

ISSUE 29

THE

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# COURTAULDIAN



*through  
each  
chartered  
street*



**The Courtauldian  
Issue #29  
Through Each Chartered Street**

Photography by Kirk Patrick Testa  
Cover Art by Sasha Dunn

Despite having now lived in London for three years, a question I still regularly exchange with friends is some variation of ‘how are you finding living here?’ The implication of this is that our experience and opinions of London are never set, but rather are perpetually changing.

Our 29th print issue takes its starting point from William Blake’s 1794 poem, *London*, to ground the opinions and wider cultural attitudes towards the urban environment explored in this issue in Blake’s seminal Romantic stance, when London was on the cusp of industrial modernity. This theme has prompted a notably personal response from our contributors, who have shared their own nuanced and shifting views on city life through prose, poetry, and artwork. Many have chosen to write as a contemporary flâneur, providing a hyper-observant, sensory account of wandering through the city streets. Relating to Blake’s cynical mentioning of ‘each chartered street,’ a number of articles touch upon land ownership, usage, and accessibility in the city; an issue arguably even more relevant today, in a time where The City of London Corporation is coming under increasing scrutiny, and people’s right to use the city streets as a site of public protest is being threatened by recent legislation. Conversely, this issue also explores the city’s potential as a catalyst for the development of countercultures, creative spaces and communities. The city’s visual language of street signs, shop fronts, graffiti, ephemera and kitsch are vital to important art-historical discussions surrounding the demarcation of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. The urban soundscape will also be investigated at our issue launch event, with a ‘Seated Walking Tour of London’ led by artist Henry Blackwell intended to guide participants through an auditory experience of the city.

The city is a socio-cultural phenomenon. We are, of course, social creatures by nature, but it is the rapid developments in modern technology and infrastructure that have brought this sprawling mass of concrete, tarmac, layer upon layer of densely-populated housing and workplaces punctuated by grandiose historical landmarks and precious swathes of greenery into being. My opinion of London is perpetually changing. It swings dependent on the extremes of experiences it has to offer. It has been such a fulfilling opportunity to help facilitate the exchange of such opinions on pertinent cultural topics for the fourth and final print issue I have overseen at *The Courtauldian*.

Maya Fletcher-Smith  
Print Issue Editor

## EDITORS'

What do you see in the city? A place of tall buildings with reflective surfaces, busy traffic, bustling streets, garbage, things, products, and an endless crowd of people: *persons*.

Although *Through Each Chartered Street* deals with the theme ‘urban space,’ I was delighted to see that the collection of individual pieces does not direct the reader to any one city space. With such individuality and personality sparkling on each page, reading this issue brings the kind of sensation one feels when walking through a big city. The abundance of people with their own stories and thoughts. The city presents to us endless possibility, for better or for worse.

The articles in this issue generate this sense of multiplicity of the city in such a vivid way. From reading about the pleasurable solitude in the Italian countryside or the sense of community in the Singaporean cityscape, it becomes evident that here, the city is not a singular space, but a place of multiplicity. Here, the city becomes an ever-evolving, never-definitive being. *Through Each Chartered Street* invites you to reconsider both how you move around the city, and what moves surrounding you.

## NOTES

Each piece of poetry and prose becomes a foreign hand that is reached out for you to hold. As you read the first few sentences, just like that, you are being led by a person who walks through the city in a completely different rhythm from yours, who views the city in a way very different from the way you do. For them, cities, or parts of a city that are alien to you, are felt as home. Some of these walks will come across like strolling through the open air and sun, quick steps brisk and light. Others might accompany weighty footsteps that explore the industrial and futuristic sites where the horizon is made up of the silhouettes of skyscrapers.

The reader embarks on a vicarious journey by dwelling between sentences full of character, personal experience and memory. Perhaps you will smile from familiarity and recognition that blurs the line of nostalgia or be taken aback by the different side of the city you have never set foot in. You might stumble over the sense of unfamiliarity and feel the fear crawling into your heart. When you are looking at the space through the perspective of the other, you will inevitably see different things, and perhaps even after you have returned to yourself, the fresh perspective may remain in your own eyes, as do the moments of travelling.

Lynn Ha  
Editor-in-Chief

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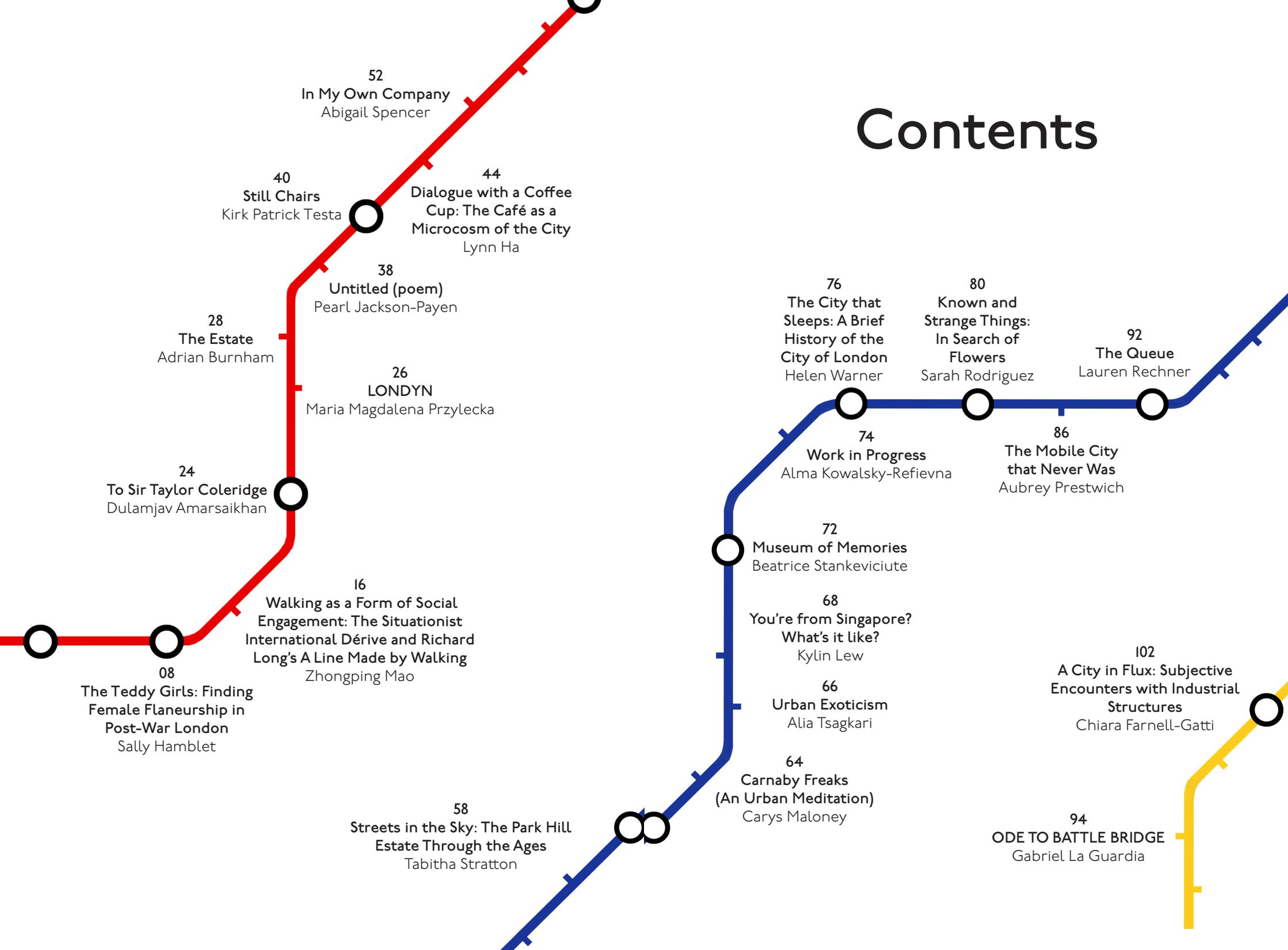
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# The Teddy Girls: Finding Female Flaneurship in Post-War London

Sally Hamblet



The Teddy Boys were a group of rowdy, stylish, and occasionally violent young men, visually identifiable by their “Neo-Edwardian” style. The sartorial subculture emerged in the British urban post-war environment. Their notoriety was well-documented by both photographers and the press at the time. The Teddy Boys are frequently cited as an example of a male-centric subculture predicated on spectacle... but one can’t help but think, where are the women? The Teddy Girls emerged with their own unique assemblage of the “Neo-Edwardian” style, visually distinct from the Teddy Boys. They challenged Baudelaire’s wealthy male *flâneur*, as working-class women who navigated urban life observing and daring to be observed. Their interest was in dressing not to blend in, but to actively be seen, to challenge and subvert the gaze that the public places upon them. The young women were documented by Ken Russell in a series of early photographs for the *Picture Post* in 1955, set in working-class London neighbourhoods that were

recovering from a war that had devastated its infrastructure. Shifting our gaze to focus on this forgotten female subculture offers a differing perspective on the experience of Post-War London that examines how the girls used their self-expression through dress to subvert both gender and class expectations placed on them by society.

Contemporary research has rightly begun to question the positions of young women, historically dismissed as merely derivative of the male subculture. Carys Bailey’s 2013 dissertation, in addition to Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber’s article *Girls and Subcultures*, expands female participation in the subcultural space as more than simply the romantic partners of male members. Russell’s images provide visual evidence that through their construction of dress codes and behaviours, they affirm their solidarity to uniquely feminine social circles that both overlap with and vastly differ from the Teddy Boys’. This is validated by oral testimony from the Teddy Girls

collected by Eve Dawoud, and various published interviews with Ken Russell. They provide contextual evidence of the involved parties’ participation in the creation of these images and reinsert the lived experiences of both parties back into the reading of these images.

The photographs, which Russell described as ‘still films,’ have a fantastic sense of theatricality, echoed in his later film career. By photographing the girls outside, in their daily environment, Russell asserts the girls’ right to be in the public spaces they lived within and creates images that are unapologetic in doing so. Two Teddy Girls, defiant in their finery, stand in an embodied contrast to the prescriptive depiction of femininity looming on the billboard behind them. Iris Thompson is featured on the left in the image above with her friend Pat Wiles, in long coats cut in a masculine silhouette, far from the highly accentuated fit and flare dresses popular at the time. Iris would note in an interview later in her life that she was fortunate that

her Teddy cut coat was custom tailored for her in navy blue wool with a velvet collar. They are caught adjusting their triangular hats which, like their vintage Edwardian umbrellas, are just one of the multitudes of different accessories they employed to create their language of style that pulls from both male and female styles of dress.

The images were originally printed on magazine-quality paper in black and white and situated within the narrative text, which would place them within the context of photojournalism during a time when the media's coverage of the teddy subculture primarily served to propagate a moral panic of these participants as immoral youths. They

are stylised in a manner consistent with the emerging style of documentary photography, which art historian Griselda Pollock subsequently notes was an aesthetic developed in the 1930s, investing imagery with signifiers of "authenticity and directness." The interviews with the Teddy Girls revealed that Russell imposed stylistic





interventions in the images he created, breaking with photojournalism's tenet of non-interventionism. Blurring the boundaries of both and creating something new. In her oral testimony, Thompson revealed the collaborative nature of the construction of the images he created.

*"Ken asked us to wear those lace-up sandals. The photos were taken in January and we were absolutely freezing. He also instructed us not to smile, so we look really hard faced. Maybe he wanted to make us appear scary and intimidating."*

The styling of accessories has previously been noted as a clumsy aesthetic choice by the girls, not aware that the direction had come from Russell, who was motivated to create images that best typified the subculture to be discerned to the masses in print media. We can now re-evaluate these interventions as evidence to interpret these photographs not just as documentary photojournalism, but as a form of fictionalised storytelling that asks the viewer to invest in

the spectacle of brash but beautifully dressed women. This story becomes a fairy tale, capturing the Teddy Girls at their most powerful, and omitting the social stigmas attached to their day-to-day existence. They are the protagonists of their own stories, richly costumed, and their London neighbourhoods serve as the backdrop.

Throughout the series, there is an importance placed on the strength of female friendships, which gives the girls agency in subcultural conversations outside the subordinate role of romantic partners to male members. In Russell's images, the female subjects are placed central to the compositions. When visible, male spectatorship is pushed to the edges, or subversively used as props. A clearly analogous visual style is displayed that works to establish the girls' allyship with each other and grounds their mutual commitment to the subculture. Mary Toovey also spoke on how the girls worked together to create their looks as an activity to be participated in:



*“My friends and I would buy similar clothes when we shopped on the Portobello Road. It was all second hand then, we couldn’t afford new.”*

Their consumer habits were impacted as they had less buying power than their male counterparts, as women’s wages at this time were considerably lower. The sharing of clothing amongst friends also allowed the young women to actively engage in playful experimentation of personal style while circumventing this income inequity. Barbra Wood recalled her time in the subgroup as a communal experience of stylistic expression:

*“Me and my friends, we all used to swap and share clothes. So you looked different every weekend. There wasn’t much money about.”*

They expropriated key garments from the men’s style like denim trousers, necessary as women’s denim wasn’t imported to England until the late 1960s. In order to literally fit into the men’s jeans, girls would have to wear them while

sitting in a warm bath to mould them to their female form. Though there is no monolithic uniform for Teddy Girls, there is the development of variations of Ted dress within distinct groups of girls participating in the subculture within their own friend groups, which provides a form of visibility as members of their distinct groups, both recognisable to each other, and to those outside the group.

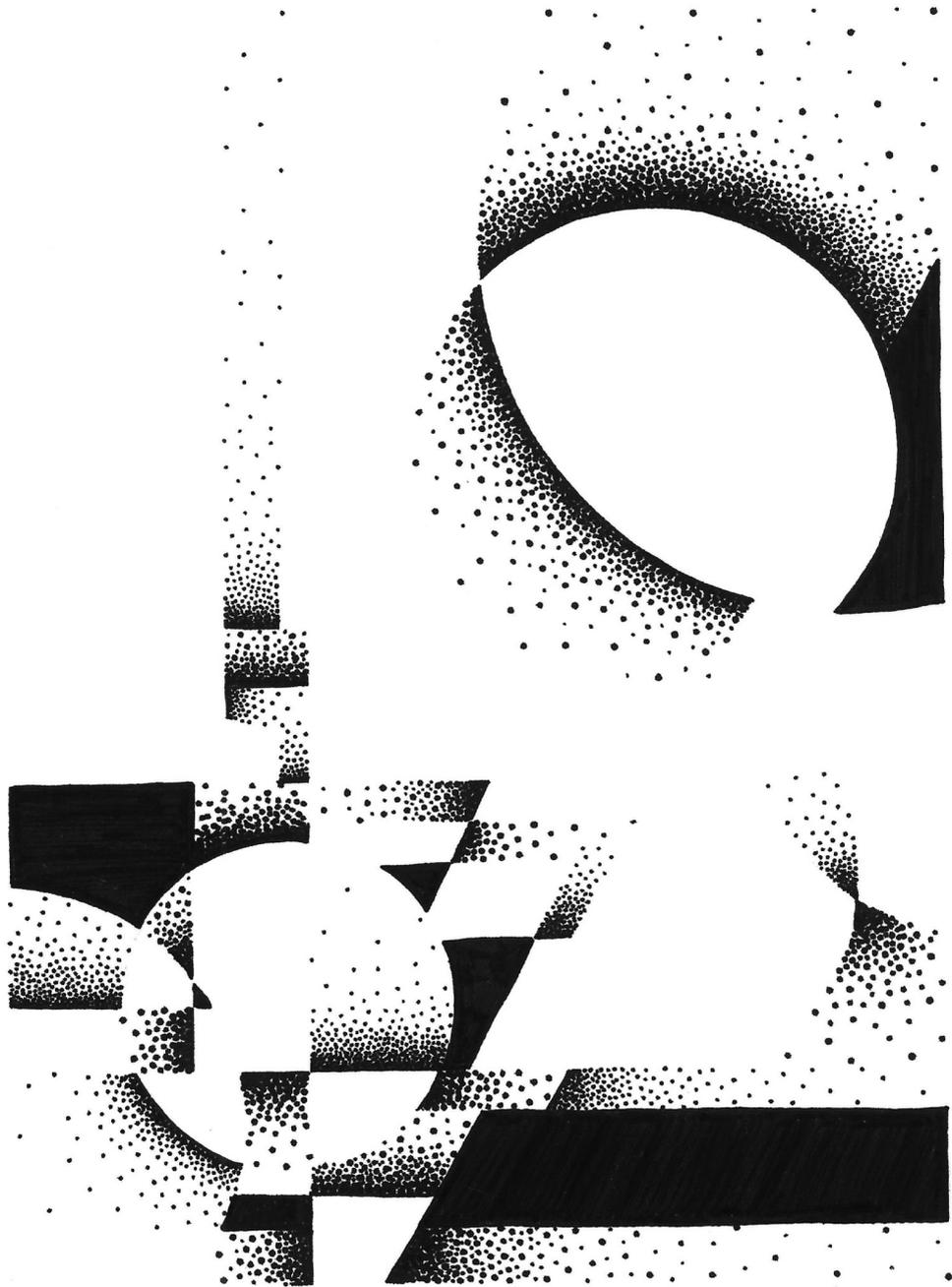
As cultural historian Phil Cohen notes, their participation in the subcultural space did not remove them from the context of their socioeconomic class:

*“Members of a subculture may walk, talk, act, and look ‘different’ from their parents and from some of their peers: but they belong to the same families, go to the same schools, work at much the same jobs, live down the same ‘mean streets’ as their peers and parents... But their membership of a subculture cannot protect them from the determining matrix of experiences and conditions which shape the life of their class as a whole.”*

Their subcultural participation was not complete escapism, but a temporary performance. They are the actors in Russell’s “still films”, the city their stage. Shaped by these inescapable societal pressures, later interviews with the subjects of the series reveal that many of these young women would eventually go on to lead lives that conformed to societal expectations by marrying young and starting families of their own. These images capture not just a part of London’s fashion history, but a group of young women who were able to assert agency over their positionality in the world through dress, if only for one fleetingly brilliant and brazen moment in time.

All photographs courtesy of Ken Russell, from his 1955 photo series, *Teddy Girls*.

Illustrations by Lola Cortés-Monroy



# Walking as a Form of Social Engagement: The Situationist International *Dérive* and Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking*

Zhongping Mao

Traversing the everyday environment, whether it is cityscape or countryside, walking is the most common form of our movement. It is a form of recreation, as well as transportation. Consider an evening stroll in the field or along the river. In this context, walking is highly circumstantial and random. What prompts us to think this way, also prevents us from realising the rather regulated nature of what we perceive

as walking's randomness. Urban space is considered the centre of capitalism, according to humanist and Marxist readings. They are the result of a capitalist economy, that alienates and regulates its citizens to reinforce class divisions. Thus, urban circulation is highly circumscribed. The spatial construction of urban spaces has made walking a regulated social practice.

