East Expressing Interest

SOME NOTES ON THE WORK OF EAST

It is not easy to react objectively to the work of a practice that you not only hold in high regard, but count as valuable collaborators and dear friends. The time we have spent talking and sharing ideas with East is unprecedented in my own experience in practice, with a richness and feeling of personal discovery that has evolved over almost 12 years. The beginning of this shared enterprise goes back to 1997, when we collaborated on a competition for a new settlement near Sittingbourne, Kent. At the time I was struck by the intelligent position East had developed as architects and people who think of urban issues. This was clearly the result of a considerable amount of critical speculation on their part and, while our own position was close enough for a dialogue and exchange of ideas to take place, Stephen Bates and I felt that we were in the company of people who were capable of making a difference, of thinking in a way that we had never encountered before. I remember fondly the site visit and the precise manner in which East quickly developed accurate readings of this wetland landscape. Later, drawing with four hands, a project emerged that stemmed from readings of place.

These are strong memories and it is necessary to be clear that the act of collaboration can (and in this instance strongly did) affect the manner in which one subsequently sees the world. In other words, through a special set of circumstances something was added to our own understandings that I value greatly.

I am happy to leave the more profound, precise or academic interpretations of East's work to those better qualified for the task. In this catalogue I would like to note a more personal reaction to a number of their projects that have moved me over the years. This is not to discredit ones that I have not chosen, because this is mostly due to lack of familiarity, rather than a dismissal of their qualities.

An overall project

East insist on the nature of their practice at the junction of architecture, landscape and urbanism, a point made explicit by their name. However, in my opinion, these disciplines cannot be precisely delineated; all three are addressed in every project simultaneously. For example, when making a carefully judged intervention in a park in south-west London, East are thinking about its place in the city as a whole. Topographical adjustments are conceived in the picturesque tradition, as a form of man-made naturalness. The finish to a precast element is carefully considered in terms of the grain of the surface and the feeling of weight or mass, which bears a deliberate resemblance to ubiquitous highway infrastructural components. The intervention made here deliberately restricts the movement of vehicles as well as creating a moment to sit and reflect on your place in the city.

Working with what is there

There is a tendency in East's work to go with the flow, to give value to the qualities of what already exists, to make careful and often numerous readings of the places they have been invited to act upon. They always seem resistant to the introduction of some large, self-referential schema.

The Tufnell Park Nursery School project is an example of this point. The essence of the project stems from a very simple and direct idea; namely, to create a new roof enclosure that rhymes or rather follows precisely the slope of the existing ground. The most public elevation of this new structure places a single window more or less centrally, its shape determined by the slope of ground and roof in the horizontal plane while the verticals are true. The same setting-out is applied to the brickwork. The image this elevation evokes is like a child's drawing of a building on a slope, but the detailing is careful and works because idea and execution are closely related and kept under control.

A way of drawing

East produce drawings in a very recent English tradition that stems from Alison and Peter Smithson and, to some extent, Cedric Price. They have an uncanny ability to find a drawing technique to communicate a particular idea or strategy. Sometimes these drawings are diagrams, overlays on an existing survey plan, surrounded with annotations. The notes are then connected, like a long piece of string, to a place in the city that they are commenting on.

Sometimes the drawing itself is of an imagined place in miniature, such as that made of the space in front of Waterloo station as part of a framework study they were undertaking. The amount of information it conveys is rendered with an economy of drawing, but it is immediately possible to grasp the qualities of this new and transformed place.

Working with ideas

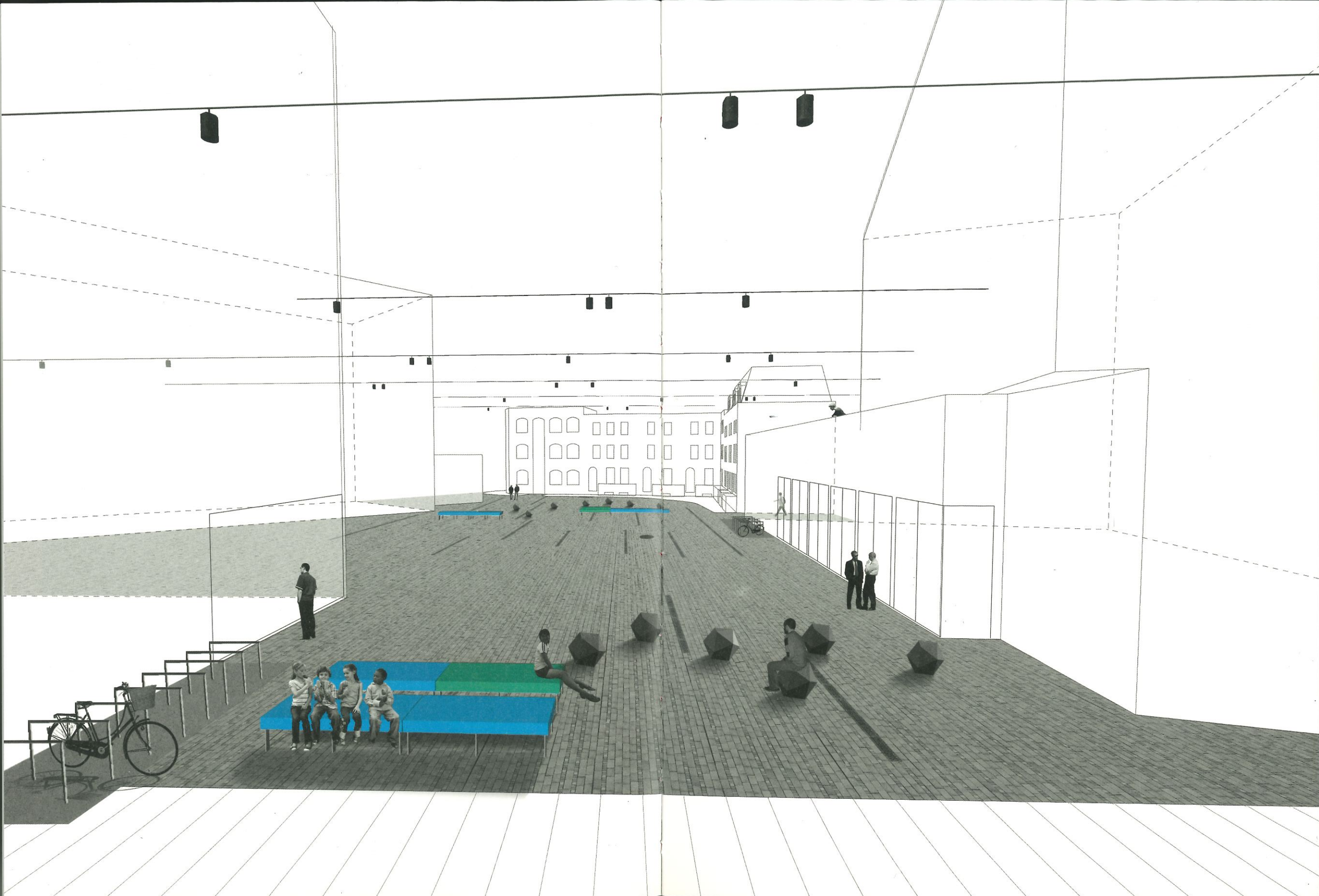
In Naas Lane Community Centre, the idea is a very simple one. The proposed building is organised to project the two distinct programmes it accommodates. The housing component (the so-called 'treehouse') is elevated and clad in green metal panels, making it appear continuous with the existing tree canopies. Below this, the public component of the programme is arranged in a more open manner, transparent and visually accessible. The intention in this project is immediately understandable, being both direct and formally bold. The project illustrates a form of humour specific to the work of East, which operates at a conceptual level.

