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Whitechapel
THE MEDIATING
STREET

CONCEPTUALISING A HIGH STREET

Whitechapel High Street fits squarely within the most literal definition of a high street. High streets are essentially mixed-use urban corridors (Gort Scott and UCL, 2010) and Whitechapel High Street forms one section of a prominent mixed-use corridor that extends six kilometres from Aldgate to Stratford.

We sought to explore Whitechapel High Street in terms of the fundamental components of movement and exchange as part of a high street system. We recognise that larger economic forces play a powerful role in determining the success of the high street but the scope of our examination and the resulting interventions is to focus on the local patterns of movement and exchange and the ways in which people interact with the spaces within this system.

What we learned is that the people who live and work on and around the high street are highly responsive to their physical surroundings. Whitechapel High Street is part of a tacit network of spaces of exchange and corridors of movement that run parallel and perpendicular to the high street itself. Throughout this network there is an ongoing mediation between the need of different users, be they local residents, workers or visitors. Based on our analysis of Whitechapel High Street we determined that this particular high street system succeeded where it accommodated these diverse needs and failed where it didn't. Therefore we believe that a successful high street serves as a mediator among the distinctive places that surround it.

CONTEXT

Region

The project area is defined by the historic A11 arterial road consisting of Whitechapel High Street, Mile End, and Bow Road. This route serves as an important traffic artery running from the City of London's bustling fringe in Aldgate six kilometres north-east to the burgeoning commercial and residential area of Stratford, the location of London's Olympic Park. The study area sits between the Aldgate East and Whitechapel Tube Stations; the latter of these serves the recently built East London Overground and will become a stop for the proposed Crossrail in 2017. This build up of public transport infrastructure transforms Whitechapel into an important regional transit node.

Policy

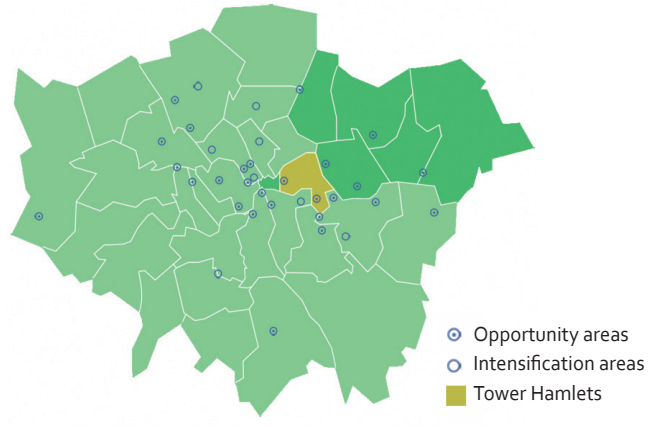
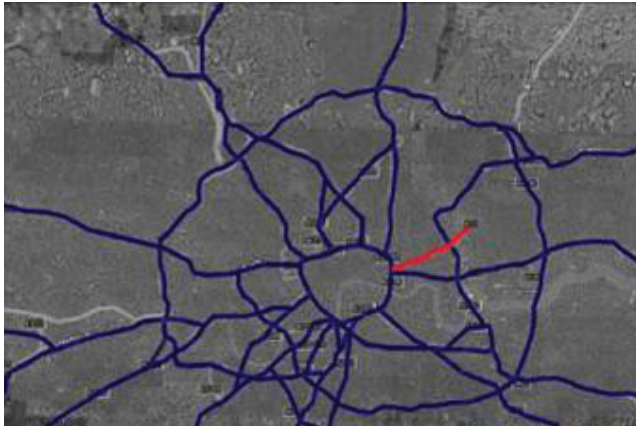
Our site straddles and is split between the jurisdictions of the City of London and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The London Plan classifies this area as part of the 'City fringe', an area deemed to possess significant development capacity because of its proximity to the City's critical mass of business and financial services and the growth of this economic activity eastward. Despite the development pressure emanating from the City much of the area within Tower Hamlets is maintained within conservation areas. The Aldgate Masterplan seeks to improve the area's pedestrian environment and promote potential links to local attractions by changing the name of Aldgate East Station to reference Brick Lane.

