



**Neither Here nor There: Walking in forgotten territories\***

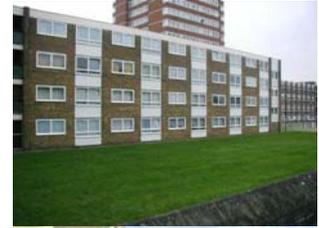
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### **The Walk – Mile End Tube Station to Alphabet Square**

*The walk begins at Mile End tube station (zone 2) in east London and ends at a residence. Exiting the tube station on Mile End Road you turn right on to Maplin Street. The street ends after 40 meters as it enters a housing estate; the pedestrian path continues straight onto a 'bridge' that does not, in fact, bridge anything. The estate consists of several four and six storey brick buildings and a pair of tower blocks. At the end of the bridge you turn left onto Hamlets Way for 30 meters and right onto English Street, a cul-de-sac. At the end is a primary school. Just before reaching the end you cut across what looks like a private courtyard fronting two brick houses to reach Southern Grove Street. This street is basically a road with two narrow pavements lined by walls on each side; on one side are the backs of houses and the school and on the other the wall of a cemetery. The vista down Southern Grove is dominated by a 24-storey tower block whose base consists of two storey Victorian terraces. At the end of the street you turn left on Ropery Street and enter an enclave of Victorian terraces. The tower block disappears but looking east just above the roofs you can see a nearby gas works. After a right onto a short street you exit the Victorian enclave, the tower block reappears, and you turn left onto Bow Common Lane. Facing you is a viaduct over which you can see the gas works on the opposite side. On your right are the parking and green spaces of the housing estate over which the tower block presides. On your left are more walls. Passing underneath the viaduct you continue along Bow Common Lane, which consists of walls, fences and buildings, which, with one exception, do not address the street. The one exception is boarded up. Behind the walls and fences are gas works, a secondary school, two housing estates and an industrial site. It is a half kilometre from the viaduct to Devons Road. The corner is a cross roads of two major roads and consists of a housing estate (behind a wall), the play yard of the secondary school, a church and a 'temporary open space.' You turn left on Devons Road, walk past the open space and turn right onto Furze Road. This takes you between a green belonging to four housing slabs arranged obliquely and another industrial estate. Turn left at the end of Furze Road and you reach Alphabet Square by passing underneath an archway into a courtyard. This serves as the entry and parking for the flats, which are arranged in a 'U' pattern. The Limehouse Cut canal defines the fourth side. On the other side of the canal are more industrial estates. It's 1.7 Kilometres and approximately 25 minutes from start to finish.*



## Introduction

I inherited this walk from a friend who was kind enough to host me during my frequent visits to London. I was shown the way to and from the tube station and subsequently added detours and shortcuts here and there. Over a two-year period I made about seven or eight visits, each time staying for one or two weeks at a time. It was only after my friend had moved that I started to reflect on the walk and the territory. I found that the architectural and urban models I had at my disposal were unable to explain the particularity and peculiarity of this terrain. This paper begins with the walk but is concerned with the questions raised by the spatial characteristics and what these mean to the act of walking. The larger issue behind this is the slippery and difficult relationship between spatial configurations and spatial practices. Discussions of how people perceive themselves and their spatial context while 'on the move' are made more complex by this very movement, the dynamic relationship of walking to space. This is compounded at Mile End<sup>1</sup> where the terrain is comprised of fragmented parcels of housing and industrial sites. It was this fragmentation that led me to consider the relationship between the spatial and the social, the territory and the walker. For the purposes of this investigation the walker is assumed to be solitary.<sup>2</sup>



[Aerial of study area – Mile End tube is at the upper left and the residence at the lower right]

One of the problems I encountered when thinking about Mile End was that most writings on cities focus on their polar conditions. That is, either the focus is on the inner core, often the

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<sup>1</sup> I will use this shortcut name to refer to the area in question, although its geographical identity is somewhat confused. The area covered by the walk is situated in the triangle between Limehouse (to the south-west), Bow Common (to the north-east) and Mile End (to the north-west). It touches all of these areas but is not contained by any of them.

<sup>2</sup> The same walk taken with a companion would produce different perceptions of the self and the territory traversed. Although this is undeniably a rich field for study, the questions asked here would prove too complicated before some groundwork was laid to give a foothold on the issues at stake.

historic centre, of cities or on their suburbs.<sup>3</sup> For example, one can cite the discussions concerning the continuing development of Bankside and Southwark in London or the proposed development of the Thames Gateway. Whatever the merits of these developments there is no shortage of interest, discussion, or theories with which to think about them. The polarity makes sense in a way, as reactions to the extremes of spatial conditions in cities. However, both these territories can be seen as spatially coherent, whether through density in the centre or the homogeneity in the suburb, and which, at least, provide spatial identity. Such identity is conspicuously absent at Mile End. It can be safely said that there is not a single building or complex of buildings along the entire route (the Victorian fragment aside) which recognise either the street system or their adjacent neighbours. Mile End, and other territories like it, raises questions, which, though equally applicable to the centre or periphery, are more extreme here.

