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# LEA VALLEY DRIFT

Oliver Froome-Lewis & Chloe Street

**BEYOND THE OLYMPIC PARK**

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 Chloe is a key researcher at 'Touching the City' and is also researching and developing the Lea Valley Drift project with LLDC. She is an Architect and Lecturer in Architecture at Kent School of Architecture, UKC.



Take a walk, see what you find.

“Objects in a path determine motion and interaction.”<sup>01</sup>  
**seth cluett** the hidden autonomy of water

First published in 2013 by LLDC - London Legacy Development Corporation, Level 10, 1 Stratford Place, Montfichet Road, Olympic Park, London, E20 1EJ.

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
 A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library  
 ISBN: 978-0-9926017-0-6

“A journey implies a destination, so many miles to be consumed, while a walk is its own measure, complete at every point along the way.”<sup>02</sup>  
**francis alys** seven walks project

“Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. These are journeys I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the ones I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time.”<sup>03</sup>  
**jeanette winterson** sexing the cherry

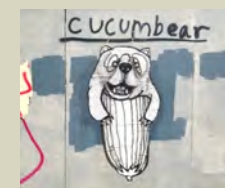
“Objects carry both ideas and passions.”<sup>04</sup>  
**sherry turkle** evocative objects

**Prelude - Touching the City**

This project contributes to our design research unit 'Touching the City'<sup>05</sup> which investigates the ways we interact with the city, observing the public realm and exploring our relationships with the unremarkable spaces we use and inhabit every day. The project is focussed on the lower Lea Valley, a location at an important juncture in its geographic history, and a fascinating condenser of voices prioritising the past or the future.

We are exploring the Lea Valley with the objective of revealing the

value of minor public spaces in the area and widening participation. City and Olympic authorities necessarily highlight the area as a limitless opportunity and resource, raising awareness and interest in the general population, while reassuring locals that





shed and tent, leamouth

Mid-winter 2012. 7.30am. CSA fieldwork in Hungary. We are running across the Chain Bridge in Budapest. It is chilly, -17, and people - there are one or two about - are looking at us rather strangely. It is not really the done thing. An empty tram glides by on a cushion of powder snow, its driver motionless in the cab. His extravagant moustache quivering.

\* \* \*

Spring 2012. 9.00am. There is rain at the Emirates Cable Car Station on the north bank of the Thames when we meet a few weeks later to test ourselves again, this time endurance walking the Lea Valley. It rains quite frequently in this part of London. Earlier we had seen the whole of the city laid out from the gently oscillating cabin of the cable car. Sunlight and trivial clouds except for the valley ahead where a dark smudge all but obscured the view to the Olympic Park far to the north. Rain, rain, rain, more rain.

The dock; dark, deep and restless shrugs off waterskiers and other insignificant vessels. It is a monumental waste. And it is impossible for it to be otherwise. Prior essential function lost, the human and material costs of excavation haunt us. We moved its freight downstream. At Excel the high level dock bridge affords an unexpected view. Planes dip to land at the airport beyond between pulsing golden necklaces of light.

A pylon, danger of death, yellow. Falling man struck down by Eastern gas-fired thunderbolt. Pride in the Distribution of Power long faded the nation paid handsomely to hide these cables beneath

“Can we suggest then, that the intersection of context and desire is very often the location of everyday struggle - both in terms of personal desire and cultural movement”<sup>06</sup>

ken ehrlich & brandon labelle  
surface tension

“The dérive (with its flow of acts, its gestures, its strolls, its encounters) was to the totality exactly what psychoanalysis (in the best sense) is to language. Let yourself go with the flow of words, says the psychoanalyst.”<sup>07</sup>

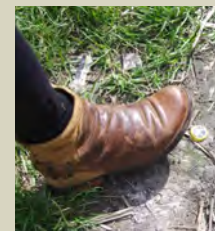
ivan chtcheglov letter from afar

Let yourself go...

the prospects for their future happiness and comfort remain credible. Meanwhile, fierce lobbying for the preservation of these local communities, for the retention of amenities such as allotments and football pitches and demands for the respect of relics of infinite variety, from sewage works to Berlin tram cars, has kept many activists, writers and local people focussed on ancient rights and past lives. The Olympic project has tended to unintentionally consolidate these positions, whilst at the same time creating opportunities for energies to be invested in alternative ways

of shaping the future of the area. The narrative above draws on a number of months of endurance walking, researching and reflecting on the multiple guises of the present valley, presented as a ‘snapshot’ in time. During the autumn of 2012 we developed this research into a mapping project, which was selected as part of the “Emerging East” programme, funded by the newly formed London Legacy Development Corporation to “deliver projects that showcase the quality of design within existing communities around the park”. We have since been developing a series of maps

and routes in collaboration with the LLDC, as part of the wider preparations for the opening of the northern section of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.



### Pre-conditioning

What were our expectations commencing such a walk? Parts were already familiar. We had crossed the area variously by car and rail, seen it through documentary, news and fictional programmes on the small screen. Read articles about design competitions. Seen the weather forecast. Viewed planes on their way to and from city airport. We were also conditioned by histories of the city, knowledge of new infrastructure projects, restaurant and café reviews, reports of possible happy or disastrous

### Lea, Lee

The River Lea and the Lee Navigation run parallel to one another. Valleys being formed by rivers we have adopted ‘Lea Valley’. Lea and Lee are used variously in the area.

futures, personal encounters, maps and guides. At the time, there was also a frenzy of activity and expenditure behind the blue fence of the Olympic Park. Media, bulldozers, McDonald’s, allotments, medals, more bulldozers, TV and the unexpected absences and presences of tickets.



