

A LATECOMER IMAGINES THE CITY

William Mann

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1. The pressures of change

*'A city is a complex but incomplete system: in this mix lies the capacity of cities across histories and geographies to outlive far more powerful, but fully formalised, systems – from large corporations to national governments.'*¹

We should be weary of the city of the future, by now, or at least a little bit wary of it – but instead we keep falling for its promises. Perhaps the pressures building on our cities make it hard to think straight: populations growing and ageing, citizens becoming more diverse and more unequal; the rapid emergence and obsolescence of employment sectors; toxic legacies and climatic threats; floods of foreign investment in real estate; ever rising land values; a febrile atmosphere of economic and cultural competition between cities. All these build an overpowering perception of the need for radical changes to the physical environment of our cities - for the replacement of obsolete buildings and the accelerated production of new ones.

Whatever the reason, images of possible cities proliferate in our media. In these evocations of the pastoral city to come, buildings are crystalline and weightless, and merge with the landscape in flourishes of textured green. The water is swimming pool blue, and vegetation abounds. Paths stretch invitingly towards the horizon, and vehicles blur past noiselessly. People stroll in ones and twos, neither menacingly dense nor alarmingly sparse: sleek, contented, ageless.

Like size zero models presenting an unattainable body image, these purified representations of the city seem to distort our decision-making: tempting our elected representatives into the expulsion of occupants and the delegation of action to private interests; setting off a purge-and-binge cycle of demolition and production. Is it possible that images like these promise a change in the urban condition that building cannot bring about - one that is not simply unachievable, but damaging?

By examining two development sites in London, the Lea Valley and the Elephant and Castle, I paint a picture of the escapist imagination that

¹ Saskia Sassen 'Who owns our cities – and why this urban takeover should concern us all', The Guardian, 24 November 2016

continues to influence our city-making. I highlight the destruction that follows such images of harmony, and the dilution of complexity that accompanies such reconstruction. I trace how over time the smooth ideal translates into a random agglomeration of sectoral products.

Drawing on work with colleagues in my architectural practice, I sketch out an alternative approach to city-making that values the capacity of the existing. In our explorations of the same two areas over the last two decades, we have embraced the complex metabolism of the city, the granular texture of its society and the resistance resulting from its continual but slow reconstruction. In projects for public spaces, we have sought to achieve substantial change by working with rather than against the deep structures of these places.

Despite the resistance of deep-rooted structures and habits, and the power of the economic forces that seek to reshape these, I argue there is still a role for the individual imagination in shaping the future of the city – and that re-orienting this imagination is an urgent challenge. For instead of the failed imagination of the heroic form-makers - delivering further iterations of the city of abstract virtues - there is a need for a latecomer's imagination, accepting that the city is already there, with all its limitations and possibilities. A latecomer's imagination would - like that of the novelist, the archaeologist, the musician - be rooted in observation, appreciative of the resistances of matter, and attuned to the possibilities of transformation: of evolutionary rather than revolutionary change.

For the history of cities is one of continual transformation: of mud into brick, of settlements into mounds; of quarrelling tribes into polities; of surpluses into fortifications, of servants into craftsmen; of weavers into industrialists; of merchants into brokers; of vacancy into invention. These transformations of collective capacity grow within the redundant spaces of today's city. They start from what individual cities are, not from the elusive pursuit of what they are not.

2. Imagined futures

*'Those who build are few, and what their operations consist of is notorious to all...Those who inhabit are an enormous quantity...The comfort used as a lever...is in reality still disorder, poverty, precariousness: all the more serious because it presents itself as comfort, as improvement - when everything, on the contrary, is still waiting to begin.'*²

Every city has a dirty river at its margins and an unloved transport node close to its centre: in London, we have the Lea Valley and the Elephant and Castle. Both are unfinished remnants of the post-war remaking of the city. In the late 1990s, when the restoration of a regional authority promised newly confident leadership, these long-neglected areas attracted attention from both public and private sectors. Two decades on, both areas have been changed beyond recognition. In the harsh light of austerity, the political and commercial bargains which have underpinned this remaking take on a sharp relief. Likewise, the perfect images used to communicate these projects bear little relation to the messy reality that has followed.

² Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'The City Front'. Tr. B. Holmes. In *Politics-Poetics: documenta X – the book*. (1997) Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz Verlag. p284-285.

The River Lea, six miles to the East of the financial district, is London's second river, one of only a handful of tributaries of the Thames not buried in a pipe. Like the Bièvre in Paris or the Llobregat in Barcelona, its broad floodplain is a tangle of muddy watercourses and infrastructures, interwoven with industry and vestiges of a rural landscape. It is an unplanned landscape, a collection of accidents. Like a geological rupture in the city, life here is both slower and more ephemeral than in the neighbourhoods that border it.

When professional and institutional imaginations were let loose on the Lea, in the pitch to the International Olympic Committee in 2003, they re-imagined it as a pastoral landscape. The tensions of the existing area were mostly imagined away, and those that remained were resolved in an image of harmonious complexity and flowing mobility. The paths were to be an extensive and complex new infrastructure, overlaid on top of the network of watercourses - like a mineral river branching, wandering and reuniting. The new stadium was imagined as a festive theatre on which all paths converged. Although many of the buildings were to be vast, they would be subordinated to the landscape design and integrated through the vegetation on their roofs. Paths, stadia and supporting buildings would all follow the same language of leaf forms and segmental vaults, a geometrical order binding small and large together in a single web.

Where the old Lea Valley was tangled, it would be smoothly connected; where work was omnipresent, leisure would prevail; where land and water were toxic, they would be purified; decay and the ad hoc would be banished; the tired and old would be replaced by the youthful and energetic. The dirty, apparently dysfunctional city would be remade as its opposite.