For example, what constitutes a neighbourhood in such an area? I have used the term street, but what exactly is the nature of streets in such places? How do I understand each fragment in passing from one to the other? Have I passed through a single territory or through ten? Could coherence be found in the construction of a narrative through the territory? Finally, if I recognise each fragment as separate how do the different identities of each affect my own identity as I walk through them?

### Approaches and critiques

Mile End can be dismissed as alienating or embraced for its dynamism in variety. Where one stands depends on the model used to analyse the walk and its spaces. For example, we could look at the walk as a picturesque promenade or as a kind of situationist *dérive*. Each would provide insight into the experience of the walk. However, there are two problems with doing this. The first is that by *applying* a model we are carrying out a conscious analytical exercise, which is removed from the experience of the everyday walker. Mike Savage, in an essay on Walter Benjamin's urban meditations, writes, "the scholar is bound to analyse the city as a text in a state of concentration, an orientation which is unlikely to be shared by most people."<sup>4</sup> The reference is to Benjamin's distinction between a state of concentration and distraction in the reception of art works.

"Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. [...] In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction."<sup>5</sup>

The difficulty is that any form of analysis, including the present one, never fully grasps the 'experience of distraction', or put another way, can never represent the experience of the everyday. The best that can be done is to acknowledge this problem.

The second problem is that some models may in themselves favour concentrated, or aesthetic, modes of perception. Such models miss the point of this walk, which is that it is not freely taken, but is determined by necessity. These walks are not strolls intended to distance one from the everyday, nor to experience the territory aesthetically or critically; these walks are wholly embedded in the everyday.<sup>6</sup> This second problem, however, is easily overcome by examining the various models with Benjamin's distinction in mind.

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<sup>3</sup> I leave aside here the important discussion on rural issues, which is the centre of many recent debates in England.

<sup>4</sup> Mike Savage, "Walter Benjamin's Urban Thought: A critical analysis" in Crang, M. and Thrift, N. (eds.) *Thinking Space* (London: Routledge, 2000) 48.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations* (London: Cape, 1970) 241.

<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre, Henri, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1*, (London: Verso, 1992). The everyday as used here follows Lefebvre's early definition of the concept as something which falls below visibility. It is, moreover, the

The picturesque promenade and its associated theories could shed some light on Mile End. One could read the various fragments, towers, gas tanks and other objects encountered as analogous to the vistas, temples and follies encountered on a eighteenth-century picturesque stroll. However, one must contend with the following: embarking on a picturesque promenade is a voluntary act and the 'surprise' vistas and architectural elements are all planned. There is, in addition, a narrative which links the experiences together; moreover, it is conceived as a totality, composed and arranged towards specific effects. One enters the game knowing its rules and prepared for a self-conscious aesthetic experience. At Mile End, individual fragments may have been planned and aesthetically conceived, however, the territory as a whole is not. The picturesque promenade is also constructed with a planned itinerary, so that apparent choices are illusory. Vincent Scully wrote of the baroque in similar terms:

"All movement is around fixed points. It is a union of the opposites of order and freedom. The order is absolutely firm, but against it an illusion of freedom is played. [...] It is therefore an architecture that is intended to enclose and shelter human beings in a psychic sense, to order them absolutely so that they can always find a known conclusion at the end of any journey, but finally to let them play at freedom and action all the while. Everything works out; the play seems tumultuous but nobody gets hurt and everybody wins."<sup>7</sup>

The walk from tube station to residence, although having fixed ends and the limiting constraint of time, may be adjusted and modified along the way, constructing an itinerary while on the move.



[One of several possible routes from tube to residence. This is the route described above]

We might consider the walker as a flâneur; however, we would have to recognise the difference in objectives. Once again we are dealing with a state of concentration and an intentional purpose, although there is no intentional destination. A further consideration is the flâneur's perception of the city as a text. The flâneur wanders in order to read the city as part of a critical enterprise. According to Savage, Benjamin's conception of the flâneur is as a

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opposite of the extraordinary, which demands attention, as does the work of art. Hence, my linking of Benjamin's concept of distraction with the everyday and concentrated mode with aesthetic perception.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Scully Jr., *Modern Architecture* (New York: Braziller, 1961) 11.

“street wanderer who is able to subvert conventional meanings and values and [who] thereby offers a critique of the impersonal notion of the ‘mass’”<sup>8</sup>. Further, the context of modernity, with its overlap of spaces, activities and people, and which nourished the flâneur, does not exist at Mile End.

