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Mile End to Bow Road

THE CULTIVATED STREET

FOODING THE CITY

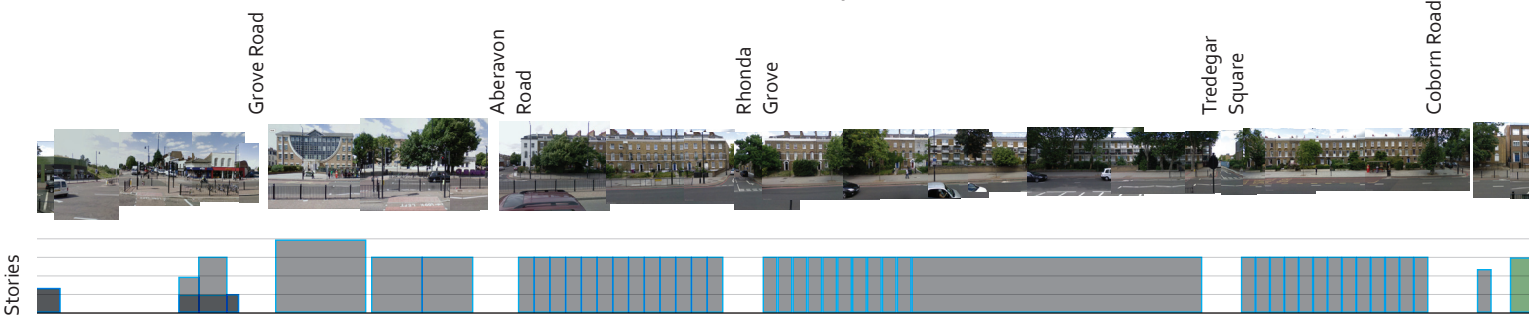
The portion of Mile End Road beginning at the Queen Mary University Campus and spanning east to the Bow Road rail overpass stretches approximately 1,000 metres and forms the basis of this study. Within the Greater London area, this represents a small section of the A11 corridor running from Aldgate to Stratford, changing names from Whitechapel Road to Mile End Road to Bow Road before turning north. Placed between two historic town centres at Stepney and Bow, the site remained in agricultural use until well into the nineteenth century, when its large plots made it ideal to accommodate a growing need for institutions. Its history as a corridor pre-dates its history as a place; the resulting social and spatial fragmentation the A11 has helped to create can still be felt on-site today, both as an east-west gap between town centres (visible in a lack of street vitality and manifest in its exclusion from key planning documents) and a north-south gap between segregated, diverse populations.

Our primary proposal is the integration of an urban farm and community kitchen into the current development plans for the abandoned St. Clements hospital site. This site, which fronts directly on our high street, is an ideal location for a food 'hub' that will act as an anchor for a district-wide urban agriculture effort and promote spatial and social connections between institutions and individuals. Envisioned as one of four iconic 'orchard crossings' and a part of a larger green pedestrian network, the 'Mile End Urban Orchard' is proposed to redraw a mental map for area residents. It aims to create a physical and programmatic place for institutions to clip into, promoting places of exchange with food as a common social denominator; and to provide practical, tangible opportunities for life skills training and affordable, healthy food.

At first glance the leap to a farm as a solution to social and spatial fragmentation might seem romantic and impractical. In fact it represents a unique and timely confluence of need, opportunity and policy. Working simultaneously 'top down'—considering a larger context and integration with metropolitan policy, context and trends—and 'bottom up'—through careful analysis of social needs and spatial conditions—we believe the opportunities are profound, particularly when considering the potential for urban food hubs in the context of London's new culture of 'localism.' The 4.5-acre St. Clements property at the centre of our site, adjacent to the high street, and on an axis connecting it the Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, is an opportunity that can't be ignored. Its historical significance and presence in the public consciousness can be leveraged to garner broad community engagement.

Relating our proposition to the High Street 2012 framework and post-Olympic London interventions reveals an inherent tension between the site's local existence and its unavoidable use as a corridor and connection to the east and the Olympic site (LDA, 2009). Given its presence within a heterogeneous stretch of the A11 corridor and the larger London context, we believe that the proposed 'St. Clements Farm, Community Kitchen and Food Hub' and the green orchard network leverages policy, forces of change and spatial realities as assets for local benefit and regeneration. Focusing on the creation of capabilities through social capital and skills – inspired by Amartya Sen's capability approach (1999) – our strategies consider a different and more robust kind of 'density' target for the city. We believe this approach to density and urban regeneration represents a model approach for other high street efforts, not in the details but in the concept of providing a place that addresses local common denominators of both need and sociability—food, health, and places of exchange.

