

Wembley Park: Quintain's Lessons Learned

ULI UK Development Forum September 2014

At ULI's inaugural UK Development Forum, 25 of the UK's leading developers and advisors joined senior Central and Local Government officials at Wembley Park, North West London, for a candid, behind-the-scenes tour of Quintain's iconic scheme.



Quintain is about quarter of the way through a remarkable transformation of the site into an integrated mixed-use development – a stark contrast to the hotchpotch of outmoded and careworn buildings the company acquired 12 years ago.

Where before it stood incongruously in the shadows of the adjacent, “twin towers” Wembley Stadium, today the estate represents a visual counterpoint to the iconic new and much larger stadium. More importantly, the carefully planned mix of residential, commercial and leisure uses takes this part of Wembley beyond the realm of sporting events.

For Quintain, the key aim is “to leverage the destination aspects of the site but also create a place where people really want to live”, according to Maxwell James, Chief Executive, adding: “We have invested half a billion pounds of capital in the overall site and we now feel that we have reached critical mass.” Architect, Richard Rogers drew up the Wembley Park masterplan for Quintain in 2004 and to a large extent the developer is on track to realise its original vision despite the subsequent financial crisis and downturn.

The project covers 85 acres and involves four distinct phases of development off a central

spine – Olympic Way – linking the Wembley Park Underground Station to Wembley Stadium, which Quintain does not own.

Phase one is based around the SSE Arena (Wembley) and involves housing, student accommodation, a new Hilton Hotel and London Designer Outlet. Phase two is known as the North West Village and construction is under way on key components, such as the Emerald Gardens residential scheme.

On completion, Wembley Park will be the setting for 5,000 mixed-tenure homes – a significant contribution to London's housing supply.

James Saunders, COO Quintain said: “We have tackled the site very much in terms of creating infrastructure in the first instance although we benefit clearly from some very good transport links. We then set about creating an identity for an area that historically was all about Wembley Stadium. We have re-branded the area as Wembley Park but in doing that you have to create an interesting balance between places which have a reason people want to live there, above and beyond being dormitories.”

Landmark stadium and arena aside, this corner of Wembley bears little resemblance to the “tired and difficult environment” Quintain inherited. Today, Wembley Park is already home to over 1,000 people and a daily retail and leisure destination for thousands more. The company describes “a work in progress” but in place-making terms, the development is arguably already greater than the sum of its parts.



Key Lessons Learned at Wembley Park

Masterplans evolve – estate management is the key to successful place-making

Quintain has tried to stay true to Wembley Park's history. The area was regarded as "picturesque" in 1790 and re-born as a "pleasure garden" in 1896 before the onset of "Metroland" and suburban development alongside the Underground expansion.

"In many ways we see part of our task as putting the park back into Wembley Park," said James Saunders, Chief Operating Officer. "It was conceived as a pleasure garden and the modern event profile that we have, the activities on site, are a good link to that."

Quintain regards its role as "curator" of a site that had its first true masterplan drawn up for the British Empire Exhibition in 1924. Richard Rogers' masterplan 80 years later "tried to make sense" of the same big arterial routes in and around the stadium and under Quintain's direction, the masterplan has since evolved in response to the different economic cycles.

"But it is important to maintain the integrity of the thinking throughout," said Saunders. "We have also had to go a long way to create the visual materials to keep the different collaborators engaged so that the individual plots respond to the wider setting."

He continued: "We get creative input, we get design, we build and then we care for the end piece we've created. And then we feed back into the next design process, which is helping us create a joined up environment – estate management is core to that."

"In many ways we see part of our task as putting the park back into Wembley Park"



James Saunders, COO Quintain

Such continuity of investment and design applies equally to the public realm, to the extent that "the spaces between plots are arguably as important as the plots themselves".

Quintain is also dealing with people's preconceptions of Wembley – "everyone has an opinion", often based on a visit to the old stadium many years ago. What is more, the developer's initial name for the project, Wembley City, did not resonate with the local community, which prompted extensive market research and a re-branding to Wembley Park, reflecting the site's history.

"We do have something to be proud of but we also have a massive re-education task ahead of us," added Saunders. "There's amazing history and I do think that people want to know where they are choosing to live. We have a lot of story telling to do over the next few years."

Development phasing is unpredictable – be flexible

Quintain started by investing in the infrastructure while re-orientating the SSE Arena so that the entrance faced a new square between the venue and the stadium. This created "connectivity" with the stadium and a sense of place in the heart of the Wembley Park estate.

Quintain then embarked upon the first residential blocks, before the market downturn prompted a switch into development of a Hilton Hotel and student accommodation. The changing conditions created the opportunity for the London Borough of Brent to build a Civic Centre on another side of the new square while Quintain moved ahead with the London Designer Outlet, which opened in 2013.

Once completed, the development will consist of 53% residential, 17% retail/leisure, 16% for other uses such as student accommodation, and 14% allocated for offices.

The early investment in amenities played to Quintain's strengths in commercial property although the sequence of development was not exactly what the company envisaged at the outset. "We thought we would have much more of the residential delivery earlier but market conditions changed against us," explained Saunders. "But one of the things we have learned is that this improvised phasing and focus on retail and leisure have really accelerated the place-making of the site."

The outlet centre in particular has given Quintain "a fantastic platform" from which to sell the residential in a rising market. Shops, restaurants, coffee shops and a nine-screen cinema in the outlet centre have been instrumental in giving Wembley Park an earlier-than-expected vibrancy.

This phasing of development has also allowed Quintain to recycle capital for various buildings and generate significant income from the retail units. The car parks for the stadium and interim uses like Powerleague are also income generators.

