

[front page](#)

[news](#)

[back issues](#)

[comment](#)

[letters](#)

[advertise](#)

[subscribe](#)

[about us](#)

[contact us](#)

[back page](#)

Legacy in lanes: the London Aquatics Centre

When the London 2012 Olympic pool finally opened to the public it was time for the Leisure Review's poorly disguised mystery customer to dust off the clipboard and head for the nation's most expensive and most prestigious swimming baths. Jonathan Ives reports.

As I walked slowly around the poolside of the London Aquatics Centre's pool hall and gazed up at Zaha Hadid's remarkable roof, the member of staff perched on the lifeguard's seat caught my eye and leant down to engage me in conversation. Half expecting advice on which lanes might be the most appropriate for someone of my size and shape or the best way to find the changing rooms, I approached the seat. "It's wonderful, isn't it," he said with a grin, before pointing out that the whole of this soaring and dipping roof structure meets the rest of the building in only three places. He then told me about the moveable booms and floors that enable the staff to configure the facility to provide six separate pools at any one time. It is, he confirmed, a lovely building to work in.

It was an informative and charming conversation that also delayed the point at which I had to get into the water and remind myself how long it had been since I had swum 50m without a slow, lingering turn half way through. Not many swimming pools inspire such architectural and technical enthusiasm among their staff but we had already been made well aware that this was no ordinary swimming pool long before it opened to the public. Hadid had been brought in by the London 2012 organising committee to provide a landmark building, a design statement that would linger in the collective memory of everyone who watched the Olympic Games that summer. Along the way the impact of its design was muted by stories of the facility's spiralling construction costs, the general debate on the likely success or otherwise of the Olympic site and the building's huge, shed-like wings that provided the temporary seating to take the capacity up to the 17,5000 required by the IOC.

While much was made of the ground-breaking design, the architectural purity of the roof lines and interiors, and the technological brilliance of its construction, it was asking a lot for the casual observer to be able to see how this ugly duckling was going to be turned into a swan. As the Olympic and Paralympic Games came and went, we were told it would be the best part of another two years before we would be able to see it as the architect intended. At this point many were tempted to park it among their collection of political promises and move the discussion on to how many pools in the capital had closed in the last ten years and how many would survive the next ten. The fences went up and everyone moved on.

It was a long wait but eventually, on 1 March 2014, the London Aquatics Centre opened to the public and we were at last able to see what sort of public swimming facility you get for £269 million. The opening received a good deal of media coverage, much of it mentioning GLL's charitable trust status and the pricing policy that means the cost of swimming in the wake of the world's greatest aquatic athletes costs the same as any of the other pools that GLL manage. Zaha Hadid arrived to offer her thoughts on the final incarnation of her building and, while no one would have inferred from her demeanour that she was in celebratory mood, she pronounced herself pleased with the end result. "I didn't mind the seating stands so much," she told the press. "They served their

www.theleisurereview.co.uk

"There in front of us is the distinctive curve of the aquatics centre, the flowing lines of its roof sweeping up and down to meet glass and ground with equal elegance."

The Leisure Review is supported by:



The Leisure Review is written, designed and published by:

QUARRY
COMMUNICATIONS

purpose, and it was always planned for what would come after: providing a great new public swimming pool for east London.”

This sounded like an interesting interpretation of the LOCOG brief but at least set some new parameters for a critical assessment of the facility. I waited a month or so before visiting, enough time, I reasoned, for the first rush of newness to die down and everything to settle into day-to-day working mode. A morning meeting in central London provided the opportunity to put my swimming kit in my bag and, with the meeting over before lunch, I hopped on the tube at St James’s Park and emerged some 20 minutes later at Stratford station in search of an international sports venue to call my own.

It is a long time since I played a small role in the early pilots of what was to become the ILAM customer service audit but I was able to recall that the audit process included reference to the signage around the venue, the assumption being that the visitor experience began with the journey to the venue and could be marred by being unable to find the place. Stratford has always been a case in point, with the route from tube station concourse to the Olympic park never immediately obvious, involving as it does doubling back to go up the escalator and heading through the Westfield shopping centre. Signage has been improved but it would still not surprise me to learn that a good few people are momentarily stumped on arrival. Head for the floodlights is a good rule of thumb in a footballing context and this may be amended here to read: head for the Orbit. The mayor’s scrap-metal tower is quite close to the aquatics centre and is useful for this – and possibly only this – purpose.

