BANKSIDE URBAN FOREST

To lose oneself in a
city – as one loses oneself
in a forest

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WWM

WITHERFORD WATSON MANN
architects

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Walter Benjamin

We set off on a walk which developed into a series of walks, and recorded what we saw, following other people, discovering hidden passages, alleys and courts. The blind women's labyrinthine route to the Times Newspaper headquarters, truant teenagers avoiding main roads, children after school gathering in their favourite play spaces, mechanics perching for a smoke. We marked these places down and added to them the golden deer, Bear Gardens and White Hart Yard. We navigated by way of the overgrown church nave, viaduct grotto, theatre courtyard, allotment and ruined wall. Our approach to developing an urban design proposal for the Bankside area of Southwark was not a linear process, it was a journey on which we accepted the value of what we saw, and used this to establish our proposition.

Redcross Way

In stark contrast to the Parliament buildings, Inns of Court, Palaces, Custom House and Bank buildings founded on the elevated clay and gravel deposits that form the Thames' northern bank, the low lying alluvial silt along the southern edge lay for many years beyond the City's governance. Southwark's river edge became colonised by a ragged assemblage of entertainment and industrial activities: wharves, theatres, works, brothels and bear baiting. If one can talk about the urbanisation of this area in any sense it would be marginal, the type of ad-hoc condition where, as TJ Clark describes:

> "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 allowed."[2]

Over time, Bankside's broadly triangular figure became defined by three linear structures of development; the medieval Borough High Street leading to London Bridge, the Georgian set-piece of Blackfriars Road leading to Blackfriars Bridge, and the wharves along the river's edge. The interior of this area remained an un-planned, amphibious place, scattered with tenter grounds and provisional uses. In the late nineteenth

Clink Street after 2012 works by WWM

century a series of east-west cuts were made across this informal landscape. The construction of the railway stations and viaducts on brick vaults above the marsh, the cutting of Borough Road, and the removal of around 400 homes to create Southwark Street, each served to reinforce the area's inherent spatial resistance to formal urban planning.

With the decline of industrial activity, development of the river edge throughout the twentieth century was piecemeal, peppering the area with a variety of imported models. Following the retreating tide from Westminster Bridge we pass the government sponsored 1951 *Festival of Britain* site, which transformed Victorian industrial buildings and railway sidings into cultural exhibition spaces. *Cultural-led regeneration* of the area was planned through the addition of the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room and Hayward Gallery in the mid 1960s, forming London's Southbank Arts Centre. *Not-for-profit social enterprise* from community action during the late 1970s secured the eventual Coin Street Co-operative housing in the early 1980s and this was supported by the *Festival Retailing* of Gabriel's Wharf. In 2000 Tate Modern opened its doors, heralding the arrival of the *Urban Renaissance* to Bankside in a former power station. As the tide draws eastwards under London Bridge it passes what was once one of London's largest import wharves, that now
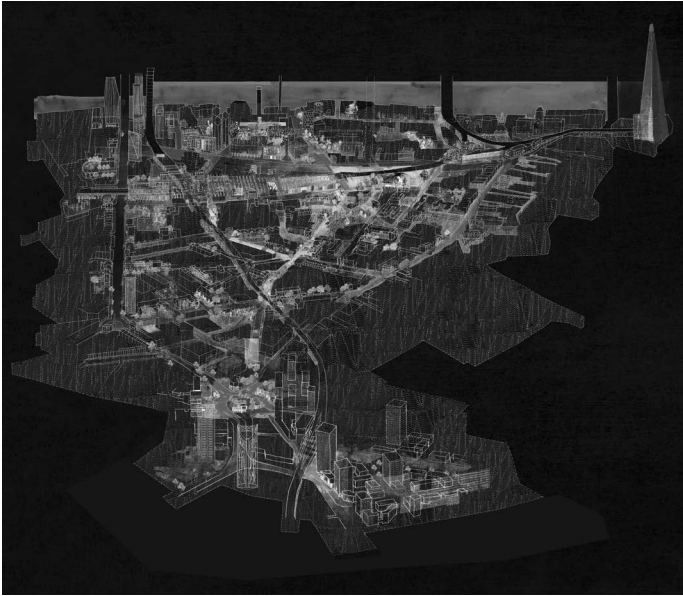
Bankside Urban Forest – Overview drawing

filled in, forms the *privatised glazed "mall"* and *gated piazza* at Hay's Galleria. We continue on to the *privatised-public space* of More London, home to the Greater London Authority and corporately branded in Irish blue limestone and management regimes.

It is hard to understand how almost sixty years of continued emphasis on the regeneration of the river's edge has resulted in so little benefit trickling down southwards into Southwark's poorer communities. Throughout the late twentieth century, the social housing estates and open spaces remained "off the map", sparking local action, the creation of resident's forums and most notably, the Bankside Open Spaces Trust. This Trust develops new projects and works with the residential community to maintain many of the area's open spaces. Only in the last few years have the first signs of new facilities, even one block back from the river's edge, been witnessed along the Cut, Southwark Street and Tooley Street. Indeed, the increasingly high-rise, high-value residential and commercial developments around Bankside's perimeter have only served to emphasise the physical and social fractures between them and the urban interior. Recent masterplans have sought to "open up" the area, providing clearer connections between the Elephant and Castle and the river edge. These have proved to be unsuccessful, in part because they rely on formal urban planning tools:

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axes, nodes, tree-lined boulevards, squares and materials palettes, which are inadequate for London's mixed historic edges.

Our public space framework proposes a more specific set of tools, which emphasise Bankside's particular topography and wild nature. Community projects are combined with more intense interventions to restore elements of wilderness and ecological reclamation to create a hybrid of new and historic urban forms.