London-ness

To date, the vast majority of East's projects have been situated in London, although not exclusively in the east. I have never had this conversation with the practice members, but I suspect their choice of name has as much to do with selecting a geographical focus for their work as with seeking to emphasise the collaborative nature of their enterprise.

In 2006 Stephen and I had the great pleasure of inviting Julian Lewis to assist us in running a week-long architecture workshop at the ESARQ in Barcelona, along with Bruno Krucker, Mark Pimlott and Jan Peter Wingender. The project we set for the students was an intensive investigation, in the form of a survey of their own city. The experience made it clear that the thinking of East, their theoretical position, is not burdened by geographical limits, and is applicable beyond London. However, I believe the practice is too committed and fascinated by the possibilities of working in London to actively look for work beyond its metropolitan limits. Fortunately, the city is sufficiently large, diverse and deficient in its organisation and hopefully East will be kept busy for a very long time.

Jonathan Sergison is a partner in the practice Sergison Bates architects and a professor at the Accademia di Architettura, Mendrisio



Over time the names of many of the shops and cafés named in stainless steel letters set in terrazzo mats have changed. This register of change is something we experience and enjoy as we revisit Borough High Street. Even though it has been dug up and relaid many times since being built in the late 1990s, the street endures, more robust than many of the buildings it serves.

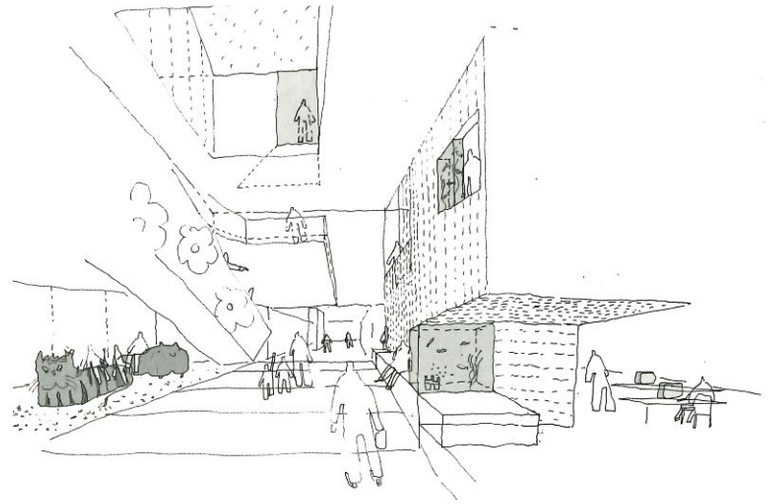
The project grew out of East's involvement with the Sorrell Foundation's joinedupdesignforschools process. Initially the brief was to design a new entrance space and headteacher's office with the student client team. Later the brief expanded to include six additional classrooms.

The Brief

Welcoming space
Display areas
Friendly reception
More private loos
Extra toilet for visitors
Elegant room for Mr Amos
Huge windows and wide views
Cups of tea
Better organised photo-copy room
Space reflecting the vibrancy of the school
More space for Mrs Fenner and Mrs Dallton
Remove clutter
Effective storage systems
Clear signs
Soft furniture
Plants
Mrs Fenner and Mrs Dalton facing visitors
Child-friendly storage in Joy's room
Mosaic
Lots of fish
More children's work for adults to see at the entrance
More room and desk space in the office
Yellow brick road

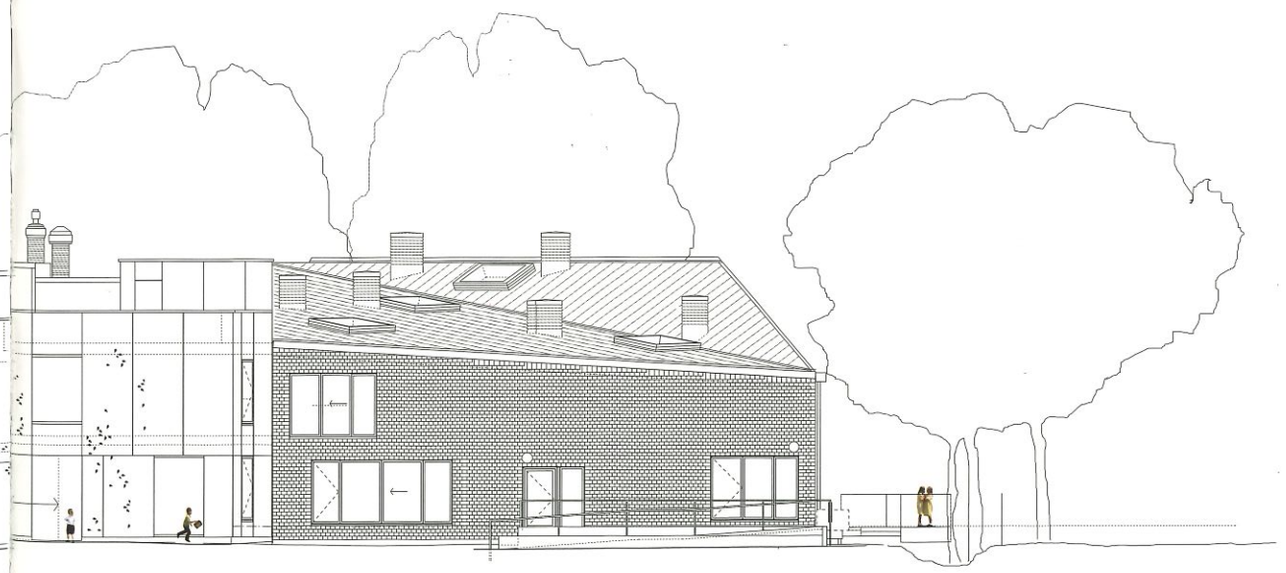
Coloured glass
Soothing music
Double-storey entrance Mr Amos on top
Extra room
Bubbles
Visitor room
Space for community
Buggy shed
Delivery storage
Fish and plastic fish
Baby massage
Living room
Sleepovers
Kiosk to sell apples
A transparent corridor
Curvy path or fence
Mr Amos going down the water slide
Electronic back massage
Bubbly lifts and elevators
Intercom systems
Multi-sensory rooms
Baby slide
Lights in Mr Feaver's shed
Crystal Palace
Natural things
Wood pebbles