The Elephant and Castle is a crossroads south of the River Thames, where the highways leading from the bridges converge before diverging again towards the coast. Close to a sharp bend in the river, it is just a mile from both the City and from Westminster, the seat of government. Like the Place de la République in Paris or Alexanderplatz in Berlin, it lies at the heart of a working-class district. It is an over-planned cityscape, a multi-level transport interchange surrounded by concrete and glass slabs, orderly but random.

When the London Borough of Southwark and developer Southwark Land Regeneration re-imagined the Elephant and Castle at the end of the millennium, they presented its future in crystalline and verdant form. Two circular towers would straddle a linear green swathe, wrapped in the sinuous curve of a glazed railway. Hanging gardens would spiral up the glassy towers, visible from within the glass vault of the railway station. At the foot of the towers would be a circular public space holding an amphitheatre; to the other side of the railway line, a market square would lead to a park lined by medium-rise apartment blocks.

Where the old Elephant and Castle was grey and drab, the new one would be clean and luminous; where it was made up of linked monolithic slabs, it would be remade of small permeable blocks; where it was ambiguous, it would be clearly defined; where it was repetitively rectilinear, it would be a playful mix of curves and diagonals.

The architects of the new Lea Valley and Elephant and Castle sketched engaging totalities in which buildings and open space are harmoniously

entwined, bound together in supple overarching geometries. Connection is their mantra, as even the plants appear to flow. The new urban quarters they promise are woven from abstract virtues: nature, leisure and mobility. The complex metropolis is reduced to an elementary syntax of parks and towers, of regular apartment blocks and token flourishes of public focus. In the images that represent these proposals, our professional optimists tantalise us with promises of a city that is pure and clean, free of dirt and disease, where leisure is the norm and labour is invisible, where movement is smooth and frictionless, where social tension and crime are absent, and where death or ageing are invisible. In the teeth of deep uncertainty and relentless change, the architects fashioned images of an order inoculated against the ravages of time. Is this how the future city really looks?

3. The provisional and fragmented present

‘...two great alternative narratives – one of emancipation, detachment, modernization, progress and mastery, and the other, completely different, of attachment, precaution, entanglement, dependence and care.’³

Not yet. The eternal present of the perfect visualisations is infinitely slow to materialise. A decade or more in the planning, these areas will be another decade in the making. For now, all that can be seen are the traces of destruction and the piecemeal construction of the new urban quarters. Of totality, harmony or balance there are few traces.

The destruction unleashed is on a grand scale. In the Lea Valley, over two hundred businesses employing five thousand staff, and four hundred and fifty residents were compulsorily purchased and relocated; at the Elephant and Castle, three thousand residents have been expropriated and moved out. The Heygate Estate is now a vast field of rubble, punctuated by cranes, piling rigs and the occasional tree. The scale of these clearances, 220 hectares in the Lea Valley and nine at the Elephant and Castle, along with the forced nature of the relocations, has made these projects emblematic of processes at play in the whole city. Rumbblings of public disquiet that accompanied the Olympic relocations of 2007 were amplified around the expulsion of the Heygate’s residents in 2010. The remaking of the Olympic site and the Elephant and Castle threaten to be exemplary in other ways than intended: for the relentless pressure of rising land value is already pushing industry and working families further from the centre.

Instead of the harmony and sweeping flows of the Olympic sales brochure, the landscape that visitors experience in the Lea Valley is filled with contrasts and abrupt changes. A land bridge carries us past the security fences of a railway line; an expanse of asphalt leads to an elaborately engineered bridge, with an old canal lock below; beside the elegant cycle track, an awkward shed houses electrical equipment, screened by coloured mesh; behind the rustic café and playground, the tall, orderly apartment buildings; self-seeded trees along the riverbanks of the ancient, meandering river highlight the man-made character of most of the landscape. Instead of a crystalline centrepiece, the stadium is a provisional steel frame designed to be dismantled, now undergoing expensive (and publicly funded) conversion for football; the Broadcast Centre, the largest structure on the site, is a

³ Bruno Latour, *A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)* (2008), <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/112-DESIGN-CORNWALL-GB.pdf>

prefabricated shed of a scale and blankness typical of the pre-Olympic Lea; along Stratford High Street to the south, a crop of unruly towers crowds in on the edge of the site.

Despite £7 billion of public investment, the deep structure of the Lea Valley is unaltered. The Olympic area remains an enclave, protected by a ring of infrastructure, connected only at selective locations. The land has been profoundly reshaped, but the site remains unusually vertical for London, strangely discontinuous; the many bridges have connected the parcels of land but distanced the rivers, whose water feels remote. The area is carved up by old and new networks of pipes, cables, roads and rails, and dotted with pumping stations, electrical sub-stations and car parks. Despite extensive expropriation, former territories have been reinstated, compensating public authorities and private developers for land drawn into the project. The water remains stubbornly toxic, washed by the pollutants of its wide urban catchment. The pure, smooth dream persists only in name: in a telling inversion, the former reservoir site at Old Ford, the source of London's cholera outbreak in 1866, has been named 'Sweetwater'.

At the Elephant and Castle, the vision has lost the engaging futurism of the original, replaced by market realism and convention. The two towers totalling ninety storeys were considered too high; fourteen smaller towers totalling three hundred storeys replace them. The social housing was originally all to be replaced on site; finally, only 79 apartments for social rent and six hundred below market rent will be built. Instead of the limpid glass and hanging gardens, the towers are sliced by hundreds of balconies, while the curved glass of the drawings materialises as boxy metal. Penthouses and shop units punctuate the towers in a perfunctory way, abruptly terminating extrusions that could otherwise be indefinitely extended. The brute stacking of space is masked behind arbitrary differences of cladding materials.