Arriving on the edge of the Olympic park, all becomes clear. There in front of us is the distinctive curve of the aquatics centre, the flowing lines of its roof sweeping up and down to meet glass and ground with equal elegance. Even with a drab, overcast sky that tones with the colours of the building, it is an impressive sight. It has been likened, among other things, to a leaping manta ray or an extravagant item of millinery and, relieved of its seating side pods, the building now looks whole, the curves of the roof line free to frame the glass curtain walls and lead the eye down to the building’s entrance.

Except that it isn’t. Or it is; but only if you are not here to swim. In Games mode this ground-level entrance, the most obvious point at which to approach the building, provided entry to ticket holders looking to take their seats. In legacy mode, this entrance requires a member of staff to point swimmers back out of the building and down the stairs to the lower, riverside concourse where what we should now think of as the main entrance is situated. Of course there are signs to this effect but, having been focusing on the architecture rather than the lampposts, I had missed them.

If it feels like being directed to a 21st-century version of the tradesman’s entrance, we can at least take heart that we are walking in the footsteps of some of the most illustrious tradesmen and women in the world. With any attempt to remember my mystery customer procedures now abandoned in favour of barely suppressed excitement, I went straight into habitual swimmer mode. The customary opening of “One to swim, please” was met with a polite request for £3.50 (the off-peak rate) and, with no obvious ceremony, fanfare or Olympic protocol, in we go to take our place among the greats and savour the air in our very own £269 million pool.

The route from front desk to changing rooms takes us through a light-filled corridor between the two 50m pools. Glazed to both sides and above, it provides our first view of the main pool hall and this does not disappoint. Our vantage point here is under one end of the roof and from this position it ripples and waves up and away from us, soaring and dipping, rising and dipping again like a vast tongue, perhaps a table cloth made out of whale skin being flapped across a huge table, until it

meets the building some 120m away. Beneath this flow sit the competition pool and the diving pool, their space gently constrained by the swathes of glass between the top of the banks of seating – still sizeable after the reduction – and the undulating roofline. Behind us, on the other side of this corridor that serves as the spine of the public space, is more glass, this time giving a view of the training pool, the warm-up pool as was. Although it is effectively underground, this pool still seems to have plenty of light and at the time of our visit is a hive of activity, with huge inflatables taking centre stage.

Turning right, we head into the changing space for the competition pool, where we find the banks of lockers and cubicles of the changing village. A quick glance round reveals a mixed area with an additional women-only changing area and gender-specific shower areas away from the open shower areas that are just off the poolside. Along the wall stretching the length of the changing space are mirrors and hairdryers, although a notice suggests that the dryers may not be working at the moment owing to some technical problems.

Clothes and bag stowed, we shower (of course) and head on to the poolside. Here the full impact of the building becomes apparent. This is a vast space. Later we discover that at its highest point the roof reaches 45m and at its broadest it measures 80m but now standing on the edge of the pool it is hard to take in the volume of the space around you. With the curves and the space, the usual perspective of a swimming pool seems to be redundant and at first the pool seems impossibly small to be used in Olympic competition. Could I somehow be looking at the wrong pool? Starting to walk along the pool's length, I am reassured that it is a 50m pool but this only serves to reinforce the scale of the space in which the pool is placed. By the time I have walked around three sides of the water, I have only just begun to take in the fact that the diving pool and the array of platforms and boards that surround it is here at the end of the competition pool. For a moment these too seem to be of the wrong scale for grown-up competition until my mind again calculates that they are a long, long way away from where I am standing.

As I begin to comprehend the distances, one other thing strikes me. For a moment I feel cold; or rather I feel as though I should feel cold, even though it is a pleasantly warm environment. It takes me a little while to realise that this is probably the result of a disconnection with what I can feel – a warm pool hall – and what I can see – grey, drizzling clouds being driven by a chill wind. With so much natural light coming in through the glass walls on both sides of the building, part of me seems to be convinced that I must be outside and reacts accordingly. Fearful of further confusion, I take to the water and, pushing off from the side, don't give the consistent 3m depth a second thought; the space under the water simply mirrors the scale of the space above it.

Half an hour later I am walking away from the building back towards the tube station. I have spent most of my time in the water stationary, looking up and around, and while this approach to swimming may not have done much for my aerobic fitness, it has left me exhilarated and enthused. It seems that Zaha Hadid may have had the best understanding of her brief after all: this is a great new public swimming pool for east London.

Jonathan Ives is the editor of the Leisure Review, a slow swimmer and a very inexperienced mystery customer.

The Leisure Review, February 2014

© Copyright of all material on this site is retained by *The Leisure Review* or the individual contributors where stated. Contact *The Leisure Review* for details.

www.theleisurereview.co.uk

Page 3 of 4

