BASTARD COUNTRYSIDE

The Mixed Landscape of London's River Lea

William Mann

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> "With their heads lowered, they made their way along the well-worn path, amid the rumbling of factories. Then, after two hundred yards, without thinking, as if they had known the place all along, they turned left, still keeping silent, and came out into an empty terrain. There, between a mechanical sawmill and a button works, was a strip of meadow still remaining, with patches of scorched yellow grass; a goat, tied to a post, walked round in circles bleating; further on a dead tree crumbled in the hot sun. 'Really', Gervaise murmured, 'you'd believe you were in the countryside...'"[1]

Vestiges of the underlying landscape survive in many gaps in the built fabric of the lower Lea valley, a swathe of formerly marshy ground which cuts through London's East End. The valley is traversed by the meandering and diverging arms of the river, which converge into a single course at Three Mills before feeding into the Thames opposite the Greenwich peninsula. Wilderness maintains a slight but tenacious toe-hold there, side by side with a mix of industrial uses, from recycling, through light engineering and construction, to warehousing, wholesale storage and distribution. Whether you stumble across

Channelsea River, 2003

the clumps of willow near the scrap metal yard on Marshgate Lane, the silver birch and reeds around Bromley Gas Works, or the tidal mudbanks and scrubby river edge surrounding the food factory at Orchard Place, this remnant landscape always has the same force of surprise as in Zola's description.

As the examples just mentioned suggest, the vestigial landscape of the lower Lea is almost invariably to be found in or around areas of industry. For it seems that there is a curious symbiosis existing between industry and wilderness. Industry seems to tolerate wild nature to an extent that neither habitation nor cultivation do; and wilderness more or less tolerates industry, the more so as polluting industries relocate or reduce their direct noxious emissions.

The presence of industry on the Lea derives from a straightforward functional relationship with the river, a relation which is more abundantly evident in the other tidal creeks which line the eastern reaches of the Thames, at Barking, Dartford and (on the Swale) Sittingbourne, where the spread of housing has not yet blurred the picture. The sequence is more or less the same across these different locations, moving from: harnessing the river or tide for power; to the use of the creek for heavy freight deliveries, most significantly of coal; to use of

the creek for drainage of industrial or chemical waste; to designation (generally bounded on at least one side by railway lines) as an industrial zone, steering unrelated activities into the area; to the eclipse of the waterways by the road network, turning what had been the front gate into a neglected back zone.

The altering match between industrial uses and creekside locations is accompanied by an enduring mismatch between large, geometric buildings and compounds designed to optimise the use of the plot with the irregular topography of river meanders and the implacable lines of transport infrastructures. The result of these encounters are pockets of land which by casual agency or benign neglect have grown a mixed plant-life worthy of a meadow. These are complemented by the river and its banks, whose food chain of plants, insects, fish and birds is sustained on the bed of alluvial mud and the texture of the embankments, which varies from the hospitable, in the form of a sloped earth bank, via stone walls, to the distinctly inhospitable sheet piling.

Second nature

To the careful observer, the relationship between wilderness and industry goes beyond tolerance,

towards a visual or even moral contrast. This is clarified by a passage in Balzac's "Lost Illusions", describing the yards at the rear of the shops in Paris' Wooden Galleries:

> "there was a space two or three feet wide in which vegetated the strangest botanical specimens – unknown to science – mingled with the varied, no less flourishing products of industry. Waste sheets of print hung round the tops of rose-trees in such a way that those flowers of rhetoric drew some scent from the stunted blooms in this untended garden watered only with fetid liquids. The foliage was beflowered with multi-coloured ribbons or book prospectuses. Vegetation was stifled by the flotsam and jetsam of fashion; you might find a bow of ribbon or a tuft of verdure, and you were disillusioned about the blossom you were inclined to admire when you found that what you thought was a dahlia was really a loop of satin."[2]

At a turning point in his novel tracing the decline of a naive provincial poet into a hack journalist, Balzac uses the description of a backyard as an allegory of the deceptions and corruptions of city life: where vanity and malice, in the form of fashion and journalism, rear their heads, where the artificial stifles the natural and renders it

City Mill Lock, 2003

barren. His moral perspective in relation to the city's corrupting influence on the soul is conventional to the point of commonplace; however, the poetic sensibility with which Balzac expresses this moral is strikingly novel, evoking an urban "second nature" in which natural and artificial are irretrievably entwined.

