

# BOOKS

## Walking Cities: London

Reading through the anthology *Walking Cities: London*, besides being a pleasure in itself, confirms urban walking is now not just the realm of down-at-heel Thames loafers, but since its reinvention by the Situationists (under the influence of Jean-Paul Clébert's *Paris Insolite*, 1952), a serious artistic praxis that despite its mainly literary history can function as an interdisciplinary tool, one that Walkative, the Royal College of Art-based group behind *WCL*, claims 'informs and triggers new processes of making, thinking, researching and communicating'. Furthermore, that both front and back inside covers carry photographs from Richard Wentworth's 'Making Do and Getting By' series alerts us to the way the contingencies of salvage are bound up with walking.

Firstly, a health warning: *WCL* is not a user guide for the mainstream tourist keen to 'do' London, but 19 intensive reports often from obscure neighbourhoods or familiar yet overlooked streets. Architect Peter St John's purlieu is Holloway Road, which he reconceives as a university town, though his eye is most taken by a red sequined high boot displayed in a shop window.

David Dernie's beat is Tottenham Court Road and he explores it iteratively under three headings – Horizon, Memory and Matter – tracing this boulevard's spatial poetics until a fractilised model of the area emerges. The quest for overview is sought by many contributors, but generally confounded since London looms as a vast, ever-changing city, one best read through its iconic fragments, which for Laura Oldfield Ford are a pair of stranded

caryatids she chances on in Southwark Park, Rotherhithe. Statues displaced from the flattened Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle, they bring on a cascade of elegiac recollections tuned to that brutalist estate's sunken garden and a latter-day encounter with the highly controversial new development Elephant Park: 'the rookery sealed', as she puts it. Douglas Murphy criss-crosses the SE1 postcode too, literally and littorally indexing a solitary detour from Convoy's Wharf, Deptford to the South Bank. A connoisseur of postwar social housing, he notes how London is all visual background until a plot gets cleared and becomes a construction site, reserving special contempt for Southwark Council's 'Faustian pact' with Lend Lease Plc.

Phil Smith – known for his polemical *Counter-Tourism: The Handbook*, 2012, and projects with the collective Wrights & Sites – is a Sinclairesque joker who likes to ramble with others, in this case Simon King, Walkative co-founder. Quirky topics in Smith's missive 'Curling up Tight' include the film *Blow Up*, 1966, a plaque dedicated to the inventor of Grano-Metallic stone, a broken teapot and Coco the clown – what he calls 'the clinker of the walk'. Rosana Antoli favours conversation too, viewing walking as a 'relational public gesture'. After a chance meeting with a member of the public during a planned walk from Mile End to the City, she devises an itinerary for him, produced as a video performance. In road sweepers' hi-vis, Graham Farrell's dance moves express his antagonism towards the stealthy yet inexorable march of corporate capital into Whitechapel, City creep threatening to price out the district's poor. But as Amy Blier-Carruthers observes in 'The Travelling Mindset: A Method for Seeing Anew', 'you vote with your feet – you create the tempo'. Tom Spooner, meanwhile,

pursues the 'desolate hinterland' of the Grand Union canal from Paddington Basin to Metroland, falling under the spell of its dystopic charms, a very different response to place than that adopted by Freudophile Sharon Kivland and geographer Steve Pile in their elegant text. They evoke Sigmund Freud's dramatic arrival as a refugee to London in 1938 through vintage postcards of important monuments which when mapped resemble 'hysterical symptoms in being mnemonic symbols'. Trafalgar Square is the focus of Ahuvia Kahane's perambulation – both as enclosed space and site of Nelson's Corinthian column – yet for him the statue is an example of 'monumental illegibility' due to its scale, a secular hero suspended as if a divinity, an ambivalent imperial piazza become an awesome venue for political unrest. The only writer to roam beyond London is Roberto Bottazzi, who in 'Gravesend-Broadness Weather Station' conducts a hazardous trek across a brownfield site to locate 'a standard 4-5 feet tall Stevenson screen', noting en route the post-industrial habitat of the four-eyed *Sitticus distinguendus*, one of Britain's rarest spiders.

Designed by the Camberwell Press, each contribution in *WCL* is prefaced by a black-and-white antique street plan and a blank page marked by a wobbly arrow delineating the walk, as if a seminar whiteboard upon which this pocket book humorously asserts its pedagogic agenda. ■

*Walking Cities: London*, eds Jaspar Joseph-Lester, Simon King, Amy Blier-Carruthers and Roberto Bottazzi, Camberwell Press, 2016, 398pp, pb, £17.50, 978 1 908971 49 4.

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