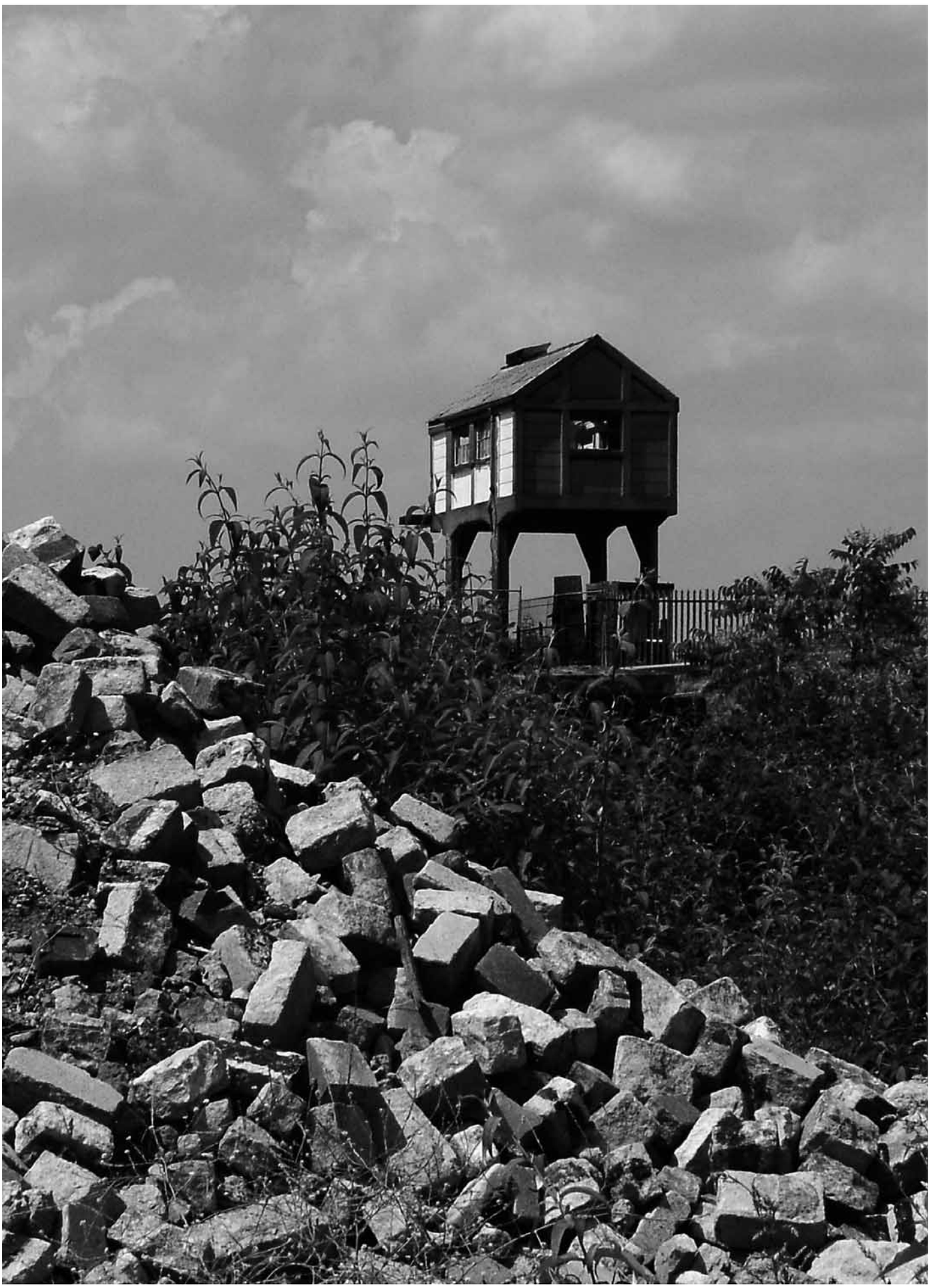


1

Juliet Davis | **Re-imagining Bishopsgate goodsyard**

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135508000894 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A temporary intervention bridging art and architecture in an East London goodsyard offers an intriguing commentary on divergent contemporary approaches to urban transformation.

Re-imagining Bishopsgate goodsyard

Juliet Davis

This paper explores the contribution made to debates over the redevelopment of the nineteenth-century Bishopsgate goodsyard site in Spitalfields, London, by an experimental architectural artwork entitled *Intact* by Office for Subversive Architecture. Readings of the urban character of Spitalfields are reviewed, as imagined and captured in film and in literary narrative. Applying in this way an approach related to what Luckhurst terms 'the spectral turn'[1] in urban historiography, I use these readings as a background for examining the site's recent development. Over the last twenty years, it has been subject to a variety of urban proposals. While some have pressed for virtually complete demolition of existing structures, others have focused on aspects of urban character and possibilities for intensifying use through intervention. The *Intact* project involves a reinterpretation of a small fragment of railway architecture. I argue that it suggests, playfully, the potential for re-imagining the site that interacts nonetheless with readings of the past.