In response, both the Situationist International, a revolutionary group formed in 1957 of avant-garde artists, poets, and writers, and Richard Long, a British artist born in 1945, turned to the act of walking — the very means of control. Here I aim to examine how the Situationist International and Richard Long used walking in a socially engaged manner, that simultaneously conformed to and resisted the urban landscape. I argue that while both the Situationist International and Long take an active method of resistance in the creation of new contexts within the urban, their attitudes toward the urban environment differ. Long avoids confrontation, while Situationist International seek an urban space transformation.

I use walking here in its literal sense — the act of moving oneself through a given space. Walking here does not necessarily entail a purpose. Instead, the SI and Long endowed walking with new meanings — not by changing the fundamental mechanisms in which one's body circulates the space, but by bringing to attention what walking could mean under newly created contexts. In other words, how one walks or is instructed to walk creates the contexts of walking, not walking itself. Using terms such as proletariat and worker interchangeably, as they all refer to the same group of people that capitalist society seeks to alienate, in this article I will explain my discussions on the SI and Long that will be based on the SI's social, economic, and cultural context.

Situationist International was founded in

post-war Europe between 1950 and 1960. They aimed to destroy the leisure-based society where workers have become consumers. Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* became the founding principle of Situationist International. Debord defines the society of the spectacle as one in which 'all that once was directly lived has become mere representation' and 'the commodity completes its colonisation of social life.' In other words, Debord suggests that direct experience has been replaced by represented images, and that leisure has returned because workers have better conditions. Capital is becoming harder to overcome as modes of production become increasingly fragment. The binary opposition between worker and factory owner disappears, as all former workers have now become consumers. According to Debord, a consumer-based society creates an urban space, where everything was designed to promote class disparities, maximum production, and consumption efficiency. Urban spaces will, therefore, gradually accumulate capital and power. In its *Situationist Manifesto*, the Situationist International renews the Marxist view on workers' constant class struggle in a post-war period, updating it to reflect the reality, where the leisure sector is replacing factories as sites of class division, and alienation and means of production are expanding to include services. This new emphasis on leisure frees workers from industries. For the first time, the proletariat was allowed to travel outside their workplaces, yet the city's spatial organisation and confinement keep them in its territory, as they may be freed from the industrial factory space, their place of



A LINE MADE BY WALKING

ENGLAND 1967

confinement is nonetheless transferred to that of the leisure district of cities.

Through the act of walking, the proletariat unconsciously traverse a familiar yet foreign urban landscape. Familiar in the sense of travelling the same route daily towards their destinations, whether it is for work or leisure; unfamiliar in the sense that the proletariat becomes indifferent to the landscapes, and thus, unaware of the controlled and regulated nature of its spaces.

The word *dérive*, meaning ‘rapid passage through varied ambiances without any particular purpose,’ is used by the Situationist International to highlight the controlling nature of the urban environment. Debord also distinguished *dérive* from the daily stroll due to its ‘playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects [of the terrain].’ There is an emphasis on a heightened awareness of one’s physical environment while walking, and an abandonment of the participants’ day-to-day relations, so they can be lured by charms of the landscape and the experiences they discover. Without the spectacle of either leisure or work, new situations and social interactions are created, such as discussions of the landscape, philosophical exchanges, or in essence, human interactions that has been replaced by work or leisure. *Dérive* walkers can explore urban spaces in a non-utilitarian way. The psychological and emotional features of the manifold landscape also offer its participants a new ‘sense of place.’ This strategy does not change how one walks, but it challenges each walker to abandon their everyday re-

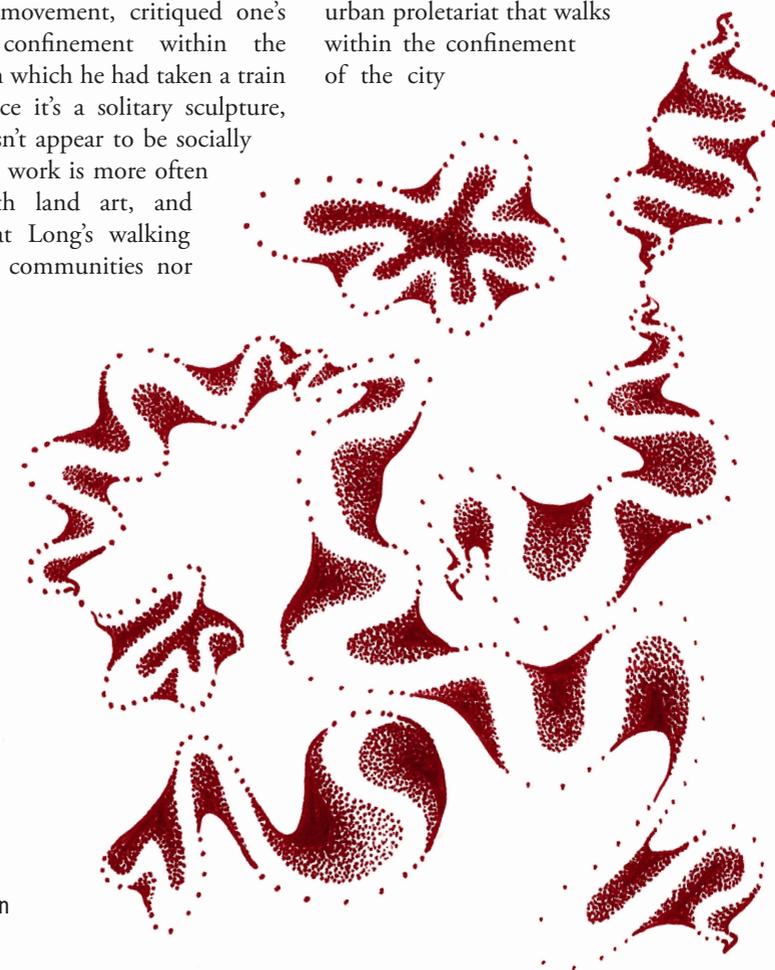
lationship with the city and others. *Dérive* can therefore be seen as a socially engaged practice for its ability to bring a community of people together and foster new social relationships. Although there are possibilities of solo *dérives*, Debord believes the best composition of the activity should be small groups of two to three people who have attained the same level of consciousness, as this ensures the conclusion reached at the end of the walk to be more objective. *Dérive* encourages participants to surrender to the aimless walk and re-examine their daily environment without their identity as workers, or entertainers. This deconstructs each participant’s social identity, creating new possibilities of interaction and reuniting people who were previously alienated by a rigid social structure. In a radical attempt to re-examine and transform the urban space through new situations and a conscious reconstruction of one’s social relations after its complete deconstruction, the Situationist International *dérive* engages participants socially.

Walking allows Richard Long to leave the city and connect with nature. It explores limits of the terrain and confronts urban centres’ censored climatical, atmospheric, and ecological experiences. Long’s walks propose questions: Where does the city end? What’s the solution?

Unlike the Situationist International *dérive*, Long’s walks are highly regulated and calculated. Long took a train from London’s Waterloo Station in 1967, alighted after twenty miles, and arrived at the site of his first walking sculpture, *A Line Made*

*by Walking*. Long walked back and forth on the grass to create this work, which he calls one of his first ‘walking as art’ pieces. After a time, as Long repeatedly walks in a self-imposed confined space, the grass starts wearing out, forming a line. Long’s performance, like the Situationist International’s challenge to walking, is repeated and responds to the urban environment, albeit indirectly. Long may have embodied the proletariat and, in his highly theatrical yet recurrent movement, critiqued one’s self-imposed confinement within the cityscape, from which he had taken a train to escape. Since it’s a solitary sculpture, this piece doesn’t appear to be socially engaging. This work is more often associated with land art, and it appears that Long’s walking unites neither communities nor individuals.

On the other hand, however, Long’s work encourages viewers to demystify walking, even though it doesn’t directly spark conversation. Long’s walks highlight the alienation of individuals by the capitalistic society, as did the Situationist International. Though many consider Long’s walking sculpture the final product, a work of art, I argue that the process of walking is equally important. Unlike the seemingly inescapable fate of the urban proletariat that walks within the confinement of the city



Illustrations by  
Finlay Thompson

every day, Long's work is not made up of everyday performances. Instead, Long stops this quest and returns to London after a line is formed. In other words, both the act of walking and the sculpture are ephemeral and would perish as the grass recedes and subsequently grows back. The act of walking could, and should, be interrupted to mark its completion as art. A double meaning is at play through the interruption of the walking and the eventual disappearance of Long's walking sculpture. The regrowth of the grass hints that the proletariat's social labour in the urban environment is insignificant. No matter how one treads the grass, new weeds will repopulate once the walking comes to a halt. The interruption of the walking, however, suggests a possibility of escape from the daily monotonous task within the city in which the Situationist International operates.

Long's work is socially engaging in the sense that it calls out the overlooked mechanisms of urban spaces. What is at play in the work is the alienation of individuals and provides a paradox vis-a-vis the Situationist International *dérive*. While the Situationist International's walk within a controlled metropolitan area aims to be aimless and adventurous, Long walks a rigid line repeatedly in an unregulated natural space. His work contains a self-imposed regulation that the proletariat encountered within the city in an otherwise unregulated and novel terrain. This, at first examination, seems like an arbitrary irony — a reversal of both the conditions and methods of resistance. When the Situationist International walks within the centre of

the capital, Long moves away from it. At the same time he creates a context in which the conditions of the urban centre become more apparent through the juxtaposition of rigidity and randomness, both at play while walking. Like the Situationist International, Long also attempts to make one conscious of the daily conditions that control how one walks. However, instead of direct confrontation with the capitalist city, Long retreated to nature and indirectly fostered his social relations.

Long is not entirely detached from the urban environment. The very means of Long's transport is train, the essential infrastructure for both capitalism and the materialisation of his work. We can see the same pattern in his work. First, we see Long as the proletariat walking on a line, where several ways of interpretation arise.

Is the linear boundary of the urban space, or is it the pre-determined route that one unconsciously travels daily? More importantly, should we see the line that Long creates by walking as indirectly addressing and reconstructing the restrictive urban space or as simply a retreat or defeat from it? I think to pursue only the former explanation, there would be the risk of over-probing and even possible misunderstanding; likewise, to seek only the latter, there is the danger of a naïve conclusion. Luckily, the definition of the work's identity does not obstruct my argument: that Long's work, like that of the Situationist International's, is of a socially engaged nature. Both methods help inform us how urban centres are constructed, and in return, bring attention to us, walkers, to make different choices.



# To Sir Taylor Coleridge

Dulamjav Amarsaikhan

Illustration by Kiera Modi



Visions of yours had reached my land  
Carried in words through a Harvard man

My family name was lost in the century past  
So with my father's I've come to yours

To ponder Shangdu with equal minds  
Where Xanadu of yours lingers on their heads

Ethiopian harps heard through invisible waves  
In a room of my own then I walk her streets  
To listen to the stories of your Abyssian trophies  
Then greet the hordes of human desires

I drink your ales with one of yours  
Stories of old ibex leaps from karmic heights  
Ponder the undoings of your men  
Payments of our forebears

Like you, I ask to imagine Khubilai's dreams  
But that of the expanding summer breeze  
Away from a city of a thousand tongues  
Much like that of yours with chartered streets

A man of mine stepped into a circle  
Of stones laid by your artist who walks along  
We've come full circle, I imagine them as one  
man and man  
With visions beyond cities, of yours and mine  
Are born knowing the beyond

As I drink your water and breathe the air  
By night lights further from the stone circle of my youth  
I ask in your tongue and that of others  
Will your words die off with the Classics men  
Or circle back as visions for a man somewhere

For now, I hear the sun's Tender Smile  
As I walk your working-class canals.

Samuel, are you in Xanadu now?

# LONDYN

## Maria Magdalena Przylecka

Illustration by Sacha Lewis

Crawling into snake's belly through its needle-wide tongue  
I yearn and yearn to make it home

I've shaved my head, I've cut my nails, plucked eyelashes one by one, broke bone after bone, shed skin, ripped flesh  
and was walking with nose to the ground sniffing the ashes of the dead  
only to put my face in urine.

Living inside a reptile requires accommodation:  
Shrinking between Canada Water and Waterloo station, inflated presence of fake smiles  
on never-ending everlasting raves, be there, be here South North East West, South-East,  
North-West be everywhere North-East South-West.  
Close eyes and unite with fellow commuters you are one blood  
in veins rushing through after run  
but climb up the social ladder with a sharp smile,  
forging your fucking fate on your fucking own  
and do not dare to think about Peckham when standing in the Shed.  
Don't stop, don't run, don't scream, do laugh, don't don't don't do not  
do anything without an aim it will only get you tangled in knots of hair.

There are cities-cherries, sweet, vivid, tiny, shining  
and half-open coffins with the rotting body of an old man,  
cities with double faces, pearl claws, made of glass, built on blood,  
old as sin, tiny like a grain of salt but bitter like dry wine.

A vagabond with broken wigs, dreaming of cherries and coffins,  
Got stuck in Shoreditch Highstreet station or bathes in digestive juices of Dalston  
bustlingly boiling at 2 am.  
London is a snake with a knot of tangled hair in the belly.  
I do wish to rip it from inside out but I've made my way here how a spider makes its web.



# The Estate

## Adrian Burnham



One spring day in 2017 Franck Allais took a breather from his job photographing product and interior set-ups to roam Regent's Park Estate, London NW1. Over subsequent weeks, months, years, a visit which began as a casual lunchtime *dérive* developed into an odyssey of sustained attention.

With a gaze that's avid but never intrusive, Allais' return visits recorded the same corners, same pedestrian thoroughfares, same play areas, same street views, same scraps of ground, same objects: bollard, bicycle basket, bench, same, same, same... You'd be forgiven for thinking that the resulting book of photographs – presented in pairs and longer series – would turn out to be something of a visual *longueur*.

You'd be wrong. In terms of light, composition, textural variations, offbeat subject choices and a keen delight in colour and form, Allais' individual pictures reward close attention. Then, viewed in series, the same scenes are revisited over time but, of course, nothing is ever quite the same. Seasons come and go and with that variations of light and precipitation, changes in vegetation as well as more and less subtle material differences, all of which contribute to shifts in the ambience of particular places.

Allais' photographic compositions range from close-up areas of ground to slightly wider shots where there's still no sky visible. Occasionally, broader sweeps take in the whole frontage of a block of flats with, say, car parking spaces, communal gardens

or a play structure in the foreground. There are also street vistas that admit a degree of perspective but in almost none of the images in the book do we see an uninterrupted horizon of sky. Throughout the series, the viewer is hemmed in which lends not a claustrophobic air but certainly a sense of being constantly surrounded.

Our attention is multiplied; finely choreographed. In one series our vision is trained on a patch of ground: a puddle evaporates, reflections disappear, leaves settle in the prescribed space.

In another sequence we're presented with a dead corner on the estate, framed in a way to enhance its abandonment, its abjectness. Again, no sky, just a low brick wall meeting a high brick wall at right angles. There's a nondescript white plastic panel and above that a tall window is guillotined by the top of the photo frame. Below centre, in the shallow foreground is the dumping spot; the pitiful site where people perhaps assuage a degree of guilt at littering by placing their trash 'tidily' vis-à-vis a lonely corner. Over time this non-descript location plays host to: a bright red gas bottle; a drop leaf tabletop (no legs); a sofa cushion and plastic penguin; a modest drift of snow and the trace of a snowball thrown at the russet brickwork; a Zimmer frame; a pile of broken furniture; a green Ninja motorcycle; a fridge. A host of presences suggested by erratic leavings.

People dwell and move variously through the estate. Another series gives centre stage to a paved 'No Ball Games' walkway. The

first image features a woman wearing a puffer jacket and pushing a covered pram, a child's face is staring out at us from beneath the plastic rain shield. In the second, we see the same woman, this time wearing sandals and striding in the opposite direction, her buggy festooned with toys. In the third photograph of the same walkway scene there's no one, just a small pale blue balloon. Next up, teenagers milling around taking photos of friends posing beneath the sign, sunlight glows on lush foliage, lambent patches dapple the ground. Then, a broken crocodile-shaped formation of younger children snaggle across the same terrain, the trees are bare this time. Finally, a claret trousered, fluorescent jacketed council worker is pictured next to a barrow with his back to us, sweeping up the last of the leaves.

In these longer series, while pictures are presented in the chronological order of their being photographed, time seems to fold back in on itself. The temptation to flick back and forward through sequences is compelling. The past appears constantly woven through, embedded in each new present. This swivelling between change and fixedness affords both understated drama and reassuring 'structure,' not just in terms of the material constancy of architecture and street furniture but in the apparent rhythmic cycles of activity on the estate.

In another selection, again a fairly wide composition, a 'No Ball Games' sign is joined by its 'No Dogs' sibling side by side above a buffed brown wall. In the fore-

ground there are bollards and chains and a London plane tree trunk that partially obscures a gap between buildings. The overall impression is high walls and boundaries, the only figure in the first frame is diminutive, barely there. In the second photograph the buffed brown brickwork is embellished with hundreds of pictures. At the foot of the wall there are commemorative floral wreaths and piles of cellophane wrapped tributes. In the third image of the series, instead of the buffed brown wall there's a far from slick – more folksy, heartfelt – painting featuring a Black youth wearing a Nike top, he also has wings and a halo. The words 'Alex's World' are painted across the blue sky and white clouds surrounding the boy. Three lads sit in front of the mural, flower tributes and photographs. Caught in a shaft of sunlight, they're all looking at their phones. Reflected light flecks the brickwork. It's an elegiac, quietly respectful image. Then the wall painting is buffed again, a redder brown this time. But there's fresh bunches too, a row of wrapped flowers propped against the base of the blank wall like sentries. It's a cold, grey day. There's no one in the frame now. In the final image, a new painting on the wall, 'ALEX' appears free written in white over a blue and green globe. There's more flowers and prayer candles and tea lights. This time a car is parked in the foreground, partially obscuring the scene, its glistening windscreen and bonnet reflect the hitherto unseen boughs of the tree and sky above.

Here, Allais' photographs witness a community marking the tragic, fatal stabbing of Alex Smith, believed to be Camden's





youngest victim of knife crime. Details of his life are not laid bare. Allais maintains a considerate but, it seems, not a surreptitious nor devious distance. A sense of transience, loss, and a neighbourhood in mourning suffuse both single photographs and this collection of understated, respectful images.

At no point in this project is it Allais' intention to aestheticise or sentimentalise social housing. We know that estates are often stereotyped as sub-standard and by association its inhabitants variously deemed inferior.