High Street chains, Whitechapel Road



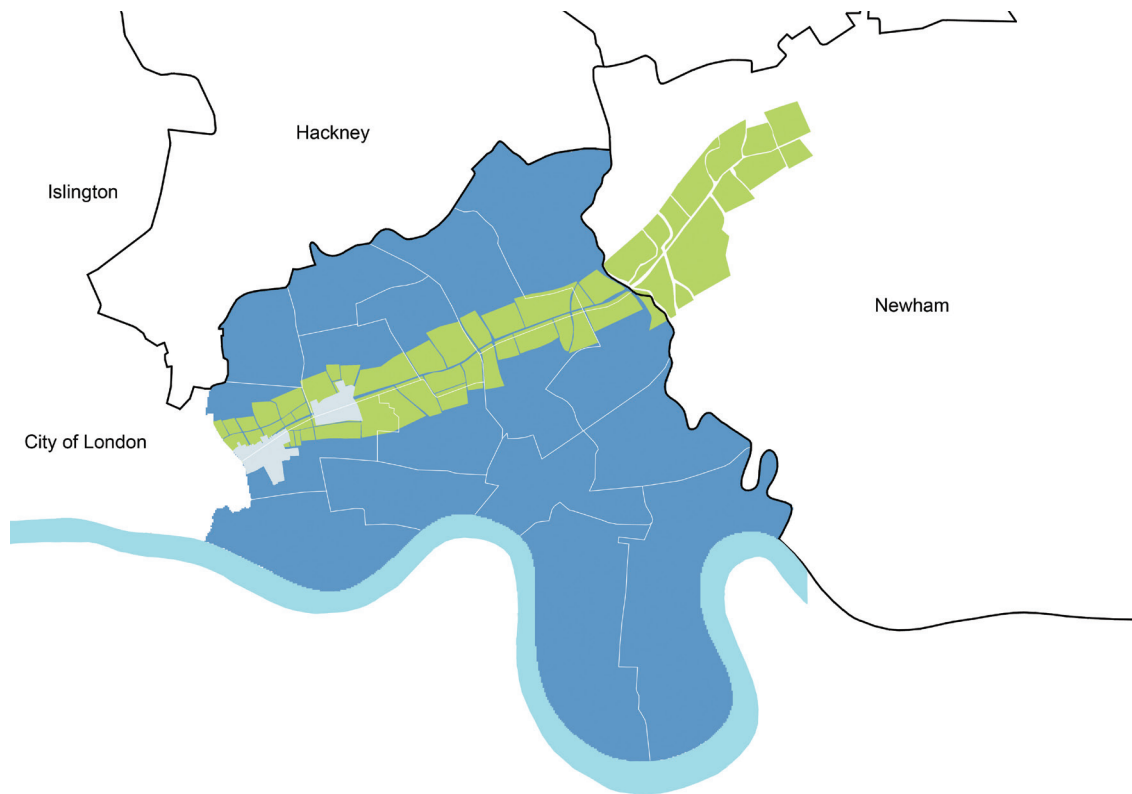
'Local worlds' in the background, Petticoat Lane





Clockwise from top left
 Whitechapel High Street in context; Opportunity and
 intensification areas as set out in the London Plan 2004;
 Existing transport infrastructure

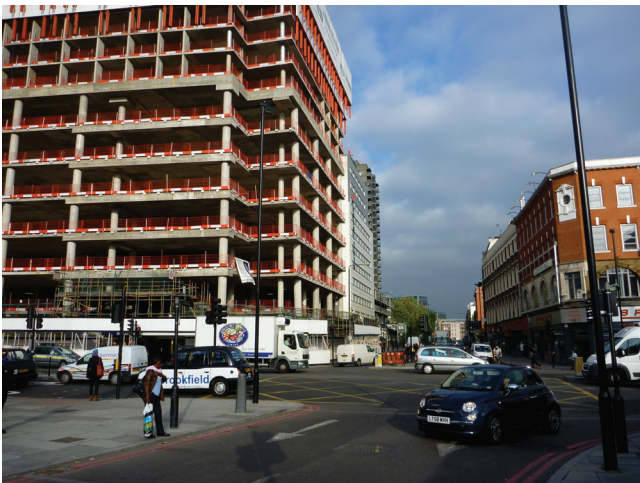




Proposed local masterplans including High Street 2012 corridor

- Aldgate Masterplan
- High Street 2012 corridor

Left to Right
New high rise blocks within the Aldgate masterplan; Scale of Whitechapel High Street



SITE OBSERVATIONS



Process

Our research focuses on a particular section of Whitechapel High Street stretching between the City fringe in Algate and New Road at the edge of the Royal London Hospital. It became immediately apparent that merely focusing on the high street frontage would be failing to grasp the full complexity of this site. Just off the high street existed several places of regional importance such as Brick Lane and Petticoat Lane as well as more discrete locales that could only be known by venturing along side streets and alleyways.

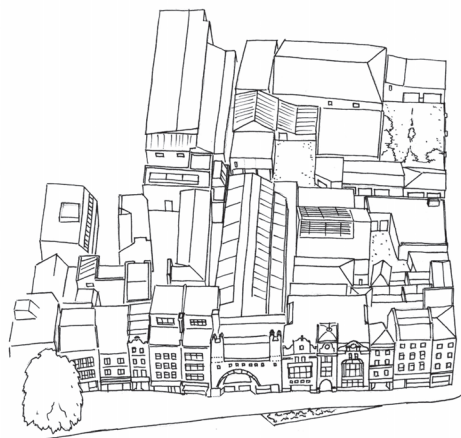
Whitechapel High Street

Heavy amounts of vehicular and pedestrian traffic on Whitechapel High Street make it difficult for any one group to claim it as their own. However this generalisation does not extend to the interiors of the many shops and markets along the high street. In several businesses there is a sense that proprietors and patrons have domiciled themselves around checkout counters and entrances to stockrooms enjoying reprieve from the street and its traffic; yet this level of comfort and ownership hardly spills out onto its sidewalks as the prevailing behavior on the street is purposeful movement by cars and people alike. In the high street's hierarchy of functions that of fluid movement maintains primacy.

Left to right

View towards the high street

Distinctive locales beyond the high street



Residual Streets

In several locations throughout the site we identified a network of residual streets. Such places exist as tributaries just off the high street, along smaller roads that benefit from the access to a major traffic artery while maintaining a degree of slowness and comfort that their more intimate scale allows for. On our site we have identified three spaces that function in such a way. They are Wentworth Road (Petticoat Lane), Osborn Street, and Fieldgate Street.