Bottom: Street photos and profiles (north side). The rhythm of the street varies between small-scale buildings and retail and larger stretches that damage the rhythm of the street. Image Source: Google Street View
Right: Images of Mile End Road at Magistrate's Court, corner of Southern Grove, and from the intersection of Mile End and Burdett Road



SITE ANALYSIS

'The single physical obstacle which most often mitigates against free movement is, ironically, the construction of the roads which are supposed to exist specifically to promote it.' (Shonfield, 1998)

Our street today betrays its previous institutional grandeur, its agricultural history and any past vibrancy as a high street, a perfect example of spaces that prioritise vehicular traffic over pedestrian and aesthetic considerations.

Investigation reveals a set of micro and macro centrifugal forces that pull people away from this site. At a micro scale signs at Tube stations and London Underground-provided maps indicate Roman Road, Victoria Park and Bromley-by-Bow Centre as major attractions, skipping the nearby Cemetery Park or other local destinations. At a macro scale investment and spatial strategies repeatedly skip or overlook the site – policy frameworks (like High Street 2012 and the Tower Hamlets Core Strategy) seem to have it in their blind spot.

The mix of pre-war Victorian row houses and modernist social housing blocks could create vibrancy through difference, but instead the feeling is of separation and desolation. Demographic and ethnographic investigations reveal this to be an area of

stark contrasts. The nineteenth century terraced housing that was retained to the north of the high street is now occupied by high-income residents in contrast to nearby council estates (distributed unevenly across the site, largely to the south) with a large pensioner population and a sharp education divide. The street as a physical barrier feels like a deeper expression of this social fragmentation between the north and the south.

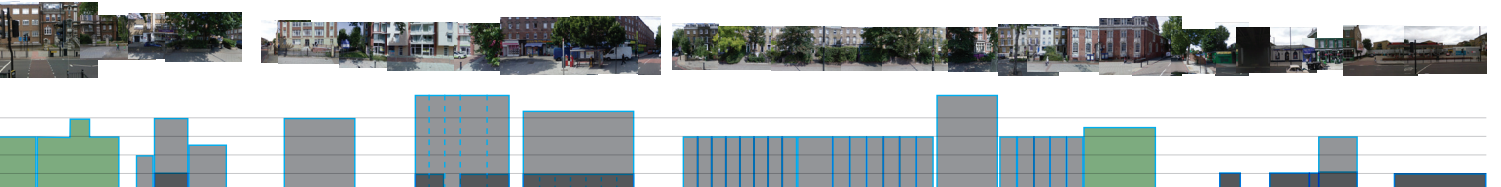
A high density and variety of institutions and numerous physical assets in the form of green space and recreational facilities is, however, promising. What is missing in borough and region-wide strategies is consideration of local diversity of needs and assets, and efforts that attempt to address the neighbourhood at multiple scales and through multiple channels. The fragmentation of social and physical assets must be addressed in creative ways that mitigate the barriers and externalities of street speed and noise, while working within the context of an east-west traffic corridor that's not here to stay. Assets in the area are poorly leveraged and lack connections. A lack of an image or neighbourhood identity may be to blame; residents seem to be either unaware of or sceptical about many local amenities, perhaps because they are not made visible, or connected to the high street.

