

Cultures of Settlement in East London (Foord, J & Evans, G L)

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The city does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand (Calvino, 1979: 13)

This is an edited extract from work by the authors (Evans & Foord, 2000-2004). The focus of this article is an area of inner London that is marked out by its density and mobile population. This has been established over several hundred years through successive waves of settlement and has experienced most forms of regeneration and redevelopment in both its physical and social fabric. Stepney is located on the fringe of the city. It bares the imprint of many different ethnicities - Huguenots, Jews, Bangladeshis, Somalis and new Eastern European migrants. It is overlain by a landscape of regeneration and is currently touched by the edging in of new gentrification - commercial and residential. Stepney has played host to continuous immigration in pre-industrial and especially in late-industrial eras, areas identified as multicultural workshops, housing the highest proportions of minority ethnic communities in London (e.g. Bangladeshis). Today, this tradition of absorbing an influx of outsiders, with their own social and cultural networks, remains firmly established and indeed institutionalised through social welfare provision and cultural development and promotion (e.g. festivals, creative industries). The presence of cheaper housing has meant that East End districts like Stepney continue to receive new refugees alongside established settlers. However Stepney's location in close reach of the core business district, coupled with the return to city centre living witnessed over the past 10 years, have contributed to new pressures which have increased local land values (Robson and Butler 2001). The acceptance of past representations in the built as well as social landscape is important for diversity to thrive and for difference not to serve as points of conflict. However, their branding through ethnic quarters' and place-marketing is instrumental and can create its own divisions.

Development in the 'East End' has been uneven, creating pockets of over-development on the one hand, and residual areas such as Stepney on the other, resulting in an east-west divide, mirroring the city as a whole. This locale was described only a few years ago, 'mid-regeneration', as 'bleak', empty and non-aspirational - the absence in fact, of life and culture. This is paradoxical given that this and other East End neighbourhoods continue to be, some of the most densely occupied (including a high proportion of young families) in the city. A lack of life seems at odds with this and suggests that much human activity and presence is 'hidden'. This includes of course the regeneration itself - house building, environmental improvements, training, indoor social activities, youth work. Certainly some exchange and activity is 'private', whether home-based, in mosque or church, at women-only meetings, mother and children's groups, and in trade. However, one might expect that diversity and density would produce a more lively feeling to a visitor's eye.



"Bleak view" - Canary Wharf office city in the distance;

Stepney Housing Agency Offices

The historic landscape of Stepney is therefore long established reflecting its role on the city fringe as the source of labour for dockyard and sweatshop alike. The local 'All Saints' church, St Dunstan's, located in the centre of Stepney, was known nearly a millennium ago as the *Church of the High Seas*, with men serving on ships for trade, exploration and emigration. What the church founders had not foreseen was that the same high seas would serve to bring successive new migrants to the area, supporting synagogue, mosque and a diminishing congregation of Christian worshippers. Change - social, physical and symbolic - takes place over time, incrementally. A range of sites and places where community and economic activity occurs in Stepney are therefore presented here in terms of the layers of settlement and history they represent - a deeper representation than either the 'bleak' or 'bijou' tags which are applied by outsiders today.

Visibility and activity levels are also functions of housing type and occupation; the proximity to services, social exchange; and perceptions of community safety. Stepney housing is characterised by mid-rise council blocks, older terraced houses (Georgian, Victorian), flats with shops on the ground floor, with new 2 and 3 storey housing being built on small vacant sites and the conversion of industrial buildings for apartments and 'lofts'. Despite the location of a large linear park at one end of the neighbourhood, local usage is low, especially amongst the Asian population, including children and women. This neighbourhood is also divided by local roads which serve as 'rat runs' cutting between two major roads linking east London/docks with the central London. Community facilities such as junior and secondary schools, youth and community centres, are isolated in islands cut-off by uncontrolled traffic, making it unsafe for children and the less agile to move from place to place.

Notwithstanding this picture of a non-descript place, Stepney has been undergoing redevelopment for the past 5 years under the government's competitive regeneration programme which has been the latest version of government urban policy since the mid-1970s, when inner city decline - unemployment, physical, industrial structural change - required a response to these intractable problems, as the global post-industrial economy undermined traditional industrial districts and their working class communities. Regeneration programmes rest on public-private partnership and leverage as a condition of public investment in new and improved housing and amenities, including targeted training for disadvantaged residents. Many of the interventions are small-scale and hidden, or build on existing cultural and social provision. Others have a greater physical impact, if not necessarily acceptance by residents. The profile of residents itself has started to change as gentrification is accelerated by regeneration; environmental improvements and new housing development. The place of artists - working in the community and as entrepreneurs - has also been affected by the regeneration process and availability of resources.