These secondary streets conform to a typology that seems to have evolved in response to the high traffic volumes on Whitechapel High Street. Measuring roughly ten metres in width they act to filter the traffic and noise of the high street. They support a more comfortable pedestrian environment in which neighbourhood shops, restaurants and street markets exist as destinations for both local residents and visitors. The tangible sociability that exists publicly in these three secondary streets can be contrasted to the more shuttered atmosphere along the High Street, leading us to conclude that they all function as the social and commercial backbones of their respective neighbourhoods and business communities. This in turn gives them a quality that appeals to a diverse range of visitors who are attracted to their distinctive offerings and atmospheres.

Clockwise from Top
Petticoat Lane on Market day
Fieldgate Street
Osborn Street



COMMUNITIES AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

Petticoat Lane

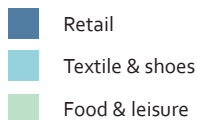
Each day along Wentworth Road, Petticoat Lane market takes shape as vendors pitch their stalls selling clothing and accessories in an open-air street market that has existed since the 1700s. The market occupies three street blocks that are lined with racks of clothing from approximately 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. On Sundays the market nearly triples in size, stretching from Commercial Street and up through Middlesex Street to touch Bishopsgate. A mixture of business types includes the market vendors who depend on the heavy foot traffic into the area and shops lining the street supplying fabric, leather shoes and mobile phone accessories. Visitors to the street market include City office workers on their lunch-breaks and casual visitors trickling out from nearby Spitalfields and Brick Lane.

Most of the shops specialise in stocks of African lace or leather goods; their businesses are maintained by long-term and long-range business contacts with buyers who come in from Europe and West Africa to purchase their goods. The dense concentration of livelihoods that share this road every day generates a social atmosphere among the businesses, casual visitors and purposeful customers. However, this energy fails to trickle to streets perpendicular to Middlesex Street, which are characterised by shuttered, disused retail spaces. The daily rhythm of Petticoat market can be characterised by a pattern of convergence and withdrawal as the road only remains active while the market is taking place and after that becomes completely shuttered. The road lacks the mix of uses that could support diverse activity beyond market hours despite being surrounded by several council estates and apartment blocks.

Batik and lace shops along Petticoat Lane

View of Petticoat Lane on a weekday

Below: Land use along and around Petticoat Lane

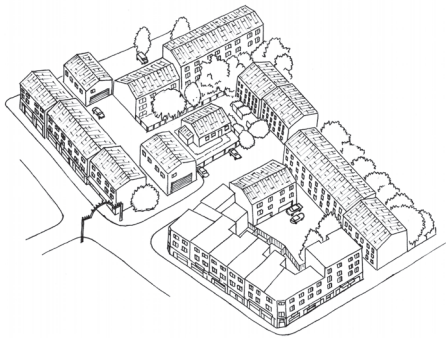


Osborn St

Osborn Street extends north from the high street for one block until it becomes Brick Lane. It takes on the qualities of a buffer zone between the vibrant pedestrian corridor of Brick Lane to the north and the busy high street running perpendicular to the south.

The foot traffic and activities that characterise Brick Lane emanate from the north in Shoreditch and taper off gradually southward before reaching Osborn Street. The southern stretch of the Brick Lane corridor takes on the character of the surrounding predominantly Bengali neighbourhood, with the curry restaurants and bars that are synonymous with Brick Lane intermixed with grocery stores, Hindi and Bengali music shops,

cafés and small travel/visa offices. The majority of proprietors and employees here are from the local Bengali community. The visitor economy that has evolved on Brick Lane is viewed as extremely positive by the businesses here because of the contribution they make to the local economy. Osborn Street possesses these qualities to a lesser degree but suffers from the visual blight of a dilapidated brick wall that conceals a large vacant lot that runs almost the entire block's length. Another problem is the speeding traffic that uses the street as a short cut between Whitechapel High Street and Commercial Street. These factors inhibit the street from integrating more seamlessly with the activity to the north.