Early drawing of the new entrance space

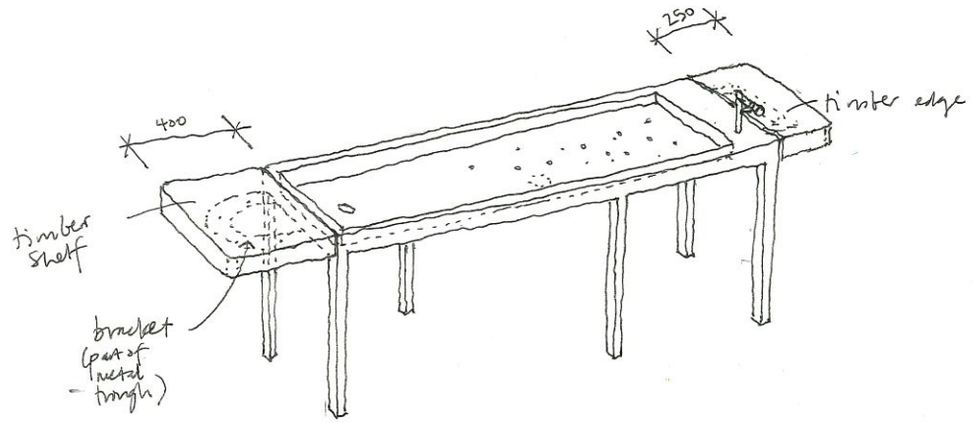


Two girls from the client team acting out the school's problems to clarify the brief, for example the lack of space for lying down and storage in the first aid room.

Photograph of the existing playground with the school entrance hidden behind the headteacher's office extension



A stainless steel play table was equipped with a water tap to act as a water bridge across the sand pit, with holes to allow water and light on to the sand.



JUDITH LÖSING

Hairy Drawings

Try this at home

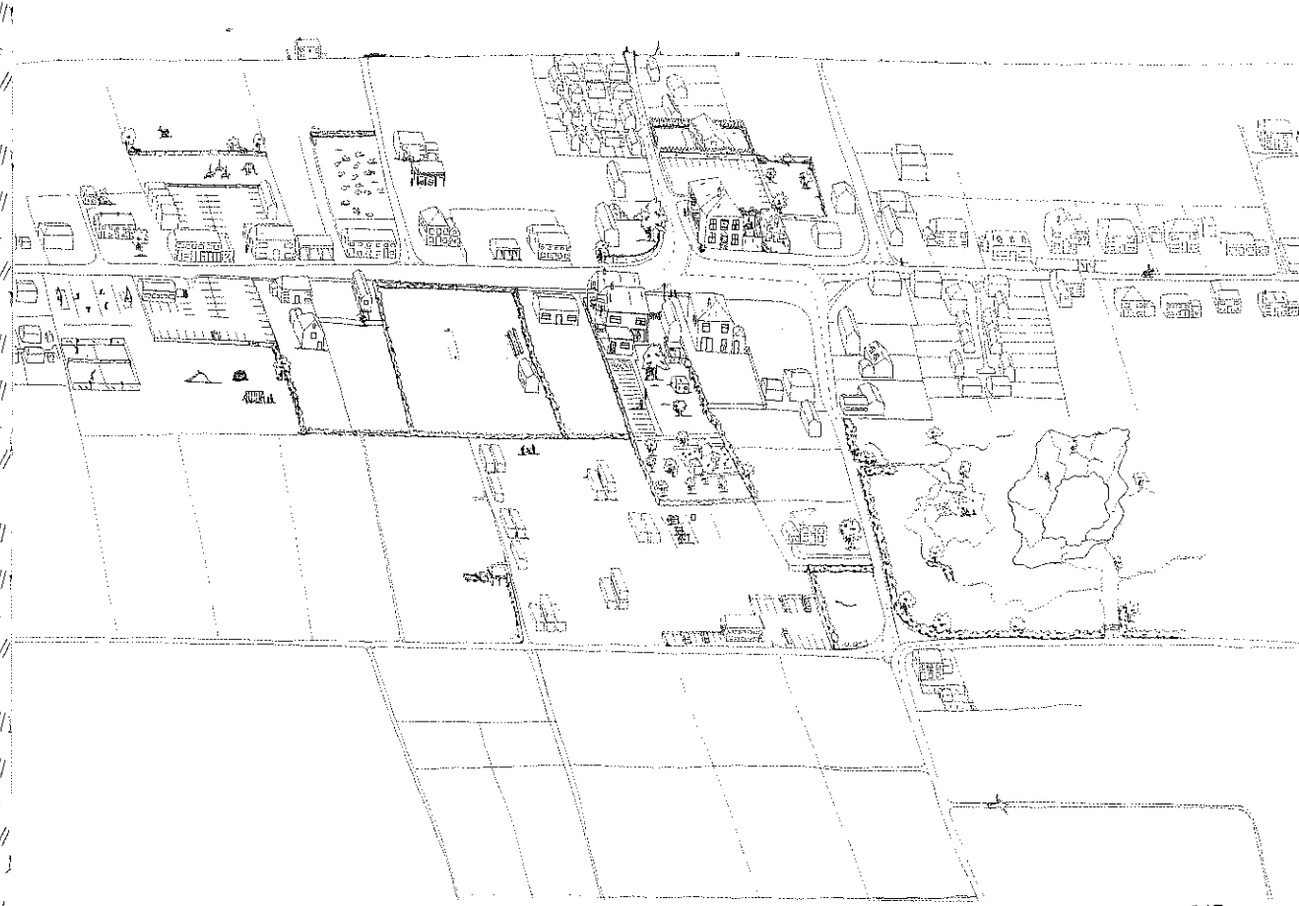
Draw your childhood home and neighbourhood from memory. Use only a thin black pen.

The drawing starts out tiny, like a baby, and expands over time, once the bedroom and kitchen have been re-explored.

The drawing is only allowed to stop when the memory runs out. Strangely enough, it is the opposite of recounting a dream. The more you draw, the more you remember.