The trajectory of these projects from the ideal to the actual reveals the balance of forces in early twenty-first century London. The weak hold of individual tenants and owners is evident from their expulsion, and their exclusion from the benefits: it is reported that the average compensation given to leaseholders of a one bedroom flat at the Heygate was less than a third of the price for the same in the new development. Reflecting its eroded tax base and post-crisis constraints, the primary role of the public sector at the Elephant and Castle and in the post-Olympic development appears to be enabling, rather than active: assembling and clearing the land, taking on huge risks of process and liability, before parcelling up sites and selling them on. The commercial transactions carried out on behalf of the public are convoluted and opaque, the visible operations of an invisible calculus trading capital assets, tax base, revenue and liabilities. Southwark council have spent as much on the process of clearing tenants from the Heygate as they received for the land in the first place; in building replacement housing units on a number of council-owned sites nearby, they have valued this land at zero. Small islands of the public sector enjoy a decisive capacity for action: the regional transport authority, Transport for London, and the temporary Olympic Delivery Authority, but not its successor the London Legacy Development Corporation – but their actions are specific and insular, like their remits. The housing which generates the real value is being built by a few private developers specialised in the field, with the capitalisation to build at the massive scale demanded – that is, in the hundreds or thousands

of homes. The housing associations providing the designated quota of affordable accommodation have morphed - under pressure of rising land costs and falling grants - from modestly scaled social enterprises into large portfolio holders increasingly indistinguishable from the developers they partner.

In this play of forces, the architect is a weak but crucial figure, by turns an authoritative visionary and an expendable service provider. In the Lea Valley and at the Elephant and Castle, where land must be extracted from many hands and passed on to few, the narrative of regeneration relies on the fiction of architectural control. The architect's delicate geometries and modulated textures build an image of the common good, in which the public is in equilibrium with the private, in which the city mitigates its environmental impacts rather than just scaling them up, in which the promise of the new outweighs the claims of the old. The composition of volumes promises density without excessive proximity, and suggests permeability even while reinforcing exclusivity. The provisional, negotiated character of the city is suppressed for a brief moment, long enough to shape an image of crystalline purity - but this image is as brittle and fragile as a crystal, too.

It is no accident, then, that there is a sharp disjunction between the vision of the future city that triggers change, and the provisional and fragmented city that results. Visions of such simple purity can only be corrupted by realisation. Under the supple interpretive culture that flows from English law, with key members of the architectural team dispensed of, and with little institutional continuity, the realisation becomes a crude approximation - the opposite of the equilibrium and coherence that legitimated large scale action in the first place. It used to be the specifics of everyday life that enriched and refined the abstract schematic of the city plan: now, multiple resistances - the inconvenient existing structure that has not been accommodated but cannot be moved, the standardised construction that refuses to bend to shared geometries, the burden of value exacted from tenants, homogenising the businesses and residents - make the translation of a schema into a city both coarse and lopsided, no more than the sum of its parts.

4. Interdependence and redundancy

*'Every landscape appears first of all as a vast chaos, which leaves one free to choose the meaning one wants to give it. But over and above agricultural considerations, geographical irregularities and the various accidents of history and prehistory, the most majestic meaning of all is surely that [geology] which precedes, commands and, to a large extent, explains the others...When I became acquainted with Freud's theories, I quite naturally looked upon them as the application, to the individual human being, of a method the basic pattern of which is represented by geology. At a different level of reality, Marxism seemed to me to proceed in the same manner as geology and psychoanalysis...All three demonstrate that understanding consists in reducing one type of reality to another; that the true reality is never the most obvious; and that the nature of truth is already indicated by the care it takes to remain elusive.'*⁴

⁴ Claude. Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*. Tr. J. and D. Weightman. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, (1984). p68-70

For those of us who knew the dirty river and the unloved roundabout, the promises of a pure Lea Valley or a frictionless Elephant and Castle were always hard to believe; so were the exaggerated accounts of their obvious flaws. In fact, these neglected edges of the urban condition are the school where my colleagues and I first heard the language of the city – and later tried to speak it. They are where we have learned to read the currents beneath the pavements and behind the walls, and where we have managed to unlearn professional habits of control.

Motivated by little more than curiosity, we have walked the Lea Valley and Bankside (the area between the Elephant and Castle and the Thames) time after time over the last twenty years, observing them from all angles and listening to the casual insights of strangers. We started our open-ended fieldwork long before these areas were a target for urban renewal, when we could look and listen with a degree of innocence. Their twisted paths and mineral edges, their odours and sounds are now imprinted on our bodies and lodged in our memories. This mosaic of images and sensations sketches the idea of a city in our minds. In the Lea Valley, this composite image is pieced together from the thickets of slender grey tree trunks against chrome yellow steel cladding, from the light on the taut meniscus of the water at the lock gates, and the deep cleft of murky silt revealed by the retreating tide; the bodily memory is made up of the unrelenting regularity of asphalt, the uncertainties of cobbled paths and the yielding surface of marsh grass, of the constantly fluctuating gusts of wind and the assaults of dust and swarf. We have stitched together these fragmentary scraps, retracing our steps in the pages of the London A-Z, and tracking orphaned structures through a succession of old maps back towards their origins. In our minds this mosaic is fragile but still coherent. When our backs are turned, pieces shift and the whole alters, staying the same but imperceptibly becoming something different. The stealthy dynamism of the living city formed our ideas of totality and change. At the edge of the city, you never step in the same river twice.