Readings of Spitalfields

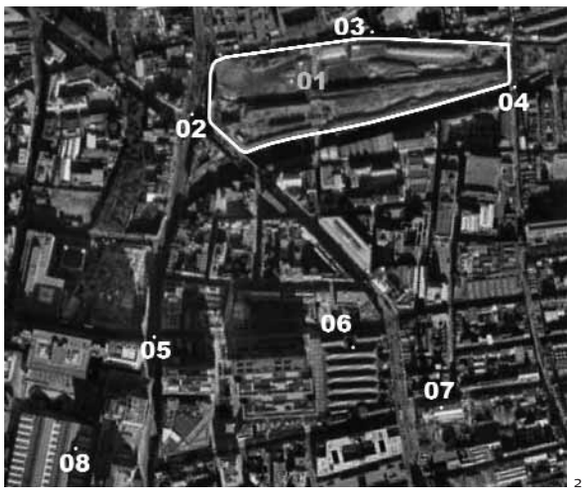
Bishopsgate goodsyard is at the boundary between the City of London and the inner east end. The site is wedged in the elbow defined by railway lines as they bend south into Liverpool Street Station, enclosing the historic ward of Spitalfields. The boundary is marked by Bishopsgate Street which the goodsyard fronted onto and was once one of the 11 gateways into the medieval City of London. Despite the massive expansion of London over time, this boundary has continued to be significant, as analysis by authors from Mayhew to Hobbs and Taylor shows.[2] On the west side of the street is the affluent and legitimised financial hub of the capital, on the east more marginal Spitalfields. In the following analysis, I will reveal how being at the margin of the city, underpins a variety of social and imaginative ways in which Spitalfields is constructed as 'other' *[2]*.

Spitalfields was one of the sites designated outside the city walls for Roman human burial.[3] Throughout the Middle Ages, until the dissolution of the monasteries, the area was occupied by Christian institutions, most notably the Augustinian priory or Hospital of St. Mary Spital, from which the area partially derives its name and which was engaged in the care of the marginalised sick and poor.[4] The tradition of care for outcasts of the city continued up until the late nineteenth century when the site of the asylum of St. Mary of Bethlehem was finally demolished.[5] The 'fields' in the name 'Spitalfields' refer to the tenter grounds used for stretching cloth by the trade of English weavers that began to develop the area from the mid sixteenth century. Spitalfields is still renowned for its rag trade, a tradition that can be linked loosely back to these weavers, though adopted and transformed by waves of immigrants over the last three centuries *[3]*.[6] The Huguenots, fleeing Catholic persecution in France, were followed by Jewish refugees from the pogroms of Eastern Europe and, most recently by the Bengali and Bangladeshi communities that now most strongly define the commercial character of Spitalfields through their curry houses, markets and fabric shops. The popularity of such enterprises among a broad audience has, as Cloke and Goodwin point out, led to a reframing of marginality in the terms of brand identity, epitomised by the recent renaming of the Brick Lane area 'Banglatown'.[7]

Through the early diversity of its population, though this came about through the conditions of poverty and labour so painfully evoked by Mayhew, Spitalfields acquired a notoriety for 'liberty', becoming 'a refuge for dissidents generally' from the eighteenth century.[8] This 'liberty' encompassed, of course, a wide spectrum. Non-conformist Christian sects, such as the Wesleyans, Quakers, Calvinists and Swedenborgians, formed one aspect of it, establishing communities and meeting houses in the area as names like Calvin Street, Elder Street and Quaker Street still testify. At quite the other end of the spectrum were the criminal elements and prostitution that helped forge a dark reputation and the diagnosis of an urban pathology, particularly in the nineteenth century. So powerful was this reputation that the *Survey of London* explains, 'the evil reputation of the area [...] has left much of now vanished Spitalfields unrecorded by any topographical artist'.[9]

1 View of *Intact* from Spitalfields City Farm, 2006

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01 Bishopsgate Goodsyard
02 Shoreditch High Street
03 Bethnal Green Road
04 Brick Lane
05 Bishopsgate
06 Spitalfields Market
07 Christchurch, Spitalfields
08 Liverpool Street Station

2 Site plan

3 Brick Lane leather and textiles shop, 2006



3

This reputation recalls key aspects of Anthony Vidler's notion of an 'architectural uncanny'. This is defined as a form of '"spatial estrangement" [...that] represent[s a] mingling of mental projection and spatial characteristics'.[10] This relationship is suggested in films and literature about Spitalfields. Stories reproduced about Jack the Ripper, for example, whose murders occurred in the vicinity, hold particular significance, as the sites of his crimes create a narrative 'map' of uncanny places that await the attentions of the nineteenth-century detective cum social pathologist.[11] Works ranging from Marie Belloc Lowndes' *The Lodger* (1911) to Iain Sinclair's *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987), re-imagine and re-create monstrous associations with the area, the latter of which evoke a sense that clues still lie close to the surface, an impression not of history at rest but of crimes lurking on in the scripts of everyday life, of unfinished business.