The coexistence of the "Big Breakfast" TV studio with the violent shredding of scrap metal and the salt habitat of the cormorant in the Lea valley updates this vision, creating a landscape where representation – Balzac's mix of vanity and semblance – the base of the chain of production and an (almost) primordial wilderness confront one another. This is fundamentally different to the "industrial landscape" of sublime scale and artifice, characterised by the heavy industries of coal, steel and large-scale manufacturing. There are vantage points, raised above the ground level, where the sporadic wilderness disappears from view and the valley takes on a harsh or even brutal aspect, the ground a sea of metal sheds and scrap metal, interspersed with metallic trees and copses in the form of pylons and gasholders. At ground level, however, artificial and natural landscapes interact to a surprising degree, and the creeping colonisation of the valley by hard, synthetic materials seems to be held in check, even reversed by resurgent wilderness. With the busy infrastructure corridors on either

The Northern Outfall Sewer, 2003

side screening the valley from intrusion, these moments where vegetation and metal interweave, where neglected landscapes and unloved buildings abut one another, seem to embody a timeless balance between ruin and renewal. It is a kind of post-industrial anti-idyll of the type described by Patrick Keillor when he writes that:

> "in the UK, the subjective transformation of landscape seems to offer the individual a way to oppose the poverty of everyday surroundings. As individuals, we can't rebuild the public transport system, or re-empower local democracy, but we can poeticise our relationship with their dilapidation."[3]

Metabolism

Any semblance of internal equilibrium is, however, deceptive. For the fragile ecosystem of the tidal creek and its symbiosis with "bad-neighbour" industries, is but a small sub-plot within a complex dynamic encompassing international capital, labour and migration. The lower Lea's patchwork of wilderness and industry is framed by the communities of Poplar and Bow, West Ham and Canning Town, by the financial

services cluster at Canary Wharf and the new development node around the European rail station at Stratford. The most significant force in this area is the far-reaching shift of London's trade from transhipment (import from a wider area for export to a local area) to brokerage (financing the deals), a change made tangible in the use of the term "invisible exports". As Fernand Braudel points out, this change is the logical conclusion for cities with a dominant position in world trade[4], which slowly lose their competitive advantage – perhaps a bit like moving from playing football to managing a team. However, the continuity exists more in terms of process than of place: although a logical outgrowth of the area's past, the transformation of the docklands into a financial services cluster with a hinterland of business services and riverside housing is an alien culture to the existing industries and communities of the area.

After a difficult period weathering the storms of the global financial markets and London's property market, and acclimatising to its new location, the implant at Canary Wharf shows signs of flourishing, and the development gamble of central government, the London Docklands Development Corporation and Olympia & York has paid off with the construction of further bank headquarters. Equally significantly, the growth of financial

services has been accompanied by strong general growth in London and the South-east, supporting business expansion and stimulating pressure on the housing market.

These pressures in Docklands and London serve to highlight the role that the Lea valley plays in the metabolism of the city as a whole. The large plots with good access to the road network have attracted the logistics and distribution sector, the wholesale fruit and vegetable market (moved out of Spitalfields to allow for the expansion of financial services space), builders' merchants and suppliers, and metals recycling. These add themselves to the supply of power and the handling of water and sewage which were established in the valley in the nineteenth century, as well as the production of dyes and chemicals, and the rendering of animal waste, now moved away from the valley. To compare the valley to a combination of intestine and vital organs is then more than a cartographic fantasy (though this is precisely what the area resembles on a map), but is an analogy for the functions the area performs for the body of London.

However, beside the large scale organs of global trade and metropolitan functioning, there are finer-grained areas which exist in pockets between the larger industrial uses. There are still many light manufacturing firms, grouped together on actual islands in the river, or virtual

The remains of Lea Bridge Power Station, 2003

islands between strips of infrastructure. Despite the decline in the London region to a negligible presence, manufacturing is here remarkably resilient, making up more than a third of the businesses in the valley.