Any lingering idea that the aim of social housing might, or should, be progressive was kicked into touch in 1986 when Margaret Thatcher famously opined 'a man that finds himself, beyond the age of 26, on a bus can consider himself a failure.' Author of *Estates: An Intimate History*, Lynsey Hanley, deftly decodes this: 'By that sick logic, every person who takes part in public life, whether by using public transport, living in public owned housing, educating themselves and their children at state schools, or being treated at NHS hospitals, has failed at the game.'

Failing people leading failing lives; that is often the stigma attached to council estate dwellers. The attitude of policy makers since 1986 hasn't improved. In the '90s Blair demon-

ised social housing residents as an 'under-class,' a 'workless class.'

Subsequently, during the years of coalition austerity, talk of 'benefit scroungers' and 'immoral cheats' escalated to the point where it seemed the Victorian notion of poverty being the consequence of an individual's defective character rather than the result of economic forces beyond their control was enthusiastically and cynically revived in the public imagination.

21st century mainstream media – tabloid press and shows like ITV's *Benefits Street* and Channel 4's *Skint* – further promoted the ill-phrased, loaded distinction between a 'deserving' and an 'undeserving' poor. Such media's commercial imperatives motivate exaggeration, division, and a crude simplification that's consistently used to shame.

Allais' photographs of Regent's Park Estate in North London, made over several years, tell quite a different story. Rather than joining the ranks of image makers who perpetuate lazy, disingenuous stereotypes about social housing, Allais' photographs – following the French author, essayist and literary innovator Georges Perec – seem to quietly ask the question, "What's really going on?"

Perec challenged viewing life through the big events, the front-page splash, the banner headlines. According to Perec, we are blinkered by what's considered 'significant and revelatory.' Seeing the world only through a lens of what's exceptional is a

diversion from many prevailing truths we are – some might say mendaciously – conditioned to ignore.

*'What is scandalous isn't the pit explosion, it's working in coalmines. 'Social problems' aren't 'a matter of concern' when there's a strike, they are intolerable twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, three hundred and sixty-five days a year.'*

- Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1974)

Whilst Hanley acknowledges the early utopian – if somewhat patrician – impetus behind social housing as well as the positive post WW2 momentum of justice and hope for building a fairer society, given the current hold that right-wing and individualistic politics has and continues to exert on the levers of power, she doesn't seem to hold out much hope for the future of social housing. In fact, her characterisation of estates – based genuinely on her own lived experience – reprises a seemingly relentless and negative hopelessness popularly associated with estate living.

*'The noise is constant, and never soothing or life-affirming; it's never children giggling or postmen whistling. It's always people having rows with each other because they don't know how else they can tell someone that they hate a life that takes them nowhere further than this grim patch. Or it's jobless boys parping round and round the walkways on put-put-putty little motorbikes, like wasps trapped between the curtain and the window.'*



- Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (2007)

We are besieged these days by images. In the streets, the press, on screens. Mostly they are hollering at us, demanding attention. Is it nonsensical to frame Allais' approach to photographing Regent's Park Estate as more a sort of ocular listening? Of course, his pictures are captivating visual texts, they result from looking and looking closely over a sustained period. But because scenes both change and are recognisably the same place, Allais' *The Estate* is an enduring gaze that equates more with the patience and openness we associate with the act of good listening.

These images don't impose themselves on the viewer, there is no myth making, no attempt to condense life on the estate into one sensational shot. In other words Allais has refused to perpetuate what are often politically motivated or otherwise negatively charged representations. Rather, Allais' images create space for a more subtle dialogue. The repetition of and close attention to aspects of estate life connote a patient companionship. They resemble the conversations we'd ideally have with people who are grieving or distressed or simply in need of a non-judgemental ally. Allais' gaze equates to and achieves a tender curiosity. It is a patient, respectful and conscientious attention that social housing rarely receives.

After Grenfell, before that avoidable tragedy, we knew only too well what negligence by governments, local councils, planners,

developers and contractors can result in. Hanley, again, gets straight to the point.

*'To anybody who doesn't live on one (and to some who do), the term 'council estate' means hell on earth. Council estates are nothing to be scared of, unless you are frightened of inequality. They are a physical reminder that we live in a society that divides people up according to how much money they have to spend on shelter.'*

- Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (2007)

It's not that Allais turns a blind eye to some of the acute problems associated with inner city estates. We've seen the evolution of a site of remembrance. Allais shows us the anti-social disregard, but there's also the pride and solicitude that many residents exercise in caring for and enjoying amenities the estate has to offer. There are no glib, jaundiced visual summations. Instead, the serial imagery and pairings promote curiosity rather than knee jerk, facile pigeon-holing.

For example, there's a pair of photographs that face each other in Allais' book. Obviously, both show the same corner of the estate. In the left-hand image, squat on the floor, in front of a lilac grey brick wall, and to one side of a municipal green door, there's a baseball cap with an orange and white milk snake twisting across both its front panels. It's a £270.00 Gucci cap, or a cheap knock off. Either way the object's connotations feed into bigoted assumptions about estates and their inhabitants.

But paired with this, in the exact same place, mirroring almost the same squat shape of the abandoned hat is a part deflated Adidas football. Rather than reinforcing prejudice, we're prompted instead to think about performance of self, play, chance and loss: all are poetically, succinctly suggested by this poignantly arresting combination.

On the few occasions when estate residents, construction workers, corner shop customers or fag breakers are looking directly at Allais' lens, there's neither a sense of voyeurism nor confrontation. There's a steady gaze back or smiles of acknowledgement. This is a testament to the photographer's irenic and amiable mien. Allais' practice, his presence, doesn't invoke animosity. The sociologist Les Back reflected on the possibility of the camera being less didactic than we might assume.

*'It is a mistake, I think, to see the lens as only looking one way. The figures [...] look back. They stare back at us. Cameras in this context are like windows that look out into the street, and through which the street looks in.'*

- Les Back, *The Art of Listening* (2007)

The final sequence in the book is just a tree. 'Just' a tree. We can't even see its greenery. Only a trunk. First amidst snow carpeted ground, caged in Heras fencing. Then, again fenced but with a late spring green scape. Next we see leaf littered grass, still fenced. At last the tree is fence free stood in an autumn arc of golden leaves. And finally we see the tree with sunlight brushing across lush green grass peppered

with yellow and white spring flowers. A quietly beautiful serial portrait of an 'unremarkable' tree trunk. An everyday monolith reminding us how remarkable the ordinary can be, Allais' practice humbly recovers commonplace experiences that have become unseen though familiarity, that hitherto were rendered invisible by habit and that over-riding propulsion: the daily grind.

It was noted at the outset that throughout Allais' project the sky is almost never allowed to occupy the whole horizon in photographs. One exception to this signifies the fate of the estate. When Allais began taking these pictures he had no idea the site was slated for demolition to make way for a new high speed rail corridor. There is a sequence towards the end of the book which features an arc of blossom hugging the kerbside and a single tree set against fencing and beyond that other mature flora with a block of flats in the background. In Allais' photographs a green hoarding and red barriers appear; workers in orange boiler suits pass through; the trees in the background vanish and then so does the block of flats. Finally, we're left with the stark, leafless single tree silhouetted against a cold grey-white sky.

It seems that Allais' project, a photographic labour of love, his re-attuning of our attention and questioning of uncaring stereotypes regarding social housing, will also prove to be a calm and forgiving memorial to people who lived, worked and played on the Regent's Park Estate while it existed.

All images courtesy of Franck Allais.

*Huge flocks of pigeons  
carpet you*

*I can hardly make you out  
amongst the fluffing (maybe for a second one green eye, that visionary dot)  
as I walk to Somerset House  
in the pale morning.*

*Gate Gate Para Gate Para Sam Gate Bodhi Swaha.*

It means going, going, nearly gone, gone, beyond.  
To me it is like a gate, appearing in translucent space, for you to enter.

Beloved lion, beautiful one.  
You are dissolving, dissolving, dissolved, gone.

## Pearl Jackson-Payen

Illustration by Wednesday Zhu



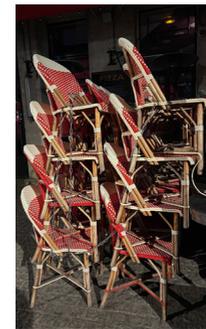
Once tools for leisure, many chairs in this series have been left to weather the harsh conditions of the city, while others have been elevated as art objects. Like William Blake's *London*, these photographs reveal a world of loneliness and isolation; the chairs stand in for the bodies that once occupied them. The images convey a paradox of the urban environment: the coexistence of overcrowded living and being lonely. They also highlight the entanglement of that which is revered with that which is discarded. Inspired by Joseph Kosuth's linguistic

# Still Chairs

Kirk Patrick Testa

proposition in *One and Three Chairs* (1965), I ask, 'Is a chair still a chair if it cannot perform its function?' The

series aims to raise awareness of the overlooked objects and spaces around us and encourage reflection on our relationship with the city, a response to Allison Knowles' *Event Score #5* (1962), which encourages others to 'Make something in the street and give it away.' Who is part of the city and who is left out?

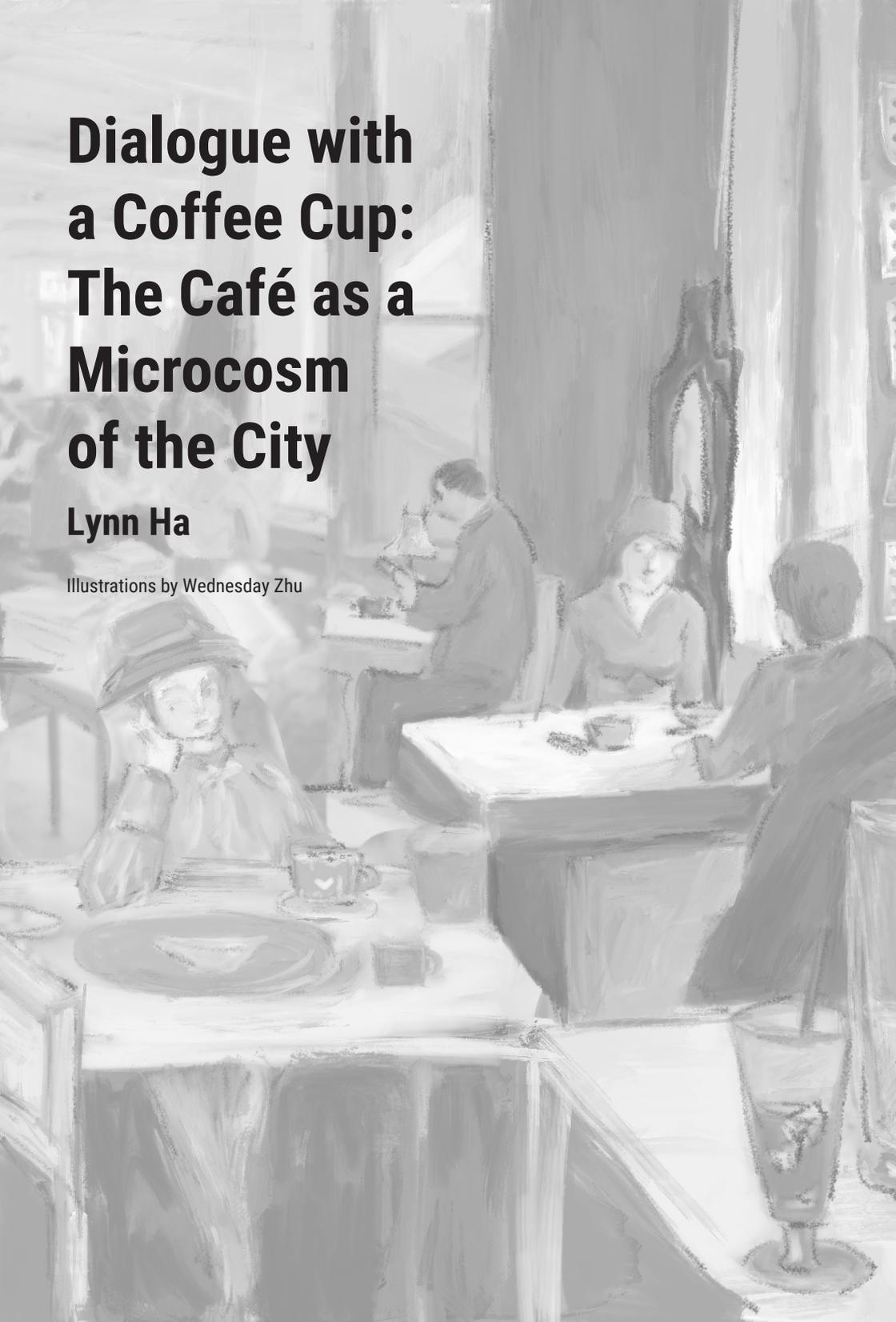




# Dialogue with a Coffee Cup: The Café as a Microcosm of the City

Lynn Ha

Illustrations by Wednesday Zhu



*Do you feel at home in the city?* The city is a vast space. The kind of space that feels so vast that it doesn't even feel like 'space.' Cities, for their inhabitants, often come across more as environment rather than place. Things surround you, and you reside in them. The environment of the city has its own rules, its own culture and ways of moving, and is always bustling with people, commodities, and some fragments of tamed nature. For some, it is an exciting surrounding, for others, unbearably excessive. What one smells in the air changes as one crosses a small street, and what one hears transforms and merges with every step one takes. An excess of sensory experience. You either like it or hate it. Are inspired by it or feel the desire to escape from it.

*Which city in which part of the world were you imagining, whilst reading the above? Where were you in the world, reading my words? Which smells passed below your nose, which colours roamed in front of your eyes, and which sounds did you almost hear, in your imagination?* Most likely, I would assume, you were thinking of the lively streets of London. You could have also been thinking of the big, famous cities of New York or Paris, or all those cities I've never set foot in, all those possibilities, unknown to me.

Moving from Korea to England at the age of fifteen was a significant decision in life, and dare I say rather dramatically, one which shaped my sense of self, how I perceive my identity, and even my body. Some decisions are made, and a few of those alter the course of your life, completely. They

change the way you think, and the way you perceive the world and yourself. My sense of self is totally different when I am in Seoul from when in London. But humans are apt at adjusting and evolving. People get used to turbulence, and resistance to change is never perpetual. Fortunately, having had the privilege to live back and forth in between the two countries for the past five years, I've grown to become a person who's very adaptable. I'm very quick at making myself at home in places that are foreign, providing myself with the things that I recognise.

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*Do you have a home in the city?* I walk out of the house — well, the student halls I live in — with a heavy tote on my shoulder. Street after street, away from the home, but approaching a space of comfort. As I enter, pushing through the glass door, a quiet but cheerful *hi* travels from the tip of my tongue and reaches the person at the counter, passing through the air, thick with the warmth and smell of coffee. Picking a table is of crucial importance, so my eyes scan the space with great seriousness. My favourite place in a café is one that has access to the whole view of the room, my back facing the wall and my eyes towards the space full of people, in their own small worlds. Such a scene always humbles me and puts everything into perspective. It's like the city's imitation of the solace that nature provides. It's the city's version of being in front of the large landscapes and seascapes, in which you realise you are only a little speck of dust in this universe, but in an encouraging way. I feel as if I am



in the middle of an endless story, away from my grip on the world, the narrative I hold. The guy sitting with a long face, a cool-looking girl with a hundred badges on her oversized denim jacket, old men in suits in an unhappy business conversation, people speaking in languages that I do not know, that I will *never* know. The city is full of people, and people are always full of stories. Stories to tell, to write, to see and to *be written, to be seen.*

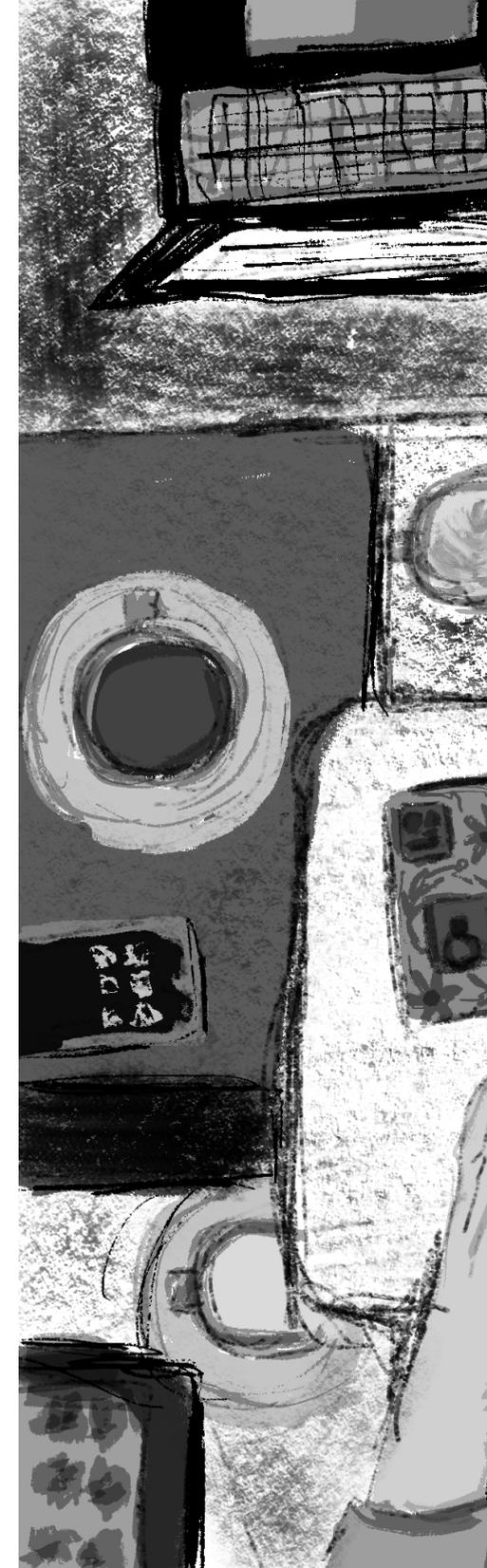
I've always preferred being around people. Perhaps it is the desire for connection, stemming from a sense of loneliness that comes from existing in a city that at times feels too far from my grasp, one that I would never get to call home. Cafés are spaces in which one can be fully immersed into their own world, reading a book with headphones on, as I do often. The music of my choice fills my ears, and just like that, *I am at home.* But it is also a shared space, inevitably, where the people could choose to listen to the same music. We sit together, and next to each other, we think about our own concerns, drinking different drinks from the different cups we hold, hot and cold.