It is as if all the spaces have been stored in your body, and the physical movement of drawing helps to brings them out again. Anne Enright describes this relationship with a place in *The Gathering*: 'I am not a visitor. This is my house too. I was inside it, as it grew; as the dining room was knocked into the kitchen, as the kitchen swallowed the back garden, it is the place where my dreams still happen.'

Lindsey Stevenson, East student 2005–2006: Neighbourhood in Yorkshire



This is our favourite way of drawing

Sticking more and more bits of paper to the first one, getting out the wider sketching paper, using the finest black pen around. Writing what you cannot draw. Drawing with four hands, as Jonathan Sergison describes it in his introduction, or even six, it feels like an occasion, with everyone sitting around the table talking excitedly, adding more and more detail, so that the thing on the table becomes complex and comprehensive. Doing this in a group makes you recall and spell out what is so clear in your head both verbally and on paper, one helping along the other.

The 'thing on the table' is usually a map, and we are talking about a place. We are trying to be as precise as possible. Every little granite sett, every name, every window might be important, and might help … in our understanding of where we're going to. This is not the time to make judgements or to generalise, or for wishing that the world was more tidy or operated according to your ideas or design principles. Wanting to do this drawing – the desire and the process – changes the way I look at a site.

Observe the street, from time to time, with some concern for system perhaps. Apply yourself. Take your time....

Note down what you can see. Anything worthy of note going on. Do you know how to see what's worthy of note? Is there anything that strikes you? Nothing strikes you. You don't know how to see.

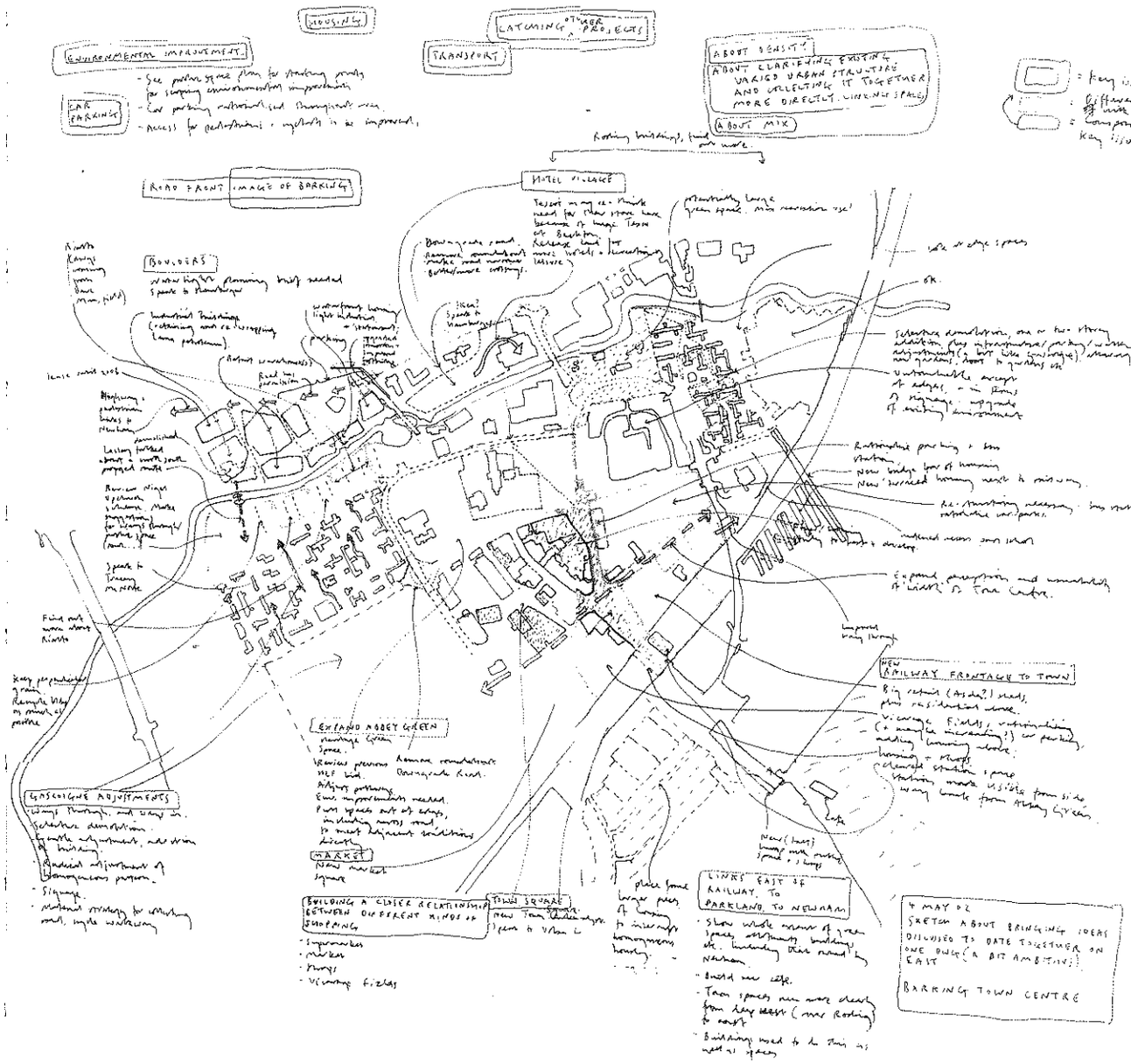
You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless....

Don't say, don't write 'etc.' Make an effort to exhaust the subject, even if that seems grotesque, or pointless, or stupid. You still haven't looked at anything, you've merely picked out what you've long ago picked out.

George Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*

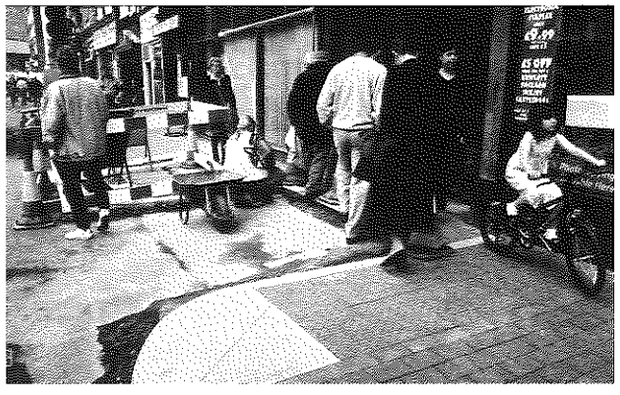
The drawing is an instrument that reveals or charts the specific conditions of a place with all its complexity, conflicts, contradictions – the banal as well as the sublime. Once this drawing exists, a commitment is made. The room is full of potential. Each opportunity and idea is sparked by something recorded and it is difficult for propositions not to be specific to the given conditions, and impossible to revert to the safety of urban design jargon involving axis, gateways, markers, piazzas and other formal gestures. These, in any case, can only be drawn with thick marker pens.