On either side of the valley are extensive areas of city composed primarily of housing, stretching largely uninterrupted to the edge of the City and to Barking Creek. These communities are among the most deprived in the country, with many wards in the top 1% of the government's indices of deprivation. The communities of the densely built-up late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century neighbourhoods were dispersed to the post-war new towns or fulfilled widely-held aspirations by moving to the suburbs, so it is now only a remnant of this larger, vibrant East-end population who remain. In another example of the curious symmetry of the area's historic links, Poplar, previously home to the East India Company's docks and warehouses, now has a large Bangladeshi population[5]. Europeans, Africans, Caribbeans, South-east Asians contribute to a varied ethnic mix.

The exact nature of the dynamic between the global, metropolitan and local is hard to determine. For as Saskia Sassen argues:

"Firms, sectors and workers that may appear as though they have little connection to an

urban economy dominated by finance and specialised services can in fact be an integral part of that economy."[6]

Currently the boundary between high-value and low-value, in terms of both accommodation or work, is handled with brutal simplicity, a six-lane highway on the line of the old dock railway separating these areas from any semblance of productive co-existence. With the majority of jobs in Docklands created by relocation rather than business growth (staff recruitment is therefore still geared to other geographical locations), there is as yet little evidence that a share of the wealth generated at Canary Wharf is finding its way to these communities. The area seems a clear illustration of Sassen's assertion that large cities in the highly developed world:

"concentrate a disproportionate share of corporate power and are one of the key sites for the overvalorisation of the corporate economy; on the other (hand), they concentrate a disproportionate share of the disadvantaged and are one of the key sites for their devalorisation."[7]

Intervening in the laissez-faire landscape

With these wider forces exercising their gravitational pull, the Lea valley is increasingly a space of conflict where London's strategic needs in terms of housing, industrial capacity and green space clash with one another. London's housing shortage is not simply cyclical but structural, however with the property boom still warm, the political case for housing has added urgency. The benefits of industrial presence in the valley are harder to quantify, though of indisputable importance to the city. Harder still to quantify, both in terms of benefit and provision, is green space.

The metropolitan significance of this landscape cannot be overstated, however. The tidal river with its unkempt, untameable surrounds represents nothing less than the edge of the city, as evoked with both precision and emotional resonance by Victor Hugo as:

"that kind of bastard countryside, somewhat ugly but bizarre, made up of two different natures, which surrounds certain great cities... To observe the city edge is to observe an amphibian. End of trees, beginning of roofs, end of grass, beginning of paving stones, end of ploughed fields, beginning of shops,

Roach Point, 2003

> the end of the beaten track, the beginning of the passions, the end of the murmur of things divine, the beginning of the noise of humankind."[8]

As London transforms – and this is implicit in the Thames Gateway project – from a radial city to a linear city running 100 km along the Thames from Reading to Southend, the importance of its tributaries in marking that receding, fictional point, the outer edge of London, becomes ever greater. The Green Belt which rings the radial city is primarily agricultural land, cultivated and worked, while the uncultivated land of the river valleys has the primordial quality of a landscape that has always been there, which precedes all the layers of culture and civilisation imposed on top of it. Both qualitatively and spatially, these creeks are the new city edge, with the Lea valley as an exemplary edge condition.

The Lea valley's specific qualities are threatened by two aspects of current development practice, both of which tend toward the domestication of their environment. First of all, the polite, generic planting around the most recent industrial buildings represents a dilution of the distinctive landscape character of the valley. Beyond these uncertain interventions, the possibility that the riverside sites will be used for high-value "riverside" or "waterside" housing threatens to

cut the existing communities off from the river at the very moment that it is opened up to them. Moreover, the success of canalside regeneration projects, for example in Birmingham, or of the waterside housing typologies which have been re-established in the Netherlands recently, is not an accurate guide to what is likely to work along the banks of a tidal creek, where, after all, the loft-dweller would spend half their day looking out over extensive mudbanks, rather than gently rippling water.

It is clear, then, that generic approaches are insufficient, and that if the different strategic demands on this area are to be reconciled a firm but inventive intervention is needed. This is perhaps the ultimate paradox of the "laissez-faire landscape" which the lower Lea valley typifies – that is, a landscape formed by chance, indifference and neglect: is it perhaps now in need of intervention?