Private lives are laid vulnerable at cafés, but also with the possibility to keep them to oneself. The contradictory, double nature of the café is what makes the space so peculiar and desirable. Complete strangers exist in the same confined space, recreating it into a comfortable one for themselves, within the limits of their table. Their tables become theirs, at least for the time being. The space of the café is a strange one to

which not only its stayers adapt, but also vice versa. Its visitors often determine the atmosphere of the space, whether that be cold and brisk, or warm and cosy. This flexible, ever-changing space is also one for communication, in which intriguing conversations take place, effortlessly heard from the other table. Privacy is almost absent in the café. The lives of other people are presented for you to watch and listen to. There is a degree of exhibitionist character to it. No one can be completely unaware of the fact that in cafés, their conversations and interactions are, in a way, performative. Yet, at the same time, the pleasant sense of solitude of the café is created by the stayers' nonchalance. In fact, we are merely *stayers* and *visitors*, not residents. We must leave as the space closes. We can always come back, and meet once more, but could also possibly never cross paths again. The fact that the time here will end, that feeling of impermanence. Enjoy the space, make yourself at home, *for now.*

\*

“나는 읽기 쉬운 마음이야 당신도 속  
훔고 가세요”\* Startled, I take out my headphones. It's another day, and I'm in front of another cup of coffee, this time at the Courtauld's beloved Frequency. The lyrics go on, in spite of my doubt — *perhaps it was my daydreaming?* Then again, “달랠 길 없는 외로운 마음 있지 머물다 가세요, 음” Ah. Against my skepticism, I am now certain that the song is *actually* being played, filling the space of the café. Encountering my mother language in this city is always unexpected,





especially because my relationship with the Korean language has become somewhat passive, hardly using it except when writing, reading, and talking with my family and close friends every now and then, the cold surface of the phone screen between us. I look around, but everyone else seems unaware of the change of language in the songs being played, still frowning whilst crouching over each of the screens they've been staring at for the past hour or two. But of course — it's London. Here, we are used to hearing five different languages walking along a very short street.

But the song continues, and as I look down at my table with a nostalgic smile, I dip back into the book I was reading, a Korean book that I carried with me when flying back from the break. Suddenly I am back, in my go-to café in Bundang, and through the window of my upper-floor seat, I can see the three-way intersection that I've passed numerous times in the city I grew up in. Being a big café with two floors, people stay for long, free from the worry of annoying the owner. Tutoring sessions take place in the corners, I can hear the rigid

math equations being spoken out loud. Kids come with their parents, listening to them reading a children's book, and getting distracted by the noise from a table nearby, where a couple is arguing. Some play board games and others have business meetings. Warm jazz is being played, and after all the people-watching my eyes travel back to the screen of my laptop, and I let my fingers dance on the keyboard. *Be careful, there is always a writer in any café.* In the warm, spacious cafés of Bundang and Seoul, I was often writing, not only about myself but about the stories that surround me. The sparkling possibilities of different perspectives are always too attractive for me to miss. But as I hear the "Hey mate, you alright?", I realise I am in London, it's still grey outside, and the song has almost finished, the soft sounds of the Korean consonants whispering towards the end.

\*

*But what do you do when you crave home at home? What do you do when you want to run away from everything? Where do you go when you want to be alone yet within the crowd?*

Feelings like those, for me, arise when I feel a sense of disconnection between myself and the city. Having lived between the two countries, most times I say, smiling with gratitude, that I have two homes, in England and in Korea. But there are moments in which nowhere is home, home is nowhere. I experience, on a daily basis, the everlasting feeling of discordance, which gives me amusement at times and isolation at others. The complexities of my relationship with my identity as a Korean person who partly grew up in the UK make me feel as if I am never grounded in *space*, a place, and instead as if drifting and floating above, just in between spaces of cities I come from and those I grew to belong to.

So once again, I lay myself open on the table, carrying all the things I need. Taking thing after thing out of the tote and laying them all on the table, in the right order that feels the most homely. The taste of coffee is one of the things I adore most about what one can enjoy from being alive, but I realise the space comes first when choosing one to go to. The café is an inviting space, a space of no questions and no doubts. For the

price of a flat white and a cinnamon roll, I buy the space that I can claim mine, undisturbed yet with a covert yearning for an unexpected interaction. I pay for the ownership of the tiny space, lasting for several hours at most. Dipping into the story I am following, held in the pages I hold, then being distracted by the stories that begin and end at every corner of the room, flowing from the surface of all the other tables. In this ephemeral space, home is trans-portable. The space of the café becomes an allegory for the possibilities of the city. For both the stark individualism and the infinite interactions and relationships that the city offers. In the city, home is where you are, and home is what you make of a space. In this abundance of stories, your own becomes the one you reside in. The café is, in fact, a space for stories and for the self. If ever bored or found spiralling in the latter, you can always travel in and out of the former and get lost, leave and return to yourself. So yes, long story short, I would love a cup of coffee.

\* From 주저하는 연인들을 위해 (*Lovers Who Hesitate*), 잔나비 (Jannabi)



Illustrations by Sacha Lewis



# In My Own Company

Abigail Spencer

Illustrations by Sasha Dunn

I woke up early, alone in my Airbnb in a village near Perugia's airport. Unlike the stray tears of exhausted loneliness the night before, the ones I was now experiencing were triumphant, and intentional. The buzz and chirps of insects brought the sun with them, dragging it up from its orbit to soak the dry earth in its warmth. A sense of pride at my own independence pushed me through the unchoreographed movements of the morning: a single serve moka pot coffee and a phone call to book a taxi, entirely spoken in somewhat stumpled Italian. Perugia was my first stop in a month of solo travel and work; a city to explore the feeling and emotional experience of its 'chartered streets.' Compiling thoughts from both a handwritten journal

and later reflections on travelling alone through a foreign country, I want to address how this month, specifically the early days, shaped my attitude to solitude in cities and the patterns of my internal dialogue.

My taxi ride led me through fields hit by morning light, before winding up increasingly higher roads that skirted the edge of hills beyond the terracotta-roofed houses and buildings dotting the near hillside, were fields upon fields of olive trees where small villages and church spires dotted sparsely across the scene. The furthest Umbrian Mountain sides were thickly forested with pine trees and conifers. It was the sort

of landscape often found in the lines of a classic novel; entire portions of the world were hidden in ravines and under evergreen canopies. I was dropped off outside the bus station where I would catch a coach to San Sepolcro that evening. Setting off to explore the city, I first found myself met with an unexpected open air escalator towards the pedestrian city centre. The sudden confrontation with reflective, metallic engineering almost exclusively reserved for shopping centres and airports jarred with the warm stone and tiles of the old buildings around me. This juxtaposition in the city's structure was succeeded by walking as a means of time travel; the fastest way to the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, and hopefully also towards some coffee, was underground.

While I had read about the *Rocca Paolina* before travelling to Perugia, I hadn't seen any photos and wasn't quite prepared for what the remains of the underground city complex would entail. Commissioned after the Salt War by Pope Paul III c.1540, the only remaining structures of the *Rocca Paolina* are the ones of the Papal Palace. The mistake here is to assume the word 'remains' means little to be seen, or that what has survived will require some function of the imagination to be awed by its ruined glory. The stone structures and corridors arch magnificently far over your head, rooms are mostly safe to go in, and open to the public just off the main corridors which just casually happen to function as pedestrian thoroughfares through the city like regular paved streets. Still rather early in the morning, I was fortunate to enjoy a peaceful walk in quietude, the echoes of my own footsteps and locals carrying groceries were the only sounds that accompanied me through the tunnels. As an agnostic, somewhat spiritual person I find the

Catholic churches of Italy both soothing and mystifying, the vaulted ceilings of the *Rocca Paolina* and the cleverly hidden windows letting daylight in affected me similarly. What should have been claustrophobic somehow became cathartic and comforting, the architecture and my focus upon it like a silent mantra for meditative introspection.

Like many artistic personalities, I have always been prone to a melancholic internal dialogue; my temperament when alone tends to dwell on grand unanswerable and emotional nuances which can often feel overwhelming. By travelling abroad to visit these imposing historic places on my own, it became easier to be comfortable with these sorts of thoughts and dialogues. When we make a choice to do something alone the staggering loneliness of living in a city can be counteracted and we learn to accept our own company as freedom. When I re-emerged from the tunnels of the *Rocca Paolina* into blinding sunlight, I witnessed the reasons I had

climbed up the many stairs and escalators: the city at 9am was humming to life. The street, coloured in tones of burnt sienna and warm beige, was scattered with cafés and shops with shuttered windows above, it reminded me strongly of vintage film sets like *Roman Holiday*. In the spirit of Audrey Hepburn and romanticising my own company I sat at a metal table on the side of the road and ordered an apricot stuffed croissant with a cappuccino. There's something very peaceful in certain kinds of isolation, the friendly (if probably stilted) conversation I had with the barista complimented by the sunny silence and the solemn musing that it was likely I alone on that quiet street was thinking in English. To be alone took on new meanings, freeing myself to feel any and all emotions of small or grand scale without the worries of regulating their intensity for the sake of being good company for others. The sort of awe-filled thoughts that can terrify were liberated, and without the pressure of 'happiness' I found a balanced contentment



under the glowing sunlight of Umbrian summer.

The main street of Perugia is the Corso Vanucci, lined with cafés and shops. The bustling thoroughfare becomes a vibrant soul of the city; to walk along it was to resist the static circuitous routes of anxieties we so often foster through our monotonous city commutes. At the end of the street, the Piazza Grande is home to the Palazzo dei Priori and other Mediaeval buildings with later Renaissance alterations, including the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria. Inside the gallery I was particularly interested in the *Polyptych of St. Anthony* (c.1470) by Piero della Francesca, its single vanishing point in the annunciation panel at the top drawing the eye down an illusionistic corridor. The holy spirit is represented as a dove with emanating gilded rays which is mirrored by the haloes of the angel and Virgin annunciate. The middle and lower oil panels depict the virgin and child, flanked by panels of saints and above narrative depictions of their stories:

Saints John the Baptist and Anthony, and Saints Francis and Elizabeth of Hungary. A week later I viewed the *Polyptych of the Misericordia* (1445-62) in Sansepolcro and marvelled at the striking difference, the *Misericordia* altarpiece comparatively eschewed scale and perspective, with gilded backgrounds and much more stylised figures. In addition to this painting, I was also amazed by the many Mediaeval and early Renaissance wooden crucifix sculptures, most once hanging in church altars and apses, as well as in the decorative goldsmiths works. Although it was still predominantly a gallery of paintings, the spattering of decorative arts and objects more commonly found in museums, especially in the earlier rooms of the chronological hang, was

a refreshing alteration to the curation of other collections from similar time periods.

Outside the palazzo housing the gallery was the magnificent cast fountain of the Fontana Maggiore which had a bronze centre and stone carving sur-

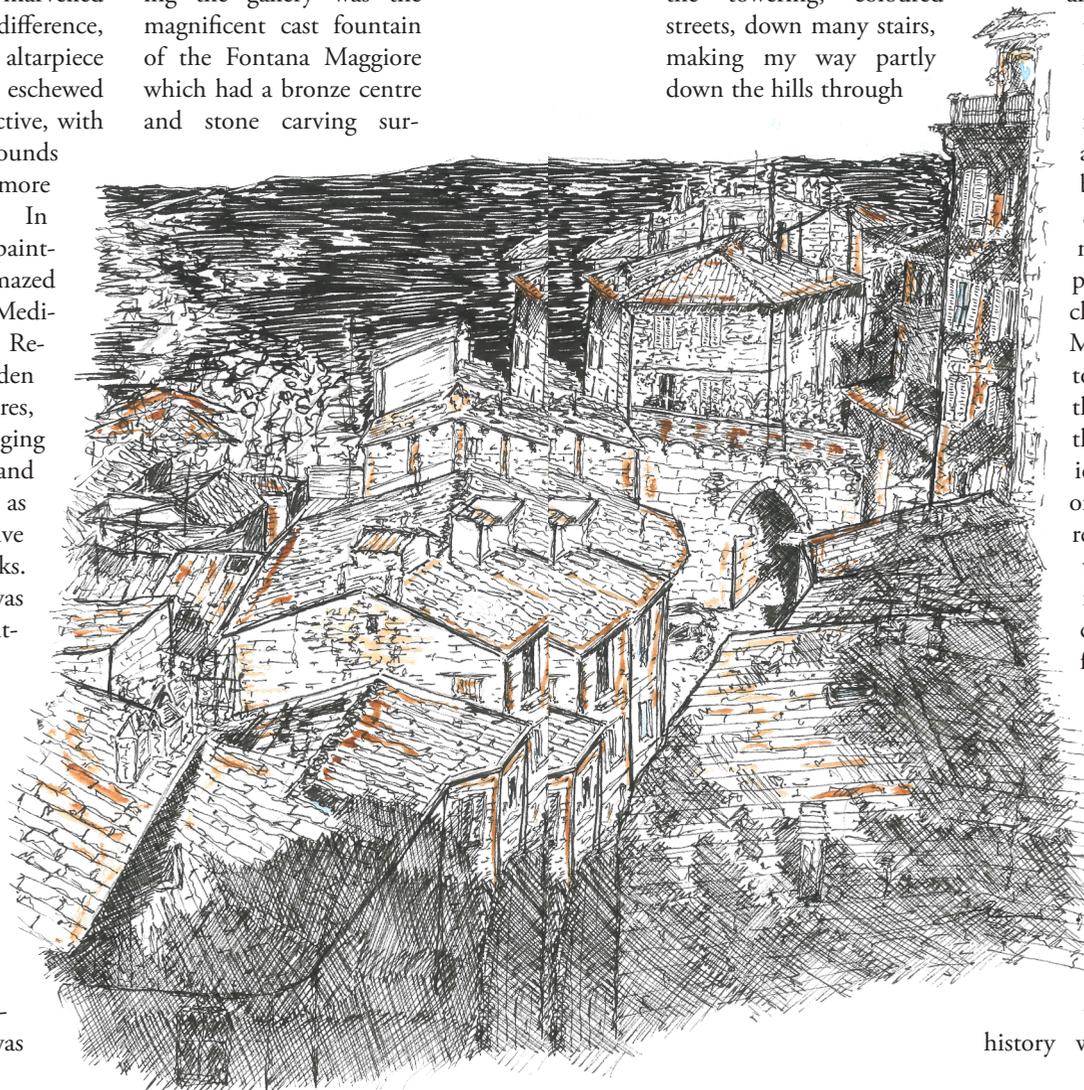
round, depicting the Perugian symbols of a gryphon and lion amongst other ornate bas reliefs. After eating lunch on the Corso Vanucci, I walked through the towering, coloured streets, down many stairs, making my way partly down the hills through

the Rocca Paolina towards the Abbazia di San Pietro, a Benedictine monastery with a highly decorated church. Every surface and object were works of art, from 10th century crypt paintings, completed at the initial founding of the abbey, to works by artists such as Sassoferrato. The monastic complex had peaceful cloisters and a Mediaeval Garden to complement the grand scale of the church's gothic interior. Much of the abbey was rebuilt in 1463, with just the foundations and crypt retained from its original early mediaeval structure.

Walking through the gallery, churches, and the streets of Perugia highlighted the layers of history which build up

the structure of the city and its identity. From the Etruscan city walls to the underground Papal fortress to the gothic palaces Perugia expresses the history of a landlocked Umbrian city in its every edifice.

There is so much to see in the world that we miss out on in waiting for someone to go with us, in being alone we get to put ourselves first and in the historic art that we find we can heal the gaps in our psyche. While cities can be harsh, towering places of isolation, by taking comfort in our own footsteps we can walk through crowded or quiet streets in blissful solitude and reflection. Breathing the air for ourselves instead of filling our lungs with fear; feeling the immense and vibrant truth that we are free to choose what we do with our time. At the intersection of freedom and loneliness magnified by the city, you can find a choice, an intentionality which determines which way you fall, whether the sound of your own heartbeat will be gunfire or a metronome setting life to a certain, peaceful rhythm.





# Streets in the Sky: The Park Hill Estate Through the Ages

**Tabitha Stratton**

Left: Aerial view of Park Hill, 1961. Image: Heritage Images/Getty Images

Across the UK, modernist council estates are being faced with demolition or regeneration. In Sheffield, the company Urban Splash have been redeveloping the Park Hill estate since 2007. As the largest listed building in Europe, Park Hill is a landmark in the history of council housing but was left abandoned for decades. Urban Splash promise a new and exciting era for the flats. Their critics see a process of class cleansing through gentrification. In this article, I explore the history of Park Hill and what the redevelopment means for its future.

Park Hill is famous for its 'streets in the sky,' designed during the late 1950s by architects J.L. Womersley, Ivor Smith, and Jack Lynn. Critics often describe the architects as utopians, but their approach was grounded in real problems faced by those who lived in the Park Hill area. Before the estate was built, residents lived in back-to-back terraces which were deemed unfit for human habitation. In 1955, Sheffield City Council decided to rehouse the entire

neighbourhood by replacing the existing development with council housing. The Park Hill estate aimed to improve living conditions while retaining the existing sense of community. After observing how the terraced streets provided chance encounters between neighbours, the architects integrated shared decking into the new estate. These walkways provided some of the main benefits of conventional streets without the dangers associated with traffic. Neighbours could socialise on the walkways and a trolley could deliver bread and milk to each apartment. Rather than a utopian ideal, the architects viewed the estate as an improved version of the existing community. They named the walkways after the old streets and housed original neighbours next to each other. When Park Hill was complete, it provided homes for up to 3000 people: more than those displaced by the slum clearance programme.

Park Hill's success throughout the 1960s is often treated in isolation from the fall

of the estate during the 1980s, but tensions already existed throughout its early period. In many cases, official surveys designed to measure Park Hill's success reveal less about tenant satisfaction than the attitudes of those conducting the research. Researchers seemed confused when interviewing residents, concluding that 'Sheffield people' tended to voice 'subjective impressions and random comments.' This lack of understanding sometimes gave rise to dehumanising advice for tackling potential problems on the estate. For example, consider this quote from the 1966 Occupier Reaction Study:

*It is ... disturbing to consider the implications of recent work among cats, and separately mice, where increasing density ... causes normal well behaved animals to become careless in their grooming and some of the mothers to eat their young. Finally, the stress leads either to total withdrawal or extreme aggression. Men are not mice but there may well be a lesson here for our sociologists.*

Because the researchers misunderstood the actual needs of tenants, the information they generated may have contributed to Park Hill's later problems.