The hairy drawing is also an early indication of the urge to extend and adjust a brief, to create loose ends, not all of which need to be tied in. More often than not, the extent of a site is already irregular and uneven. A drawing can test and retest whether the edges are right, or if they are solely determined by practicalities such as ownership or funding, or the preference of a single public sector client. As the public realm does not operate in isolation from its surrounds, the best commissions are those open to negotiation.



Barking Framework Plan
Sketch about bringing ideas discussed to date together on one drawing

The Borough High Street drawing for example (pp46–47), is a record of permissions and agreements sought for interventions from raised crossings and sunken kerbs on private land to fixing lights to buildings. The project was a deliberate move to extend the scope of the project beyond the public space of the road into adjacent, privately owned areas. Convincing a trust of building owners in Canada of the benefits of removing street clutter and making space on the pavements of Borough High Street by removing a light column. Making them enthusiastic about fixing that light on to their building is a welcome complication and consequence of inviting more people to be our clients.



Borough High Street, under construction

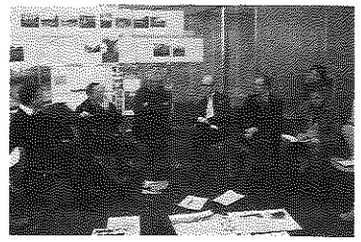
Implementing such a spreading and yet carefully negotiated project has its own conditions: a piece of road cannot be neatly hoarded in until it is all new, complete and approved – it is there for everyone to see and comment upon. It is an operation without full anaesthesia.

DANN JESSEN

Edge Spaces

We love edges. More precisely, we love edge spaces. They exist at all scales: the dusty edge of a bookshelf, the marginal spaces of an industrial estate. Edge spaces can be wild and untidy and it is difficult to know where they stop and start. They need to be taken for what they are and carefully understood and described. We use drawings to reveal their physicality, to reassert their status as places and establish their spatial opportunity.

We regularly find ourselves drawing the edge spaces where housing estates meet streets; where industrial compounds are woven into the fabric of housing. Large mixed-use developments are inserted into incompatible urban structures, as London stops and the Green Belt starts, with the

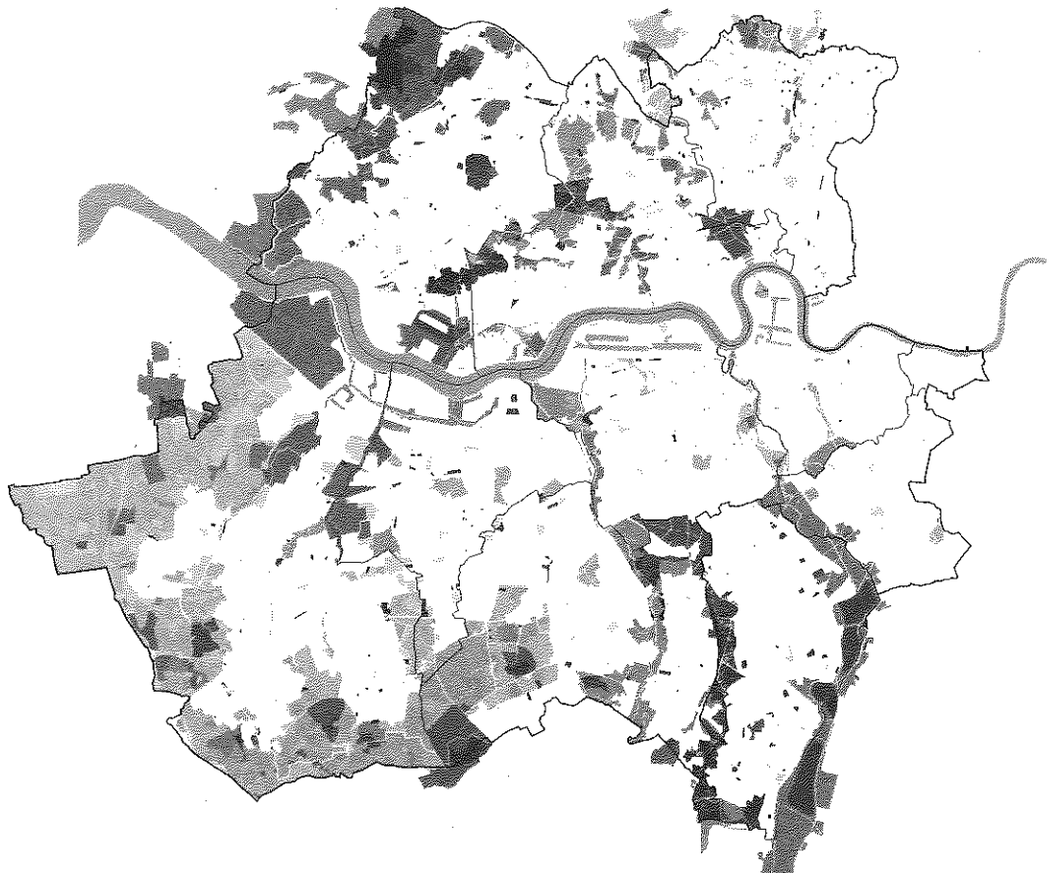


Bostall Wood
At a seminar at the Hayward Gallery we explored opportunities for improving the edges of London's woods with Ken Worpole, Fred Manson, Robert Mull and our 2007–2008 students.

Drawing the spaces at the edge of woods revealed new opportunities for using and revalidating both the woods and the surrounding neighbourhoods as relevant and rich.

Small pockets were occupied by children playing or garden waste; larger spaces by cemeteries, camping sites or allotment gardens. Areas in-between were rarely cared for, with a wilderness pushing its way into the city.

The creative effort was focused on reinvesting the architectural significance and relevance of these spaces (by reshaping, renegotiating and reallocating).



edges of woods, commons and wild spaces. These are areas where architectural utopia is deemed to not exist, and where architects often lose their nerve in exercising their skills.

It may be our focus on London that has driven our interest in describing and influencing edge spaces, because London is made up of them. Wildly differing places are located in close proximity, usually unnegotiated; established and maintained with little care about adjacent uses and places. In this sense, London is suburban at its core because there is always a desire to have space around buildings and plots, keeping others at bay.

In inner city areas such as Farringdon, which we are studying at the moment, edge spaces tend to be pushed away or, more often, shrunk through density. This is not only because plots need to be developed to their maximum, but also, significantly, because these spaces are frustratingly demanding and difficult to understood and categorise, lacking in architectural validity; and they therefore get ignored. Examples include the spaces around Smithfield Market, and the railway line that follows what was the Fleet river. The special openness of London is vanishing.