optimistic taxi bather close to the 2012 'pleasure gardens' at the royals

More specifically we were conditioned by previous walk based projects, carried out through our wider design research unit Touching the City', which occupy genres of 'found place' and 'off site practices'. We recalled artists, photographers and filmmakers such as Francis Alys, Anna Best and Tacita Dean, who specialise in transforming understanding and experience of found places and happenings. And theorists such as Jane Rendell who link practices and cross boundaries between writing, theorising, making, film, performance art

and architecture. And, in any project related to walking, it is impossible to ignore the influence of literary history: William Blake, Arthur Machen, Poe, Baudelaire, Benjamin's 'flaneur'. Not to mention the mystic powers of Surrealism and the incarnation of 'psychogeography'; Guy Debord and the founding of the Situationist International; Iain Sinclair's rather dry take on psychogeography and Patrick Keiller's modern take on Defoe's 'Robinson'. Added to this, the academic cohort of contributors supporting an experience based analysis of the Everyday in the city,

"The notion that desire is inside and place is outside oversimplifies a complex terrain for certainly desire is externalised in the very formation of place. Place itself is loved as much internally as externally....."

Location – physical parameters and phantasmic projections.....

Making apparent the negotiations that occur in conceptualising and implementing ideas within a public domain....."<sup>08</sup>

ken ehrlich & brandon labelle  
seek definitions

the Olympics. A last pylon stands sentinel marking the point where the cables descend. They slide back to the surface, beyond the park, blinking. Leamouth; levelled sites awaiting development, and a bridge to Canning Town. And the former Pura vegetable oil refinery peninsula, rapeseed from Essex, once destined to become an Italian Hill Town, (gated community), awaits its first Olive Tree.

*Whilst our priorities differ slightly, a heart-stopping block of chocolate brownie or a handful of seeds, lingering at the pond dipping gate or admiring an abandoned brandy bottle beneath the A13 flyover... We concur on the peculiarity of an expansive landscape built upon with such lack of visual consequence but charged with traces of lives unseen. They tug at in our consciousnesses, demanding appreciation.*

Fresh air, discordant sounds; the rumble of trains, whoosh of cars on their way to the Woolwich Ferry or Canning Town, a jungle of thrown-together forms and inhabitations, a stray dog, the gentle fall of light. Across the river the deserted skywalk of the Millennium Dome is silhouetted against the sky. A skinny cobalt caterpillar scaling a bleached leaf.

East India Docks offers another approach to surplus water. An inner city salt marsh with bird hides. Perhaps an important stop off for those necessarily migrating outside the holiday season. Purpose made floating islands, ideal for nesting, their grey stones nicely camouflaging both sitter and guardian. There are only two islands, however, about two meters square each. Perhaps the flight path to the city airport and a vast bird colony are not really compatible? Though the dock provides an identity and amenity to neighboring apartment developments, human nesting, close by. Iron-bird one, Grey Wagtail nest elsewhere, please.

including: Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Richard Sennett could seriously delay an actual departure.

And yet, standing, getting soggy, all this prior knowledge was overwritten and channelled by the indisputable force of present reality, the eternal present, and the unique genius loci of a terrain in rapid transition.

### Way Finding

Once we set off these preconceptions were given order by the narrative of experience. Our navigational approach was simple – the river was to be our guiding force. Starting at the mouth of the River, we tracked as closely as we could to the banks of the Lea (river) alternating at times with the towpath of the Lee (navigation). Rivers predate the towns that surround them, support life along their banks, but also provide their own life. They have always played an important part in stories – their very essence is of narrative - the

route from fresh spring to tidal delta forming a metaphorical parallel to a human life.

Reaching the environs of Trinity Buoy Wharf, we were in familiar territory; the fluctuations of ownership and intentions in this area have offered a fertile test-bed for architecture students for a decade and provided the locations for many student briefs. Co-walking enthusiast Ralph Ward was following a parallel agenda and we shared and compared our experiences. Having worked previously as Regeneration Advisor for the



rising above it all

We are sitting at UCL following a screening of 'The Golden Temple', Enrico Masi - one of a large number of 'Lea Lost' movies screened over the past year.

Iain Sinclair is speaking and we are scribbling messages to and fro:

- Iain:** protest builds up narrative. enjoying protest.
- Chloe:** capturing energy generated by protest.
- Oliver:** only being able to generate energy by protesting.

Olympics and Thames Gateway at the Department of Communities and Local Government, Ralph was keen to find a way of connecting the under-valued historical and ecological points of interest in the Lea Valley, by forming an association of key members including: The Robin, Trinity Buoy Wharf, The Three Mills Trust, and further north, the Walthamstow Transport Museum. All of these attractions lie within close proximity to the River Lea, yet the physical and conceptual drives for the creation of a continuous riverside route remain incomplete along its lower stretches.

The "Lea Valley Walk" is one example of the on-going endeavour to realise the public amenity of the riverside. This way-marked route of 50 miles, opened in 1993, originating at the source of the River Lea in Luton, and ending in London. It is one of the six London Mayor's strategic network of walking routes covered by Ordnance Survey Explorer 162.174.182.193 Landranger 166.177. The last section of the way-marked route down to the Thames was added in 2000, though parts of this have been out of use during the Olympic Park development. Significantly,

Close-by the roundabout to the Lower Lea Crossing sports an engaging sculpture. It could be a joyful dancer but appears as a urinating man from our viewing angle. And what lies inside the central fronded jungle?

We shadow the Lea briefly. A broad path, brick paved, surely worth following, begs for friendly arm linking, ruby slippers and a jaunty step, but is actually sparsely populated by perforated steel benches. These are scorched, in the Lea tradition of 'ordeal to street furniture by fire', or, perhaps, they have been sites to improvised midnight barbecues? Sausages and charcoal are helpfully and appropriately available from Esso's 'On the Run' convenience store close by. The inflated pay booth is clad in false plastic brickwork, 'On the Cheap'. Advertisements proliferate as we approach; unwrap gold (Cadbury); open your world (Heineken).