By the 1980s, Park Hill's social reputation and physical integrity were both deteriorating as Sheffield entered a period of economic decline. The local steel industry collapsed, and a sixth of the workforce lost their jobs. Instead of addressing these issues, press coverage about Park Hill mostly

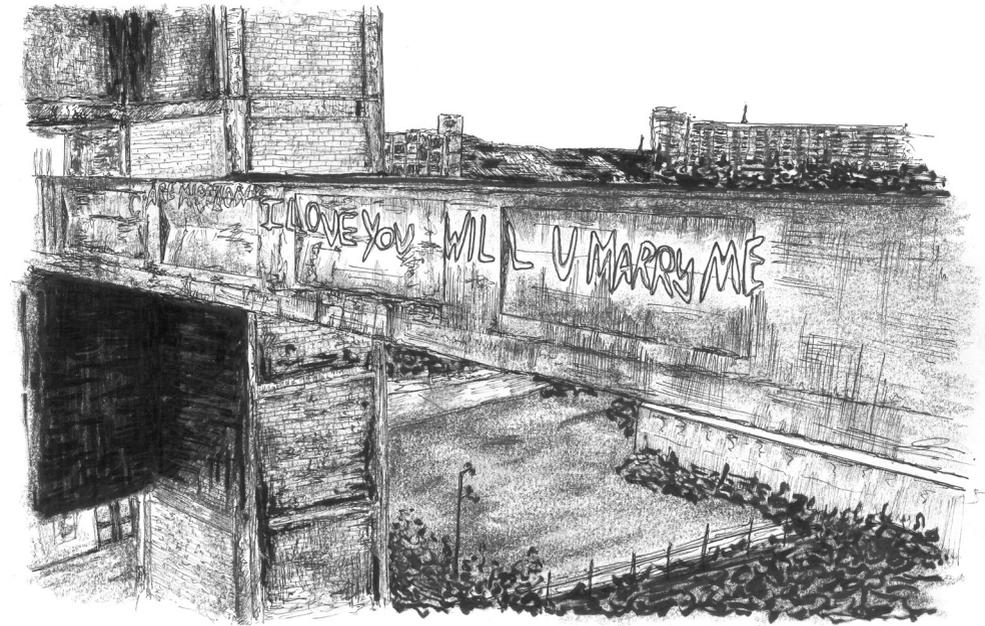
blamed its modernist architecture for making it a dangerous place to live. Journalists reimagined the 'streets in the sky' as dark alleyways concealing criminal activity. This instilled locals with a sense of fear around the estate, making Park Hill a highly undesirable place to live or even to walk through. By the 1990s, it was abandoned and derelict, symbolising social decay where it had once stood for working-class community. Stripped of its positive associations, its sprawling, brutalist design was thrown into relief and people argued for its demolition. The council knocked down most of Park Hill Part 2, the higher-rise Hyde Park estate built close to the original structure. However, the original flats were saved from demolition in 1998, when English Heritage listed the estate at Grade II\*. This decision was ridiculed in the press, as headlines called the estate an "eyesore" and even "the ugliest building in Europe." With Park Hill protected from demolition, how could the council soften these polarising responses? Ironically, the first step towards cleaning up the estate's reputation involved a piece of graffiti.

In 2001, Jason Lowe entered the abandoned estate to spray paint the words "CLARE MIDDLETON I LOVE YOU WILL U MARRY ME" onto the side of a bridge on the 13th floor. He chose the location so that his girlfriend could see it from across the city, but its placement also made it notorious among the public. This unconventional way of proposing resonated with local people, who began to speculate about the relationship. Rumours spread to solve the mystery behind the

message and Park Hill's 'I love you' bridge became an iconic part of the city. When Urban Splash bought Park Hill from the council, they recognised that the graffiti's popularity could be used to market their regeneration project. If they framed the message strategically, they could minimise

more fashionable and profitable era.

While the message grew in prominence, the people behind the graffiti remained anonymous until 2011. Hoping to uncover a light-hearted love story, a BBC documentary revealed the conflicting interests sur-



the negative connotations of graffiti while fostering Park Hill's growing cult appeal. They overlaid the writing with neon lights to integrate it into the regeneration scheme and make it visible from across the city at night. Significantly, they did not overlay Clare Middleton's name, which removed the message from its original function and made it a suitable marketing slogan for the renovated flats. The modified version has since featured on billboards and merchandise, marking the beginning of Park Hill's

rounding the graffiti and its use. Although Jason and Clare got engaged after the proposal, social services advised them to call off the marriage. In 2007, aged only 30, Clare Middleton died of cancer. Her family said that Clare was proud of the graffiti's popularity, but they wished the message would be removed. For them, the bridge is a constant reminder both of Clare's death and of a difficult period in her life. Jason also faced difficulties in communicating with Urban Splash. He opposed the way

that the company repurposed the graffiti. Because he wrote the message specifically for Clare, Jason was disappointed that Urban Splash removed her name in the neon lighting. While the company continued to profit from repurposing Jason's message, he has struggled for recognition. After becoming homeless in 2014, he asked the company for a flat in Park Hill. They did not respond.

More recently, the graffiti generated more controversy around the relationship between regeneration and public heritage. During the COVID-19 lockdown, Urban Splash removed the message without any prior notice. Only after public outcry and press coverage did the company explain that the paint would be reinstated once maintenance work was complete. For many people, the lack of communication served as a reminder that regeneration only preserves heritage to the extent that it is profitable. In reapplying the paint to the bridge, the company made the writing clean and bright, and erased Clare Middleton's name entirely. Today, the message is fully separated from its original function.

Urban Splash took a similarly dramatic approach to regenerating the building itself during Phase 1. To make Park Hill desirable, or in their words, to "make it a proper place," the company needed to completely overhaul its reputation. Park Hill's poor reputation allowed Urban Splash to intervene as heavily as they liked. Most people saw Park Hill as an ugly blot on the horizon which could only be improved, and those more sympathetic to its character were

generally willing to accept regeneration as a better alternative to further neglect. The most effective way for the company to announce its role in regeneration was to start with the most visible side of the structure. Facing towards the city centre from above the railway station, this side forms one of the first impressions of Sheffield for visitors by train. The company knocked out the internal structure, leaving only the original concrete frame. Within the frame, old brick panels were replaced by windows, while the original windows were replaced with brightly coloured cladding. Effectively, this inverted the original layout of walls and windows to signal a new era for the estate.

Urban Splash have not only reversed the stylistic choices of the architects, but also the purpose of the building. During the 1960s, Park Hill contained shops and services to develop the estate into a self-contained community. In contrast, the regeneration aims to attract more people into the area to make Park Hill into a new quarter for the city centre: meaning more commercial space and fewer residential flats. Where the original Park Hill provided 996 council flats, the redeveloped building will contain 874 flats in total with just 200 being social housing. Although Urban Splash describe the story of Park Hill as "rise, fall and resurrection," the regeneration project pursues different goals to the original development. Once designed to provide council housing for the local community, Park Hill demonstrates how regeneration can vastly alter what a building means, and how it is used.



Residents on the streets of Hyde Park Estate in 1988, shortly before its demolition. Image: Bill Stephenson

Illustration by Sasha Dunn

# Carnaby Freaks (An Urban Meditation)

Carys Maloney

Illustration by Sacha Lewis

And with each year passing  
(One here, another now)  
I once believed myself to be moving  
Further, away from you, yet this wasn't true  
I grew, I grew — I circle home. I knew  
Little of the nature of Time, I dipped  
My fringes in the puzzles of Rhyme, or there  
Where perplexing patterns are stitched.

Tell me, there's no need.  
It's by paradox alone that we succeed —  
The opposite approach shall work the most.  
There are many things, only Time can teach  
I want to know everything — sitting alone  
On Carnaby Street, pervaded by gentrification  
Sweeping the nation, Capitalist Feats — I search  
The branded land, filled with an ugly nostalgia.  
I won't find you here, nor will I find the past:  
It's gone and dead, bar The Stones Store up ahead.

Yet I'm filled with optimism for the future.  
A future to fight for, despite  
Everything against it. I think  
Being human can be likened to one word:  
Hope. And when Hope is forsaken,  
Hell reigns in the heads of humanity.  
I strive to mould my disparity  
Into one harmonious whole,  
Ever-giving, ever-bold, at least  
It's a kind of bringing together —  
I am as Eros to my flickering inclinations.

We the people  
(One here, others now) passing  
Here in Carnaby, well  
We continue to live as best we can.  
I fill my head with world literature and  
Dwell, throw my soft glance upon  
The art of the ages, in Silence, mourning  
Yet giving new life. I tread the galleries as such:  
Furtive funerals in each stare.  
Eulogies resounding in my mind's eye,  
As the children laugh  
And turn the corner.



# Urban Exoticism

Alia Tsagkari

Illustration by Zoe Williams



‘Urban exoticism’ in an obviously expanded sense circumscribes a perception of the metropolitan space that values fragments, unexpected juxtapositions, and elements obscured by everyday experience. Revealing the mystery beneath the apparently banal surfaces of the modern city, it provokes the emergence of extraordinary realities drawn from the realms of the exotic, the erotic, and the unconscious.

The organic sensuality of Athens’ wet market – juxtaposed with architectural remnants of underlying depravity and imbued with the mystical qualities of the neglected ancient relics – render the Athenian cityscape a visual manifestation of urban exoticism, for Athens is not entirely desanctified. No doubt, a certain theoretical and practical desanctification has occurred in the form of gentrification. However, it may still have not reached the point of the strictly regimented Western city. One could say, by way of roughly retracing the history of space in Greece, that there is still a hierarchic ensemble of spaces: open places and obscured places;

gentrified places and hidden, neglected places; unified, homogeneous places and fragmented places of Otherness.

The latter exist as counter-sites; as spaces within spaces that, bearing the traces of their oriental, mystical, and licentious past, constitute what I shall call, by way of reference to the Foucauldian term, ‘heterotopias of exoticism.’ They are marginalised places that, in relation to their human and architectural environment, are being perceived as foreign, strange, exotic. Under this prism, urban exoticism draws upon and deconstructs the bewildering array of ideas that harbour within its cultural progenitor; the exoticism of the nineteenth century. Set in specific cultural and spatial circumstances, it recontextualises the original phenomenon in the modern metropolis. More precisely, it turns to the urban fabric of Athens to trace and anatomise the exotic Other, which is identified with a defamiliarised cultural reality that pervades the familiar topography of the Western city.

# You're from Singapore? What's it like?

**Kylin Lew**

Illustration by Isabella Taleghani

I have never been more aware of my life in Singapore than I am now, after I have moved out of it. The differences between the memories of my adolescence and the experiences of my present life in London are stark, and they have naturally fostered my sensitivity to the experiential qualities of my double life between these two cities.

In my first year here I often thought about how different the streets looked, and how different it felt to walk on them. Few buildings in Singapore are as old as the ones in London, and I had never seen a horse in Singapore, let alone one on the street. I hardly walked anywhere in Singapore either, because it would often be too hot and humid to do so. The sounds on the street were different too: the sirens, more piercing than they had to be, and the chatter of people walking by, speaking in accents different to what I was used to. The public spaces are also organised differently, and of all places I missed, it was the lack of malls in central London that took me by sur-

prise: back home there could even be a few in every neighbourhood – imagine a mall next to every tube stop! I had anticipated the obvious differences, but the many differences in the experiential qualities of the two cities were what really struck me. The air felt different on my skin and in my nose, the beliefs and habits of people I met were strange and new, I could not find anything that tasted like home, and everything combined felt totally alien. It was difficult to put this into words; what exactly did I miss? What is different about London that made it so strange? How do I explain this to friends at home?

In conversation with friends who have never been to Singapore, these differences arise too, albeit in a much different manner. To those who have only heard of Singapore and seen it online, it might look a lot like the new rain vortex waterfall in one of the airport terminals, high fines for all sorts of small offences, skyscrapers overlooking the river, high GDP, and a chewing gum-less

existence. Of course, for someone who has lived in it all my life, the Singapore I have in mind looks very different to me than it does in ads and finance newspapers. In my homesickness, I think often about my two cats, falling asleep to the roar of the monsoon rain, and the aunty at the neighbourhood bakery who recognises me because she has seen me come and go since I could walk. To me, what Singapore has that London does not is not the indoor waterfall that gets reposted around Instagram or the high tax on buying cars. It is instead the fruits I miss that I cannot even find in London's Chinatown, the rain trees, and the sweat that adheres shirt to skin after a brief walk outdoors. I was familiar, of course, with the cityscape and the iconic downtown skyline: walking around the area in the evenings I often replicated on my own Instagram stories the same photos that tourism advertisements would use. Yet, that is not how my country primarily appears to me, and neither are these images the defining differences for me between Singapore and elsewhere.

Arriving home after my first year away, I re-learned the realities of living under the glare of the equatorial sun, the feeling of pavement dirt between my feet and my slippers, and the commute from home to town, where I met many of my friends. In my first few days home I was awoken by the sound of birds whose absence in London I had not noticed, and at night I struggled to fall asleep to the whirl of the fan and the chirp of crickets when I had never struggled with these before. My experience of moving about in Singapore is wrapped up

in all of these small joys and discomforts, and many other feelings I could not put into words.

Surely the city must look like more than Google Images can suggest! I have never known it to be the dystopian urban jungle that others might imagine. What then makes a city? In my self-consciousness as I explained life in Singapore to my friends in London, I also wondered: how accurate is my version of Singapore?

In my search for other opinions I found Jerrine Tan's article *The Fantasy and the Cyberpunk Futurism of Singapore* in WIRED magazine. She grapples with Singapore's reputation as a garden city, 'brand spanking new' buildings, and the meaninglessness of it all. She is haunted by the nonchalant bulldozing of our past — her childhood — as we build into the future. This version of the country, one that is sold to the rest of the world, is sparkingly empty. What can we replace this unreliable image of the city with? Even if I were to flesh out my memories it would not be enough — there is more than one Singapore. To be exact, there are 5.5 million Singaporeans, one for everyone living on the island, and even more, if we count those who flit in and out for work or leisure.

This idea of the multiplicity of a single space has become increasingly apparent to me as I read Teo Yeo Yenn's *This is What Inequality Looks Like*, an anthology of essays on inequality in Singapore. Teo, a Singaporean professor in sociology, wrote about her fieldwork, in which she interviewed low

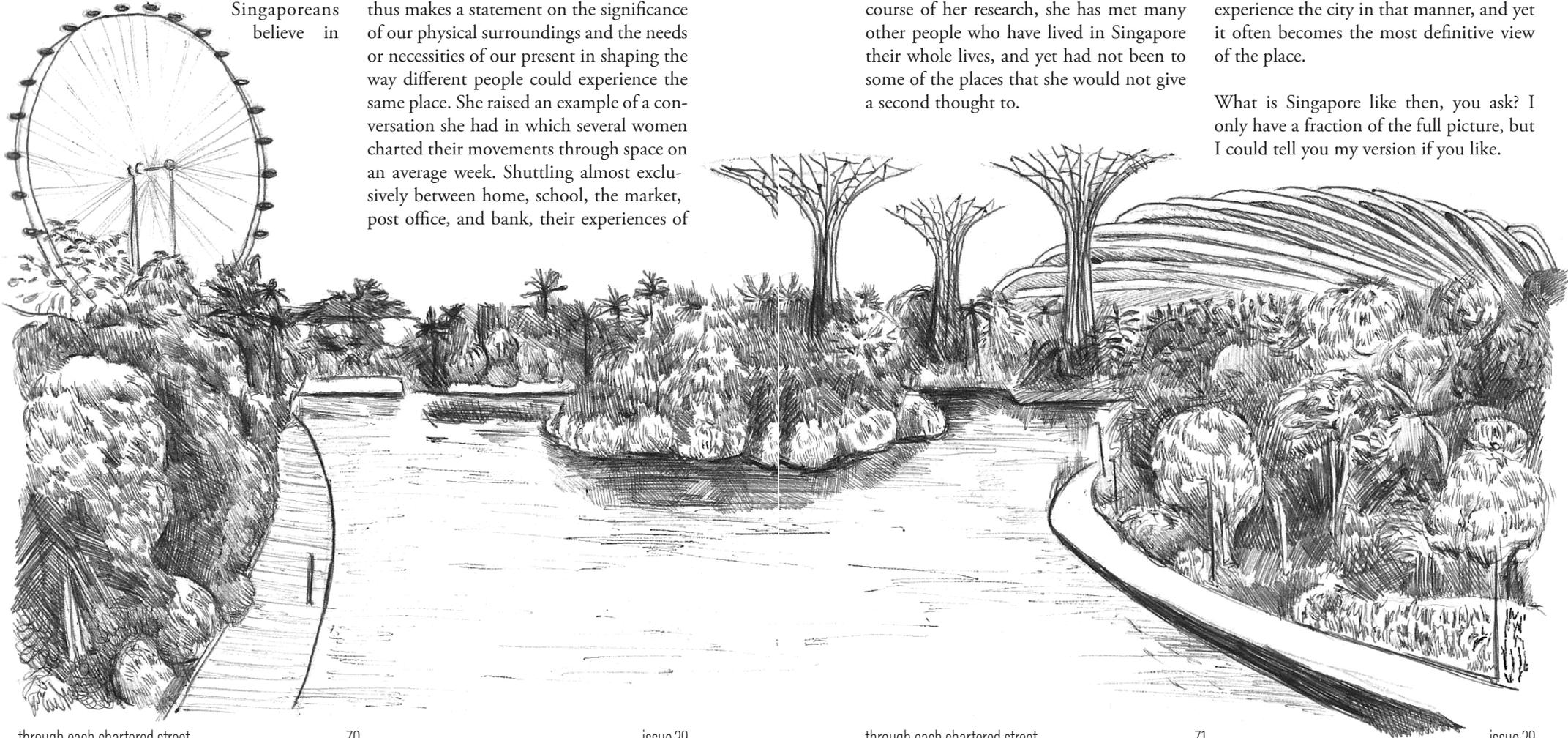
income families on their lived experiences. She makes several compelling points: to many average Singaporeans, poverty is invisible, because those living in poverty are invisible. Rental flats for people in this socioeconomic class look remarkably similar from the outside to flats that most other Singaporeans live in, and their lives within them are largely sheltered from the public eye. The rags to riches narrative of progress that most Singaporeans believe in

also gives comfort to those who have succeeded by society's standards, and simultaneously leaves those who have not in the past. This is both mental and tangible: they feel left behind, and also appear to live in a way that for most other people belonged to the past. Teo comments on a sense of nostalgia she got from visiting these families; the way they live in the present reminded her of the way her grandparents used to live in the 1980s, in semi-rural Malaysia. She thus makes a statement on the significance of our physical surroundings and the needs or necessities of our present in shaping the way different people could experience the same place. She raised an example of a conversation she had in which several women charted their movements through space on an average week. Shuttling almost exclusively between home, school, the market, post office, and bank, their experiences of

space in Singapore was limited to a radius of no more than a few kilometres. This was not because of a lack of curiosity for the rest of the city, but practical concerns of work and raising children, which were difficult to step away from. To many other Singaporeans, the island is woefully small and unexciting, with never enough new things to do on the weekend. Yet, to those Teo interviewed, the island was a large unexplored space. She mentions that over the course of her research, she has met many other people who have lived in Singapore their whole lives, and yet had not been to some of the places that she would not give a second thought to.