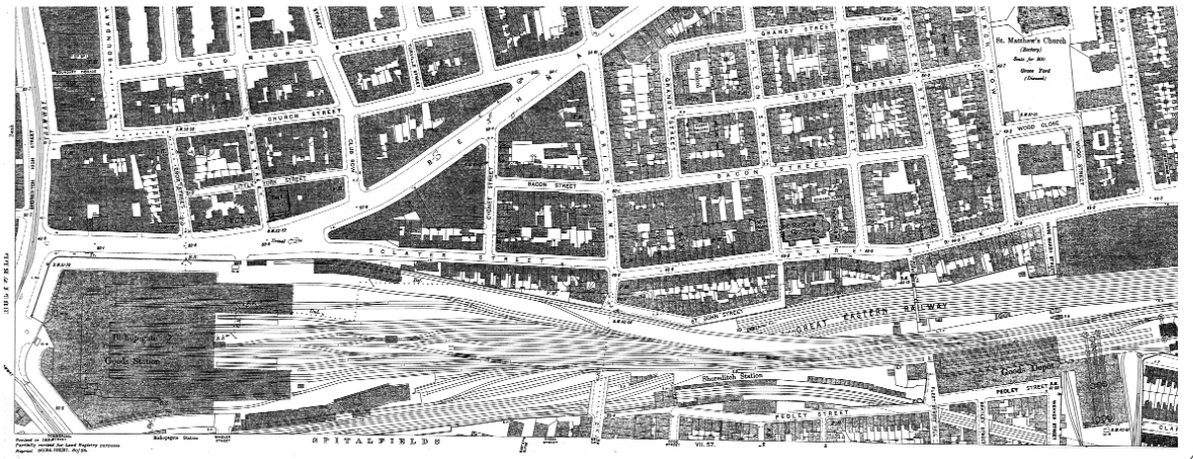
In the film *The London Nobody Knows* by Norman Cohen (1967), the noir sides of Spitalfields street life are highlighted, thrown into relief as curious and desperate irrationalities by contrast to the marching modernity of London's post-war reconstruction. Here the 'uncanny' resides in the imminent disappearance of such street life. Peter Ackroyd's novel, *Hawksmoor* (1993), a fictional investigation which includes a contemporary murder occurring in the vicinity of the architect Nicholas Hawksmoor's Christchurch Spitalfields, evokes a sense of continuity or, as Lynda Nead puts it, that '*the present remains permanently engaged in a phantasmatic dialogue with the past*'.[12] As the story evolves it becomes entangled with history, finally reaching conclusions which seem pre-determined for the places around the churches, cast as under spell.

Through each of the above cited narratives, a form of 'psychic topography'[13] fills part of the gap formed by the absence of earlier topographical records. Though involving subjective interpretations, these arguably bring important aspects of the identity of the area – relating to its occupation and use, but also to the world of urban myth and memory – into the light. In looking more closely now at the recent history of Bishopsgate goodsyard, I will argue that recognition of them can have both negative and positive impacts on the ways in which urbanism is imagined and re-imagined.

Bishopsgate goodsyard

Another contributor to the character of Spitalfields from the mid nineteenth century was the transport infrastructure and associated commerce that did much to transform the earlier urban grain of small townhouses and workshops *[4]*. The site of the goodsyard was developed in 1840–1842 as a passenger terminus for the Eastern Counties Railway Company, which operated between London, Norwich and Yarmouth. The railway line was elevated on a viaduct designed by company engineer John Braithwaite. This is now widely regarded as one of the best examples of nineteenth-century railway engineering *[5]*.[14] The station closed to passengers in the early 1880s. The development of railways dramatically increased the potential for goods – fish from the Norfolk coast, produce from the fens of East Anglia – to be brought fresh to the city, and it became essential to have a goodsyard near to the key markets.[15] The development of this goodsyard resulted in a multi-storey topography of engineering structures. At street level, there were roadways and loading bays for lorries and carts; at first floor, terminus platforms; and, over this, a 158,000 square foot warehouse. Movement of goods between floors