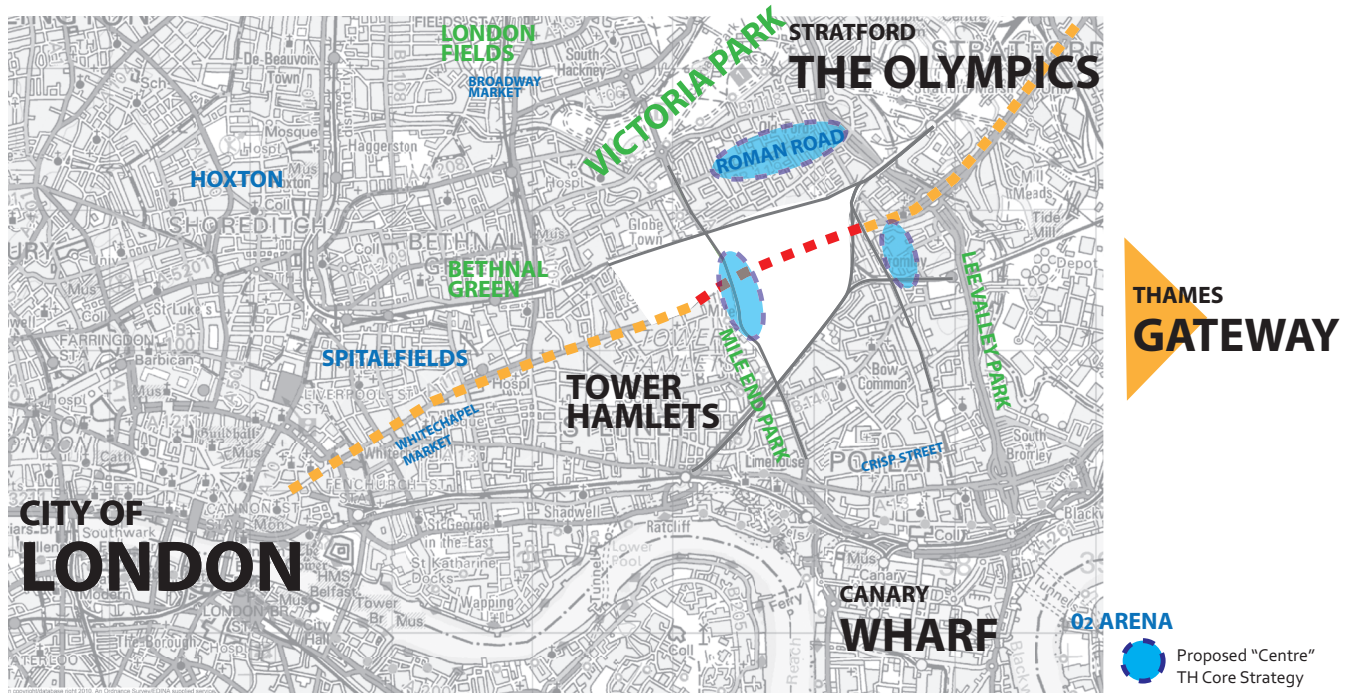


Coborn Street

Harley Grove

Alfred Street





Clockwise from top left:

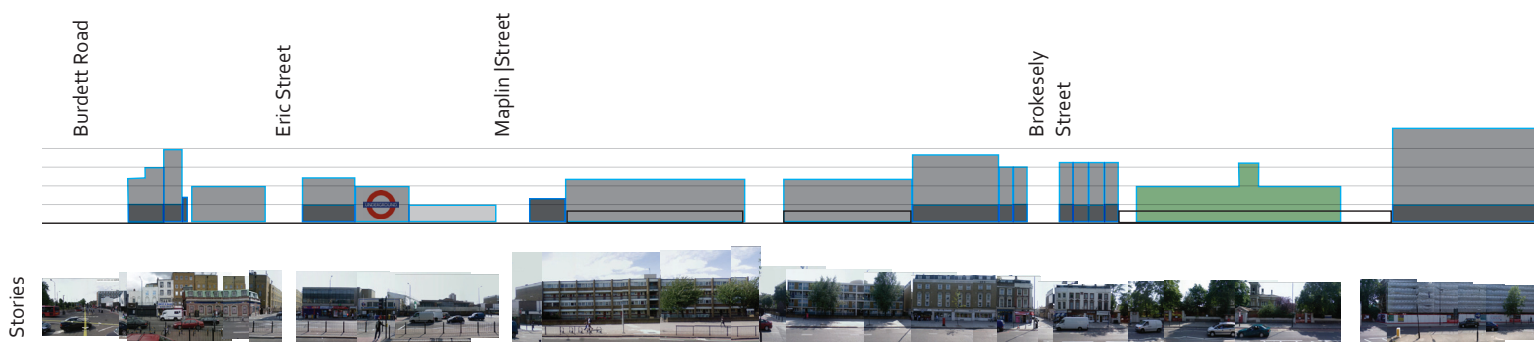
The site (shown in white) in relation to the City of London and other major locations and policy, development and recreational 'forces' that influence the use and characterisation of the site. A void in the 'mental maps' of London's policy-makers and residents, it is either ignored or seen only as a corridor within regional, city and borough-wide strategies.

Base map source: Edina

An inventory of ground-floor building uses on the site shows a large density of institutions and few retail opportunities along the main street. Base map source: Edina

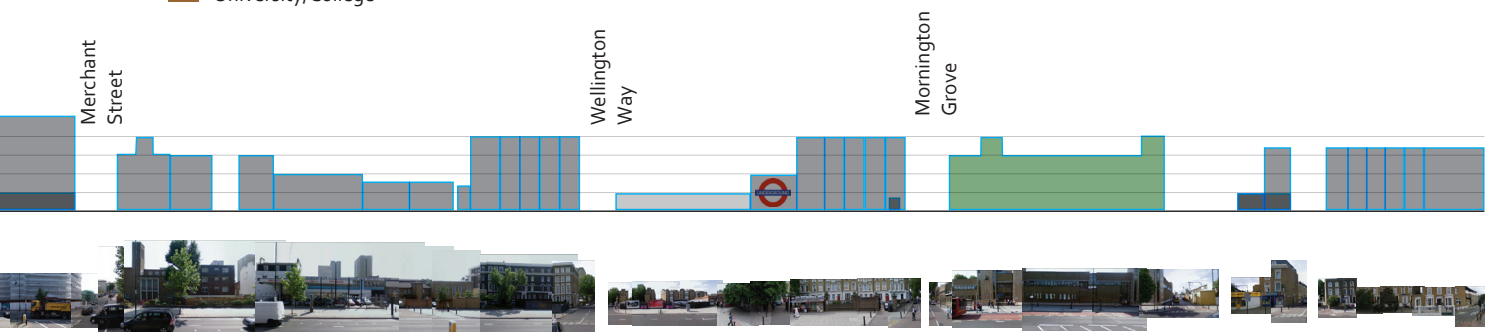
Street photos and profiles (south side)