As it turns out, the 'urban experience' is located within the individual, and the individual's experience is often influenced by factors outside their control, socioeconomic or otherwise. What this means, then, is that there is no such thing as the urban experience, because there is no homogenous conception of the city. Most deceiving of all is the image of the city that has been plastered onto a tourism ad, because no one, not even the tourist, gets to experience the city in that manner, and yet it often becomes the most definitive view of the place.

What is Singapore like then, you ask? I only have a fraction of the full picture, but I could tell you my version if you like.



# Museum of Memories

Beatrice Stankeviciute



Illustration by Zoe Williams

I wander through the city like a long-lost child,  
Stepped out from a painting

Picking up words and smiles, exchanged hellos and outraged shouts,  
Storing all away in my jeans' pockets, frilled against the edges.  
With each step weaving them into stories,  
Those told and those to be.

People met, strangers made friends,  
Seconds turned minutes; minutes turned hours.  
I'm a collector, filling up a jar full of memories  
Like pennies clinking against the porcelain.

The night, my muse  
So full of feeling spilled into ink,  
Soaking paper like rain under the blanket of darkness and moonlight,  
*A sound, a puzzle.*

I grabbed your hand to talk about life  
And walk along the silent shores of concrete and marble,  
Paths intertwined, winking, dancing shadows.  
A game of hide and seek, shall we play?

Such a sweet, sweet taste, that eternal feeling,  
With a dash of cinnamon from a morning pastry  
To wash away the cold bitterness of fleeting goodbyes.

*I cherish, I adore*  
Those conversations, warming my heart,  
The smell of coffee, reaching my lungs

As I enter through the doorstep, stuck somewhere  
Between the familiar and unknown places,

*Usually, frequently, always.*



# Work in Progress

## Alma Kowalsky-Refievna

When I left my hometown to come live in England, my area was about to undergo a major rejuvenation project. I have never been back and I do not want to: the idea of getting lost where I was born frightens me. Using Google Maps, I had a look and my favourite restaurant is closed.

There is always a gap between our idea of a place and the reality of it. Our mental map of the world is not of the present moment but only what we remember of locations as we last left them. Travelling in your mind is travelling in time. My hometown: 2013. My grandma's old house: 2007. My room: this morning, 2023.

While you are not somewhere, who knows how things are changing. Maybe someone robbed your house while you were away. Maybe people moved out and you have new neighbours. Maybe someone vandalised your bus stop. But the image in your brain is of the past.

Everywhere around you is always evolving or decaying, just at different rates. Nothing ever stays exactly as it was. What is the limit when one place can no longer be considered the same? Can London thousands of years ago be considered London? Is the home you return to the same home? Or is there no coming back?

What would a Londoner from the days before the 1666 Great Fire think of the city now? What will it be like in the future? I heard that in the 1990s, Tottenham Court Road was full of electronics shops; now it's more vape and American shops that the mayor suspects of being money laundering fronts. Stores close and open, walls are graffitied, Victorian pipes need replacing and the streets abound within construction works.

Rather than a static idea of 'London,' I wanted to record all those little parts that do not endure but show that the city is living and dying everyday.



# The City that Sleeps: A Brief History of the City of London

Helen Warner

Illustration by Amy Brand

I can't imagine anything worse than the City of London on a weekday. The streets stretching from Liverpool Street Station down to Fenchurch Street and London Bridge are dominated by men in suits rushing between coffee shops and meetings or, at the end of the day, between the office and the station. Like the skyscrapers which line the streets, they are an imposing presence. At the weekends though, it's a different story. The sense of peace here on the weekends is the direct inverse of weekdays; it feels like stepping into a void. The silence of the City is more an energy than a reality - it is still London after all,

and there are almost always the sounds of construction as some new skyscraper ascends to outcompete the others, but they fade to the comforting hum of background noise.

Wandering the City on a Saturday morning feels like being the only person in the world. Though obviously there is life and activity, the void left by the workers is palpable. Every coffee shop is dark and the underpopulated streets invite you into hidden alleyways and squares, new secret spaces always discoverable. Being in amongst the skyscrapers is comforting in a way which always surprises me, given that as a child I

was terrified of these same buildings which appeared to cave in on me as I looked up at them. I wonder if this is how the tiny churches feel when increasingly enormous monuments of glass are constructed around them. The sense of nostalgia in the City isn't just my own, it is a result of the history which hasn't stopped being written since well before the Romans arrived. It is written into every alleyway, every dwarfed church standing its ground valiantly against the march of modernisation, every square which has seen so many lives.

Unlike Canary Wharf, London's other major busi-



View of Church of St. Ethelburga within Bishopsgate, London, photographed by Helen Warner, 2023.

ness district, the Liverpool Street area has built up around the foundations of a City which has been there for centuries. This history is visible everywhere you turn; from the Corinthian columns of the Royal Exchange and its neighbour the Bank of England, to one of the few surviving medieval churches in London, the tiny Church of St. Ethelburga, flanked by two towering office blocks. The life of this church alone is a testament to the history to which the City has borne witness; first recorded in the year 1250, it was rebuilt in the fifteenth century and minor changes continued to be made until it suffered bomb damage in the Blitz. It was restored in 1953, only to be half destroyed by an IRA bomb which exploded only metres away. When demolition rather than restoration was proposed, there was public outcry, so St. Ethelburga's was rebuilt to its original plan.

The history of the City is long and complex, some of the earliest traces remaining are in the Roman city walls. Built circa 200

AD to protect Londinium, parts of these defensive structures can still be seen around Ludgate Hill, Tower Hill, and Barbican. They have been fortified in almost every century since, including in the fifteenth century when they were a key defence during the Wars of the Roses. These traces of the area's history, now in conversation with the imposing presence of capitalist structures, are what lends such a feeling of nostalgia to the streets. The monument, for example, built between 1671 and 1677, which commemorates the devastation of the Great Fire of 1666, is now completely invisible until you happen upon it, drowned by the skyscrapers and other office buildings which flank it. At the time of its building, it would have been one of the tallest structures on London's skyline. Now it provides an interim between the ground and the top of the skyscrapers around it. My sole memory from climbing its 311 steps to the viewing platform as a child is watching my brother, only a toddler at the time, chase pigeons around the square

below. That surveyor's view is something we've lost in the modern trend to ascend skyscrapers instead, from the top of which pedestrians are barely visible at all. Yes, from the top of these buildings you can see as far out to the horizon as your eyesight will allow - but it is an entirely flattened and homogenised view, fundamentally lacking in personality. The brief climb to the top of the monument is, in my view, much richer.

It would be negligent to discuss the architectural and spatial richness of this area of the City without acknowledging the plans, released earlier this month, to dramatically redevelop Liverpool Street Station, the terminal which serves the City by bringing in commuters from across Essex, Suffolk, and Cambridgeshire. Liverpool Street Station was the last major London terminus to be built by the Victorians, so unlike many other stations elsewhere in London, provisions were made to replace and improve the slums and to relocate the people within them who were displaced by its con-

struction, adding to the architectural and social history of the area. These plans have already been opposed more vehemently than any other station modernisation project in recent history, though multiple other London terminals have undergone transformations in the last twenty years.

The reason for this opposition speaks volumes about the strong nostalgic identi-

ty of the City of London. It's alleyways, churches, and historic buildings, whether Roman or Victorian, add up to a place which, I would argue, is one of the richest in terms of its concentration of important architecture in not just London but the whole country. Though redevelopment and modernisation brought us the skyscrapers which now lend nostalgia to the older architecture, I agree it would be wrong

to lump another on top of such an icon of the modern history of the City of London, and one which has served it so loyally, as Liverpool Street Station has. Nevertheless, I believe the area and its buildings can more than stand their ground; no matter the ratio of old to new, the history which is wound into every street, alleyway, and building won't be obliterated, only continue to be written.



# Known and Strange Things: In Search of Flowers

Sarah Rodriguez

Illustration by Kiera Modi

Few small indulgences make such a difference in one's day-to-day life as a vase full of fresh flowers.

Sometimes, the addition of a bouquet of lilies, lilacs, or peonies to the kitchen table can engender just the sense of possibility needed to affirm the day, some flash of genuine delight. A table without flowers is like an orchestra without piccolos. Their inclusion is superfluous, yet a symptom of a certain individual or cultural aliveness. So, when the desire springs up in me to hit the streets of London and purchase a bouquet, I give in.

It is four-fifteen on a crisp Thursday afternoon. I lock the iPhone that tells me the time and toss it into my cobalt tote bag. This roughly two-by-three-inch screen is at once my prized distraction, my lifeline, and my nemesis: pathetic and a portal to the infinite. It is high time to shed the cyborgian skin, as well as the worries about this essay, that due date, the thing I said and now regret. I am heading out to be refreshed. Before leaving the flat, I swirl up my hair into a loose bun and pick out a pair of dangly hoop earrings. Out in the hallway, the doors of the elevator open; I'm ready to descend upon London.

The air is brisk, the breeze palpable. I can feel the gentle brush of stray baby hairs on my forehead. In my immediate presence, brick buildings skim the cloud-streaked, cerulean sky. Mulberry trees lining the streets form a quasi-canopy, light poles droop over like iron candy canes. Facing me: an imposing office-edifice, a gated

home to Barristers. Occasionally, a full-fledged poofy, powdered wig emerges from a door. Some anachronisms are plain old entertaining to behold — for the participant, perhaps, but especially for the wanderer... the voyeur...

I walk North on Gray's Inn Road. M&S is a passable purveyor of flower bunches, but if you're looking for a superb set, Bloomsbury's outdoor stand, about fifteen to twenty minutes by foot, is simply where it's at. When I reach the corner intersection with Theobald, I wander mindlessly into my Pret a Manger. A new café worker loafs inside after his last drag of cigarette. I order my usual: a filter coffee — black, no sugar. This mediocre, watery cup of coffee is my go-to...

Behind me, a man sits alongside his young daughter, both on café stools. They're two feet above the floor. The zest in the man's eyes in front of his container of steamy soup recalls what a bear's might be, in front of a gooey bowl of honey. Together, the father-daughter pair maintain some mysterious, magnetic connection, some impenetrable sense of being locked-in synch. "Black filter!" the barista calls out, he: brown-eyed and brawny... Onward, now, to Bloomsbury...

Like a tedious argument, the streets unravel this way and that. A slow stream of people trickle through the blocks ahead. Some of their faces I can see, others I cannot... A trio of women, concealed by bur-

gas, shuffle to my right. Just spottable are their gloriously incongruous glitter-coated heels. Conservatism meets the modern age; the sacred: that which appears profane. Sipping my coffee, I pass four-story buildings, the bottom floors taken up by stores and restaurants. The top fourth of a given building always seems to be its most ornate and interesting. I am at a loss to name much of the architecture around me, a fault I attribute both to personal ignorance and a curbed education. Still, I am drawn to gaze... There's a clash of old and new, tall and high, brick and stone. I allow my eyes to skate along the surfaces, not to grasp hold of any singular happening... Seamus Heaney's words reverberate... *You are neither here nor there... but... a hurry, yes... through which known and strange things pass...*

An Italian pizzeria & café emerges on my left. Cone and spheroid arancini perch on its counter, visible through the window — each like a little artefact of a now obsolete civilisation. Tote buzzes. A notification. I adjust the straps and reluctantly fish out my Phone. "Hey, how go things?" An instagram message from an acquaintance. Rather than reply, I switch to Spotify. One airpod, then another: pops in. I stop on the inner part of the sidewalk, hoping not to draw attention. I'm searching for a smooth song. Exiting the Spotify window, I go to play the audio version of a long time favourite book, *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf.

One minute in, I remember, too: *quit the Phone! Didn't you promise?* With some

force, I toss Phone back into Tote. Flowers. *You need to follow your sense of direction to buy what you came for.* Reaching Costa's maroon mug, I turn left, heading toward the Russell Square tube stop. Chewing gum relics polka-dot the block, each grey dot: the shadow of a past walker, a mouth, saliva; *don't step on the lines between the rectangles on the sidewalk*, like when I was little. This lasts maybe forty seconds.

Heading north again, I turn up Guilford Street. I take a long sip of coffee, walking around a black-gated park. There is a man in the corner casually peeing. *Why not find a fucking bathroom, sir?* I avert my gaze so as not to generate embarrassment (*for whom?*). But this man — humming some hardly recognisable tune — appears absolutely brazen. There's a double-edged quality about being a London wanderer. In the flurry of walking about, one remains mostly illegible to others — a passing spectre among the sidewalks: a feat both thrilling and awful.

Clouds begin to crowd the sky and the sun to descend in the west. A big shopping complex appears on the left: bland, sterile, and oh so consumerist. At the least, it's a harbinger of the flower stand, only two blocks farther in this direction. No man has ever bought me flowers as a romantic gesture, only my father to celebrate orchestra concerts. I cherish having bunches of them wade in water, cherish even watching their petals wither, brown, and drop. Upon his death, my grandpa wrote a letter to my father and his brother with one wish: that every month, his mother's grave be supplied with flowers and swept. He could

through each chartered street



have wished for anything, and he wished for that...

I reach Marchmont Street, and find myself a channel among crowds of people. Like flecks of paint, each face seems to be a dot in an impressionist painting... Some are forever obscure, some disclose their characters. *Is it true that character is simply an unbroken accumulation of gestures?* I toss my drained coffee cup in the recycling. Police chitter-chatter, disagreeing. Golden hour sunlight streams through the streets, an aura roaming about the people: shining if hardly visible. All these tiny details will one day be forgotten, transported to oblivion. The scene may amount to a fleeting imprint on a sole consciousness...

The flower stand! It's the flower stand. There lay three rows of bouquets, each swaddled in dark brown paper, dipped in the water of a ball jar. It's just the vendor and me among masses of flowers: clusters of lilacs, ranunculus, jasmine, peonies, roses, carnations. I bring my nose to the jasmine and let its delicious, rich scent waft toward me in the wind. Looking at the peonies, light pink, I'm reminded of the ones my Grandma used to dry, placing them in the middle of book pages. Aromatic bliss. *Perhaps the roses really want to grow; the vision seriously intends to stay.* A line of W. H. Auden springs to mind — a line which still eludes me; the roses themselves, meanwhile, strike me as too 'Valentine's Day,' thus absurdly commercial; the carnations, in all sorts of primary colours, as somewhat kitsch.

I rummage through Tote and find iPhone, slide the debit card out of its back pocket-pouch. "One bouquet of peonies, please." It feels bizarre, a bit of a let-down, to finally hold what I came for. No more hidden object lurks at the end of an adventure. I press my card to the reader. Wait for the beep. Gently stow the bouquet in Tote. Resist the urge to snap a photo beforehand. "I must have flowers, always, and always," Monet once said... wouldn't he be an ideal candidate to paint the flower stand?...

How exquisitely each bouquet would be rendered, in pastel colours: brushy, fine-flecked. Perhaps a few sidewalk faces — little dots, almost themselves petals — would bob about in the backdrop. Tote buzzes — this time, my body ignoring the familiar sensation. I pivot 180 degrees, orienting myself back toward home. Pigeons dart and play; I hear the faint chirp of a wren, then see the sprawling shopping complex: a once distant edifice, made mundane. Pass the same park near which I caught the man peeing on my way here — a small, if pungent, puddle still present, as a relic, on the sidewalk. Less excretory goods also pervade these blocks. Out of the periphery of my eye, I catch a circular cobalt sign, flanking an apartment complex. "George Orwell once lived here," it reads. Yes, and my literary hero of all heroes, Virginia Woolf, was down the block.

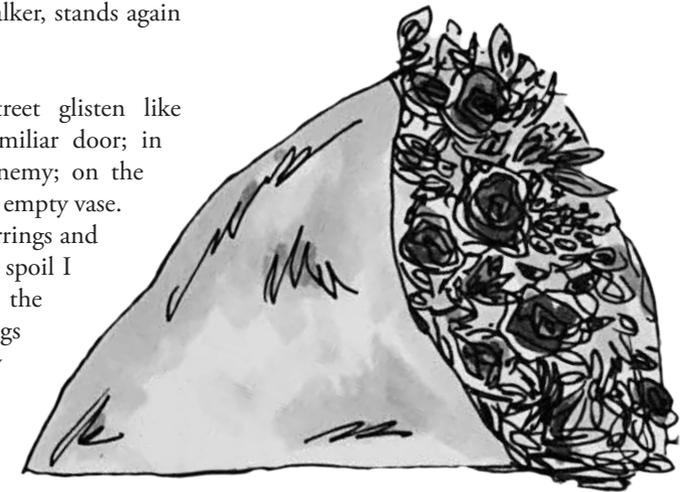
Did the two cross paths? Did they know each other; were they estranged?