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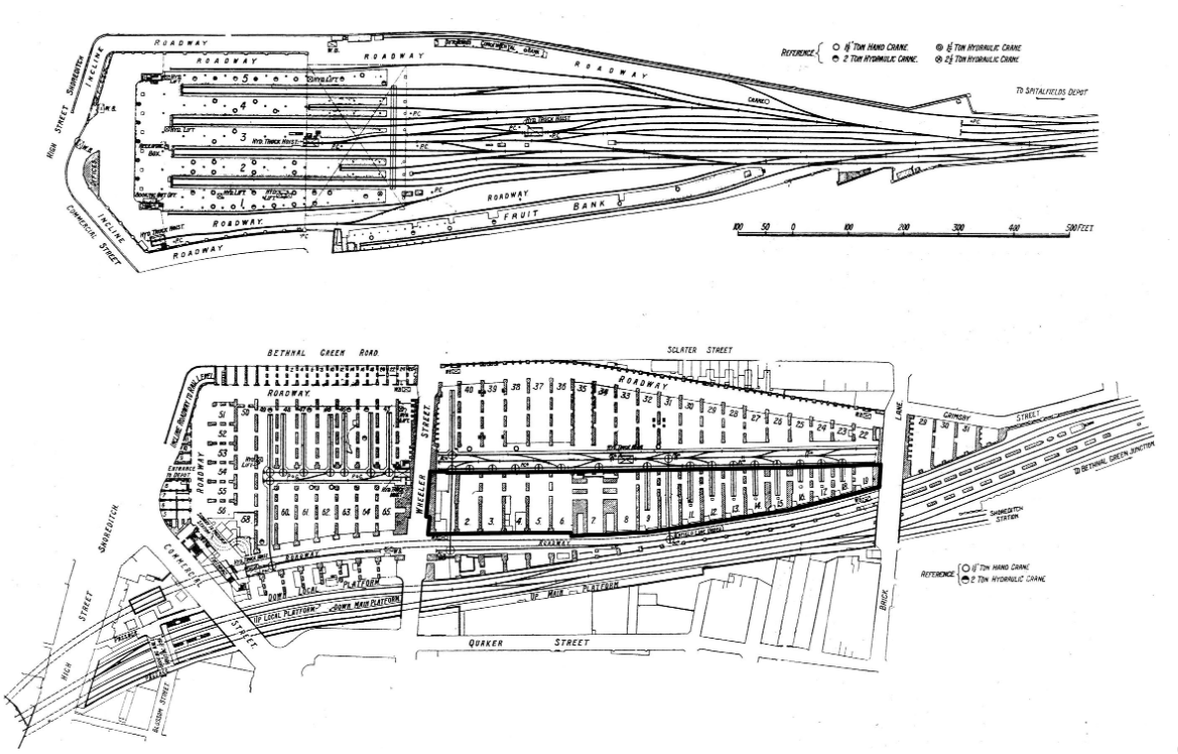
4 Ordnance Survey Map, 1894

5 Bishopsgate passenger station, 1850

6 Bishopsgate goodsyard.
Above: deck level.
Below: ground level (the area denoted by a black line is the Braithwaite Viaduct)

was made possible by large hydraulic cranes and lifts *[6]*.[16] The goodsyard continued in operation until the 1960s, its buildings surviving the Second World War intact. In 1964, the goodsyard was all but destroyed by fire. The buildings were uninsured and, as they were becoming dated in any case, reconstruction was out of the question.[17] The yard was closed, the structure made safe and then the site was left derelict *[7, 8]*.

Arguably, in the late twentieth century, just as in the nineteenth century, processes of evaluation that served to render the urban topography invisible also enabled distinctive forms of inhabitation to grow up organically. From the 1960s, the alien character of large-scale production gradually gave way to small-scale enterprise around the site's borders, in keeping with London's East End tradition,[18] from small-time joiners, bicycle mechanics and salvage merchants to fashion and accessory stores. The westernmost arches of the goodsyard were used for commercial



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7 Goodsyard entrance from Shoreditch High Street, 1966

8 Goodsyard deck, 1988

9 Goodsyard market, 1993

car parking. On the upper deck, curiously conspicuous, was a car breaker's yard operating without planning permission. The undercrofts of the western section of the goodsyard were informally occupied as a flea market [9]. A proposal to extend the East London Line was initiated by London Underground Ltd. in 1989 (LUL) and they were granted compulsory purchase power for the entire site in 1993.[19] English Heritage did not consider the goodsyard to have enough architectural significance to warrant listing, considering conservation less important than the catalysing effect the tube line could have on regeneration in a down-at-heel part of East London.[20]