The architectural promenade proposed by Le Corbusier can be seen as analogous to the picturesque promenade in that it is a composed (and hierarchical) walk through a pre-determined territory. The situationist dérive in turn exhibits many of the same characteristics of the enterprise of the flâneur. The rapid changes of ambience at Mile End do provide the kinds of experiences sought by situationists on a dérive. Nevertheless, the drifting walker was after a conscious experience provided by traversing the urban field in unexpected and unintended ways. It is a critical practice that is consciously chosen and enacted. At Mile End one is confronted with a pre-given ‘dérived’ territory or one might suggest, Mile End ‘dérives’ the walker.

The flâneur’s as reader of the ‘city as text’ allows us to consider its opposite, which is the walker as writer. This is a notion proposed by Michel de Certeau – “[T]hey are walkers, *Wandersmanner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it.”<sup>9</sup> De Certeau, along with Henri Lefebvre, provide a non-aesthetic concept of spatial practices. This is considered in its everydayness and is particularly important in its relationship to psychic and physical conditions. One of the legacies of de Certeau and Lefebvre, along with the Situationist International, has been a spate of studies on walking practices. Many of these, however, have reintroduced or focused on the aesthetic aspect.<sup>10</sup> What is often missing is close attention to the particular phrasing of de Certeau’s description of the dynamic between the walker and her environment.

“First, if it is true that a spatial order organises an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualises some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements. [...] And if on the one hand he actualises only a few of the possibilities fixed by the constructed order (he goes only here and not there), on the other he increases the number of possibilities (for example, by creating shortcuts and detours) and prohibitions (for example, he forbids himself to take paths generally considered accessible or even obligatory).”<sup>11</sup>

There is neither complete freedom nor total determinism in this formula. It prevents the assertion of both absolutes and the complete relativism of conditions on the part of the subjective experience of the walker or the physical reality of the territory. What this passage proposes is the importance of the *relationship* between the spatial order and the spatial practice. The activity of walking, contradicting de Certeau’s earlier statement, is *both* reading (of the spatial order) and writing (actualisation of possibilities).

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<sup>8</sup> Savage, “Walter Benjamin’s Urban Thought”, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 93.

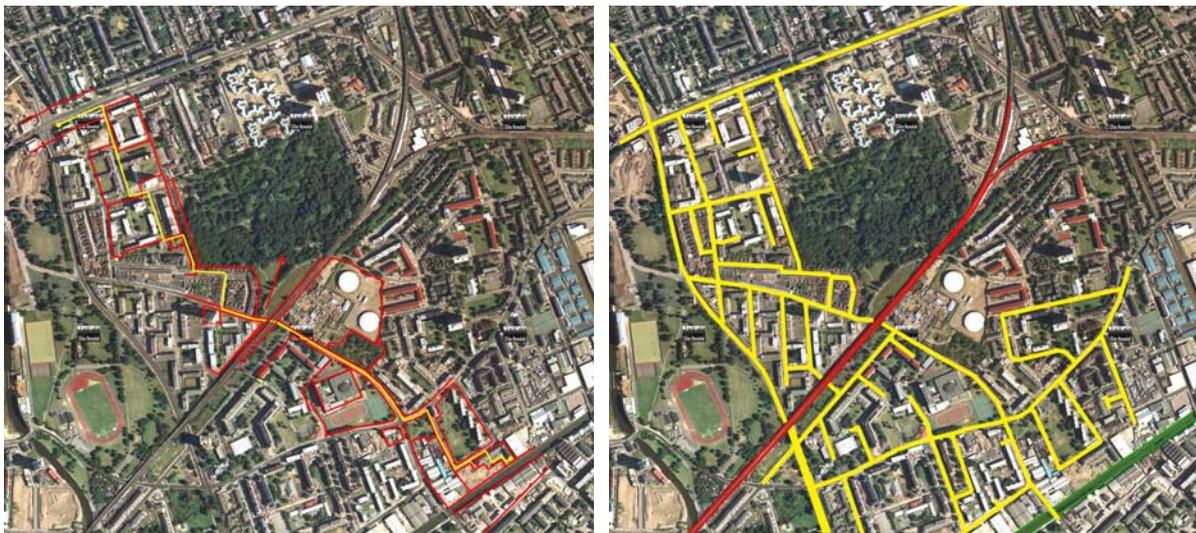
<sup>10</sup> See for example, Francesco Careri’s *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2002), Christel Hollevoet “Wandering in the City, Flânerie to Dérive and After: The cognitive mapping of urban space” in *The Power of the City – The City of Power* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992). Anke Gleber’s *The Art of Talking a Walking* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999) asserts the artistic and critical role of the flâneur. Iain Sinclair’s psychogeographic journeys in London and Patrick Wright’s meditation on Hackney both use the city as a text to be deciphered and as trigger to develop historical and anecdotal accounts. These last could be said to at least touch on the everydayness of their chosen territories.