In the Lea Valley, industry, nature and community reveal themselves through contrast and contradiction rather than through categorical neatness: yards in which giant metallic arms lacerate the scrap between their fingers next to a salmon smokery and sushi factory; ancient willows, poplars and oaks along meandering riverbanks and ditches, crossing the lines of skeletal, silvery pylons and the russet drums of gasholders; a heronry at a reedy bend in the river amongst the shiny metal distribution sheds; a golf course next to a sewage works; housing estates next to towers housing global corporations; ancient marsh and woodland next to recovering landfill; toxic silt next to filtered drinking water; a church congregating in a large metal shed, and a pumping station that resembles a Russian Orthodox church.

These seemingly arbitrary juxtapositions start to reveal the deep structure of the valley. The differences in the rivers, between long, straight canalised sections, and verdant, meandering stretches, are rooted in the long-standing separation of transport and power into separate watercourses. Expelled from the city proper as it cleaned and simplified itself, the works and depots have collected in the floodplain that marked the city boundary. Businesses along the Lea now serve central districts of the city, and rely on this proximity: the aggregate works recycling demolition waste to return it back to construction sites, or the smokery providing sous-chef services to West End hotels.

Manufacturing and infrastructure have polluted in places yet operated a regime of benign neglect in many others, creating a strange symbiosis between industry and wild landscape. The complex web of interdependencies is nowhere clearer than at the luxuriant fig tree at Three Mills Island: self-seeded from storm sewage discharge, growing from the river wall, protected from frost by the mild tidal water.

For East Londoners, the Lea Valley is a space that remains outside the logic of the city: a space of transgression but also a parallel constellation of associations. Identified and protected as a linear swathe shaded green on a modernist city plan, its administrators have never quite been sure what it could add up to - and have allowed some parts to run wild, and loaded others with venues for organised fun. At the margins of the valley, cottagers, dealers and boy racers find space; through its patchwork spaces, small groups organise themselves in rowing, boating, fishing and sailing clubs, rambling and jogging groups, community gardens. As one allotment gardener explained to us, 'Tottenham is very mixed demographically in terms of races and cultures but there's not a lot of integration between the communities that live here. At the allotments everyone has a common interest which is to grow vegetables and to hang out and be a bit mellow and connect to something which isn't part of the city.'⁵ The open spaces along the Lea are a fragile common ground, vast but granular, institutional but improvised, continually under negotiation.

If the Lea Valley seems not yet city, the Elephant and Castle feels like it has been urban, but is no longer so. In between its blank modernist facades lie places of assembly for the early mass society: the grand classical portico of the Metropolitan Tabernacle beckons to a vast congregation, while blue steel cladding and club night posters conceal a gargantuan music hall; the palatial Victorian public house survives only in the name of its squat concrete reincarnation. Beneath the modern roundabout lies a medieval crossroads multiplied by eighteenth-century thoroughfares: a white stone obelisk nearby marks the end of a grand and orderly Georgian avenue, tracing a straight route across the marshes from a newly-built bridge. These remains of the pre-modern city are like isolated, worn teeth in a mouth of crowns.

The infrastructures of the post-war remaking are motley but grand: the tall concrete slabs of housing, the rectilinear volumes of the universities and the shopping centre, the delicate geometries of the former Department of Health office, and the low metallic transformer box. Alexander Fleming House, whose foyer was decorated with photomurals of nurses and doctors in crisp white uniforms with stainless steel implements, was long ago converted to apartments, rebranded Metro Central Heights. The transformers for the Underground are clad in a grid of concave stainless steel panels, straddled by a steel skeleton: an abstract hymn to electromagnetism and its discoverer Faraday. These structures display the accelerated decay typical of modernism; but this physical decline is all the more pathetic for accurately evoking the gradual abandonment of the ideals that created them - equal access to housing, healthcare and education. The tarnished gleam of the Faraday Memorial reflects the mortality of the future.

The battered modernist remains linger as promises that are no longer fulfilled but not yet broken. In this they repeat a cycle. Each new making

of the Elephant and Castle carried promises about the future encoded in their streets and buildings: promises of order and trade; competing offers of hedonism and moral reform in the industrial metropolis; declarations of equality and rights, and of technological abundance in the post-war city. Yet each evocation of the future came with a price: for creation and promise were inseparable from destruction and discipline. The grand avenue was accompanied by a scattering of asylums, prisons and workhouses, carving large institutional plots and new confinements from the fields. New roads and railways brought the district into a larger metropolitan orbit, but were tactically directed to displace poorer residents from their decaying lodgings. By directing a high volume of traffic at this crossroads, the post-war planners could argue that it was unsuitable for the public uses that clustered there – legitimising the thorough destruction of theatres and public houses. At each remaking of the Elephant and Castle, the attempt was made to apply the discipline of the present to the recalcitrant fabric of the city. The succession of corrections removed what was disordered, separated what was complex, and obliterated what was old, dismantling the granular interdependencies of the city.

Yet if much of the resistance of the city’s material and social structures can be overcome by a concentration of political will, capital and industrialised production, one form of resistance cannot. Every project to reshape the Elephant and Castle has foundered sooner or later on the resistance of time. Destructive though it is, the escapist imagination that underlies modern city thinking has a self-defeating streak: at their edges, successive purges and binges have left a heterogeneous array of remains. They do not form a hospitable environment or a cohesive balance of interests, but the buildings and the spaces between them host a rich assortment of organisations and institutions, and a wide diversity of individuals: two universities, trade union and charity offices, a dance troupe in an old school, a street market. The redundant spaces of the city are among its most receptive to associational life – yet it is precisely such redundant spaces that successive renewals have tried to erase.