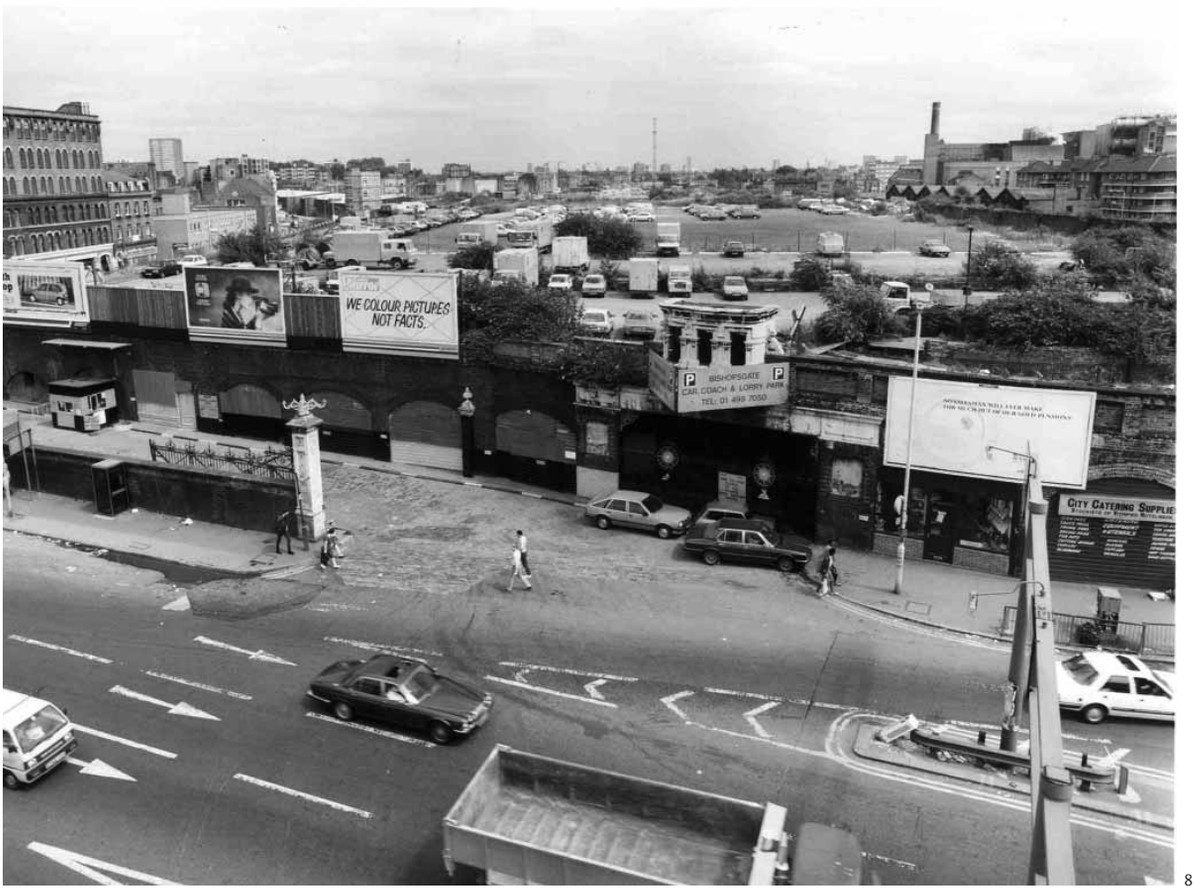
Since the early 1990s, the streets around Spitalfields have been restored and property now commands high market prices. This reflects not so much a 'return of the middle classes' as discussed by Pitt in his text on Islington,[21] as a new form of settlement and even 'conquest'.[22] As Bondi identifies, 'conquest' gentrification runs parallel to 'displacement' because all types of accommodation become desirable property. In Spitalfields, gentrification has proceeded on a number of different fronts. The Georgian architecture around Christchurch caught the attention of a notably intellectual middle class – including Dan Cruickshank, Simon Thurley and Jeannette Winterson – many of whom have campaigned for the preservation of historic Spitalfields. The frontier of Bishopsgate Street has been placed under pressure as the financial district has grown in a buoyant market, demanding new lettable floor space.[23] The small-scale commercial character of the area has also shifted in the direction of new art and design industries and markets. While the street markets continue to represent the Bangladeshi community, they are at risk of becoming 'historical rather than contemporary'.[24] This recalls Luckhurst's argument that an undeniable aspect of contemporary interest in the 'spectral' is a typically middle-class 'rapacious demand for authentic London history' that, in desiring to settle romantically among the vanishing, only hastens their disappearance.[25]

Urban transformations

There was a public outcry following the announcement of intentions to permanently demolish the goodsyard, particularly given the absence of a developed alternative scheme for the site. An extensive consultation process had the effect of stalling London Underground's demolition plan. For six years, the broader architectural and cultural value of the goodsyard formed a subject of political debate that pitted institutions such as Transport for London against powerful lobbyists fronted by Prince Charles.

Debate over the retention of certain elements of the goodsyard over others clearly related to originality and worthiness of construction and hence importance within architectural history. This hinged most powerfully on the 1840s Braithwaite Viaduct [10a, b]. In 2002, English Heritage re-evaluated its former position, conceding the importance of the viaduct in these terms and spot-listing it. This action served to protect but also to isolate the Braithwaite Viaduct from the rest of the goodsyard fabric. It also led to London Underground's proposal becoming the subject of judicial review proceedings in the High Court.

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10a



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10 *a, b* Derelict goodsyard interior, 1995

11 Bishopsgate Space Management's site (denoted by the grey tone)

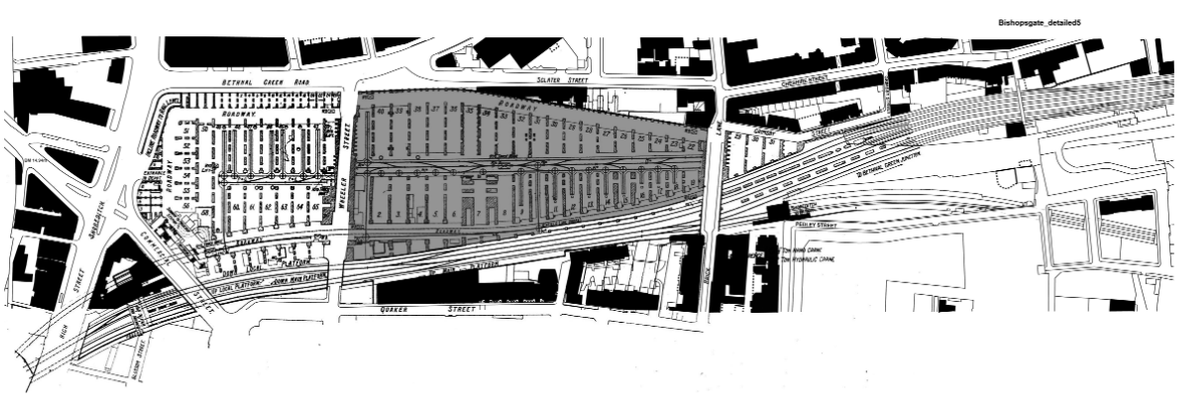
12 Bishopsgate Space Management's renovation: new units under construction in the Braithwaite Viaduct arches