Edge spaces are by definition marginal, and therefore not clearly recognisable as places until better understood and renegotiated with clients. The clients themselves often need to be found out and integrated into the process. And this is what makes edge spaces interesting: that they are not obviously 'legitimate'. They are without clearly defined clients or users, usually because they sit at the intersection of various ownerships.

In seeking to legitimise edges as places, we focus on understanding and working precisely with their special – and undesigned – character. In many parts of the world, architectural practice takes an approach to context which relies on simple repetition. All that seems important is to maintain the status quo and build something that is roughly of a similar size, material and colour to the building next door. This approach is irrelevant in London where a sophisticated judgement is required about the situation, economy and exchange, varied scales, the public realm, people and the way all of these come together.

This heightened sense of urgency and complexity is fundamentally urban; it is the edge spaces, where spatial opportunity and managerial openness are at their peak, which hold the urban opportunity. Edge spaces offer the opportunity to connect and take up the slack; they are available for changing uses. If ignored, they are the most vulnerable part of the urban landscape and can disappear overnight. It is this very fragility that makes edge spaces vital.

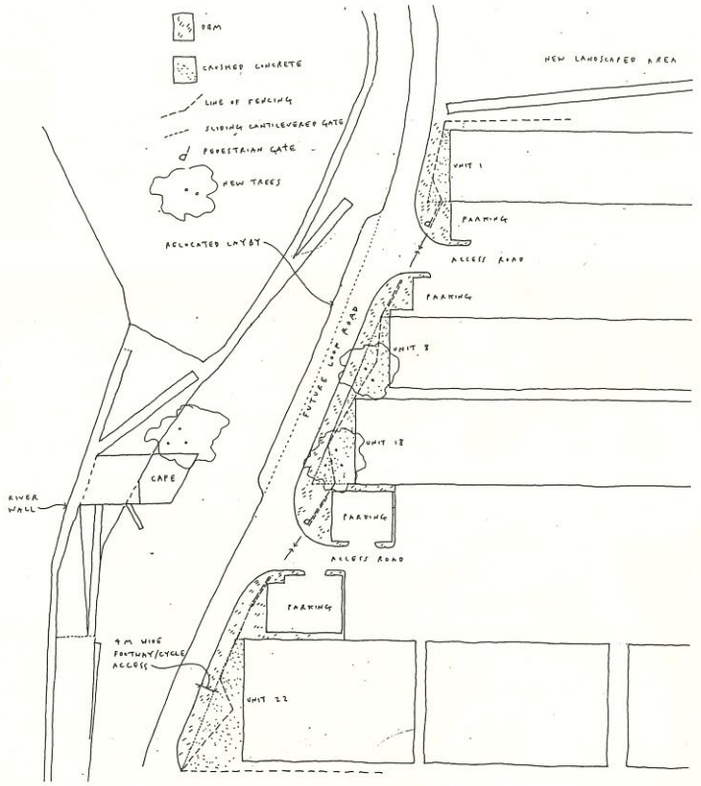
The Smithsons proposed 'holding strategies' for the incised spaces around the motorways in Glasgow, comparing these 'new' spaces with railway yards and stations that had lost their purpose. The proposals involved planting indigenous trees, specifically Gorse and Rowan, to strengthen the presence of these spaces as part of the city, letting greening be the vehicle for maintaining the urban nerve, while allowing time to consider and improve the raw edge of the motorway. These were sophisticated proposals that registered the need for employing architectural means to counter architecture.

In our projects we use the reading of places-as-found propositionally, to make the most of a place before resorting to the tools of physical intervention and building. We aim to adjust and add to situations, negotiating ownerships, stimulating carefulness, treasuring the culture of the place and revealing new opportunities for use and spatial specialness.

Rainham Riverside
Negotiations with the Environment Agency, Thames Water, London Borough of Havering and the developer of the industrial estate were required to agree proposals that were led by the space rather than incidental to ownership boundaries.

By drawing the edge of the industrial estate and the edge of the river as one space, adjusting proposed fences and stretching the landscape we made an immediate relationship between the sheds and the riverside.

Strands of the riverside path were pulled into this new space making explicit the spatial connection between new ramps, a raised café and the Corten sheet piling river wall and river space beyond.



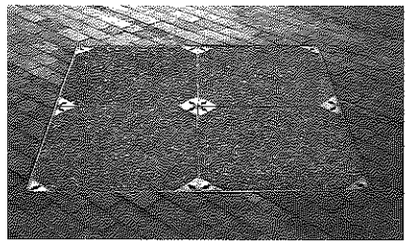
Peckham Rye Common
Understanding the corner of the common as a space with its own validity allowed it to be reconsidered and adjusted to reconnect the common with its surroundings, not culturally, but spatially.

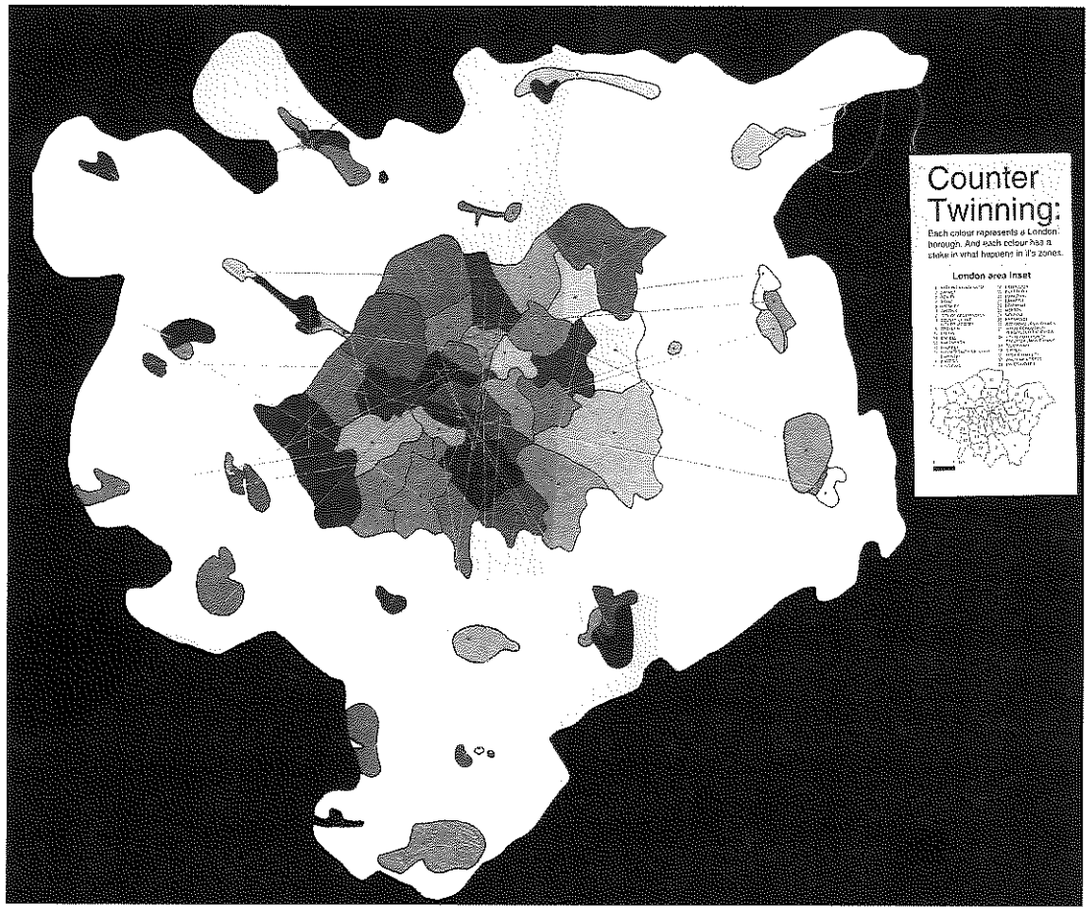
Its edges were lifted up to become available for use and given depth to reach the large space beyond.