Any intervention here will need to combine strategic clarity with great tactical attentiveness. In other words, it will need to combine both helicopter and walking boots. For the coherence of the Lea valley is nominal, it is composed of numerous small enclaves and complex entities, formed of businesses, communities and landscapes. Its complexity and highly specific character call for both new tools and new sensibilities if the norms of English practice

are to be made sufficiently supple and robust to match the richness of reality.

The tools which are required relate to both perception and action. At the perceptual level, a thorough mapping of the existing condition, which gets under the skin of this "amphibian" organism, is a fundamental starting point, so that the existing fabric is treated with a respect that is above and beyond the usual. In terms of action, the best prospect seems to be offered by a framework which establishes a consistent approach (if not a consistent result) to the landscape, and which is capable of tolerating the diversity of conditions within the limits of certain basic typologies.

The sensibility that is needed relates to this uniquely urban landscape, which will never attain the virtues of the picturesque landscape or the coherent cityscape. To work productively in this area a distinctively modern or contemporary landscape sensibility is needed, which can absorb the complexities of the situation, as has been developed in parts of the Emscher Park in the Ruhr, or as Manet and the Impressionists discovered for the first time on the edges of nineteenth century Paris. In TJ Clark's description:

> "Where industry and recreation were casually established next to each other, in a landscape

> which assumed only as much form as the juxtaposition of production and distraction (factories and regattas) allowed, there modernity seemed vivid, and painters believed they might invent a new set of descriptions for it."[9]

The Lea valley is a microcosm, or test case, of all the issues relating to the Thames Gateway as well as the national issue of brownfield land. It is already, and may well become to a further degree, an embodiment of the strengths and weaknesses of the English planning system and practice of urbanism. If the typically weak controls and strategic vision are relaxed too far, it is possible that what distinctiveness it has will be carelessly erased. However, with its characteristic flexibility, diversity, and evolutionary nature, it is capable of accommodating a symbiosis of communities, leisure, landscape, industry to form a park unlike any other, in a way that could under no circumstances have been planned.

1 E. Zola, L'Assommoir, quoted in TJ Clark The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers. (1999) p.27

2 H. de Balzac Lost Illusions (trans. H. Hunt, 1971) Part II chapter 11, p.260–1

3 P. Keillor "Popular Science" in The British Council, Landscape (2000) p.61–67

4 F. Braudel Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century (vol 3): the Perspective of the World. 1985, p.243

5 The links are not entirely fortuitous, however: a number of historians have argued that the disastrous disruption of Bengal's economy was started by the practices of the East India Company. Jon E Wilson "False and dangerous" in the Guardian 8 February 2003: "British rule pauperised India..."

6 S. Sassen "More Than Citibank: Who Belongs in the Global City?" in Topic 3, February 2003, p.111–117

7 S. Sassen Cities in a World Economy (1994) p.123

8 V. Hugo Les Miserables quoted in TJ Clark Op cit, p.147

9 TJ Clark Op cit.

Witherford Watson Mann started off their collaboration nearly twenty years ago, with a series of walks through the edges of London; since then, they have approached every project as an open-ended enquiry. They have no stock answers for how change will translate into building; instead they find out through dialogue and adaptive design, helping progressive institutions realise their ambitions and reinforce their values.

Whether adapting an old furniture factory for Amnesty or shaping the city plan for London's Olympic quarter, they have always made the most of what is already there, adding judiciously to maintain the distinctiveness of each place but transform its capacity. Their best known building, Astley Castle for the Landmark Trust, won the 2013 RIBA Stirling Prize for its distinctive entwining of past and present.

Recently completed projects include social housing in Belgium, two small art galleries, and public spaces in Bankside, South London. A new generation of projects includes buildings for higher education, for small businesses, and for older people. Witherford Watson Mann distil the complexities of contemporary collectives, of urban sites and public processes into durable, economical solutions that remain open to future change.

Bastard Countryside:
The mixed landscape of London's River Lea

First published in
Scroope 15, Cambridge Architecture Journal,
Cambridge University School of Architecture, 2003

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This essay from 2003 explores the forces shaping this edge of the city, and reflects on the difficult challenge of planning the future of this laissez-faire landscape.