- Food & Leisure
- Services

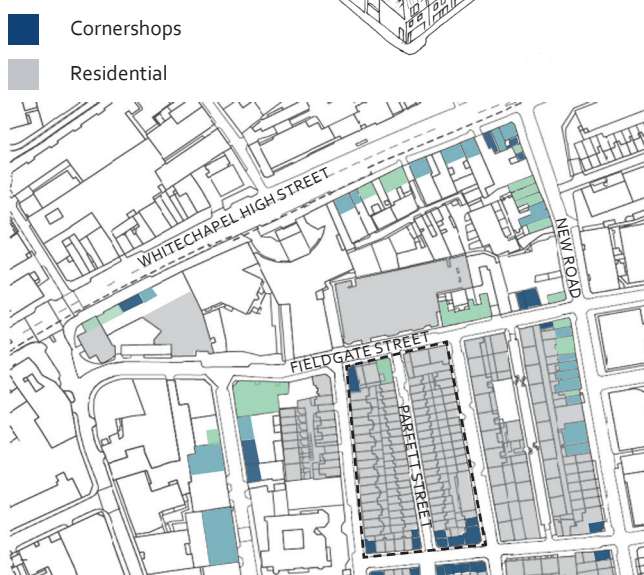
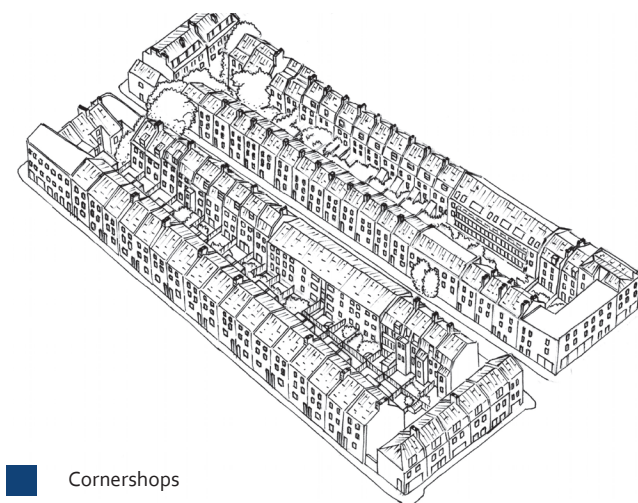


Clockwise from Top
 Sketch of Brick Lane / Osborn Street
 View along Osborn Street
 Restaurants along Osborn Street
 Land use along and around Osborn Street

Fieldgate Street

Fieldgate Street is a one-lane road that runs mostly perpendicular to the high street and behind the East London Mosque. The scale of the street prevents heavy vehicular traffic and also provides a sense of intimacy among the dynamic mix of uses that occur here. The East London Mosque has its prominent frontage on the high street while its back entrance opens onto Fieldgate Street. Here people often linger after prayer or school and then slowly disperse into the area where many families will go to have a meal.

Several large South Asian restaurants and smaller cafés are located along Fieldgate Street; these establishments are popular with the mosque congregation and other visitors to the area. One such popular restaurant generates long queues in the evening that spill out onto the sidewalk where a social atmosphere routinely develops. These restaurants and café employ many local residents, making them important assets of the local community.



Fieldgate Street also serves as the main access road for a distinctive neighbourhood made up of a slender grid of narrow streets that are closed to traffic. The neighbourhood blocks are made up of rows of terrace houses and a cluster of small shops and offices. This neighborhood supports a vibrant, multi-generational community made up mainly of residents with origins in the Sylhet region of Bangladesh. Many of the local business owners belong to the community and employ family members and friends. Shops at times also function as communal spaces as groups linger around shopfronts.

The neighbourhood functions as a coherent enclave, with Fieldgate Street mediating its relation to the abrasive high street.

Clockwise from Left

Former millworkers terraced houses, Fieldgate Street

View along Fieldgate Street

Fieldgate Street Synagogue

General land use around Fieldgate Street



EXISTING CONSTRAINTS

Voids – Petticoat Lane

During market hours Petticoat Lane market activates the length of Wentworth Road yet its presence fails to bring life to the surrounding streets. Toynbee Street in particular runs perpendicular to Wentworth Road yet is lined with disused retail units. This street rarely sees vehicular movement and is mostly utilised as parking space. The housing blocks to the north and south of the market fail to engage with the adjacent streets because they are either surrounded by vacant retail spaces or parking structures. Another problem is at the junction of Petticoat Lane and Commercial Street. Here a large sidewalk is fronted by a row of vacant retail spaces at the base of the Denning Point housing estate. This large space is partly covered by a concrete overhang that leaves much of the vacated space in shadow for much of the day.

The blighted spaces surrounding the market make it feel isolated although the activity of Spitalfields and Brick Lane are only blocks away. This is made worse by the lack of amenities to support the market activity, such as cafés or seating areas. The absence of complementary activities is a reason why the area fails to retain visitors beyond the market.



Clockwise from Top

Derelict brick building on Toynbee Street (Void)

Disused retail units along Toynbee Street (Void)

Concrete along Commercial Street (Void)

Entry to Petticoat Lane (Void)



Erosion – Osborn Street

While Osborn Street receives some foot traffic from Brick Lane this one-block stretch does not attract the high density of pedestrians and commercial activity that makes the rest of Brick Lane so attractive. One key cause is the frequent streams of traffic that accelerate through the street and use it as a short cut between the high street and Commercial Street. The use of Osborn Street as a rat-run disrupts the pattern of pedestrian activity from Brick Lane, eroding the social character of the street.

Absence of public realm – Fieldgate Street

The East London Mosque, with its surrounding complex of buildings, occupies a prominent corner that is defined by Whitechapel High Street on one side and by Fieldgate Street to the rear. Within this complex is the East London Muslim Centre which includes schools, gymnasiums, a health centre, office and commercial spaces, and a residential tower for the elderly. This dense concentration of functions attracts a constant stream of people that use the mosque and its facilities throughout the day. This bustling node reaches breaking point during Friday prayer when approximately seven thousand people converge on the mosque. All available spaces within the mosque are used until the congregation spills on to the pavement outside to pray. After prayers, large crowds disperse throughout the area yet there is seemingly no where for this activity to release into. This indicates a serious need for public space in the adjacent area. The neighbourhood block flanking Fieldgate Street contains the area's highest population density yet there is no significant space in the immediate area where residents can gather for social and cultural activities. Fieldgate Street itself suffers from constrained space with narrow sidewalks that are often lined with parked cars. What the area severely lacks is room for its diverse activities and residents to swell out in relief or come together in public.