5. Recollection, projection, negotiation

‘One aspect that always strikes me in relation to architecture and the city of our time is that there is the desire to finish everything very quickly. This anxiety for a definitive solution prevents the complementarity between different scales, between the urban fabric and the monument, between construction and open space. Today, for any intervention whatsoever, even small and fragmented, it is immediately compromised by the premature demand for a definitive image.’⁶

In London, where architects and designers serve an overheated property market, and pander to the grand ambitions but limited means of public actors, the escapist imagination has an established role. Professional optimists play out a limited syntax of abstract virtues in endlessly small variations. Yet at the awkward edges of the city, where sites are complex and constrained, and when the new has run out of energy and money, there is room for the frictions and imperfections of the latecomer’s imagination. In public space, working between heterogeneous buildings and over buried infrastructures, negotiating conflicting imaginings and claims, design is

⁶ Alvaro Siza, *Imaginer l’Evidence*. Tr. D. Machabert. Marseille: Éditions Parenthèses (2012).. p95 [my translation from French]

by necessity a form of adaptation to found conditions. Such places call for considerable suppleness and openness, and an understanding of the city that adds up to more than the sum of its parts. These are the kind of situations where our architectural studio, Witherford Watson Mann Architects, has found itself working, and where we have tried to speak the language of the city that we had slowly learned to hear.

In three projects for public space, in the Lea Valley and at the Elephant and Castle, we have been offered the opportunity to take on the awkward legacies of the cumulative city, and tried to leverage its resistances into a form of change. Coming in at the tail end of long processes of change, we have imagined the city different to the present one, but nothing other than itself. In the Upper Lea Valley, we produced a strategy for the landscapes and open spaces of a twenty-five kilometre stretch, whose first project is currently under construction at Walthamstow Reservoirs. For the Olympic district, we prepared a strategy for the public spaces of the post-games masterplan, which was consented and is now in the process of delivery by developer-led teams. At the Elephant and Castle, we have designed a new public square as a part of a highways project, whose first phase of construction has just been completed.

On these projects, we have experienced design not as something sudden, fixed and personal, but rather as something gradual, collective and open-ended. We have found ourselves recollecting the city, editing, rehearsing and performing it, negotiating, prototyping and only ever partly completing it. To call these 'tactics' would suggest a conscious degree of control that wasn't present; yet these actions follow a pattern of non-linear exchange - between individual and group, between experience and imagination. From this perspective, design in the city seems to be a series of ever closer approximations to a dynamic equilibrium. Tentative steps and representations allow multiple imaginations to be negotiated into something resembling a shared imagination; they allow complexities to be accommodated through collective judgement. The patient and provisional nature of every action offers the possibility for new voices to contribute, and for each step towards realisation to add to rather than subtract from the emerging equilibrium.

Unable and unwilling to play a controlling role, we have embraced the multiplicity of participants, and the team of specialists beside us, accepting that both questions and answers will be negotiated. We have widened the conversation by carrying out in-depth interviews with members of the public, drawing in specific observations and broad emotions. In this multi-sided conversation between local government, public agencies, utilities and public, the tone shifts rapidly and bewilderingly between fact, interpretation and feeling. Faced with such irreducible complexities, we have used the knowledge of fellow participants to tease out the nature of places and the links between possible actions and desired behaviours. Rather than imposing an order, it becomes our role to bring together competing logics in a soft overarching narrative. At its most effective, such a process is a construction of trust, between participants and with us; in more tense situations, a suspension of mistrust may be enough.

In the quiet of the studio, we rehearse the complexities of a place, weighing existing physical capacities, and judging the capability of institutions to carry out change, or of social and economic groupings to support new grafts.

A combination of hand and brain starts to grasp which elements have the greatest inertia, which are most prohibitive in cost or political capital to remove - the deep structure of a place. Even in the apparent tabula rasa of the Olympic site, the simple exercise of subtracting infrastructures - the Victorian interceptor sewer and railway, but also the cables and pipes laid for the games – laid out the scraps from which a new city quarter would have to be fashioned, radically reshaping the narrative of freedom into one of constraint. We sift with our eyes and bodily memories, narrating commonalities and differences with the stroke of a pencil. Tracing the existing city from the map, my hand feels its different dialects: the wild, the utilitarian, the naturalistic, the isolated, the collaborative. As I drag the graphite across tracing paper, my body relives memories of its topographic order or its social texture. Filtered through the individual consciousness, but shedding the individual will, the movements of the pencil gather together the tensional actions from which the city is woven: excavating deep capabilities, building possible futures from this foundation.

A few lines in crude perspective are enough to trace the boathouse and the curve of the canal, or the metal box of the memorial and the concrete harmonies of the apartments behind. These traces of the existing are enough to transport me to a place that does not yet exist, and to prompt an imagining of life that I can believe. Neither the alarming vacancy of the blank sheet of paper nor the information overload of the CAD survey file can do this. As I draw, I am nurturing like embers the life along the towpath or the exchanges in the market. I know this energy is beyond the control of any construction project, and all we can do is lay the kindling and channel the draughts.