13 Bishopsgate Space Management's renovation: the orchard

Debate revolved around the question of the relationship of the Braithwaite Viaduct to surrounding structures including the remaining machinery of the yard. It was held that if the viaduct could be understood conceptually as an independent structure then London Underground could legitimately demolish all surrounding structures and replace with new.[26] The High Court ruling placed responsibility for taking this view in the hands of the two local authorities: Tower Hamlets and Hackney. While their subsequent decision that the Braithwaite Viaduct could not be conceptually extricated from the rest of the goodsyard structures led to an expensive formal planning application, in the end, permission for the demolition of all but the viaduct was granted anyway.[27] Not only the less worthy parts of the architecture, but the existing occupants of the site, were deemed historically unimportant. Planning rhetoric explained this by again connecting the regeneration benefits of the East London line with a need for demolition.[28]

The public interest and reaction generated around the proposed demolition led to these occupants and their interests acquiring sudden visibility. In 1998, in response to this sudden focus on the site and its attributes, Bishopsgate Space Management Ltd. (BSM) negotiated with Railtrack to acquire a lease to manage half of the 10-acre site *[11]*. They acquired permission to upgrade the space under the arches and to lease them to a range of businesses up until such time as a firm and fully accepted development plan was in place.[29] These included a big corporate entertainment facility, a go-karting venture, a mixture of light manufacturing workshops, leisure facilities including a swimming pool and five-aside football pitches, a restaurant, a Sunday market and even an apple-producing orchard *[12–15]*. The sports facilities were inserted under the widest-spanning arches under the old tracks.

Bishopsgate Space Management's approach demonstrated that the structure could accommodate a range of viable, self-funding uses. In this sense, it demonstrated that changing relationships between the metabolism of the city and its spaces of consumption do not necessarily create a need for demolition. Eric Reynolds, BSM founder and managing director explained in



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interview, with reference to the goodsyard, how 'things that have been huge holes or lumps or rocks through which people had to flow suddenly become capable of being infiltrated'. He sees these processes of infiltration as inherently positive, a way in which such 'rocks' yield to creative public use. He argued that the demolition of structures such as the Bishopsgate goodsyard take place at the expense of that kind of public space in the city that is 'accidental ... which, if taken away, reduces London's diversity by another factor'.[30] BSM's approach suggested the possibility that long-term development could be constructed over and around the structures, so intensifying rather than erasing existing urban territory. Reynolds explained: 'Our proposal was to preserve an area for the rail – which

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may or may not be funded one day [...] In front of it you put sport or whatever it is that's going to act as a buffer to the railway and then build the residential. In all these (existing) internal spaces, you could continue to have all the things that you already have.'[31]

Over the time that Bishopsgate Space Management was in possession of the goodsyard, further evidence was brought to bear on their side of the debate. The Architecture Foundation launched a competition in 1999, endorsed by the Government's new Urban Taskforce, to provoke visions of high-density mixed tenure housing by London's architectural community. The competition brief suggests that projects should aim to work with the existing urban fabric rather than assuming *tabula rasa* and, in so doing, propose to 'puncture the structure [...] and also to affect the street edge – i.e. wrap or infiltrate the existing structure from the street side'.[32] An engineering evaluation by Ove Arup & Partners concludes that the brick vaults could have reliably supported loads from two-storey buildings and the proposed East London line. English Heritage, re-evaluating its former position with regard to the Braithwaite Viaduct, commissioned the study 'Delivering the Good' which concludes that contextual development of the existing structure could enhance the quality of the area and the experience of the existing local community.[33]

In 2003, however, with no planning permission yet in place, or any certainty of it, London Underground repossessed the site in order to validate the terms of the compulsory purchase they had obtained in 1993. The businesses and occupiers of the goodsyard were issued with notices to quit. Although the listing of the Braithwaite Viaduct became binding in the terms



15

14 Bishopsgate Space Management: occupation of the spaces under the arches

15 Urban Space Management's market advertisement

16, 17 Informal market around the goodsyard site perimeter, 2006

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of planning permission, English Heritage's additional recommendations did not. Now four years later, the goodsyard has been entirely demolished save for the viaduct and the gates on Shoreditch High Street. Interestingly, the informal markets continue to thrive around its perimeter, filling Sclater Street, Brick Lane, Cheshire Street and the pavements of Bethnal Green Road each Sunday *[16, 17]*.