We see this area as an opportunity for a physical intervention that would be directed at improving this space to facilitate more activity and work as a node that opens the area up to the spacious corners where Fieldgate Street meets Whitechapel High Street.



From Top
Junction of of Osborn Street with High Street (Erosion)
Friday prayers spilling onto the pavement (Absence)
East London Mosque at Friday prayers (Absence)

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Space and Proximity

Whitechapel High Street and its environs are an intensely utilised part of the city in which people navigate fast streets and negotiate busy sidewalks. The area also contains many empty spaces that run against heavily used paths, remaining under-utilised and left to deteriorate.

Our analysis revealed several locations that behaved as nodes of commercial and social activity. While they thrive by serving a diverse range of users, each is sustained by a proximate group whose livelihoods are there. In the case of Osborn Street and Brick Lane they are the local residents who operate neighbourhood shops and restaurants; in Petticoat Lane they are the market traders and vendors who form a work community. These groups assume the role of stewards of their respective locales. The frontages of the market streets behave as the public faces of the local cultures that support them and must maintain a degree of openness in order to engage visitors to the area.

These are places where differences can be exposed and appreciated in a shared realm of exchange. It is important that this balance is maintained because these commercial spaces upon which many different groups converge often serve as the fringes of a less public, more intimate world that exists beyond or even within them. These are perhaps the spaces that accommodate the non-western concepts of inter-cultural life that Bhabha (1984) refers to, precisely because they possess the duality of being permeable and resistant and are neither public nor private. This duality allows the communities who rely most on these space to sustain a tacit barrier between the cosmopolitan and the local.

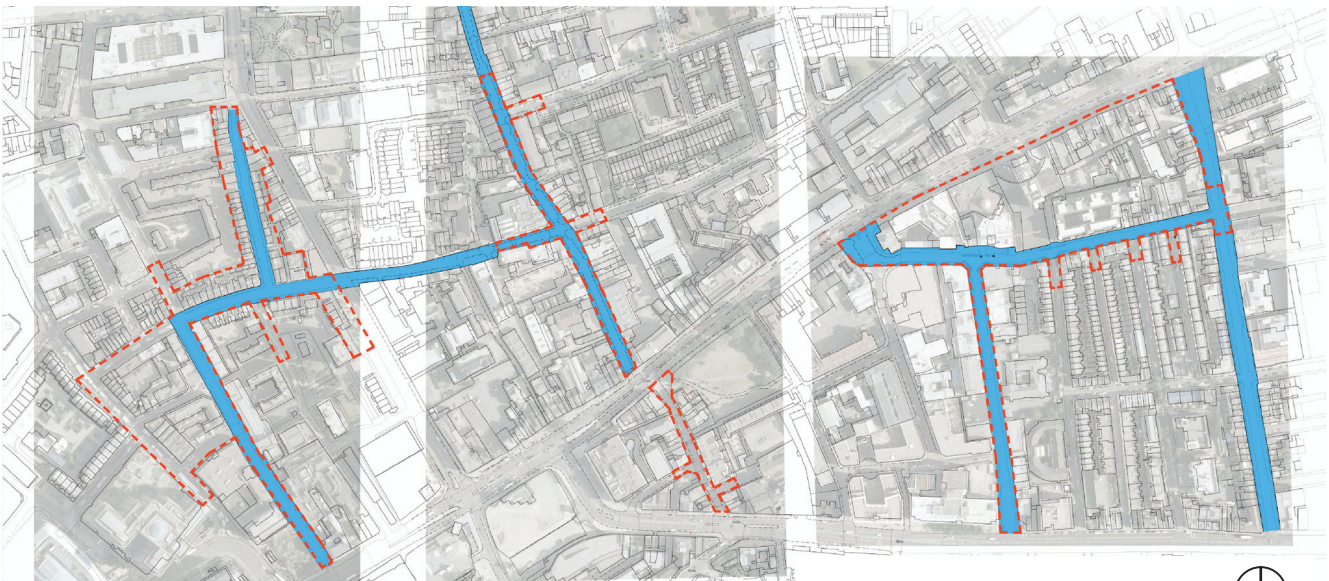
Our approaches for intervention began by observing this 'system of spaces' in order to draw inspiration from actual social and physical conditions and by 'emphasizing relationships rather than opposition, complementary rather than isolated objects, and substance rather than surface' (Ellin, 2006: 118).