Recollection and projection are entwined in these paper rehearsals and meeting room performances. My memory interposes fragments of other cities, suggesting moments that are analogous to those before me: the vertical stack of bridges and terraces of Edinburgh's Waterloo Place, the fishing platforms and reed beds of Brussels' Vallée de la Woluwe, the panoramic view from the slag-heap in Bottrop, and the couple in intense conversation there. My suspicion edits these unconscious prompts, dismissing recollections of order and playfulness, retaining those where constraint and distinctiveness are inseparable. With my colleagues, we weave them into a patchwork of images and words, which we play out with different discussion partners, dropping some elements and refining others as we go. We communicate in the language of structure and experience - of plan and perspective - drawing the detached and the attached into a relation, persuading and inviting comment. Through this process we must fend off false analogies, either reductive or over-ambitious, and surpass the benchmark of ideas which have already gained some traction: the floating hotels on the reservoirs, the visitor attraction for the affluent, the fiction that either park or high street is continuous despite multiple interruptions. Even once construction has commenced, trust and confidence must be sustained by a feedback loop of positive response, if later stages or related projects are to be funded and supported. Such work is both patient and opportunistic: like a game of cards, the city plays us just as much as we play it.

We tailor the tools for thinking and discussion to each project. For the Upper Lea Valley, we devised a three-dimensional drawing projection that enabled us not only to compress twenty-five kilometres onto an elongated vertical scroll but also to zoom in and design parts in greater detail; over six months,

switching between hand drawing and digital manipulation, we pieced these localised interventions into a loose whole. At the Olympic site, focused on its surprising verticality, we built a physical model in grey card, starting with a small piece covering the tangle of infrastructure at its centre, growing over the months to take up a whole room. For the Elephant and Castle, an elevated night view placed the buildings in the background, allowing us to focus on the multiplicity of small spaces and their cumulative identity. These representations are analogues for the dynamic mosaic of the city, where the parts are neither subordinate to nor independent of the whole.

Starting from the concrete detail of the existing city may seem limiting compared to the apparent freedoms of the blank sheet of paper. Yet the fig tree, the metal box or the allotment holder's phrase are all springboards for the imagination more vivid than the abstract virtues of smooth movement and pastoral parkland. Submitting to the chains of existing infrastructures, land ownerships or remnant structures interrupts the flow of productive logic, but the nimble mind will find or improvise different orders which fit these left-over spaces. Just as submitting to the discipline of the text is no limit to the actor's craft, or starting with a tuppenny song is no limit to the musician's invention – think Josquin des Prez or John Coltrane – there is no reason that the existing city should be seen as a limit to the architect's imagination. The contribution of the professional to the collective imagination simply needs to be redefined: instead of the imagination of the heroic form-makers, what is increasingly called for is the adaptive imagination of the latecomer - accepting that the city is already there, adding and subtracting locally, intervening decisively and distinctively.

6. Transformations

*'I had learned one thing from my years studying architecture: Buildings take the shape of their architects' and buyers' dreams. After the Greeks, Armenians and Levantines who had dreamed up these buildings were forced to leave them in the early years of the last century, they came to reflect the imaginations of the succeeding occupants. I am not talking here about an active imagination shaping these buildings and streets to give the city a certain look. I am talking of the passive imagination of people who came from faraway places to streets and buildings already looking a certain way, who then changed their dreams to adapt to it.'*⁷

Our landscape strategy for the Upper Lea Valley was a search for small keys to open large doors - an attempt to establish modest initial projects that would have a disproportionately positive effect, or to find single actions with multiple benefits (and access to different budgets). Additional paths and bridges to create a more complete network, making the valley easier and more rewarding to use; additional facilities to appeal to more diverse users and encourage longer visits; a strong sense of particular and local qualities but an understanding of the modest overarching unity required.

The first project from the strategy illustrates the fundamental transformation achievable with modest means. Under the alliterative but loose title 'Walthamstow Wetlands', a restrained £9m of construction work will open up 200 hectares of working reservoirs for public use. The landscape works are infrastructural but focused: paths, bridges and boardwalks in steel, with

7 Orhan Pamuk. 'Why Didn't I Become an Architect', in *Other Colours*. Tr. M. Freely. London: Faber and Faber. (2007). p306

new river edge trees and reedbeds in the ornamental Victorian reservoirs. Two existing pump-houses will be adapted, stripped back to their brick shells and opened up with steel walkways, hosting a café, an exhibition space and a classroom. Elevated platforms within these tall utilitarian structures will offer views of the broad floodplain that the raised reservoir bunds prevent – a minimal and opportunist addition offering visibility to the otherwise elusive Lea Valley. The project has been negotiated between the water company who own and operate the reservoirs, the local authority and an ecological trust, re-imagining a functional infrastructure site into a multivalent public space – reserve, cycle route, meeting place and promenade, as well as operational water supply. Its use and operation will be a project too, a new public space entailing mutual encounter of diverse ethnicities and interests – a construction of organisational capacity and a negotiation of civility.

What we have slowly learned is that, although the extensive landscape of the River Lea seems sparsely populated, in fact it carries a heavy emotional investment on the part of its users; it seems neglected but is if anything over-determined by conflicting demands and desires. Here, the understanding of the designer must be broad, but their action focused; only by absorbing and negotiating others' imaginings, can their imagination gently reshape the collective unconscious. In other words, here the designer is like a novelist weaving many experiences into one loose container – not a heroic inventor or founder.

Further down the valley, at the Olympic site, the western edge of new development had been neglected during the construction of the Games – it was the site of first the hoarding that closed off the works, then a steel security fence. We identified this edge as one of the most substantial opportunities of the 'Olympic Legacy Masterplan', the framework for developing the sites vacated by temporary venues and the extensive back of house facilities for the games. Rather than being the place where the energy of the new ran out, it became imaginable as a place energised by both existing and new residents and users.