<sup>11</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 98.

## Mapping Mile End

"I have always been struck by the way in which Lynch's conception of city experience – the dialectic between the here and now of immediate perception and the imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality [...]" - Fredric Jameson<sup>12</sup>

Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping provides a way of understanding Mile End as an alienating terrain. He writes: "[...] Lynch suggests that urban alienation is directly proportional to the mental unmapability of local cityscapes."<sup>13</sup> Another way of thinking about this concept is proposed by Jameson's phrase 'dual thinking'.<sup>14</sup> Jameson adds a psychological dimension to Lynch's model of simultaneously visualising a local conception of place and a larger territory; for example, by understanding one's position within a particular street and that street's (and hence your own) position within a district or the city itself. Moreover, dual thinking can extend to non-physical aspects of location and identity. Applying Lynch's notion of cognitive mapping, we can see Mile End producing difficulties in relating individual fragments to a larger reality. The lack of a recognisable larger spatial system or organising property (the streets do not form any easily produced 'image') makes mapping a process of relating fragment to fragment, discarding the last when a new one is encountered. Even if one is able to link the fragments in order, it is difficult to imagine the emergence of a coherent overall concept for the larger territory. The primary activity of dual thinking is the forming of *relationships* between specific and general conditions.



[Left – one possible delineation of fragments; right – street pattern]

The difficulty does not end with attempts to spatially map one's position but is compounded by the multiple shifts in one's psychological state. The implication is that there is a dialectical process of identity formation between territory and walker. How the walker sees oneself is partially determined by the territory through which one walks. Likewise, the identity given to the territory by the walker is partially dependent on the state of mind. If we feel threatened then the terrain is branded as dangerous. The sources of those threatening signals can be physically determined. Admittedly a threatening atmosphere can be socially or culturally produced, for instance, perceiving threat in the mere presence of teenagers loitering in temporary open spaces. However, the absence of signs of population, for example, the absence of windows along Southern Grove Street or Bow Common Lane, can produce a threatening atmosphere on its own. Here we are close to the territory covered by Oscar Newman in *Defensible Space*. Newman's study, in fact, is a rare contribution to architectural

<sup>12</sup> Fredric Jameson "Cognitive Mapping" in Nelson, C and Lawrence, G. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: Macmillan Education, 1988) 353.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 353.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 360.

thinking that maintains a careful balance between social and formal determinants.<sup>15</sup> The major drawback has been that its content has been taken too literally and is often invoked defensibly, that is, as a means of repair rather than construction.

### **Conclusion in the form of a beginning**

So what would a strategy for intervention look like for Mile End? Is intervention necessary? The purpose has not been so much to work towards a 'solution' or strategy for Mile End, but to interrogate what we think we can know about such a place. One outcome of this is an awareness of the problems associated with aesthetic strategies. I intend here two interpretations for 'aesthetic': the first as a synonym for Benjamin's notion of the 'state of concentration' and the second in the sense in which it refers to the visual. Kevin Lynch's concept of cognitive mapping avoided the first but ultimately succumbed to the second. Lynch began with everyday perceptions and avoided imposing any artistic intention on his subjects, but ultimately based his model on the visual realm. This dimension is not unimportant, but as I have tried to show, cannot and should not be separated from what is practised and the spatial configuration in which they occur.

There is, in truth, a narrative at Mile End and it is directly related to the spatial and programmatic configuration. This is the daily flow of people to and from the tube station, in the morning funnelling towards it and in the evening dispersing away from it. This activity, as an overlay, provides a practised logic to the area. People recognise the pattern and each other along their individual routes, increasing in density and commonality as it nears the station. This shared activity is one possible starting point for considering intervention.<sup>16</sup> But this has to be seen in a complex web of conditions. De Certeau took a more optimistic view of the everyday than did Lefebvre and sought reveal how individuals invent ways of investing bleak conditions with meaning.<sup>17</sup> This position was developed from a careful analysis of the relationship between fixed orders and individual practices. This ensures that solutions would be rooted in the specificity of problems found on the site. For this reason what should be avoided at all costs is the importation of models, no matter how well they work, from other territories whether it be the city, the suburb, or the village. But in the end, further analysis might suggest that Mile End is almost all right.

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<sup>15</sup> Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space* (London: Architectural Press, 1972). Although Newman and others credit Jane Jacobs with pioneering the concept of defensible space in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (London: Cape, 1961), her study relies too heavily on social expectations that are presumed to be universal.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Sennett, in *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), argues that recognition of strangers is an important and primary condition for constructing a public realm.

<sup>17</sup> This optimistic reading of the everyday is more clearly evident in the second volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life* but is implied by his proposal of walkers as 'writers'. De Certeau, M., Giard, L. and Mayol, P., *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).