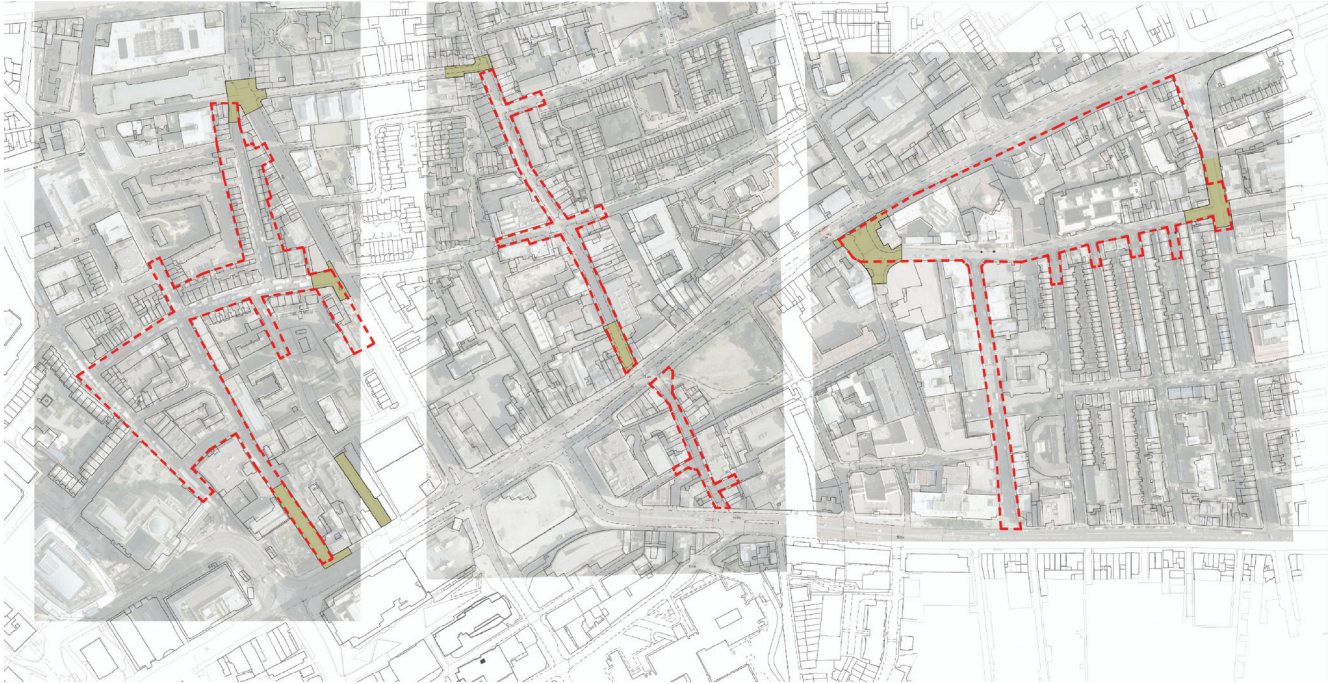
Spatial Analysis

There is an elaborate street network beyond the high street comprising of secondary roads and alleys. These operate as the 'small high streets' of the distinctive locales, linked either directly or indirectly with the main arteries such as the high street and Commercial Street. As this network extends on either side of these arteries they become a part of a larger system.

Secondly, we identified the 'cracks' – existing voids between the built forms and inside the blocks, breaking up their volume. They also constitute linkages from the high street – through small entrances beside the street – to the worlds at the back where diversity reveals itself. Most of these spaces remain empty or underdeveloped, occupied by parking lots and warehouses or remaining clustered and abandoned. We believe they offer potential for interventions as functional intermediate spaces. Additionally, they offer configuration patterns aimed at promoting diversity and spontaneity as well as increasing permeability to concealed spaces beyond the main routes.

Thirdly, the 'thresholds' or 'release' spaces are where the limits of the local worlds are more clearly observed. The specific activity engaged in each pocket is 'released' in different directions as if its solid color fades away and the transition to a new experience is revealed. We see these spaces as places to potentially pause, meet and exchange.





Left: Secondary connections beyond the High Street
 Above: Existing release spaces
 Below: Identified cracks

INTERVENTION: PETTICOAT LANE, TOYNBEE STREET AND COMMERCIAL STREET

The blighted areas we identified around Wentworth Road provide opportunities to address two of the area's problems: inactive side streets and disused retail spaces.

To address the dereliction on Toynbee Street our intervention aims to activate this dead street by facilitating fixed and semi-permanent economic (retail / food) and social functions. The physical modification is to make Toynbee Street a semi-landscaped level surface (hard) and use the long distinctive brick building to accommodate the functions. The building will retain its external wall and will become a permeable volume consisting of solids (functions) and landscaped voids (patios) that facilitate social and sometimes market use. The new social spaces integrated into the intervention will act as a mediator between the residents of the adjacent social housing block and the business community engaged in market activities.

The expansive sidewalk space fronted by the abandoned shops at the corner of Commercial Street and Wentworth Road is currently where the market activity comes to a halt. Our concept envisions a space that provides release and calm from the intense pace of the market activity. The space will serve as a positive outdoor space that is well defined and where people feel comfortable. Creating this sense of comfort requires several specific treatments to the existing conditions.

The most fundamental aspect of this treatment is to activate the disused shopfronts. The existing assets to the site include a spacious sidewalk and a line of large, mature trees. Another potential asset is the columned overhang over part of the sidewalk, with only a row of empty parking spaces above. Plans have been approved to discontinue the use of this parking area and demolish a section of the structure for the construction of an underground private car park. With this in mind, we stress the importance of maintaining the shopfronts and to a lesser degree the row of columns that give form and character to the space. Removing the concrete overhang to reduce its shadow while maintaining the structural columns is important.