The edge is marked by the Hackney Cut, an eighteenth century canal that shortcut the wide meander of the river across the floodplain. Since the towpath is a deep-rooted liberty, it is populated by joggers, dog-walkers and houseboat-residents; since there are no locks for six kilometres, it is also popular for rowing; with security and management absent, a different atmosphere prevails. The old boiled sweet factory buildings sit at either end of the arched bridge, the old Eton Manor boathouse and the church tower of St. Mary's are evocative remnants of the philanthropy that first tried to correct the errant labourers; a Victorian school building looms over the low yellow brick houses of the 1980s home-owning democracy and the metal sheds of the enterprise culture. Here, the manufactured differences of design coded developments meet the real differences of an area built and rebuilt many times.

In developing the idea of a 'canal park', of equal weight to the inward-facing Olympic Park, we argued that this edge of the site has significant possibility as a public space where differences can be expressed. The two canals open views to the clusters of towers in the City and in the old dock districts, offering users a sense of connection to the existing metropolis. New public buildings and shared facilities, if located here – for example, two schools, a

library, the railway station, bus stops and new shops - can serve both existing and new communities. The inherited accidents and the found diversity of the edge condition offer a more promising basis for collective life than the managed parklands.

A knot of infrastructures at the heart of the site called for further acceptance and improvisation. Here, the canal runs four metres above the meandering Old River Lea; the railway crosses just two and a half metres above the canal; the Olympic land bridge crosses five metres above the tracks. This knot of infrastructures was more than enough to defeat any ambition to maintain the smooth continuity of the park landscape – indeed, it would be hard to reconcile with any conventional idea of a park. This conundrum opened up instead the opportunity to expose and intensify the different levels. In our conception, the wide windswept land bridge should be inhabited by apartment buildings and be extended to the edge of the river, narrowing the valley at this most vertical point; conversely, by means of a pontoon link under the railway bridge, it should be possible to follow the meandering river and its tree-lined banks through the valley without having to climb back up to the city.

As one moves through and around it, this knot and its many levels will be experienced something like a fault, exposing the geology of the city. Despite the clearance of the site and sculpting of the land, this area is an accumulation of matter, in which successive waves of development overlay the alluvium and gravel in neat strata. These strata trace the evolution of the site from a broad area of marshy pasture to a swathe of riverside mills, factories and works, to an engineered landscape elevated high above the floodplain. This accumulation is not simply material: in exposing and accentuating it we offer the multiplicity of pasts and their imagined futures for public experience. We have used the apparent tabula rasa of the Olympics to demonstrate its opposite, the impossibility of escape and the inevitability of entanglement in the city we inherit. Here, the designer doesn't have to be more than a geologist, tracing the still live energy of a fault; or an archaeologist, scraping back the layers to find the village beneath the city, or the city beneath the village.

At the Elephant and Castle, highway works carried out by the transport authority connect the island at the centre of the roundabout to the shopping centre to the southeast, replacing the subways with street level crossings: they rebalance the priority between vehicles and pedestrians, but are focused on movement. In designing the public space thus created we have dared to speculate that despite the volume of traffic, users might linger, stop and even talk; that here in the contested and conflicted public realm a form of civility might be possible that is unlikely to flourish amongst the managed spaces and artificial differences of the new development.

We have honoured the large outdoor room formed by the modernist blocks, by proposing that the two new developments are subordinated into this existing but incomplete square – making this a bastard version of London's archetype of public space. This large square would be populated by three existing small buildings, with a fourth, new, pavilion on the old street line, forming a canopy for market stalls. The pavements in between the road, the pavilions and the square are correspondingly diverse in dimension and character, linking the new street level crossings, offering outside space for

the institutions that ring the space despite the best efforts of its makers: the London College of Communication, existing shops and cafes, and the market. Offsetting the felling of the mature landscape at the Heygate, 60 new trees will be planted to shade these areas, selected to replace the mix of odd species accumulated over the centuries in this area. The new canopy roof and the blind gable will be planted as hanging gardens, allowing the square to be both paved and verdant. In the middle of the new square, the Faraday Memorial glitters and scatters the rays of the sun and passing vehicles; removed from its island, this ghost of futures past sits at the centre of this frenzy of creative destruction. Beside and high above, we plan to install the bronze elephant salvaged from the Victorian pub, atop a column like Nelson or the lion of St Mark. These twin monuments, one abstract the other figurative, are emblems of continuity amidst the flux of the city.

Designing a new public space here is a work of negotiation – negotiating with landowners, residents, highway authorities and public transport operators, but also negotiating awkward inheritances. The imagination we have exercised here is synthetic – like editing a set of found texts with new contributions, or mixing found noises, words and songs into a provisional synthesis.

Despite the many physical constraints, despite the negotiated character of the design processes, and despite incomplete and approximate realisation, our experience on these projects suggests to us that profound change is possible in the city through small scale, incremental actions. It may not be necessary to clear away existing structures, nor to create a blank sheet of paper. In this way, in the Upper Lea Valley a neglected edge can become a common ground. At Walthamstow Wetlands an enclave can become a porous reserve. At the perimeter of the Olympic site, what was a boundary can become a border, permeable and fertile; at its centre, what is an obstacle to pastoral continuity can be turned into a celebration of its metropolitan contrasts. At the Elephant and Castle a set of pedestrian islands can be made into an archipelago of public spaces, what were awkward fragments can be embraced as traces of continuity. The deep structure of a place may itself be unalterable, but its value can be changed, even inverted.