Bow Creek Ecology Park lies opposite. A luxuriant emerald habitat beyond the burnt steel. We exhale amidst the mature planting, recall trying the little theatre beneath the DLR with Yves, Rafat and Kyveli and gaze at the beautiful pond which is equally suited to mini-beast dipping or the recreation of Millais' Ophelia. But has perhaps witnessed neither for a while. Dragons fly.

The A13 makes a substantial blockage to further progress north. Various initiatives to cross and circumnavigate the river, to a position where the road has 'flown over' and can be passed beneath or to force a passage to Canning Town, the Jubilee Line and lunch in Mayfair intertwine. Plenty of galvanized, triple pointed fencing tries to make sense of access. A scary elevated meshed passage.

"Anyone hoping to walk from the north end of the park to the Thames needs to be both determined and fearless."<sup>9</sup>  
**ellis woodman** fatwalk review

this last leg diverts down the Limehouse Cut at Bromley-by-Bow to end the walk at Limehouse Basin, thereby missing out the mouth of the River Lea itself, the point where it finally meets the Thames.

More ambitious plans for riverside transit are in progress in the form of the 'Fatwalk'. This Olympic Legacy project is extending the green parkland of the upper Lea

Valley, in a southerly direction from the Olympic Park to the River Thames, forming a continuous public route along these inner city riverbanks. The LLDC is working with architects '5th Studio' to open up the edges of this river corridor and enhance public use.

Drift, *dérive*:  
 "In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there."<sup>10</sup>  
**guy debord** les lèvres nues #9

While a continuous riverside route remains the ambition, the reality on the ground is unrealised. Segments of path currently stop and start abruptly and you are forced to navigate your way through the industrial or residential hinterlands to either





More Harlem than (Tower) Hamlets. A dark passage beneath where today we find half a lemon amongst the neatly left Super Strength cans and butts. And, just beyond, we are surprised by the Olympic Park, not the geographical park, but the physical content, the park soil, scoured, packaged and stacked high in white bags.

Potential here for an event. This installation could be named 'ice floe' and a sound track of arctic wasteland added. A quick search, type in 'Arctic Soundtrack', 'Falling aStreep: Pieces of the bears.' sounds suitable. (<https://soundcloud.com/falling-aStreep>). Sit atop with a friend, a thermos of hot chocolate and a lion bar perhaps. An urban picnic. It is only seven thousand years since the last ice flow passed by and two thousand since Romans tramped the A13 to their Colchester garrison, in steaming leather, to be rewarded with cold wheat meal porridge.

At the Log Cabin Café we are told of (Red Indian?) raids and warned to keep our cameras out of sight. There have been parking problems since the greening of the bus depot, yes, a mini-wind turbine is visible over the rooftops of neighboring light industrial units, and bus drivers are being encouraged not to drive to work. They have to park further away making it more difficult for passing wagons to draw up for an 'egg banjo'. Perhaps this 'Frontier' Log Cabin will establish a dialogue with the new Olympic Park Timber Lodge?

Crossing the river at Twelve Trees reveals Canary Wharf beyond, near in miles and far in expense accounts. The long, straight, Limehouse Link. Don't fall asleep at the helm.

Floating bird tubes; installed to encourage 'greater nesting opportunities and increased hatchling survivability' for Lea

side. Meanwhile, the Olympic development itself provided further obstructions to the route, at its most extreme, camouflaged army encampments were deployed to block towpaths as security stepped up during the event. However, the inaccessibility along significant lower stretches the terrain is actually more conducive to exploration: drifting is at its best when one's sense of direction is frustrated, when it requires us to explore and take risks.

### Finds along the Way

Our explorations gradually revealed to us that the area is ideal for long, reflective, meandering walks: 'drifts' (Particularly if you like rain). The contrasts between past, present and future converged forcibly on our path as we navigated our way along dismembered sections of the Lea Valley Walk, paced partially completed segments of the 'Fatwalk', wound through tended conservation areas, and trekked across virtually extinct industrial parks.

Perhaps others could enjoy this peculiarly varied experience? Perhaps bringing life to the Lea Valley depends on supplementing the 'big vision', a 'constructed reality', with one that can be positively experienced today, or tomorrow? Today the 'big vision' is only sporadically present, and nurturing and turning attention to what is present on the ground now, could be liberating as well as necessary and important.

Earlier Touching the City projects tested live events as catalysts for new relationships between the public and public space.

In this case we wondered how imaginative way finding and carefully curated 'found content' might combine with novel graphic delivery to stimulate change. If the Lea Valley can be imagined as a tapestry of juxtapositions, we set about identifying a notional 'Weft' using the River Lea as a connective thread locating the diverse points of interest along the valley.



"The closer the artwork encoded perception of reality to reality experienced by the audience the more powerful the inferred meanings for that audience and to parallel situations that they have encountered." 11