In addition to these minor enhancements we feel that the space requires a stronger sense of containment which is why an additional structure is proposed in the middle of the area to define the whole space. This structure should be small and contain a social use such as a coffee shop. Such a use should become a focus and act as a node of social activity. Together the activation of Toynbee Street and the space along Commercial Street would supplant the existing voids with places that build off the success of the market while responding to its deficiencies. This works to create a Petticoat Lane that is integrated with the surrounding urban fabric and connects with the larger network of pedestrian pathways.

Right: Current entry to Petticoat Lane

Below: Proposed treatment of corner entry to Petticoat Lane





Top: Toynbee Street treatment, activation of shopfronts
Bottom: Commercial Street treatment, activation of shopfronts

INTERVENTION: OSBORN STREET

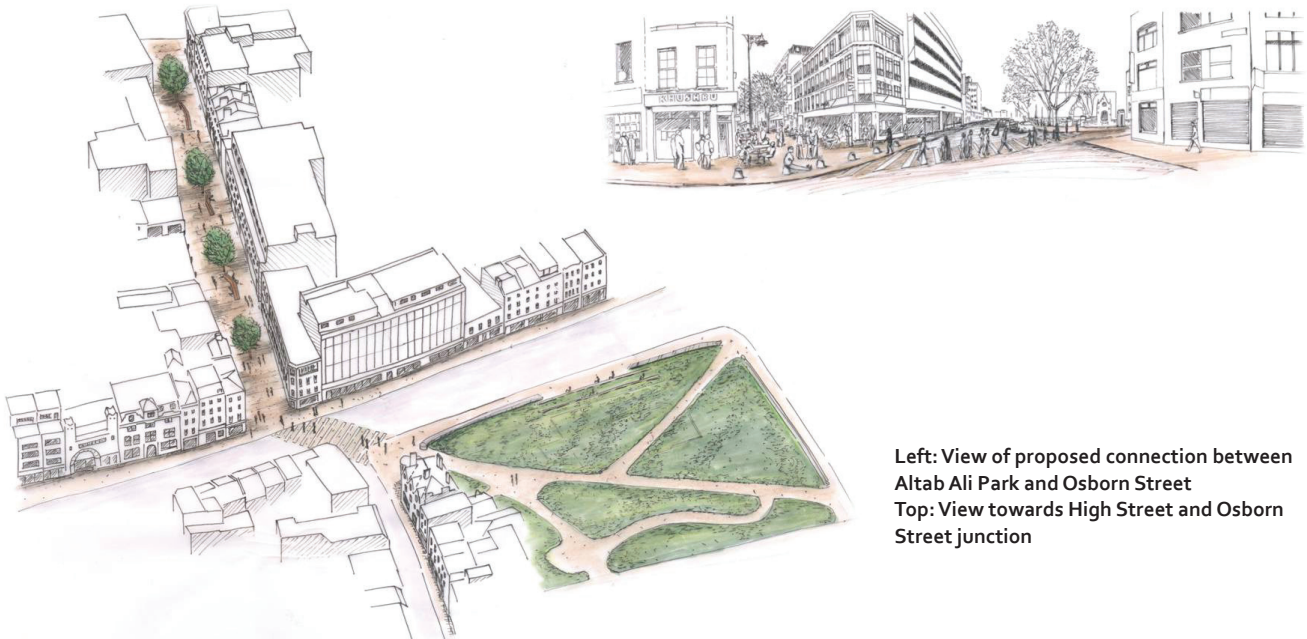
The most significant factor inhibiting Osborn Street is the rat-run of traffic that interrupts the comfortable flow of pedestrians. While the Brick Lane corridor to the north is able to accommodate the occasional stream of traffic it is understood to be a pedestrian realm where cars move slowly and with caution. Pedestrians on Osborn Street do not enjoy the same comfort as on the rest of Brick Lane because of the abrupt connection to the traffic volumes on the high street. Our discussions with proprietors on Osborn Street indicated a preference to see the street rid of traffic. If Osborn Street is to achieve the level of pedestrian atmosphere that characterises the rest of Brick Lane the traffic issue must be resolved.

We propose closing one block of the street from Whitechapel High Street to Wentworth Street to vehicular traffic. This would not significantly inhibit access to the area to the north as Commercial Road provides an alternative route to Wentworth Street. Establishing Osborn Street as an exclusive pedestrian realm is central to the scheme to encourage the vibrant activity of Brick Lane to flow uninhibited southward, with the possibility of it spilling out onto the high street. This would become a space where two realms converge: the fast pace movement of the high street and the relaxed stroll of a promenade.

Establishing a strong connection between Altab Ali Park and the proposed promenade on Osborn Street would allow the park to serve as a southern end point to the pedestrian corridor of Brick Lane. By functioning as an endpoint, Altab Ali Park could be integrated into the Brick Lane experience. Several treatments to the park should be undertaken to facilitate this.

Integration of the park into the patterns of movement around the site could be achieved by removing a section of the historic wall that surrounds the perimeter. This wall currently inhibits access from the high street sidewalk; removing a section of this wall and providing a terraced seating area in its place would allow this area to function as a social space. Another treatment involves creating a second entrance to the park on its north-east corner and creating a path that runs parallel to the high street's sidewalk. This would provide an alternative path to the sidewalk and allow more foot traffic to flow casually into the park.