7. Re-orienting the professional imagination

‘Still short-lived

Like a machine that is used

But is not good enough

But gives promise of a better model

Work for endurance must

*Be built like a machine full of shortcomings.*⁸

London is being rebuilt at what feels like a fast pace and a large scale. Drawing in nearly ten times the infrastructure spending per head than Britain’s other regions, the Crossrail rail line will stretch the city-region’s footprint to ninety kilometres. Extensive blocks of land left behind by the industrial metropolis are a ready-made reserve for the city’s growth: old exhibition sites at White City and Wembley, the swathe of old wharves and works from Vauxhall to Deptford, the old railway sites at Kings Cross, Bishopsgate and Whitechapel, the old factory sites at Hayes, Leamouth and Tottenham, the vast but fragmented Royal Docks, still in a state of

8 Brecht, Bertolt, ‘About the Way to Construct Enduring Works’ in Poems 1913-56. Ed. and Tr. J. Willett, R. Manheim, E. Fried. London: Methuen. (1987) p194

becoming more than thirty years after the impulse of the London Docklands Development Corporation.

Nonetheless, the city's expanding range and increasing density are not enough to restrain the fast-rising cost of housing or of industrial land. As the scale of pressures mounts, it seems as if only ever-larger solutions will provide satisfactory answers. It is perhaps unsurprising that the legacy of modernist city planning, the large areas of prematurely aged sheds and barrack-like apartment blocks, are seen as ripe for intervention. Although the Olympic site is a one-off case, the example of the Lea Valley is being applied to the vast Park Royal industrial estate, whose 950 hectares have been incorporated into a Development Corporation. Renewal of housing estates continues to deliver more homes but reduce the stock of social housing. Yet as both the Olympic site and the Elephant and Castle show, the larger that the project is, the more cumbersome and onerous the processes, and the slower the delivery; the harder it is to escape the sudden changes of the market or of mayoral policy; the more the public sector is reliant on highly capitalised investors and contractors; the more the final result differs from the initial promise – not just in terms of appearance, but in terms of the values that underpin it.

The elusive future city haunts plans for these large 'brownfield' sites. In echoes of the Lea Valley or Elephant and Castle, glass towers, roof gardens and strips of green are the default language. By these means, associations with industrial decay are banished, and vague promises are made about permeability and public space. The infrastructures and watercourses that mark their edges contribute to the atmosphere of the enclave, reinforced by the radical differences in density between these sites and their surroundings. The new districts of twenty-first century London are dense but their life is muted and provisional.

These imaginings of the future city are strange throwbacks to the aesthetics of the Victorian park and the modernist project for the city. Although updated by techniques of complex modelling and irrigation, they share the same fear of dirt or of touching, the urge to demolish and the unwillingness to retain, the taste for decorative vegetation and unifying geometry, the same narrative of physical change translating into social improvement – everything but the progressive values and convictions that underpinned these projects.

Past corrections of the city were carried out in the name of prestige, moral reform, public health and crime prevention. What or whom do today's regenerations serve? The actors in local government, the development sector and their architects all subscribe to the ambition to create areas with diverse residents and uses. Yet, despite significant organisation and political will, these intentions are easily inverted or diverted. For it is precisely the elusive interdependencies of the urban condition that large-scale, industrialised production cannot deliver. Behind the fictions of controlled design and simulated diversity, the granular city is being slowly dismantled in order to be reassembled in larger packages, more suited to standardised construction and easier to manage.

In comparison to the storm of forces driving urban change, the individual imagination is puny. Yet the future city imagined by our most persuasive architects plays a crucial role in unleashing change. It is the promise that

legitimizes the displacement of work and of residents from the centre of the city, and that provides a superficial measure against which the dirty river and unloved roundabout can be found deficient. It is the promise that the answer lies in large scale production of the environment, and that this large scale requires a blank slate. It is the promise of harmony and balance that never materialises, for with local, regional and national governments in retreat, control has been delegated from collective to private, from present to remote interests.

Contemplating the accumulated deposits that make up London, it seems that the more quickly we try to build the city, and larger the parcels we do this in, the wider the gap between benign intention and unintended consequence. It seems that our industrial and economic capacity to produce the components of the city outstrips our collective capacity to make it habitable – to find a balance between multiple interests. The city as we find it is has an inbuilt capacity for change, through everyday destructions and constructions of its cells; accepting this granular structure distributes the capacity for change amongst a wider range of actors. A counter-intuitive conclusion suggests itself: that in these times of profound economic and social upheaval, the physical continuity of the city is fundamental to our collective capacity to accommodate change. For the city belongs to culture and not to technology: like other aspects of culture, it precedes and shapes us, rather than being shaped or controlled by us.

If we cannot reshape the city to match our dreams – pure and smooth, ageless and timeless, in a serene state of being - shouldn't we then change our dreams to accommodate the city as we find it - dirty and congested, ruined and under construction, in a restless state of becoming? This would require a rewiring of our professional imaginations, and a rejection of the fiction of architectural control. It would require us to dissolve our egos in the collective imagination of the city. It would require us to find our creativity alongside the interpretive, improvised skills of the novelist, the archaeologist or the musician. Working with the resistances of the city's fabric would enable us to build on rather than erase existing capacities; it would leverage the impacts of the individual imagination, and reinforce the responsibility that comes with its exercise.

I am describing the imagination of the latecomer, not the heroic founder. For, if the city is a party, we are always late for it. We arrive to find a corner seat next to unfamiliar faces, overhearing only the tail end of sentences. It may be tempting to leave and start our own, in order to be there at the beginning, to be in control – but, at the scale of miles and timescale of decades that characterise the city, this threatens to be a long wait. Being a latecomer brings all sorts of limitations – but accepting this condition offers greater opportunity for profound and progressive change than fighting it.

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