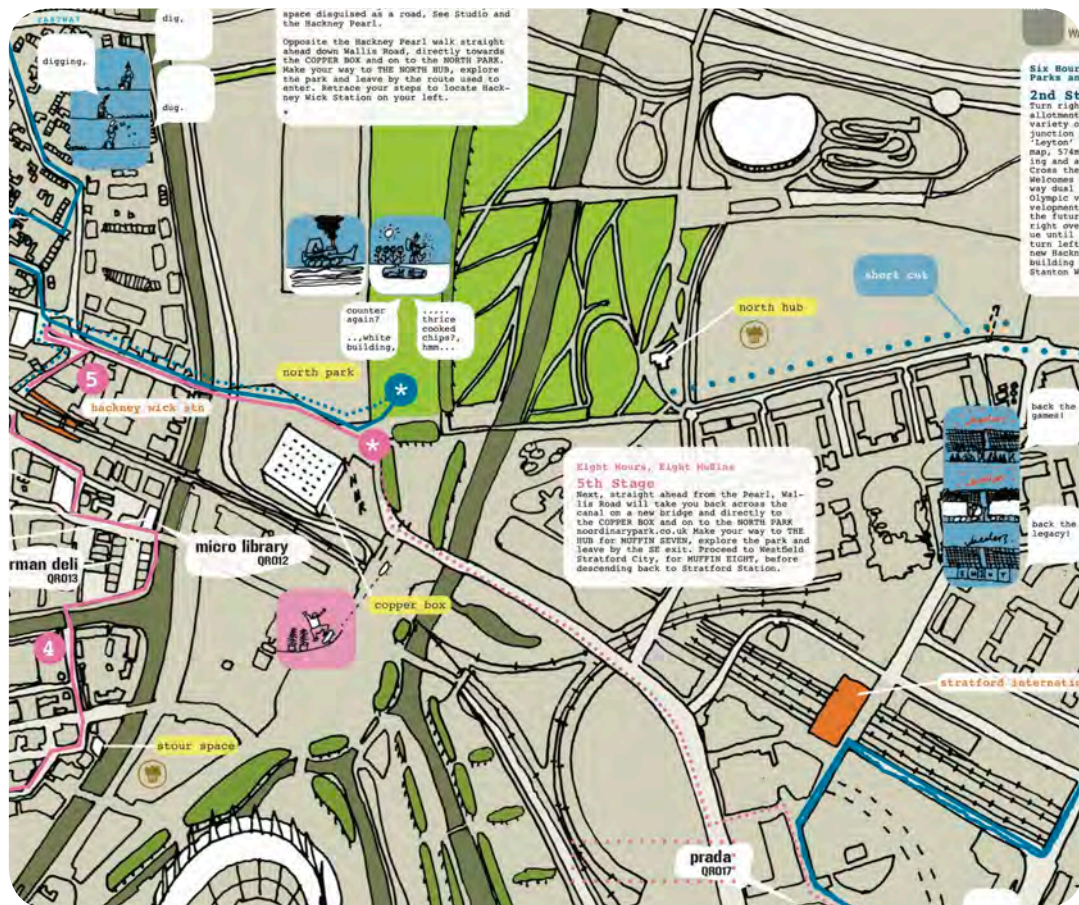
stephen willatts artwork as social model



### The 'Paper' Lea

The present 'Lea / Lee Valley' has multiple guises. The related marketing material takes many different forms, often camouflaged neatly into 'helpful guides' of the area. More cynical depictions are offered by the various dissenters and activists, keen to portray an aggressive 'alien', authoritarian takeover of over local life.

The officially named 'Lee Valley Park' was created by a unique Act of Parliament to create a "green lung" for London, Essex and Hertfordshire. This particular



*Valley birds. Successful occupation is strongly design dependent; correct height, width, materials, locations = happy procreating birds. Floating gardens; vessels of desire, the hanging gardens of the River Lea.*

Plans for a pedestrian link from the bridge to a rather pleasant footpath to Three Mills that runs at lower level between the Lea river and the Lee navigation are still fruiting so our alternative route takes us past a popular but grimy car wash (no photographs please), squeeze through the rear of a lonely gated residence and climb to the Bromley-by-Bow flyover. **New apartments available.** New sites for apartments available. Demolition opportunities. Special prices. A vast Tesco.

*Past, absent, declining, mothballed and corralled industrial activity, coupled with rather weighty heritage and infrastructural presences, combine with sites that are already cleared, in the process of being cleared, evidently becoming redundant and ready for development, to leave the present focused along edges; pathways that occasionally widen into a cafe, a park or a nature reserve. Remote, obscure and expansive places, such as the marshes, can be seen as extraordinary contrasts to Westfield. Some of these locations provide perfect opportunities to talk over relationships, business ideas, to plan futures or simply to be alone. To enjoy these characteristics it is necessary to 'let go' of the notion that public spaces need to be manicured and 'set up' for conventional pleasures.*

The House Mill welcomes visitors as often as it can. An attractive programme, space and garden. Plenty of energy and initiative but footfall is limited as yet. A potentially busy centre waiting for the FTSE 100 to catch up. We enter. Pleasure at our appearance. Disappointment that we are so few. The small shop offers a variety of guides and maps to the area and we pick up a handful. Who are they for?

**WICK LANE WHARF**  
2 AND 3 BEDROOM FLATS



post-industrial vision for the Lea Valley originated in Abercrombie's Greater London Plan in 1944, where he identified its potential for regeneration. The park is 10,000 acres and 26 miles long, stretching across London, Essex and Hertfordshire, and is managed and developed by the "Lee Valley Regional Park Authority", a statutory body set up in 1967 on the basis of a Civic Trust report supporting regeneration of the Valley and promotion of recreation and leisure. This Authority is also responsible for "regenerating derelict and neglected land into high quality public open spaces

and wildlife habitats of ecological importance, as well as preserving the region's historical value". They state: "Our approach is to be community focused and commercially driven, to work with partners to produce a unique combination of activities, sights and experiences". The Authority owns three of the Olympic 2012 venues, which it hopes to open for local community use, and is thus instrumental in the Legacy project.

Access to this terrain is encouraged by the prolific maps, guides and websites created by the many authorities in the area.

It is boldly portrayed: green and watery wonderlands, ecosystems brimming with life and tapestry-like landscapes richly studded with impressive industrial heritage. Potential visitors are encouraged to imagine entering the Lea Valley on smoothly operated public transport links, arriving at specified nodes where information boards, leaflets, maps, markers and facilities will give clear instructions as to exactly what is available to them. They can then traverse winding routes of enlightenment, educate themselves at a series of connected cultural events and visitor centres, freshen the stale air

in their lungs, absorb sunlight and interact with nature.