Bankside is a forest

"If forests appear in our religions as places of profanity, they also appear as sacred. If they have typically been considered places of lawlessness, they have also provided havens for those who took up the cause of justice and fought the law's corruption. If they evoke associations of danger and abandon in our minds, they also evoke scenes of enchantment. In other words, in the religions, mythologies and literatures of the West, the forest appears as a place where the logic of distinction goes astray."[3]

Filtered through means of walks and drawings, we started to recognise a structure where at first there seemed to be none: a different set of laws. A combination of streams, rides, clearings and pathways respond to the area's deep topography. The streams (Borough High Street, Southwark Bridge Road, Great Guilford Street, Great Suffolk Street) run north-south, forming meandering routes from the Elephant and Castle to the Thames. The rides (river embankment, Southwark Street, viaducts, Union Street, Borough Road) are formed from cuts through the area for moving more directly and at speed. The historic courts, shrines, sanctuary spaces, and small gardens form dispersed clearings, which support sociable activity, offering places of reflection. The pathways establish an irregular network, often connecting the clearings.

With something of Benjamin's child explorer we moved from this categorisation of the area's typical conditions to the imagined topography of the Forest, recognising the sublime qualities in the river's menacing currents, the tangled streets, labyrinthine pathways, ruins, buried viaduct vaults and proposed soaring towers, the distinct sense of moving from the vibrant activity of the edges into a deeper, quiet interior. In stark contrast to the formal planning of London's estates and parks, each with their distinct boundaries, authorities and by-laws, Bankside is a forest.

In our proposals, one of the Forest's thresholds is marked by a deep railway viaduct where hydroponics and growing lights sustain planting across the underside of the vault. The brick mass

Union Street Orchard by Wayward, for the 2010 London Festival of Architecture

Flat Iron Square with new public space and café canopy

of Tate Modern would be approached from the south through a grove of figured Scots Pines sheltering a large new playground, where the play structures would take the form of scaled versions of Turbine Hall commissions. The extensive viaducts that cut across the area conceal a quarter of a million square feet of vaulted spaces that we have imagined being gradually inhabited by provisional uses, workshops and small businesses, beginning to bind the interior into the activity of Southwark Street.

The proposition is not a return to something that has disappeared, but recognises the sublime in this deep layering of constructed landscape. The proposed intensification of small spaces and physical incidents within the forest, this imagined wild nature, begins to bind the disjointed structure together.

Conflicting demands and the common good

In Bankside's industrial landscape only 30 years ago there was little demand for private residences or corporate offices, let alone any ambition to make a distinctive public realm. London's centre was de-populating and the river edge remained vacant and threatening. The last 15 years has seen the middle classes return to the city centre and the river identified as something to behold.

The combination of spiralling housing costs in established neighbourhoods, the lack of large sites in the financial Square Mile and the completion of new infrastructure, like the Jubilee Line Extension and Millennium Footbridge, have made Bankside's post-industrial landscape increasingly desirable.

A landscape of opportunistic development is emerging, characterised by clumps of 20 to 40 storey residential and office towers planned around London Bridge, Tate Modern, Blackfriars Road and the Elephant and Castle. This "Manhattanisation"[4] of the periphery threatens to polarise the urban interior, physically and socially.

The Bankside Urban Forest recognises within this conflict the opportunity for common good. It provides a coordinated framework to direct public and private investment in public spaces that all parties recognise are increasingly critical to the liveability of the area. "Places of Exchange" can be found within the area, places where people who do not know one another might meet. Borough Market with its specialisation in high quality food, Guys St Thomas's Hospital and Southwark Cathedral are all important spaces for social interaction. The intensification of small spaces through planting, public art and diverse activities establishes more opportunities for sharing between the area's new and existing residents, workers and visitors. At Flat Iron Square, the existing café (a former

public toilet) is turned into a woodland hut built around the trunks of the giant Plane trees. One side of the highway is re-claimed for pedestrian use, connecting the café to the existing shops along the outhern edge. Drawing the existing qualities of this place into this new configuration provides a setting for a new art commission, seating and opportunities for the local shops and cafes to colonise the space.

At Redcross Way we have again proposed a modest intervention. The existing one way road between the primary school and community garden is closed and planted with exotic trees. This forms a generous space that can support the convivial activity that surrounds the dropping off and collecting of children. The social facilities provided within the new developments, community gardens, cinema club, meeting rooms, food school, supermarket and doctors' surgery can be stitched back deeper into the urban interior. Pedestrian-friendly adjustments to the streams, rides and pathways bind the new facilities and intensified clearings together. In recognition of the area's particular topography, and resistance to formal tools, we have outlined an evolutionary approach that combines the enterprise of local groups, individuals and businesses to effect change in their environment. The negotiations that effect this change and the conflicting demands on the places are as much a public space as the physical fabric which results.

The forest and the process of its growth establish, in the words of Richard Sennett, the capacity for:

> "the city's diversity of urban life becoming
> a source of mutual strength rather
> than a source of mutual estrangement and
> bitterness."[5]

1 Walter Benjamin, One-Way Street and Other Writings, 1978, p.152

2 TJ Clark, The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers, 1999

3 Robert Pogue Harrison, Forests: The Shadow of Civilization, 1993

4 Term taken from one of Shibani Bose's interviews with residents – "I don't want Bankside to turn into Manhattan. Height is the main issue. There are more and more housing towers and office towers coming up here, which spoil the view and the sunlight for everyone. I feel like soon we won't be able to see the sky!"

5 Richard Sennett, "Civility", Urban Age Bulletin 1, Summer 2005.

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.

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This essay sets out the development of our proposition that Bankside is a forest, a complex ecology of spaces, mentalities and possibilities.