Sorting out the edges and making sure the junctions are good works as a guide. The rest can then more easily be made to work well in relation to the edges; the edge space becomes a manifold for a larger collection of spaces, extents and uses.
Image by Dirk Lellau

Utility cover
East's design adjustments to utility covers with a deep frame and a shallow cover (as opposed the usual deep frame / deep cover or shallow frame / shallow cover) means that paving slabs can be neatly cut, right up against the frame without a second framing of mortar. A shallow concrete-filled frame can be used instead of one with inset paving slabs which is lighter to lift, always put back the right way round, and more enjoyable, as the layers of the city and its utilities are read against a carefully designed public realm.

The critical position of dealing with edges includes an approach that says if you sort the edges out, then the centre takes care of itself. Making sure the junctions are good, means that the rest is made to work well in relation to them.





Picnics in the Green Belt
This research project was not about gentrifying the Green Belt or countrifying the city, but about making a strategy that allows a fruitful interplay with easy access to recreation in London's edge spaces.

A new countryside structure would be able to assist the urban structure. This could happen by relating a new Green Belt strategy spatially to the city structure; reviewing Green Belt boundaries and how Green Belt meets the city and its densities; and reviewing edge conditions and allowing for extreme meetings in some locations, and merging edges in others.

The spatial edge strategy for London could include:
- replacing Green Belts with a well informed strategic gaps and wedges plan as a way of allowing for a mix and proximity of uses;
- understanding in new ways that physical patterns and physical and spatial characteristics can enhance existing qualities and integrate new patterns;
- twinning inner with outer London spaces to increase sharpness of vision.

Image by John Ceclich, East student 1998–1999: Counter Twining

JUDITH LÖSING

Commons

Common land is land owned by one person, but other people can exercise certain rights over it. On a common your rights might extend to pasture (the right to graze livestock), turbary (the right to cut turf for fuel), mast (the right to turn out pigs for a period in autumn to eat acorns and other nuts), and estover (the right to take wood). Imagine this in a park: pick the flowers, take the playsand, let your chickens run and scratch! Then you understand why park management is so focused on fencing things in and out.

A common is a place where the ordinary relationships of society, law, management and ownerships are overturned; a realised utopia or heterotopia in Foucault's list of other places.

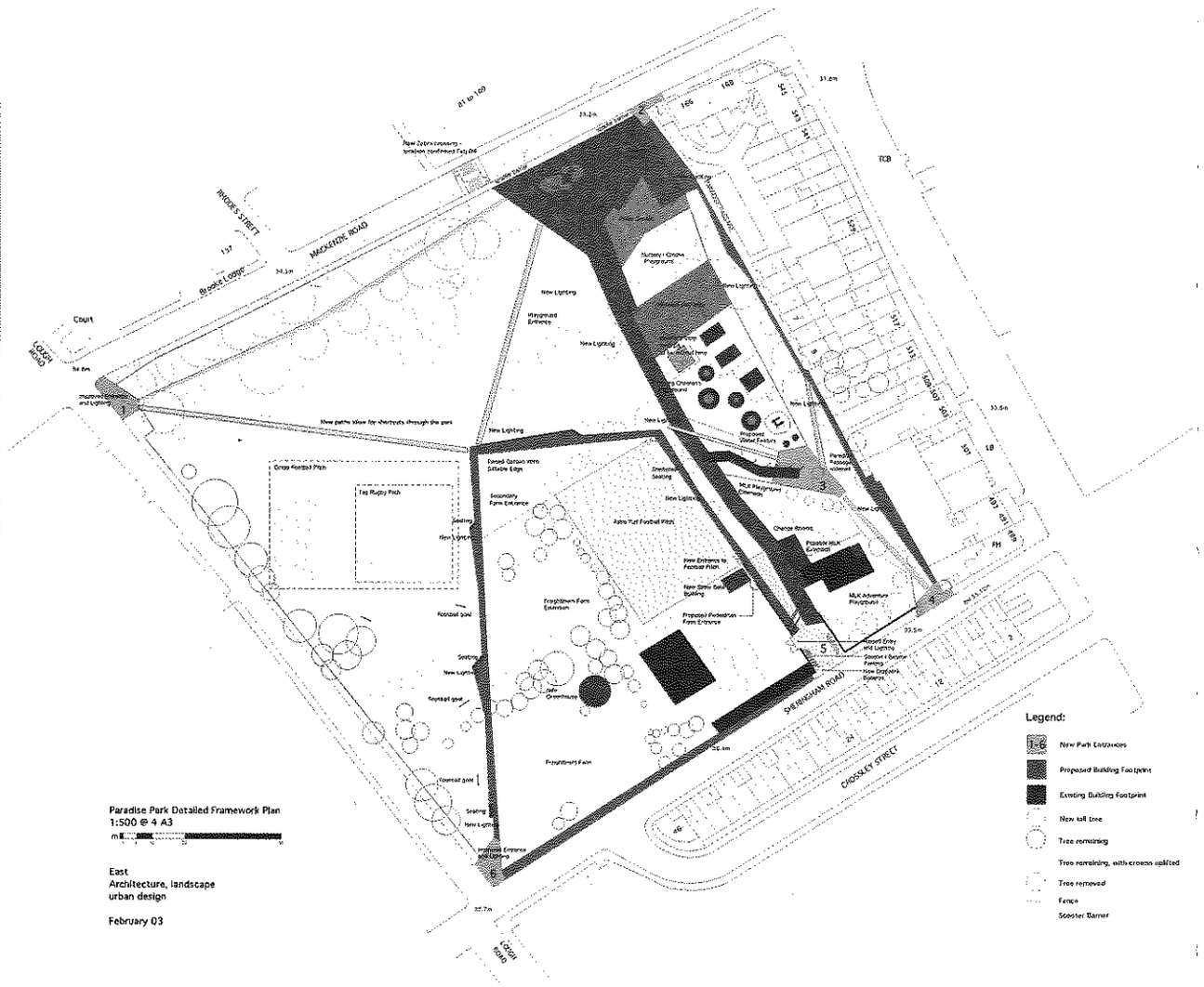
To achieve the biblical status of perpetual plenty, a fine of management balance has to be struck – rights of estovers, for example, relate to underwood, bracken and furze only; rights to pasture are limited to 15 cattle, four horses, ponies or donkeys, and 50 geese. On the other hand, underuse of common land might equally pose a problem: habitats no longer grazed eventually develop into woodlands, losing their original ecological and utilitarian properties. Some plants achieve this moment of plenty at a certain point in their life – the more sweet pea flowers you pick, the more you get. Never let them go to seed. Coppicing works similarly, on a different time scale.