In reality, this vision is best appreciated from afar. The green ribbon and expanses of water in the maps and guides are clearly visible, cutting through the city, as you fly over London to Berlin or Helsinki. However, such literature appears mostly concerned with the creation of a persuasive identity (An East London Eden), and less so with encouraging and guiding a successful live visit. Natural features are exaggerated by the foregrounding of the colours blue and green: the same

green belongs to parks, marshes, football pitches and private embankments, the same blue indicates both the visible (the narrow river and the canal) and the invisible (the vast reservoirs). In fact the lower part of the river 'drains' at low tide revealing expansive mud flats.

The information included in these guides is often insufficient to fulfil their apparent purpose; the distances between places are distorted by the foreshortening effect of oblique aerial views, while attractions are compressed





red indian telegraph pole at trinity buoy wharf

On to Abbey Mills Pumping Station, a reputed Victorian Pile. There is a new park, glimpsed in the press, on the way. A generous disc of perfect grass. Table tennis tables in use. The players don't really want us to record their combative pleasures. A circuit through housing, a startled and starving fox, occasional glimpses of the Orbit above the rooftops and eventually beneath the 'The Greenway' prior to climbing to join it. This route reveals that the Greenway is comprised of huge pipes that are part of London's sewage infrastructure. Whilst this major footpath is generally quiet a great deal is in transit beneath.

Originally known as *The Cathedral of Sewage* the pumping station generally aided sewage on its passage out of the city but could also discharge sewage into Abbey Creek in the event of an overload emergency. The outlets are visible from the Greenway, along with a neat row of park benches above. A slight aroma hangs on the air. Bats circle the tower.

Along Stratford High Street faded manufacturing headquarters and the Porsche showroom summarise the scarily polarised nature of the old and the new.

pudding Mill Lane Station. A nexus of phased improvements. Dig, re dig, build, rebuild. The surface of the earth scoured away. 'Access maintained'. (OK!, come through...). Order emerging. Push your way through to the View Tube. Busy in its own way. A constant churn of visitors enjoying the view, what else?



together graphically creating a false impression of scale. Often the small size of the maps has made the editing out of detail a necessity. In fact, the most surprising quality of the valley is its size and the substantial distances between similarly themed points of interest – historic, say, or wildlife – which is almost insurmountable in a small document.

In contrast to this optimistic output, there is a prominent contingent of 'dissenting voices' promoting the negative impact of the games and the destructive effects of redevelopment on local lives and communities. Journalist Rachel Cooke interviewed the author Iain Sinclair on their walk around the outskirts of the Olympic site:

"Sinclair regards the "loft-style" flats with a cool eye. "Look at them. Too close together, too dark, totally unsympathetic to everything around them. And where has the pavement gone?..." Sinclair goes further than most

when it comes to condemning what he regards as the folly of the Olympics. 'It's catastrophic. Apocalyptically catastrophic. It's brutalising: the time scale of it, the fact that it was imposed from above, the consultation a farce, and the promise of this legacy - which is what? It's Westfield shopping mall, basically. Have you been there? Horrendous. Drains the life blood out of you in seconds. Then they have the nerve to call it the People's Park. What do they think was there before? It was the people's park: anglers, birdwatchers, footballers. Now they're all gone, so it's the opposite. I'm deeply disturbed and angry'.... (Meanwhile), his publisher was marketing 'Hackney' as 'the book they tried to ban', a claim based on the fact that the local council

did not want its author speaking in any of its libraries because he is 'anti-Olympics'".<sup>12</sup>

Anna Minton is another journalist keen to alert the public to the dangers of commercial agendas in the redevelopment of east London, and the potential loss of control over public space. In her book 'Ground Control',

She writes:

"A very substantial part of east London will be characterised by new private fiefdoms accountable only to the blurred mass of quangos which are replacing democratically elected local government."



<http://www.placehacking.co.uk/tag/abbey-mills-pumping-station>

She warns:

"far from the civic-minded legacy promised", the area will be characterised by the "architecture of extreme capitalism."<sup>13</sup>

### Shifting ground – re-prioritising the present

Disruption of familiar geographies always causes consternation. As late as the 1800s there were no maps of the city available to the general public. People relied on their mental maps, built up through experience and exploration, for navigation of London, relying on sight, smell and topography. Daniel Defoe's 'A Journal of the Plague Year' charts in novelistic prose, the unravelling of familiar routes through the city of London in 1666 as the plague spreads its annihilation, blocking off known



the colourful mapp's 2 cafe, a popular spot



*Olympic anticipation turned to Olympic memories in a few days. Incredulity that it is going to be here, switched to incredulity that it was. Questioning of the fitness to become the world stage replaced with questioning of relevance as a local stage.*

Poor lovely stadium. A resource like any theatre waiting for a good show, and hoping for an audience. White angel - steel saved, Red daemon - steel splurged. Along the gurgling Greenway towards Old Ford Locks. Past the Old Ford Water Recycling Plant which converted sewage to irrigation and toilet flushing water for the Olympics 'significantly reducing reliance on water treated to drinking standards'. 'Old meets new and butterflies too'.

We descend to Fish Island (many Streets named after freshwater fish). Passing the enticing London Centre for Book Arts. On to Old Ford Locks. A subdued version of the gallery quarter around the High Line in New York or the waning Mitte area in Berlin, it is less clear who is winning the ownership of this alternative identity opportunity. The Hackney Pearl cafe and See Studio, gallery fit the New York model. The Yard, Frontside and the German Deli, with a PVC strip curtain and a Chandelier, are closer to Berlin. Though 'run down' the area can't really be called 'deprived'.