Intact

In 2004, the year after the demolition of the goodsyard began, the London Cell of the Office for Subversive Architecture created a small intervention, entitled *Intact*. This involved the brief transformation of a signal box into something resembling a small house *[1, 18]*. As such, it portrayed a vision for the site that looked very much from within its existing identity. The transformation involved minimal material intervention, no more than brilliant white paint highlighting the exposed concrete structure of the signal box to make it look like a mock Tudor house, artificial geraniums in typical green window flower boxes, fixed to the windows, artificial long grass on the balcony, a 'regular but comfortable director's chair [...] alongside the cheapest BBQ on sale [...] door [...] painted gloss black and conventional suburban ironmongery [...] a small family car battery, suitable for any small family car [...] installed with a light hooked up to a timer [...] set for 21:00 hours each night; sunset'.[34] However, it involved a semantic transformation, based on the resemblance of the signal box to a dwelling – this an essential form of dwelling in the Bachelardian sense.[35] This was achieved through the application of popular domestic imagery, features as simple and familiar as those of a childhood Wendy house, or, if in slightly mocking tones, of contemporary English suburbia. Thus, importantly, although *Intact* perches out of reach and actually without use over a derelict viaduct, it succeeds in conveying an image of 'house' that anybody could recognise as such. OSA's aim in doing this was not to be didactic but rather use the strength of an immediately identifiable image to promote a range of different responses, whether critiques of its banality, nostalgias or desires.

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18 Views of *Intact* on completion, 2004

19 View of the demolished goodsyard, 2005

The intervention meshes with the theme of 'the uncanny' touched on in relation to the history of Spitalfields in the first section of this article. Although a home is not created, the project, 'an intact living space in a philosophical sense',[36] nevertheless appeals to 'the memory of the house', dreamily rising up and through the 'uncanny aura'[37] of the disused site or the seamy urban character portrayed by authors like Sinclair. Despite the somewhat cutesy image projected by the intervention, features such as the light, flowers and chair serve to create a sense of reassuring inhabitability.

The incongruous relationship between the 'house' and its situation, its elevation lending it a quality of the monumental, calls to mind André Breton's surrealistic vision set out in 'Towards the Irrational Embellishment of a Town' for the wild transformation of monuments in Paris.[38] However, OSA are keen to point out that the project is not intended to be a memorial, but rather to mark a moment in the life of the structure. This is achieved while barely touching the original signal box. The project therefore leaves also 'intact' a familiar urban landmark in its existing locality. What is formed is not new architecture but, as it were, a new architectural layer on the site. I would argue that one of the project's important achievements is the restoration, however fleeting, of potential homeliness without at once creating what Vidler describes as 'homesickness'.

Unconventional practice

The process of transformation or embellishment clearly breaks with norms of conventional architectural practice. This is evident in the fact that the project was executed without any formal permission. In fact it was, for the most part, carried out overnight from the end of a long ladder. More importantly, from a conceptual perspective, the project involved a 'tactical' approach: the appropriation and re-working of spaces through direct action.[39] Such approaches are often referred to as 'guerrilla tactics' in the architectural press. Whether guerrilla or otherwise, they clearly resonate with a range of critical practices in the arts and architecture going back to early twentieth-century reactions to the modern city, from Surrealism to the work of the Situationist International[40] to the more recent and in some respects derivative practices of writer Iain Sinclair, architectural groups such as Raumlabor or Stalker and film-maker Francis Alÿs. These, though significantly different in detailed respects, are all practices that have set out to resist the dominant 'spatiality of power' produced through the instrumentality of capitalism, and are widely regarded as critically marginal, transgressive or counter-hegemonic.[41] For Bernd Trümpler and Karsten Huneck, designers of the *Intact* project, the actions of taking control of the signal box and reworking it, the reactions of those that witnessed it, community members coming forth to speak about their memories of it, the events that were hosted for the project's launch in Architecture Week, and the ongoing process of representing it, were all as important as the materiality of the project itself. In other words, the stories generated by making, reacting and inhabiting are as significant as objects produced at any given moment.

OSA's focus on the transgression of the normative limits of architectural practice, rather like Sinclair's psychogeographic walking, serves to reveal both ways in which the built environment is controlled and certain possibilities that lie beyond control, in gestures of informal occupation or making that unfold in time. OSA's mode is provisional and temporary, operating for the moment and not producing fixity far beyond it. Indeed its primary aim appears to be to open up a ground for thinking about the site both contextually and creatively. This is supported by OSA's statement that:

> *'the installation is meant to be temporary and its duration is in relation to the general future of the site. Later, it should give way for a sensitive architectural development which addresses the issues of [...] locals as well as the need of a proper treatment of the urban space'.*[42]

OSA's success in achieving the transformation from signalbox to house demonstrates the potential for creating something surprising with very few material or financial means. It also demonstrates the potential for re-imagining historic structures in a way that both preserves their spatial qualities and radically revises possibilities for their present use and meaning. While not putting the project forward to be considered as a prototype for the development

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of the site as a whole, it is feasible to link it with the spirit of the informal occupation and re-uses of the historic fabric of the goodsyard that I described earlier and to be somewhat allied to Urban Space Management's approach. In so doing, it can be considered a useful advocate for the possibility of spatial transformation to occur in the context of public engagement and everyday life.