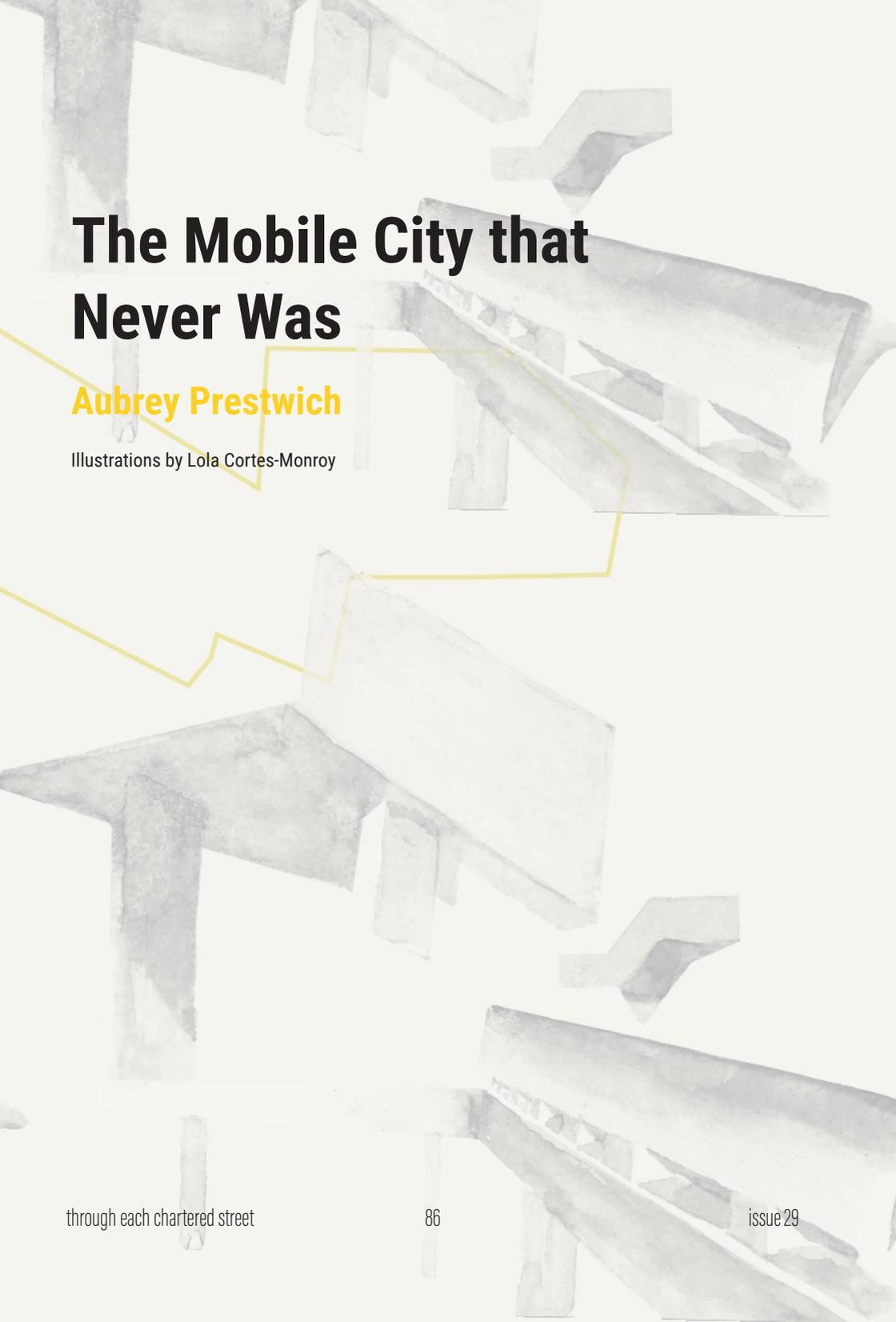
The sky begins to imbue with blood orange, melding with splotches of yellow and menacing pink. Streets coil, tangle,

and snake. Every time a phenomenon or thing reveals itself, another becomes opaque. School children flock behind their devoted teacher, she: their mother goose. As I reach Guilford Street, nearing the periphery of Bloomsbury, I ricochet between distraction and focus. Soon "Snippets: Hair Studio" emerges on the corner, turning back on Gray's Inn Road. The store's closed and a barber plops himself close to the mirror, shaving off his unibrow. Pret's lights, a few doors down, are flicked off. Gone are the wholesome father-daughter pair and brown-eyed barista. Life inside the Barrister's offices seems to be winding down for the day. Street lamps now glow like half moons, from their poles of iron candy canes.

To escape and wander the streets of London is a great pleasure. Even so, as I approach my building, I greet old concerns and preoccupations. My self, which has traversed so many street corners, which has been like dandelion fuzz swirling about by this and that London walker, stands again enclosed and shielded.

Windows along the street glisten like sequins. Here is my familiar door; in Tote, my lifeline and enemy; on the common room table, the empty vase. I unclasp my weighty earrings and free my hair. Here is the spoil I have retrieved amidst all the known and strange things of the city. Here is my bouquet of peonies.





# The Mobile City that Never Was

Aubrey Prestwich

Illustrations by Lola Cortes-Monroy

The city glares at us. The buildings, their glinting, glittering window teeth, bared. A church bell tolls, and a car revs its engine in competition with the police officer's wailing siren. An ambulance wends its way towards tragedy. Lone pedestrians fight mobs on bridges: everyone has forgotten how to walk in a crowd. The city is an oppressive atmosphere, grey not because of the weather but the decay, the concrete, the sludge seeping out of a lazily discarded McDonald's bag.

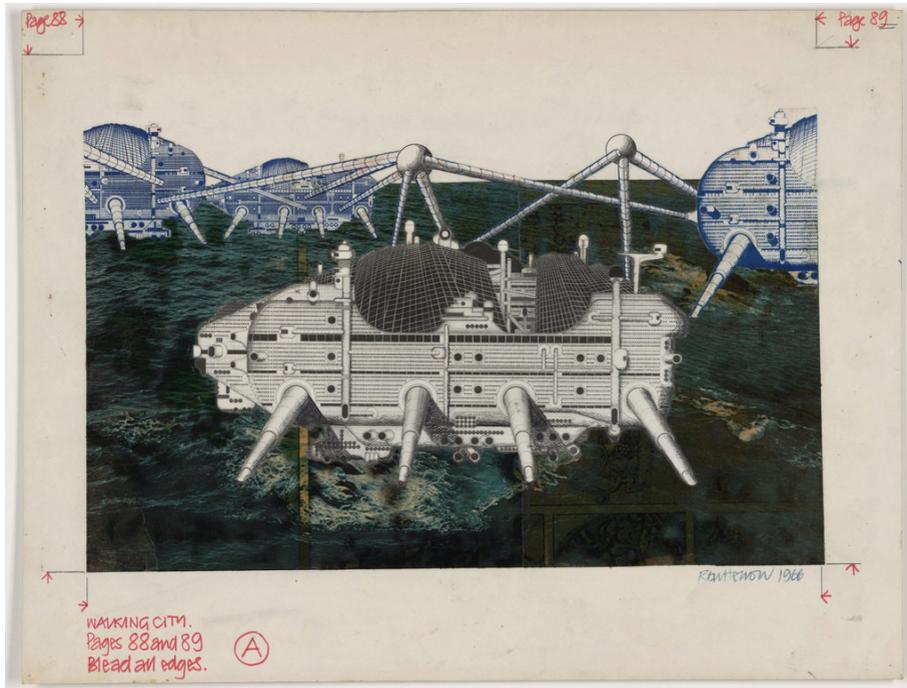
As we emerge into a new lull between crises: post-pandemic and pre-World War III, it can be hard to think of the city as anything but hostile. Threats come from every corner: the local man's bloodied face and broken glass, evidence of a bar brawl, the BBC reports of earthquakes and terror attacks. Just how easy is it for this building to crumble? How can the city adapt to an ever-changing, never-changing world?

In the 1950s, Britain was facing a similar set of questions. Terror from the skies destroyed sections of London and entire cities further afield. Rebuilding and prosperity slowly replaced air raids and austerity. British modernists rebuilt the city in a modern image. Reinforced concrete cantilevered from above, pitching forward into a future of excitement and uncertainty. Glass curtain walls created permeable entry plazas on the ground floor of skyscrapers. Yet, at this point, these new ideas for city building weren't new anymore. British architecture of the era reinforced the oppressive, grey sameness that creates such an ennui in the city dwellers of the

21st century. Everything looks the same because the nuance of its design can only be appreciated by those well-schooled in the Bauhaus and de Stijl; only Mies van der Rohe's close personal friends can chuckle at the difference between this glass wall and that steel frame.

Exhausted of this genteel, nose-tapping high Modernist milieu, students Ron Herron and Peter Cook wanted to shake up the game again. Where once the designs that are now tired were new, Herron and Cook wanted to create something that once more treated newness with opportunity for innovation. Enter, Archigram — the first iteration of the entity known as Archigram was a magazine and manifesto. Cleverly collaged and scribbled together pages professed that the time for a new architecture that 'rejects the precepts of MODERN' is now. The publication turned into more magazines, which then became a six-person architecture firm. Though very few of their buildings would ever be built, the drafts and drawings they produced created a whole new genre of city planning and idea generation. Paper Architecture was a theory of the possible, of the unbuilt, that responds to the fear and grime of the city and the hope of a better future.

Archigram believed in consumerism, in temporary solutions that could easily be discarded for the new and the better. They loved adaptability and technology and were inspired by the possibilities of the space race. Coming up at the same time as Pop and before anyone realised



Ron Herron, *Walking City on the Ocean*, project (Exterior perspective), 1966, Cut-and-pasted printed and photographic papers and graphite covered with polymer sheet, 29.2 x 43.2 cm, MoMA, New York. Image: MoMA

the extent of environmental degradation plastic caused, it was an exciting time to be creative. There were few limits, far more possibilities. An endlessly adaptable, endlessly consumable megastructure that could house everyone and move independently was not impossible: consider the ocean liner, the rocket, the atomic bomb! Everything that makes the world what it is today was still being invented. Why not a new avant-garde architecture? Why not Archigram lead the way?

Perhaps the most radical manifestations of Archigram's desire for a new, highly expendable, commercially driven architecture are the city-as-building paper designs *Walking City* and *Plug-In City*. Combining the need for mass housing and adaptability with a fascination for megastructure, each represents what the group was most interested in accomplishing: a wholly new way of thinking about buildings and the city inspired by seemingly limitless technological innovations. No longer did buildings need to

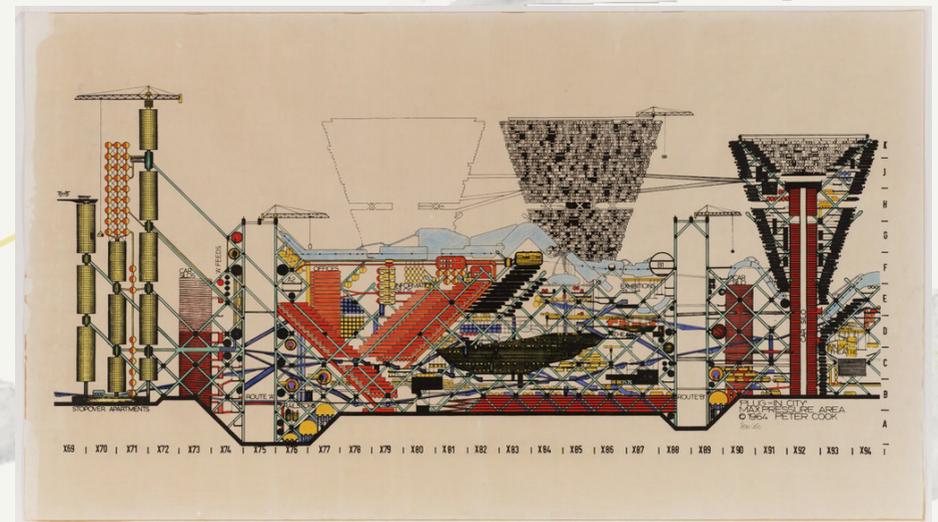
be built of reinforced concrete and glass: these buildings were metal and plastic. The *Plug-In City* consisted of overlapping clusters of machinery and activity, creating an endless beehive that was never finished and always occupied. Apartments hung in clusters off of support frames. Nodes of infrastructure were continually regenerating and ending, mimicking coral or moss growth. The plug-in city's endless transformation made architecture continuous — an event rather than a moment.

*Walking City* brought the building to the scale of the urban metropolis and then put that metropolis on legs. Part tank, part dwelling, part entertainment and employment space, the walking city modules call to mind Star Wars' AT-AT with their spindly supports and heavy abdomens. Each

mobile unit could combine with others to form a larger and larger footprint. These metropolis-units would rise out of the rubble of dystopian static cities. From the ashes of New York, proposed Archigram, deploy the *Walking City* and create an urban infrastructure wherever needed. Should threats ever arise, the city could literally walk away from harm. The generation of imagined forms like such created an architecture of opportunity and a city of mobility rather than the staid or the continual.

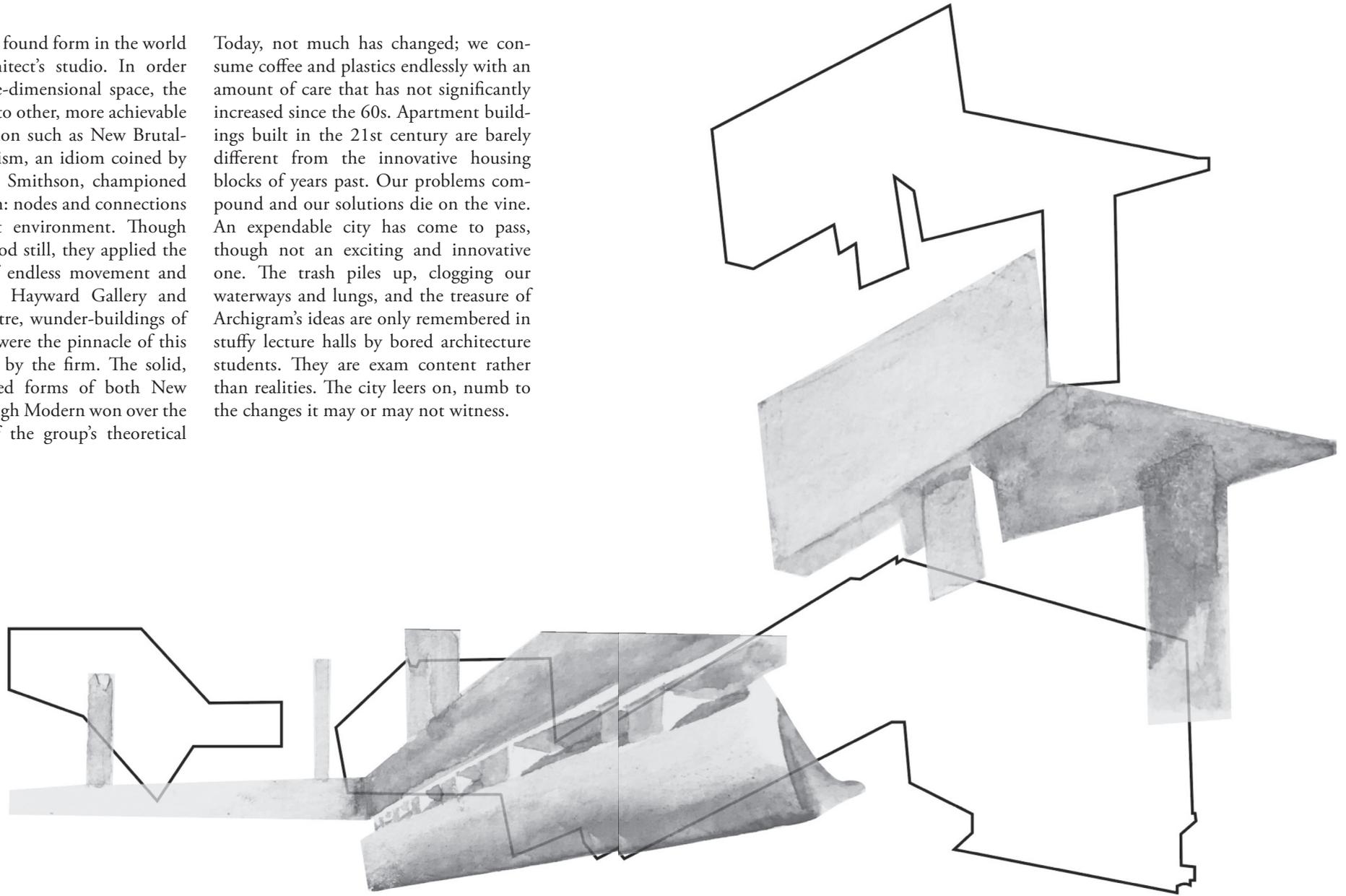
The city of Archigram's paper dreams never came to pass. Their realised commissions are few, and the group only practiced together for a handful of years. Actualising the mobile and the expendable was beyond the limits of possibility. It was a

Peter Cook, *Plug-in City: Maximum Pressure Area*, project (Section), 1964  
Ink and gouache on photomechanical print, 83.5 x 146.5 cm, MoMA, New York. Image: MoMA



theory that never found form in the world outside the architect's studio. In order to build in three-dimensional space, the firm had to turn to other, more achievable forms of expression such as New Brutalism. New Brutalism, an idiom coined by Alison and Peter Smithson, championed visible circulation: nodes and connections within the built environment. Though the buildings stood still, they applied the same theories of endless movement and connection. The Hayward Gallery and South Bank Centre, wunder-buildings of New Brutalism, were the pinnacle of this design expressed by the firm. The solid, imposingly-massed forms of both New Brutalism and High Modern won over the mobile forms of the group's theoretical designs.

Today, not much has changed; we consume coffee and plastics endlessly with an amount of care that has not significantly increased since the 60s. Apartment buildings built in the 21st century are barely different from the innovative housing blocks of years past. Our problems compound and our solutions die on the vine. An expendable city has come to pass, though not an exciting and innovative one. The trash piles up, clogging our waterways and lungs, and the treasure of Archigram's ideas are only remembered in stuffy lecture halls by bored architecture students. They are exam content rather than realities. The city leers on, numb to the changes it may or may not witness.



# The Queue

Lauren Rechner

Violet snuck in with the morning gloom  
shimmering in the stale grit of charcoal centuries the streets wear as perfume

heavy chimes yawned hello  
yet no soul was to be seen  
for all the bones were in line  
and only the umbrellas hung mistakenly serene

a young swan flipped under the bubbling black scar  
while the world below hummed and spattered her spittle-choked tune

this is where oysters go to die among the silent stares screeching turns  
and coughing sighs

there lies a treasure trove of yesterdays on which one may begin to rely

a torn orange ticket  
an orphaned shoelace  
a once punctual petrified crumb  
a melancholic glove, which will be replaced

spilled soot called liquid memories dribbles down the floor  
and with each “mind the gap”  
it oozes two centimeters more

above, brittle leaves brewed to the smell of decaying grins and frozen conversations forgot  
how to spell Friday

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branded are our fingertips (inked with to-dos) cement blocks are our feet (seared with have-tos)

they say songs of experience  
flood each charter'd street, sloshing and tripping each sole they meet

though glittering in tar  
sutures of innocence remain  
in every beating heart reborn  
in cracked pavement buried, forlorn

steal a smile, watch it grow  
all of our tired eyes should know

iterations become our futures  
unless we rewrite the prose  
lackadaisical ambivalence is not tolerated  
for mendacious masks are never presupposed

two seagulls shared sips of yesterday's sunlight and she could not blink

for today, laughing clouds of lilac possibilities filled a glass with patience  
and a long careful wink.

Illustration by Wednesday Zhu

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# ODE TO BATTLE BRIDGE

Gabriel La Guardia



Illustrations by Finlay Thompson

*Kings Cross, dense with angels and histories,  
there are cities beneath your pavements, cities behind your skies. Let me see!*

– Aidan Andrew Dun, *The Brill*

The sun sets slowly upon the West,  
casting shadows on all the rest.  
The eternal flame is sunk and lost,  
behind the behemoth of old King's Cross.  
On come the streetlamps, omniscient light,  
once cosy paraffin, now clinically bright.  
Cold, despotic and blinding security  
illuminates the plaza, the crux of the city

I gaze out my small window, I see dusk fall  
I lean out and peer down and I look at it all  
The writing on the wall, the buses, the people  
The trains at God Speed and the top of a steeple.  
Like a fang flashing gold in the gap-toothed skyline  
I follow these omens now all of the time  
I'm beckoned outside by London's tall chimneys  
Unused and unsmoking, all except me  
Beyond these four walls is a metropole gaunt  
I lock my front door and trudge out for a haunt

I arrive without purpose at this nexus of roads;  
hallowed grey pavements down which all have strode  
Any of which I could walk on a whim  
Pentonville, Euston, Caledonian, Gray's Inn.  
The great crossroads of the new Jerusalem  
Where many a night I have aimlessly spent;  
watching the creatures spawn and disappear;  
the putrid scent of lust and fear.