*What will it become when the Olympic Park housing takes off? Borough Market in B1 Units? Mansions with pools, hot tubs and sprinklers on the front lawns? An outlet for SCP? Watch out 'Dog Walker Vans' ahead!*

Across the navigation close to Hackney Wick station and finally back to the towpath. The long

passages and documenting a new geography of contamination through the red crosses of death marked on doors<sup>14</sup>. The Olympic project has had a similarly rapid impact upon the once familiar geographies of East London.

Following the successful Olympic delivery, and despite some scepticism that it would come about, the development of the Legacy project is now underway. The London Legacy Development Organisation (LLDC) was established in 2012 to oversee this project, as a 'mayoral development corporation'

under the 2011 Localism Act, amalgamating the power of the six local authorities which hosted the games: Barking and Dagenham, Greenwich, Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest.

"With little fanfare the London Assembly last week unanimously approved the creation of Britain's most powerful unelected planning body in modern times"<sup>15</sup>  
 elizabeth hopkirk legacy analysis

The LLDC's official status is a public sector not-for-profit organisation responsible for the long-term planning, development, management and maintenance of the Olympic Park and its facilities after the London 2012 Games. The website states their intentions: "It is our task to transform and integrate one of the most challenged areas in the UK into world-class, sustainable and thriving neighbourhoods".

Although development is largely perceived to herald improvement overall, it is perhaps the speed of this Olympic fuelled

development that has caused most consternation among locals: a sense that the space has been trampled over so rapidly, that the 'genius loci' of these places, of real local experience, will be lost forever. By its very tools of production, the contemporary practice of urban masterplanning suffers from a top down, control-focussed approach. It is testament to the LLDC that they are working hard to counteract the dangers implicit in the power they have been devolved, through encouraging and supporting local artistic projects and enterprises that are working hard to retain

and restore the area's distinctive character. We would argue that public enjoyment of the pavements is part of this story, claiming the genius loci of the present:

"the simple act of walking can take on a subversive hue, abolishing the distancing and voyeuristic perspective of those who view the city from above. This dual perspective is built-in within the structure of the modern city and is what psychogeography seeks to overturn, restoring the primacy of the street."<sup>16</sup>

merlin coverly psychogeography

### The Paper Lea – an ethnography of the path

Our proposal to cultivate 'explorer' experiences, interweaving the 'real city', with the 'reflected upon city' and encourage walkers to enjoy making their own connections and constructing their own stories, required the development of a new kind of map. The formula for a 'Drift Map' began to emerge.





one of the many Lea Valley palms  
the adopted symbol, wry luxuriance



“And it is utterly true that he who cannot find wonder, mystery, awe, the sense of a new world and an undiscovered realm in the places by the Gray’s Inn Road will never find those secrets elsewhere...the essence of this art (The Great Art of London) is that it must be an adventure into the unknown, and perhaps it might be found that this, at last, is the matter of all the arts.”<sup>17</sup>

arthur machen things near and far

The physical effects of lengthy walking missions - spurred by motion through space, rhythm of pace and sense of distance achieved – occur in both countryside and urban

settings. In the urban parallel to country walking, it is equally necessary to feel the achievement of physical effort and endurance. The increased levels of stimulation encountered along such an urban route were also borne in mind. After testing several variations of the river route and experimenting with various shortcuts, we agreed that the longest version of the trail produced the most triumphant mood at journey’s end. This walk took about four and a half hours, and once refreshment breaks were added, this amounted to six or seven hours – a good days outing, requiring an early-ish departure,



and achieving a level of active experience that warranted the title ‘endurance walk’. Awareness that scale is affected by size, fitness, age, mobility, ironman tendencies and impairments is reflected in a series of individualised scale bars (a measure of distance unrelated to likely speed isn’t always useful).

straight view, absence of road, navigation traffic, occasional languid Swan or Dutch orange crew from Lea Rowing Club make for a torpor inducing walk.

*Empty places whose emptiness is intrinsic, marshes, forests, long shingle beaches, are tranquil, while empty places that were once busy are melancholy? Certainly cleaning up after the past, clearing the table, upgrading, has the effect of readying, of preparation and the more effective this has been the louder the voices calling from the water and towpath: What next?*

We cut to the right through dense trees along a soggy footpath to emerge on Hackney Marshes (a vast playing field). Pass through a long, elegant, low lying community building, COR TEN, gabion walls, huge sliding panels seal everything away at night: a huge games locker.

Here we rejoin the river. It has transformed. Muddy banks, enigmatic meanders, overhanging trees. Curiously there are three parallel footpaths the fisherman’s path skirts the waters’ edge, the walkers’ path involves slightly less stooping and the runners’ / cyclists’ ‘way’ has a firm wide surface. There are exercise stations along the path. Instructions to improve. (We do).

We come upon a bench with a slightly longer view. The polished earth studded with crown caps that have been stamped cheerfully in, the viperous undergrowth laden with bottles and cans dating from 1976. A taxonomy of sorrow drowning. It is not idyllic, but it is the least unidyllic location. Everyone agrees.

We established three walks. The first, which is described in the narrative above, follows the river from Leamouth, to Lea Bridge Road just beyond the Lea Valley Waterworks, a distance of about six miles as the crow flies, but more than eight miles including the route’s meanders and deviations. This walk describes a cross section of the city from south to north, with the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park its centre. The second and third complete a full circuit around the QEOP, one connecting the surrounding communities of Leyton, Homerton and Hackney Wick to the north,

the other linking Stratford, West Ham, and Bow to the south. Both of these walks pass through the newly opened northerly section of the Queen Elizabeth Park at their conclusion. A diversion may also be taken from the south-north river route to visit the park at its mid-point. On account of the scale shift, we termed the south-north route ‘wide’ and the circuits ‘close’.

Working as a set, these three routes describe the social territories around the Olympic site. By directing this wider urban experience into and through the

QEOP, the psychological barriers of the infamous ‘blue fence’ that marched around the Olympic development site are broken down. A sense of ownership is restored, connecting and linking these urban villages as a greater community with a new public facility at its core.

