Events at **Timber Lodge** (020 7241 9076, squaremeal.co.uk/unity), which is dedicated to employing people with learning disabilities. Beneath the high ceilings, sustainable catering is a priority and everything's in place to get a whole lot of business done.

A short stroll south, **ArcelorMittal Orbit** (020 8221 9114, squaremeal.co.uk/orbit) might just be the final outpost of Tech City. Anish Kapoor's landmark tower – six times taller than the Angel of the North, fact fans – has event space for up to 250 guests. Get up to the upper and lower platforms and you can see all the way across Tech City to that famous roundabout, where it all began. **V&E**

ILLUSTRATION WEI YANG & PARTNERS



Why I love Tech City

Joe Scarboro, co-founder of local events management firm 3beards, effuses...

What makes the area special?

It's been an artistic place since before Shakespeare. There's a different energy here, a little bit of magic. All of this has attracted the techies because there's a strong relationship between creativity and the innovation and entrepreneurialism that they're all chasing.

How does that atmosphere shape the events scene?

You won't find anyone standing up and speaking for two hours here. Events are interactive and really engage the audience. They're about not settling for the status quo. Sometimes bigger firms can lose their innovative edge just because of everything else they've got going on.

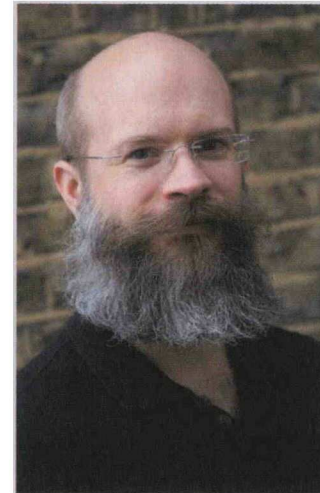
Any favourite local venues?

Shoreditch Village Hall on Hoxton Square has the rustic feel that's popular around here, but with great Wi-Fi. We use it a lot. The Strongroom is a great bar, especially in summer. Then there are the coffee shops: Ozone was one of the first and Shoreditch Grind even has its own recording studio.

Eating east

Our pick of the group dining options in Shoreditch

Restaurant	PDR	Contact
Tramshed	40	020 3641 8345
Rivington Grill	32	020 3641 1870
Boundary	30	020 3641 5848
Hoxton Grill	22	020 7739 9111
Merchants Tavern	22	020 3463 0655
Andina	20	020 7920 6499
Blues Kitchen	20	020 7729 7216
Pizza East	18	020 7729 1888



Doing it digital

2009-13

London's tech sector grows faster than California's

382,000

Londoners working in computing, gaming, telecoms, film and media

£12bn

What they will add to UK economy in the next decade

46,000

Jobs the digital tech sector will create in that time

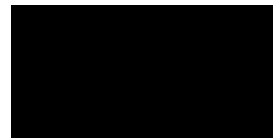
40,000

Delegates who attended first London Technology Week in June

Source: London & Partners



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