The result of this series of interventions would be the creation of a fluid pedestrian corridor that flows from Brick Lane, through Osborn Street and out onto the high street where it is encouraged to disperse into Altab Ali Park.



Left: View of proposed connection between Altab Ali Park and Osborn Street
Top: View towards High Street and Osborn Street junction

INTERVENTION: FIELDGATE STREET

The East London Mosque is the most significant node of activity within this area. It sits at the prominent wedge-shaped intersection of the high street and Fieldgate Street. This corner intersection serves as the main point of entry into the shops and restaurants along Fieldgate Street and the dense residential neighbourhood adjacent to it. It is heavily traversed as steady streams of pedestrians pass around it throughout the day. A seven story residential tower for the elderly fronts the corner but little interaction occurs here because it is surrounded by a wrought iron gate.

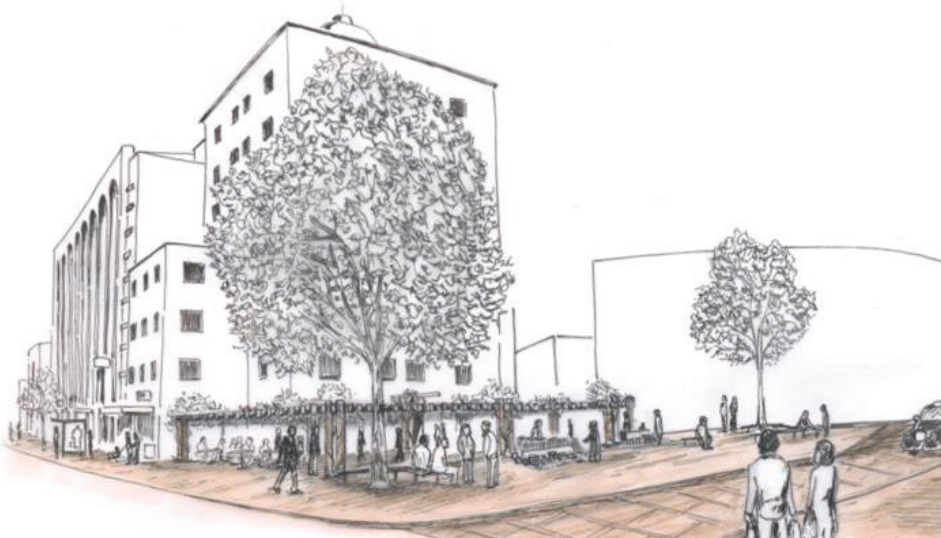
Opposite the residential tower stands the old Whitechapel Bell Foundry, a significant historic brick building dating from the 1500s. A generous section of sidewalk flanks the building yet this spacious area is rarely used because it sits outside of the area's main pathways and lacks any amenities. The corner rounding the mosque and leading into Fieldgate Street receives such high levels of foot traffic that it has the potential to support a large public space and relieve the congestion of insufficient sidewalk space. This could be achieved through re-appropriating the large sidewalk space beside the bell foundry.

Realigning the current road so that it cuts through the bell foundry space would allow the sidewalk on the opposite corner to be expanded significantly. Our intention for doing so is not simply about relieving sidewalk congestion, but to create an outlet for the highly active mosque complex and dense surrounding neighbourhood.

The location of the proposed space between the high street and Fieldgate Street would allow it to serve as a shared space between the local community and the mosque congregation as well as pedestrians on the high street. It sits strategically as a tangent along several intensely used paths, encouraging the

diverse groups that take these paths to pause and linger in the space en route to a destination. In addition such a generous space could accommodate more substantial uses such as a small market or festivities. Treatment of the space with small clusters of seating and a few shade trees is sufficient to germinate such uses. A minor addition to the hard frontage of the residential tower could be a trellised walk that visually softens this façade while providing the opportunity for intimacy around the periphery of the space. These light touches serve to break up the space so that different groups can use it without infringing on each other.

The larger purpose of this intervention is to provide a space that mediates between urban scales and between groups or individuals who converge at this intersection.



Left:
Proposed treatment leading to
Fieldgate Street

Above:
Map indicating intensity of use

Fundamentally Whitechapel High Street is a corridor of movement made up of spaces that accommodate exchange. While movement can function exclusively on a trajectory through space, physical exchange amongst individuals and groups must occur within a defined space. The diversity within our site revealed a spectrum of places that varied among sites of activity, intimacy, and isolation. We analysed the value of each identifiable area in relation to its users and the site as a whole. What emerged was a way to conceive of Whitechapel High Street as a system that facilitates movement between different scales of urban life. The system as it exists functions to separate each scale by allowing a buffer of neglected or poorly used space to form. We have proposed that this system can be strengthened if these spaces are able to mediate between different scales.

Our interventions illustrate several ways in which this could occur. Whether this is achieved through spaces that provide repose, release or convergence each intervention was conceived in response to the specific patterns of movement through the area. Our treatment of each space aims to encourage sociality while also ensuring that they maintain opportunities for intimacy. Strategically addressing the issues that exist at these critical intersections recognises that the ways in which people respond to changes in urban scale and movement can mean the difference between an integrated urban system and one made up of pockets of disuse. The high street is the primary mediator for the flows of movement among different urban scales; thus in order to facilitate exchange it must engage with, rather than repel, the local worlds that surround it.

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Osborn Street Crossing