“the closer the artwork encoded perception of reality to reality experienced by the audience the more powerful the inferred meanings for that audience and to parallel situations that they have encountered”.<sup>18</sup>

stephen willats artwork as social model



lubricating the pristine markfield beam engine, springfield park



In designing the map, we carefully tested the relationship between the extent of the 'Real Lea Valley' that we wanted to convey, and the size of 'Paper Lea Valley' output that was practical to use. Our choice of paper size was made to integrate neatly with the physical action of walking. We asked: how will the map feel in your hands, what can be agreed as a happy measurement of the distance between outstretched arms, does it work on the move, how do your eyes follow a trail of information from map to icon to written description,

just how many flaps are both intriguing and ergonomic enough to let your hands keep up? The length and shapes of routes determined the final scales of the maps themselves: the long sinuous south – north river route demanded a scale of approximately 1:10,000, while the two routes circuiting the QEOP zoom up in scale to approximately 1:5000 to enable a more intricate route to be followed. The folded map aligned with the folded 'berliner' size of the local newspaper, 'The Wick', with which it was distributed.



[www.pylons.org/](http://www.pylons.org/)  
It's simple: the Pylon Appreciation Society is a club for people who appreciate electricity pylons.

We carefully curated the material for our maps. We assembled a collection of 'finds' balancing obvious and recognised points of interest, with evocative and eye-opening items that best suggested alternative ways of reading and understanding the

*We encounter a hugely varied range of people occupying and passing through these edges. Dog walkers, cyclist commuters, refuse collectors, weeders, sack putters, canal-boat owners, publicans (and a few pub goers), cafe diners and groups of planners populate the footpaths through interest and need. Bird watchers, anglers, heritage walkers, fitness cyclists, canoeists, oarsmen and oarswomen are there by more active choice. They love the Lea.*

Further north, almost to our end, we come to 'The Waterworks - Nature Reserve and Golf Centre'. A pleasant new hub with a cafe. Surprise that we are ordering. They check three times. Panic. Then smile. It's true! Chilli. Hot and plentiful. Then across a part of the river running through a levee, Los Angeles for just a moment, then onto a wonderland of allotments and reclaimed reservoirs. Dense young trees occupy the drained reservoirs and slightly elevated timber walkways run inside. It feels as if we are entering huge blackened pie dishes. Catering for the valley gods. Local families have arranged a picnic right under the one gigantic pylon. Pylon worship? Or the only place that it couldn't be seen from?

Journeys end: Lea Bridge Road. A fitting couplet to the Leamouth Flyover where we began.

*Such a walk compares with a long days' walk in the countryside, something that we are quite acclimatised to, but is typically unheard of in the city. Some of the effects are the same: exhilaration at completion, a sense of achievement, of gaining ownership of a territory. This is particularly empowering in London, which we tend to experience in little fragments. But this is also a day working through accidental adjacencies of varied distance. An intense immersion in city realities. Although 'Tower Hamlets' seems a curiously inappropriate name for one of the boroughs' 'villages clustered around the city walls', is actually quite a helpful way of imagining the human toe-holds on the area. Pockets*

city. Given that the scale of the Lower Lea Valley leaves rather long distances between 'official' destinations, our collection balances the predictable tourist-friendly finds, with stimulating traces of city life today: moments of contemplation, a startling graffiti bear, a creatively discarded piece of litter, someone's Wellington



boot, increasing the breadth of experience for the explorer.

Our 'Drift Maps' use a variety of visual devices to describe these finds. We developed a series of icons for the 'Leamouth to Lea Bridge Road' maps, offering the same graphic delivery to both types of 'find'. The 'wide' map unfolds from the general to the specific to reveal more detailed visual analysis of the area in sketch form, and QR codes linking to the 'virtual Lea Valley' available on the internet. Here again, we have curated more obvious links, with less distinct digressions,

offering further surprising diversions for the virtually connected, multi-modal explorer. The 'Queen Elizabeth Park' map ('close'), integrates small narrative sketches of instances that occur (or have occurred) along the route. The accumulation of these stories build up to confound, surprise, and stimulate the user, providing a mental toolbox for reading everyday sights more rigorously and with greater reward.

The environs of the Lea Valley have been charted many times throughout the last few centuries. Most of these maps



the public test the route, open house 2012

*of initiative, pockets of enduring history, pockets of beauty, pockets of enterprise, pockets of high value and pockets that are almost impossible to occupy. Noisy, raw, tight places; windswept expanses of river and marshland; islands of nature left between the infrastructures of the city. And between great tracts of the indeterminate and their human, animal, insect, bird and vegetative populations. Waiting to discover the world that they will eventually belong to.*

Sometimes the river is brown, the footpaths are overgrown, the street lighting flickers, the bins are overflowing and yet, at other moments, on other stretches, the river sparkles in the sunlight, the footpaths are smooth and tended, the litter is (eerily) absent, and a plethora of street lighting emerges, testament to community-focussed artistic installations. These contrasts allow us to reflect on the complexities governing our experience of place, from the relative tolerances and efficiencies of municipal cleaning, to the more subtle effects of a shift in wind direction.

We board the Eco-Bus to Stratford.

Try it.

OFL + CS. 04 July 2013.

'We're sure you'll love this product...'

were commissioned by public authorities, none without invested interest: see footnote <sup>19</sup> for examples. As well as their use as simple way-finding devices, maps therefore play a complex political and social role in the production of space: pre-eighteenth century maps were only really available to the ruling elites and were used as symbols of power and authority, while during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, artists and publicists were quick to realise the commercial and political potential of maps. Although also commissioned by a public body, our project for the LLDC 'Emerging

East' programme comes under the umbrella of 'artistic endeavour', which has granted us the freedom to experiment with mapping as a tool on our own terms. Our 'Drift Map' could be considered a form of 'detournment' from traditional map commissions.