Canal views - boys playing on barge; Matts Gallery & ACME Artists Studios

'Artists are the stormtroopers of gentrification'

The colonisation of vacant space by artists and creative activities has a long history in abandoned inner city locations. The role of developers in capitalising on this 'pioneering' process to promote gentrification is also commonplace in core cities of Europe and North America. On the edge of Stepney, this process is beginning to take place. Copperfield Road overlooks the canal on one side and Mile End Park on the other, and so has two desirable aspects of land reclamation in close proximity: water and green open space. The artists' are housed in one key site - a

converted five story warehouse space. ACME, a charitable organisation, converts disused industrial space into studios and housing for practising artists. Artists' CVs are closely vetted in order to protect the ethos of the organisation. Studios cannot be used for any other purpose. In this way the organisation protects their premises against encroachment by commercial (and community) activities. This site houses 53 studios, offices and also Matt's Gallery, a contemporary art exhibition space. This gallery moved to this building in 1992, however the specific location of these facilities is incidental: Stepney is only a backdrop to the activities of ACME and the building's users. There is little or no interaction with local residents and no intention to encourage local associations. The users and audiences for ACME studios and Matt's Gallery are drawn from a self-contained arts world, although it is claimed: 'Due to their longevity [they] now stand as established orientation points in the artistic history of the area' (Archer 2001: 9). Stepney's isolated gritty urban landscape represents cheap rents and a fiercely protected privacy in which work can be undertaken out of the public gaze. For local residents this is a no-man's land - creating a barrier between their own spaces and those of the park beyond.



Mile End Park: new landscaping, and in the distance Stepney's housing blocks

People's Park

When London's masterplanner, Abercrombie developed his Greater London Plan as part of the post-War reconstruction of the city in 1944, he envisaged 'green lungs' linking town and country. Existing open spaces in dense urban areas were to be extended, forming green chains by which urban dwellers could access the lower density suburbia and green belt. None of these green lungs were successfully extended, whilst new town and suburban developments were seen as the solution to urban overpopulation. In fact, encroachment on existing open land, long-established for communal usage, has been the norm for over fifty years. In Stepney, Mile End Park - one of these green lungs - has been the subject of an environmental makeover and has been branded once again as the 'People's Park': a 'radical park for the 21st century' - the rhetoric is of inclusion. However, the meaning of the park has to be recreated for local people. Their memory, prior to redevelopment, is of a resource that was not for them. In the 1990s it had become a no-go area after dark, and for dog walking and anti-social activities by day. The park sat beyond the barrier of Copperfield Road with few reasons for locals to venture beyond the residential streets. In the regenerated park, peaceful plantings, waterfalls and facilities for sport - a stadium, pitches, go-karting track and jogging "trim" trails - have been created. No multicultural references to residents are paid in the redesign. Research into Asian women's groups for instance found that they enjoyed memories of open space in their native country and had a real desire to use parks here in a similar way for social occasions and relaxation. For these muslim women, a public 'trim trail' is of no practical value. Many of the facilities still remain outside the

cultural world of many local residents. The cost of hiring sports facilities are beyond the reach of local youth and Asian Football Club. The sports facilities are targeted at the new urbane Stepney resident and Docklands office employees.



Ragged School Museum

The Ragged School Museum is a local museum housing artefacts of school provision for poor children in the 19th century. Housed in an original building, the museum captures the philanthropic history of education and enlivens the experience for school visitors through re-enacted classroom activities. The museum emerged out of a 3 year campaign to 'save' the buildings as a key site of local heritage. Those involved, and who now staff the museum on a voluntary basis, are drawn from a pool of ex-Stepney residents - mainly white retired men and women who now live elsewhere in London - for whom the museum represents a symbol of Stepney's past. This representation of poor but noble Stepney and its promotion sits, not always easily, alongside local children's attachment to the museum as a holiday play space. A programme of arts and children's activities is run during holidays with the expressed intention of teaching children to make 'good use of their leisure time'. Again this coincides with the intentions of the early settlement movement and a form of governance which stresses self-improvement and self-reliance. For the children though, the museum is just a place they might go for an hour or two to relieve the holiday boredom. Sited on the corner of Copperfield Road it is just within psychological reach.

Conclusion

There has been an optimism that runs through the current regeneration programmes. This suggests a new anticipated urban order in which economic growth and social justice are not only compatible but work in synergy. However the historic perspective and formations discussed here have largely been ignored, and as has been found, expected urban orders inevitably produce points of resistance as expectation and experience diverge from one another. In common with other findings (Fainstein 2001), we have charted how urban change or 'progress' and social benefits are often contradictory and are more likely to produce segregation, displacement and inequality. The 'settlement' of the East End with its involuntary population movements and interventions represents this dialectic. It is one that is firmly held in past and present cultures of settlement. In Stepney today these multicultures sit in close spatial proximity, whilst social distance is not reduced. Gentrification through creative and heritage industries, housing and amenity development, creates a form of insulated isolation for these new settlers. Distanced from the everyday mixing of Stepney, the trappings of gentrification and place-making can be seen as a resistance to the heterogeneity of inner city settlement.

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