From the North and the East, from the South and the West  
Come travellers certain their story is best  
Some wait for their trains, some board and some hustle;  
Some boozy old twat's always up for a tussle  
Under the eye of St Pancras belltower  
Their spirits are dampened by an early spring shower  
Yet I welcome the rain from this high-above place  
Weight off my shoulders, dirt off my face  
Silent and cleansing, a secret confession  
Trickles into the drain with no verbal admission



I recall in the rain that beneath my two feet  
Is the stinking sludge sewer of the old river Fleet  
The icy wind blows and I'm bitten by the draught  
And I long for the warmth of the underground shafts  
A sprawling network of serpentine tin cans  
Hurling voyagers as fast as they can  
Tap in, barge through or slip behind  
Your destination you will soon enough find.

Forty odd years ago one little spark  
From the end of a Chesterfield left a grim mark.  
Fanned by the gust of Victoria's carriage  
Wind and fire betrothed in fatal marriage  
It caught and it spread, a fireball of death  
Leaving no-one below much time for a last breath  
Like the fiery locks of Queen Boudicca's mane  
Buried 'neath platform ten, some like to proclaim  
She avenges her passing with thirty-one souls  
Themselves avenged only with a plaque gilded gold,  
A clock from that evening, no longer ticking,  
And up go the signs to ensure you're not smoking  
Escalators of metal installed last but not least  
Sharp jaws of iron, gargantuan beast  
Their eternal rotation discomforts me more  
Than the threat of the wooden ones that came before  
Below us keeps spinning The Wheel of the Law  
Preparing new horrors nobody foresaw  
We're carried, indifferent, to our final destination  
Our burial tomb may well be the next station.

I watch Hogwarts fanatics run into a wall,  
attempting escape to a world less awful.  
If only they knew the most magical portal  
is back into time, to a neighbourhood mortal,  
Though resistant to change and willing to fight,  
Big money means murder, almost overnight  
In a city still changing and always in flux

Up shoots the glassy, the premium, deluxe  
I don't feel they belong and I don't think they're pretty  
Soulless, irregardless, no sense of identity  
It reminds me of Frankfurt or even Shanghai  
Like Sydney, San Juan or God Help Us, Dubai

"The new Regents Quarter," friends whistle, "how swank  
Surely that's costing you serious bank."  
I shrug and I tell them the mould brings down rent  
And for the location, it's money well spent.

Parklife resides where a junkyard once stood  
A granary looms from when business was good  
Every red brick and each plaster cast mould  
Are scrubbed and repainted so they don't look old  
The effort and toil that's long been forgotten  
Someone's hopes and dreams that have slowly gone rotten  
are wrung into the mortar and thoroughly mixed  
Just like holy water, his blood in the bricks.

A secretive Magdalen, open for business,  
Hides behind a red door, and waits with a kiss  
There's no meaning or love but a price tag agreed  
And her fate and longevity's not guaranteed.

I speak with the ghosts who fell on the track  
they describe Battle Bridge from a century back:  
"North of the stations, it's dangerous there  
A blind spot, a no-go, why would you fare"  
"Machetes," they warned, "drug dealers too  
They'll rob you and merk you like mutton for stew"  
They bid me good luck and they ghoulishly shudder  
"Hope that you don't end up mugged in the gutter"  
Trapped for all time in this underground limbo  
They know not the present, they haven't a window



They haven't a clue of the recent displacement  
Of families crowded, five to a basement.  
Out with the icons and the culturally rich;  
The diamonds and pearls of the old Battle Bridge.  
Bought out, evicted, displaced or dead.  
The loss is hard felt like a hole in the head  
Of the old Stanley Buildings remains but one only.  
Razed to the ground to make space for Sony.

Behemoths of glass beneath which rest  
Battlefields, nightclubs, and some of the best  
Bagleys, The Cross and The Key once were tops.  
Before came the steel sweep of the brand new Coal Drops.  
Dwarfing and shrouding with glass and concrete  
Hedonistic times past and the 808 beat  
Ringing through the yard like modern church bells  
Pierced by percussion of bottles and yells  
The punters pile out in oblivious glee  
That their favourite club will soon be Fred Per-ry.

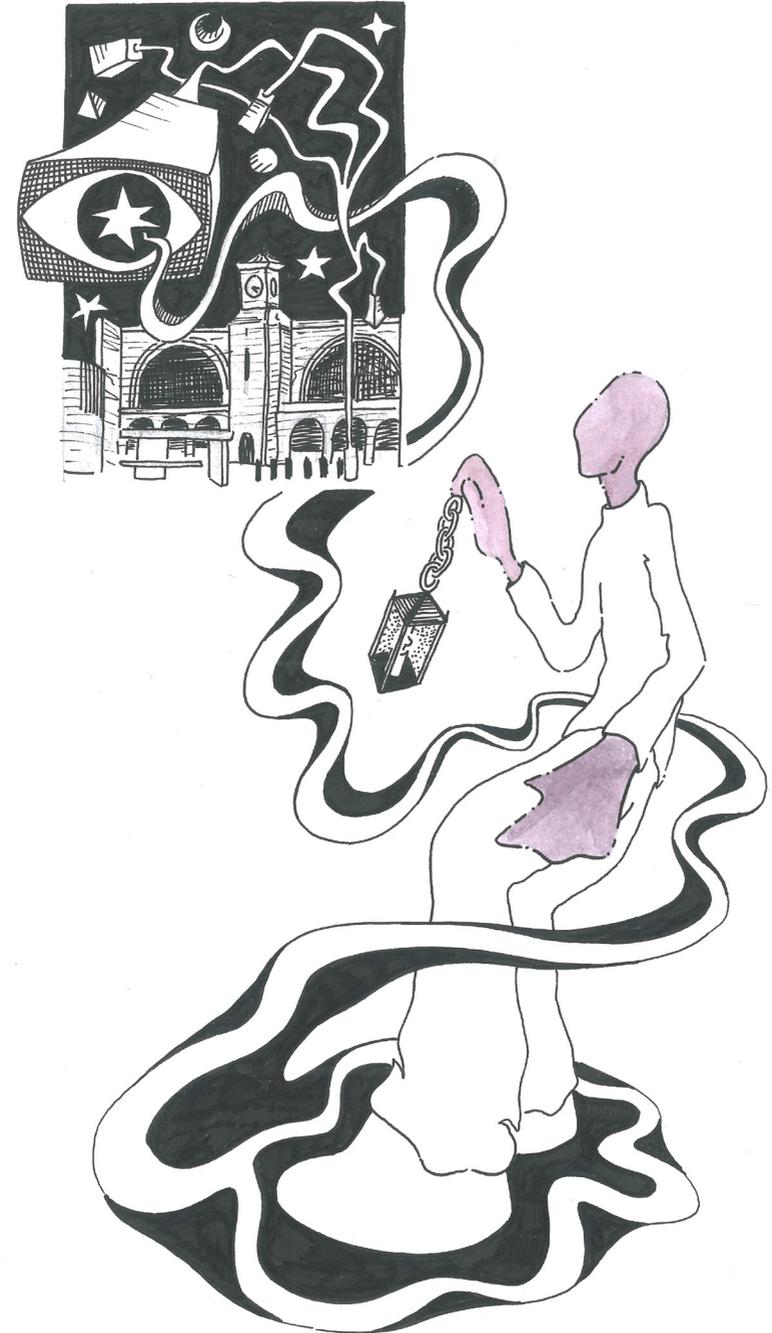
Rave on, rave on, Britannia Cool...  
Till big business came in and shattered that jewel.

Centuries of pilgrims avoiding sobriety  
You cannot bulldoze such intense notoriety  
These corporate murals that aren't even good  
Aiming to whitewash this bright neighbourhood

Nothing lasts forever, the good things least of all,  
and after Summers of Love, the autumn leaves must fall.  
"I love you so much" but it's lacking sincerity  
Then the love falls away - it was only the E  
If pingers had jaws they would come back to bite;  
balding ex-ravers drop dead in the night.  
Flush all the powders and head for the beach,  
Or a lethal crescendo your blood pressure will reach.

The plague of profit spreads like a miasmatic dust  
And we are vaccinated thrice against love and trust  
Numbing the pain with each swipe of the plastic,  
Spending is feeling, each transaction orgiastic.  
Yet I notice the glaze in the eyes of another  
Disinterest and apathy, seldom a brother  
People zone out and try hard not to care  
In the face of futile pleas for a few coins to spare.  
The feed of closed circuit is played back on screens  
And we see ourselves tiny, obscure and 2D  
Suspects, targets, read by an android  
And we become just a bit paranoid  
Self-awareness kicks in just as hesitance does  
And we never act out or make much of a buzz  
True to ourselves is a mythical concept  
Under surveillance, our souls are inept;  
Can't express or be free or feel like we're at home  
All lenses are on you and you're not alone  
Blend in or stand out in the Metropolitan Horde?  
We're all trussed up in uniforms, of our own accord.  
Buttoned up, guarded, I've got my boots on  
I barge through the crowd and I blast another song  
To tune out reality, spin a world of my own  
Like everyone, seeking a place to call home

So deeply caught up in my own rumination  
I don't realise I've walked back to the station  
Soaring arches and Victorian romance  
Diverts my attention from my nihilist trance  
Change as it may, and evolve as it must  
I naively believe and wholeheartedly trust  
From ashes to dust, from gloss to moss  
My heart will never leave King's Cross.

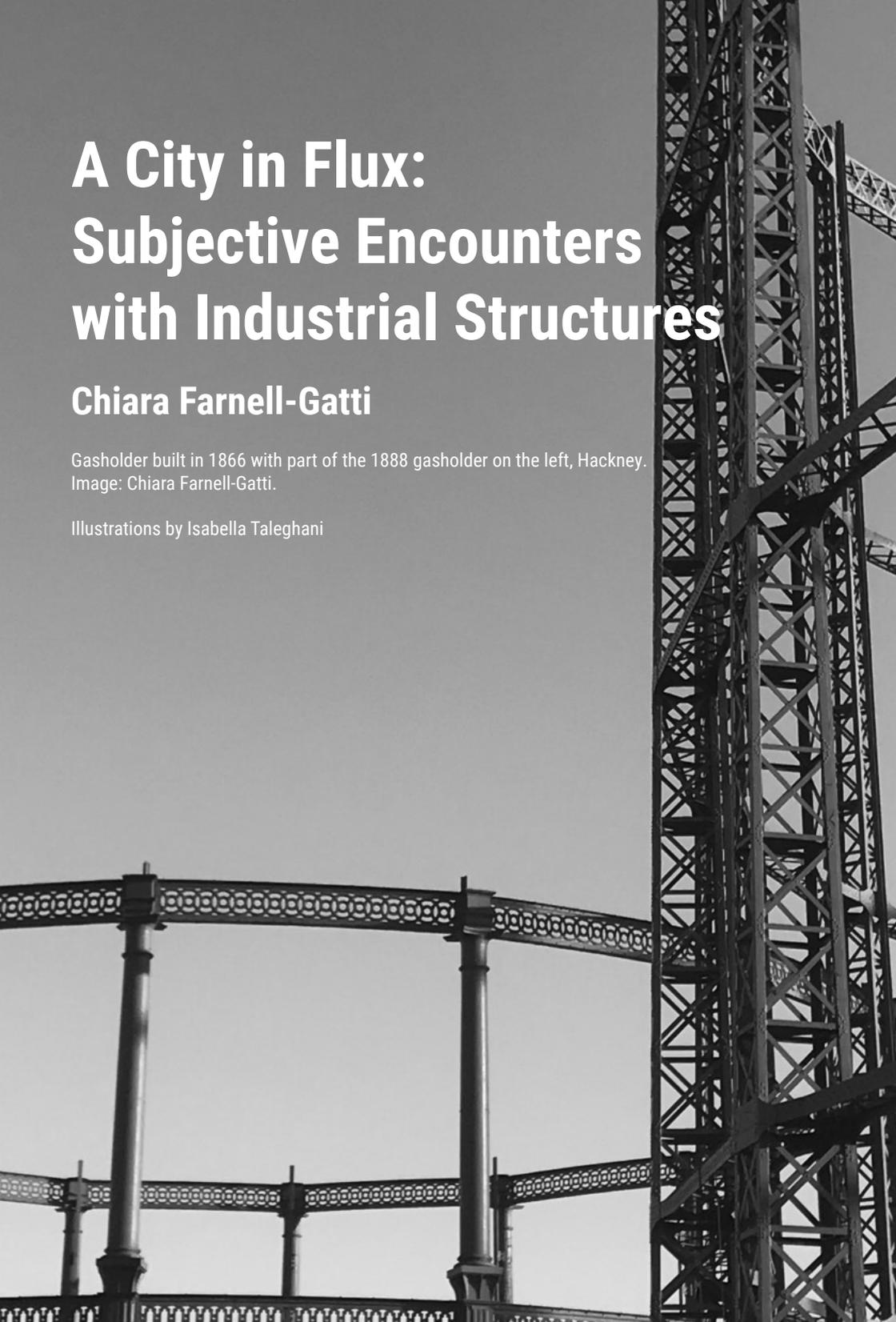


# A City in Flux: Subjective Encounters with Industrial Structures

Chiara Farnell-Gatti

Gasholder built in 1866 with part of the 1888 gasholder on the left, Hackney.  
Image: Chiara Farnell-Gatti.

Illustrations by Isabella Taleghani



Two colossal gasholders clench a bank of Regent's Canal. Although they are named Bethnal Green Gasholders, they are in fact nestled between London Fields and Victoria Park. It was during the various lockdowns and daily walks that graced 2020 and 2021 that I became acquainted with these two chunks of Victorian ironwork. Unsurprisingly, given the overfamiliar narrative surrounding the revelations to be found in isolation, I had never given them much thought before COVID. I should here stress just how large the gasholders are — you have to bend back to see them in their entirety from several meters away, and they have a solid, impressive quality against the skyline. Although these gasholders are industrial looking, they are also detailed, like iron

strips of lace and tulle. Built in the mid- to late- nineteenth century, the structures stored gas for the Shoreditch site of the Imperial Gas Light and Coke Company. The smaller of the two, completed in 1866, is the world's oldest surviving gasholder frame, while the larger, from 1888, is one of few surviving pieces by

gasholder design innovators Samuel Cutler & Sons. I however wasn't familiar with them in historical terms until fairly recently. The scale of my revelation during lockdown walks was humbler in scope. It occurred to me that the landmarks are visible beyond and before the canal. For the majority of my route, they pop up behind warehouses and between tree branches, their imposing presence now branded into my awareness.

Yet, they were also anchors for me, tangible points of reference amid the unfamiliar pace of the pandemic years. As structures made up of iron loops which had no apparent beginning or end, they resonated with lockdown's similarly infinite feel. I found myself imagining these relics in their





Silvertown, East London Docks, 1950. Image: Getty Images.

youth, an inky London of printing presses, harsh realities, and ribbons residing in adjacent streets as wealth and poverty plunged deeper into themselves. Once so vital to city water ways, the gasholders are, much like the canal, abandoned spirits of industrial capitalism.

London's old docks were similarly rejected. The Docklands Light Railway now glides through Poplar's suits and contactless credit, a far cry from the shipping heartland the area previously was. Photos of mid-century East End are the greatest traces of this iteration of London. In perhaps the most popularly known photograph of this subject, a ship looms large at the end

of a street, houses on one side and a school on the other. It is giant compared to the humble homes it overshadows, but families passing by are unfazed by the beast behind them. What is a fun juxtaposition for the contemporary eye was once a matter of the everyday.

Ironically, the shipyards, drivers of British economy for several hundred years, were literally replaced in the 1980s by the skyscrapers of the financial district. These new forms, too, seem to crop up every time you look over your shoulder. From the park, at the end of the market, the bottom of the street, on the motorway, and from the train, I can almost always spy a shimmering pane of



Gasholder built in 1888, Hackney. Image: Chiara Farnell-Gatti.

glass from the corner of my eye. From near and afar, their sparkling surfaces contrast with the brick of the city. On a clear blue day, they're just a tone off from the sky, like a rectangle of paint. Even at night they're alight — like frenetic fairy lights bent on upstaging the stars' centuries-old stronghold in the darkness. From below, it's an awesome sight, an impossible form for the eye to take in whole.

Much like the market they represent, the presence of these architectural landmarks is perplexing, at once intimate and intangible. People's lives play out against this backdrop, and, as buildings, they have a direct impact on people's daily experience. The glittering



towers create sharp tunnels of wind and reflect beams of sunlight onto the pavements fleetingly occupied by pedestrians. But what do personal memories and individual experiences have to do with the spaces these buildings contain and what they represent? Wealth, tech, capital — a world with its own laws and systems. Most of London's population will never come into direct contact with the spaces that skyscrapers contain and will not grasp a skyscraper in its entirety by looking down at the city from their steeples as well as looking up from ground level. The market, too, conjures tangible consequences while remaining perpetually aloof. Inflation, rising costs of living, housing crises — these factors in most people's lives in personal and real ways. Yet, what the market is in practical terms remains largely elusive.

The city of London is perhaps then the convergence of two factors. Firstly, corporate and governmental interjections — removing, adding, and exchanging people and capital in different places. To some extent, these organisations have a monopoly over meaning in urban spaces. These corporate and governmental powers relocated the communities of the East End to garden cities after the Second World

War and later turned the gritty industry of the docklands into the hostile landscape of capital. Yet, 'the city' is also a receptacle for intricate trails of personal interactions. We directly and indirectly meet, collide, pass by, and barely notice landmarks each day in unpredictable ways.

Have I come far from the Bethnal Green gasholders? Their inky city and iron capitalism seem so distant that they risk romanticisation. Nonetheless, the themes are the same. London's residents are still carving their lives against a backdrop of institutional and economic

entities, not just their present incarnations but also their ghosts. The Bethnal Green gasholders are about to be turned into predominantly unaffordable apartments. I find such changes challenging to accept and ethically difficult. How can it be that the gasholders used to signify labour and sweat and are now something pretty and marketable? Yet, as the pandemic propels into the past, the iron structures loosen their hold, and anchor me less. What I find most difficult to grapple with, simultaneously tragic and fascinating, is how spatial meanings in this city are constantly in flux.



Kingsland Road, Dalston. Image: Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images.



### Distribution

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