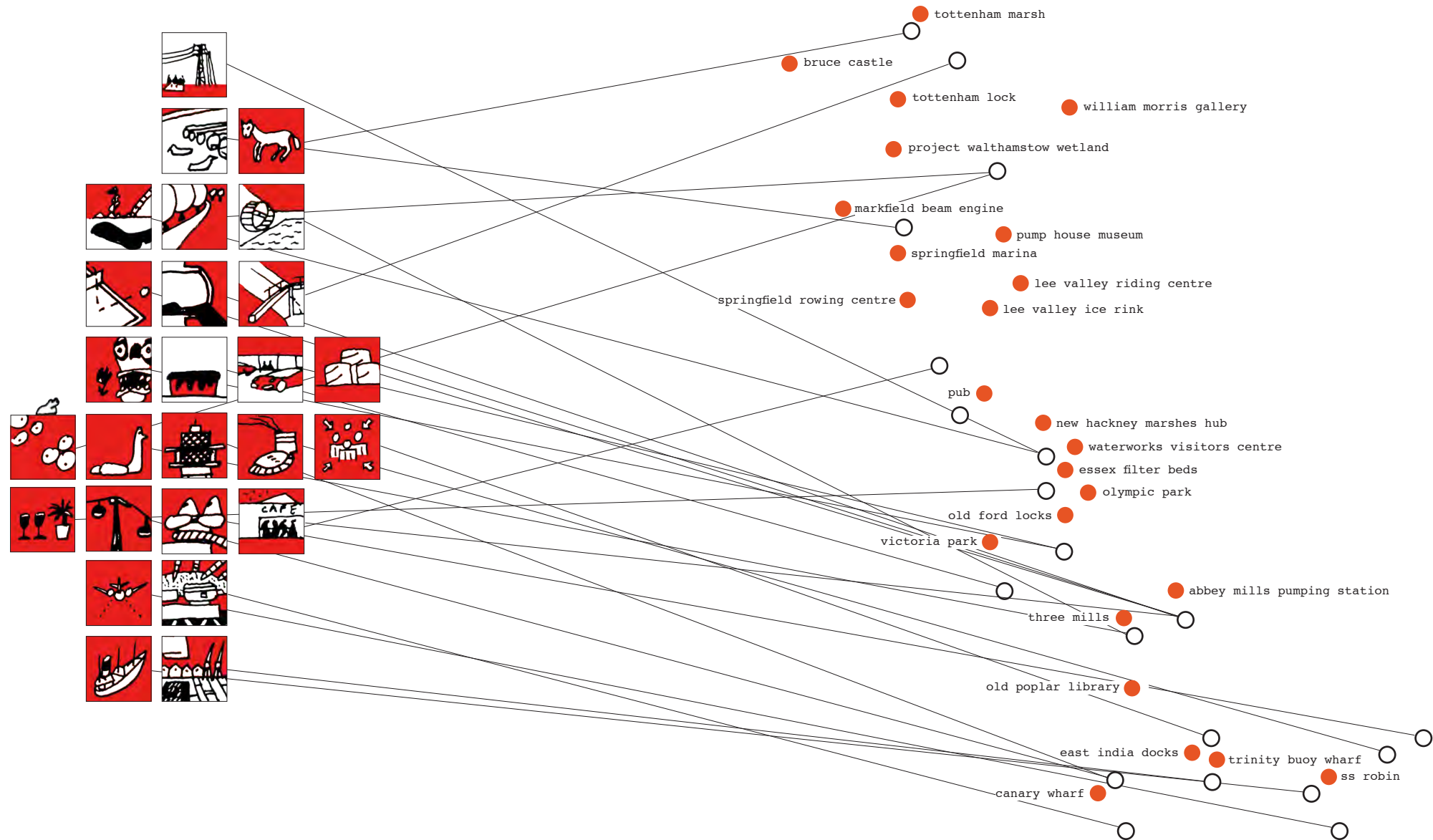
We hope the use of these maps will reveal the value of minor public spaces in the area and will inspire an interest in endurance walking in the city and in the experiential possibilities of questioning everyday and mundane objects. Such 'readymade' art pieces; curiosity in decay, wilderness

and transformation; isolated touchstones of social, historical and economic history; moments of natural beauty; the extraordinary survival of creatures in sometimes harsh conditions; surprising observation points and the disparate and 'off-beam' specialist activities and projects that the area has to offer, create a heady cocktail of experiences. By bringing into focus the activities and detritus of 'everyday life' in the Lea Valley, these experiences can serve as a foil against which the ambitions of the grand redevelopment programme might be assessed.



"The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below' below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city: they are walkers" <sup>20</sup>

**michel de certeau**  
the practice of everyday life





























**Acknowledgements** We would like to thank all those who have encouraged our project from walk to walk including: The London Legacy Development Corporation for their funding, support and carefully considered advice, especially Hannah Lambert, Adriana Marques, and Eleanor Fawcett. Dr Juliet Davis and Nazar Ali Khan for their wider perspectives. Ralph Ward who introduced us to both the extraordinary heritage interests in the valley and to Dr Jim Clifford, a Canadian Lea Valley enthusiast. Nicola Worton and Jonathan Tarbatt for their encouragement and forbearance. Finn (11) and Soren (5) for advising that the walks were not really quite long enough. Daren Ellis and Isaac Marrero-Guillamón of 'The Wick' for excellent advice and for suggesting collaboration on map distribution. Sarah Ichioka at the Architecture Foundation for boosting our energies at just the right moment. And Emmanuelle Waeckerle and Sam Francis at bookRoom, who helped us to put this publication together.



dolly partons

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