There has been another "happy ending" to that early downturn in residential sales. Quintain decided to rent out 150 apartments and the company has gained invaluable experience of residential management and the

local rental market, which has laid the foundation for a more targeted move into the private rented sector in future development phases.

Saunders added: “If we had done it the other way – which many developers do – and built lots of residential with the retail and other uses to come, I think we’d have a very different place to the one we have today.”

Planning matters – work closely with the local authority

At the time Quintain gained outline approval for Wembley Park in 2004, it was the largest mixed-use consent in London and one that involved several listed buildings, including the Grade II listed SSE Arena.

Quintain has since gained expertise in modernising listed buildings but also the planning challenges that are specific to Wembley – every application is scrutinised for its transport impact on the stadium.

Given its overall size, Wembley Park has necessarily entailed close collaboration between Quintain and the London Borough of Brent Council. The long-term alignment with Brent remains essential but that in itself is challenging at a time of shrinking resources and changing personnel in local authority planning departments.

Construction is a team effort – deliver infrastructure and utilities concurrently

Strong relationships with contractors have underpinned the construction programme at Wembley Park, not least during the recession when funding was difficult.



“There is a need to stay engaged with the construction industry,” said Saunders. “They need to understand what you’re doing and you need to be looking for partners before perhaps you need them.”

One key reason behind this strategy is that Quintain believes in delivering infrastructure and utilities concurrently with development rather than at the last minute, and not letting the utility providers dictate the construction programme.

With such a long-term project, Quintain has also spent much time and effort engaging with its neighbours and stakeholders, and will continue to do so to ensure it is creating as many synergies and as little disturbance as possible.

Partners are important – look after your commercial family

The Arena was rebranded as the SSE Arena earlier this year as part of a naming rights and sponsorship deal with the energy group.



Maxwell James, Chief Executive, Quintain

This sponsorship enabled about £1m of internal refurbishment at the venue and that was just one, early result from the deal. Similarly, AEG was brought in last year to run the Arena, which has already led to more events at the venue.

Those are examples of the immediate benefits sponsors and operators bring to Wembley Park but they also help drive long-term growth in footfall at the site.

There are many and varied partners involved here – from Brent Council to Hilton Hotels and the F.A. – reflecting Wembley Park’s broad mix of property assets and operating businesses.

Quintain is forging stronger links with its “commercial family”. This is in no small part aided by the continuity evident within its own Wembley Park team, some of whom have worked on the estate for many years.

“We spend a lot of time looking after that family, working with them, creating facilities for them and building that relationship,” said Saunders. “That is part of the DNA at Wembley Park and something that we will always do.”



Event management and estate management – driving footfall in a constructive way

Wembley Park has gone from four million visitors in 2012 to nine million in 2014 – an extraordinary rise in footfall that reflects its transformation from an event-led destination to a more regular, retail-leisure location.

“We are on show every day,” said Saunders. “We used to be on show only on event days and no-one came the rest of the time. It now needs to be clean, safe and secure every day – and secure is fundamental for residential success going forward.”

Such an operational shift has necessitated a significant cultural change in the Wembley Park management because “the old event day mentality is very different from a customer service mentality for a retail environment”.

At the same time, Quintain has improved the public realm by planting grass and hedges as well as investing in signage and lampposts. “These are not the things that get developers excited,” said Saunders, “but they really make a difference in affecting people's belief that this site is changing for the better.”



Even so, the adjacent stadium and SSE Arena still set Wembley Park apart from other large-scale regeneration projects. Quintain has to be flexible with some 130 event day surges in visitor numbers a year, which it welcomes for their “multiplier effect” on parking and retail revenues.

Further plans involve the introduction of markets and an ice rink over the Christmas period, not just for their short-term income potential but as a form of community engagement and a means of accelerating a change of perception away from the old Wembley.

“Driving footfall in a constructive way has been a key part of our effort,” added Saunders.

About ULI

The Urban Land Institute provides leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. It is an independent, global, not-for-profit organisation supported by members representing the entire spectrum of real estate development and land use disciplines. Founded in 1936, ULI has 32,000 members worldwide. National Councils are ULI's country networks which organise local events and activities. ULI UK is the largest National Council in Europe with over 700 multi-disciplinary members.

The ULI UK Development Forum is a new initiative convened by ULI UK, building on ULI's long history as a neutral, non-lobbying membership organisation for real estate industry leaders. The Development Forum has been created to provide a mechanism for the development community to gain exclusive insight, share challenges and ideas to break down barriers and to explore new ways of delivering major development and regeneration opportunities.

Background to Wembley Park

With consent at Wembley Park for over 5,000 homes, 1.5 million sq ft of retail and leisure, and 1 million sq ft of offices in an iconic location, Quintain benefits from one of the largest mixed-use development opportunities in London. Phase 1 focused on creating a new heart for the new commercial neighbourhood. Capitalising on the “big spirit” that has been associated with Wembley since the British Empire Exhibition of 1924, Wembley Park Boulevard provides a leisure offering including 70 new outlet shops, 20 restaurants and cafes, a nine-screen cinema and the area's first 4 star hotel, as well as creating world-class event facilities within the historic Wembley Arena. Construction of 475 homes arranged in seven buildings around an acre of private gardens will start this summer, located next to Brent Civic Centre.

Development Forum: Companies represented

AECOM
Argent
Barratt London
Berwin Leighton Paisner
Canary Wharf
Capital & Counties
First Base
Grainger
Greater London Authority
Grosvenor
Hammerson
Helical Bar
Knight Dragon Developments
Legal & General Property
Lend Lease
Mount Anvil
PLP Architecture
PRS Taskforce
Savills
Stanhope
Strutt & Parker
The Crown Estate

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