Interestingly, the work was vandalised shortly after it was completed. The *Intact* website explains that 'the authorities stormed the project with the aim to make the structure uninhabitable' fearing, presumably, that the intervention would be taken literally and actually inhabited.[43] In certain respects, it is fitting that this occurred, as it served to reveal the political nature of making and taking space in the city, the constant relationships between action and reaction in contests of power. It also removed the thorny problem of whether the project would have a legacy in itself, when a more fitting memorial might rest in the more insubstantial or indeed spectral realm of memory – through photographs, articles, stories and perhaps myths that represent it. It is interesting to consider how such short-lived work often only has currency in the moment. What clearly persist are the complex issues surrounding the future of the site and the tenuous belonging of the diverse local community to it. This, the intervention has helped bring to light.

Transformation and reimagination

In 'What Time is this Place?', Kevin Lynch sets out the ambivalence inherent within forms of selective conservation as a series of questions:

> '[A]*re we judging and evaluating the past, choosing the more significant over the less, retaining what we think of as best?* [...] *because they were most typical of their time? Because of their intrinsic qualities in the present? Because of their special usefulness as sources of intellectual information about the past?*'[44]

These questions may be raised incisively to the decision to retain the Braithwaite Viaduct in isolation from the rest of the goodsyard structure and in the context of otherwise entirely new development. The viaduct can serve to document, in an academic sense, a moment of invention in Victorian railway architecture deemed unmatched by the later goodsyard structures. As such, it can provide a source of information about particular aspects of the site's past, speaking honestly of the original use to which it was put. Its contribution might be seen in these terms to be a 'collective memory' of the site, as defined by Aldo Rossi in *The Architecture of the City*.[45] For Rossi, enduring physical features of the city serve to establish both continuity with its past and its present authenticity. However, what this ignores are ways in which urban processes leave behind not just records of objective history but form decisive historiographic accounts. The viaduct's preservation bestows on it a permanence which is curiously at odds with the marginal situation which provided the conditions for its survival after 1964. Though the physical continuity of the Braithwaite Viaduct enables it to allude to a nineteenth-century function of the site, it can no longer refer to the informal adaptations and uses to which it was put more recently, nor accept a future in those terms. Instead, the retained fragments of the structure become, to use Christine Boyer's argument, like pieces in a museum, carefully selected to tell the story of a particular strand of history but no longer

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embedded in the thick, messy, evolving totality of experience, imagination or of complex, multi-cultural memory.[46]

While there is no doubt that the goodsyard was obsolete in terms of its original function, the range of uses to which it was put clearly indicate that this obsolescence was not 'absolute' but 'relative', pointing towards the inherent adaptability of the urban fabric.[47] This argument recalls the loose-fit urbanism theorised by Bernard Tschumi in the 1980s, for whom the relationship between use and spatial form weaves between conditions of 'indifference', 'reciprocity' and 'conflict'.[48] The theorisation of such conditions loosens the traditional, rational, binary relationship between form and function. Tschumi challenges the notion that function attaches for perpetuity to the structures which first embody it, that such structure cannot be released, reused and re-imagined for the future. The work of Bishopsgate Space Management Ltd., and the aims inherent to The Architecture Foundation's competition brief, both suggest ways in which regeneration might relate to urbanism which is incremental rather than eradicative, thus weaving through patterns of social change. This resonates with Lynch's argument that incremental and small-scale change, rather than big eradicative gestures, represents a key to persevering continuity with the past, a past understood as both built and social, objective and subjective, complex, tangled and multiple.[49]

The intervention *Intact*, a small-scale gesture, posits alternative ways of re-imagining apparently redundant urban fabric. The transformation of signal box to house suggests the possibility for space and structure to tell a variety of different stories relative to use, experience and memory. In this sense, it acts as a provocation to those reductive definitions that would dislocate the historical from the contemporary, the lived from the memorial *[19]*. While not producing a solution to the problem of the site, the intervention can be considered to suggest possibilities for both re-imagining urban space and leaving room for future change. This approach runs counter to that epitomised by the conservation of the Braithwaite Viaduct. Both the work of Bishopsgate Space Management and Office for Subversive Architecture, though vastly different in terms of scale and emphasis, provided future visions for the site – still shrouded in mystery despite the completion of demolition – pointing towards the possibility of regeneration able to involve re-imaginings that interact nonetheless with readings of the past.

Notes

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135508000894 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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arq gratefully acknowledges:
Author, 1, 2, 3, 9, 14, 16, 17
Nick Catford, 10a, 10b, 11
Phil Gyford, 19
Office for Subversive Architecture, 18
Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, 5, 7, 8
Urban Space Management, 12, 13, 15

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135508000894 Published online by Cambridge University Press