This conditional generosity is what interests us as a practice. How can spatially and programmatically conflicting desires be accommodated in a simple space? In Paradise Park, for example, both main occupiers, Freightliners City Farm and Martin Luther King Adventure Playground, wanted to take on larger areas within the park. In a square park we proposed triangular extensions, allowing direct shortcuts along occupied and fenced-in areas. In Parish Wood Park we initiated and helped to negotiate a landswap to allow Our Lady of the Rosary Primary School direct access to ancient woodland, in exchange for an area of school grounds to be given over to expand a wetland habitat.

Commons are not designed. They are a left over remnant of the medieval manorial system. Each manor was self-sufficient, with the good land used for growing crops, the poor for grazing, shared between the commoners. Yet the riots against successive Acts of Enclosure were as much about preserving the commoners' economic interests, as the right and space to gather for festivals and holidays. Peckham Rye Common was so popular that there were concerns for people's safety on Saturdays and public holidays, with estimates of its use as high as 70,000 on Good Friday and 30,000 on Whit Monday.

Even if we wanted to, we would find it impossible today to design a public space in the same way as an interior or a building. Too many people are pushing around the edges, too often the budget is shrinking and expanding, too many interests are at stake. This is what gets our imagination going. We enjoy the complexity of allowing for more than one thing or one person at a time. Reaching agreement with the paying client on who else should be the client is part of the brief we set ourselves. On a less good day, the danger is that only the lowest common denominator parts of a project can be agreed; on a good day, this extended project team makes project reviews more refreshing and relevant to its place and its users.

Paradise Park
Extension of both Freightliners Farm and Martin Luther Adventure Playground, while introducing shortcuts and additional space for playing football



Paradise Park Detailed Framework Plan
1:500 @ 4 A3

East
Architecture, landscape
urban design

February 03

Peckham Rye Common,
'William Blake saw angels here' were the words East proposed to be cut out of a sheet of polished stainless steel, making a sign near the entrance of Peckham Rye Common. It referred to an event in 1767 when as a young boy Blake reported seeing in an oak 'a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough with stars'.

The intention of the sign was to allude to the nature of the common as a space out of the ordinary, a space for people, animals and divine beings alike, a space where visions can be experienced.
Even though the funding was in place, the sign was never implemented, as it was felt by the Friends of Peckham Rye Park to be 'too middle class'. They suggested a statue of an angel instead.

Image by Dirk Lellau

JULIAN LEWIS

Lords of the Realm

To move south across the wild border of the river Thames is to experience a peculiar sense of departure. It seems as if the marshes along the southern bank which were once a refuge for those escaping the regulations of the medieval city remain the northern half's alter ego. While the northern river edge presents itself as a rampart lined with cars, the southern reach is open and accessible, with beaches, walks and celebratory buildings.

North London is more densely developed than the south. This simple observation has influenced the relationship that towns on both sides of the river have with their public open spaces. The densely packed, landlocked towns of north London jostle alongside each other, each with their own centres, characters and identities; separated by brittle edges. Turning a corner from a council estate in Gospel Oak, you enter the haven of Hampstead's South End Green. Cross a road and you leave the genteel calm of Canonbury for sleepless Kingsland Road. Stuffed full of facilities, streets, shops, and services, the public spaces of the north are rare and well used, thriving under the pressure of need.

In south London by contrast, one town leads to another, drawn out along roads from which social uses, green spaces and shops hang in series. It is as if the town has become unfolded, like a kind of endless town centre. New Cross stretches along through Deptford, floods around Greenwich and drives on to Woolwich, unbroken by street-bound centres, chunks of industrial estates or green spaces. The south is quiet, spacious, fluid, open and often estuarine, with a hinterland of coasts and beaches. The perception of south Londoners that they are living in the countryside within reach of the city is countered only by the sense that they are elsewhere, in some other place. Parks are quiet, streets are underused and buildings rarely overlook public spaces.

One of the enduring qualities of London is that its public urban spaces are not the set piece 'squares' of European cities in which visitors languish, but are an integral part of its infrastructure for movement. Streets, roads, highways, lanes and other linear public routes have been established as by-products of servicing the city; whether bringing Romans from town to town, providing access across soft marshland; rationalising densely packed medieval timber villages; accommodating Victorian sewers; or throwing concrete highways through, above and below the city.

These spaces have stubbornly remained key influences on the shapes of buildings and on patterns of movement. What has changed is the relationship between these spaces and what has grown around them. The parks, forecourts, islands, parades and precincts that have emerged for commercial and recreational reasons have been rebranded as the public realm. While the phrase is intended to be inclusive, the etymology of the latter word recalls royal kingdoms and power causing reflection on the ownship of this realm.

For all its repackaging, the public realm is still a condition that has come about rather than one that has been planned. The generic term does little to explain why public spaces in north London are so different to those in the south. When you look at the extreme need for space in the north, compared with the surfeit of it in the south a conundrum is revealed. The south has not yet discovered how to own its spaces and takes them too much for granted, doing little to value woodlands more than golf courses, or to consider the social opportunities of its high streets.

But for all this sense of neutrality and languor there is an opportunity to reuse this extensive public territory, and to re-examine the means by which its parts can be strengthened through new relationships and proximities of uses. It is difficult to think of a more exciting opportunity than that of establishing a recharged southern realm with new roles for long town roads, a realm able to accommodate as many varieties of owners as there are people who need it.