Image source: Google street view





- | | |
|---|--|
| Café, Pub | Primary/Secondary School |
| Restaurant | Art and Leisure |
| Grocery Store, Chain Retail | Community Services |
| Real Estate, Betting | Hospital/Health Services |
| Other Retail | Public Services |
| Religious | Office, Workshop |
| University/College | |



A STRATEGY FOR INTERVENTION

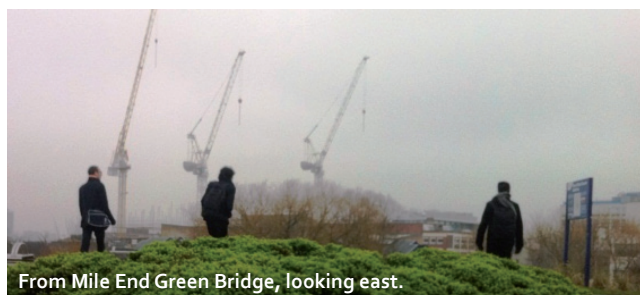
In the site's planned future, its presence as a transit corridor is celebrated. Strategic planning documents identify this area as a gateway to the east and a major arterial road. It is targeted for significant increased residential density, largely to support employment centres in Canary Wharf and Stratford, raising the danger of the site becoming a 'dormitory' community. Powerful stakeholders behind the current agenda—the City of London, Tower Hamlets, housing and commercial developers—are driving the march of cranes from west to east. Even a High Street 2012 effort more focused on local needs would struggle to address the more basic problems of our site. Our core challenge is making a road into a street, creating a place of exchange where none exists.

Our goals for intervention aim to:

1. Meet local needs
2. Create places of exchange
3. Leverage existing assets
4. Work across scales

These goals are informed by four central beliefs:

1. Any intervention is a **means, not an end**. Our proposals leverage projects as 'catalysts for negotiation' (to steal a phrase from Moshen Mostafavi, 2011) and tools that must always be judged against these larger aims.
2. Solutions must be both **'bottom up' and 'top down.'** Community engagement is central to our proposals and their potential success. A top-down approach, however, can push the boundaries for how actors and institutions can network in ways that may be missed on the ground.
3. Strategies should be judged on their ability to develop **capabilities**, as outlined by Amartya Sen (1999). This includes both basic needs (health, nutrition, safety) and needs relating to the capacity to participate in society.
4. While optimistic our solutions are grounded in a positive **pragmatism**. In a time of austerity, it is important to couple vision with viability. Truly pragmatic solutions accommodate **flexibility, capacity for productive feedback, and the ability to change** based on lessons-learned during intervention.



From Mile End Green Bridge, looking east.

Fooding the City

We propose the creation of St. Clements 'Farm, Community Kitchen & Food Hub' as the centre of a distributed food network. The 4.5-acre site will accommodate the current proposed residential development, while adding productive farmland and greenhouses alongside education and community facilities. Local green spaces provide additional productive land, contributing to both the viability and visibility of the project.

The historic building that fronts the street will become a community kitchen and food 'hub,' incorporating market and public spaces for a variety of uses addressing the area's many stakeholders. The street frontage will become an 'orchard crossing' at the centre of the urban orchard network connecting existing green and recreational assets, marked by orchard plantings at strategic intersections and pathways.

We aim to create alternative public spaces that local institutions can 'clip' into in a variety of ways. The on-site farm and community kitchen acts as a hub and a pilot project for the distributed farm plots and the orchard intervention. Adaptable ground-floor studio/store spaces built into the design of new housing units will allow for entrepreneurial activities within the complex, and for change over time.

We believe that an intervention strategy focused around the growing, production and distribution of food represents a unique confluence of need, opportunity and policy.

Need. Interviews with community stakeholders identified a need for quality, affordable food common to many deprived neighbourhoods. Recent attempts to provide affordable meals to local residents by a local housing provider via a community kitchen stalled due to problems with funding and visibility.

Opportunity. The St. Clements site's central and high street location and historical character are unique assets to create visibility. That it is the site for current development proposals offers an opportunity to piggyback on ongoing community involvement, and address how best to leverage community funding sources related to the proposed housing development targets, including Section 106 funding.

Policy. Engaging with the current political debate around the Localism Bill is also central to the strategy. When enacted, the bill will offer both opportunities and challenges to communities as they grapple with new possibilities to control and intervene in their surroundings amid increasing financial austerity. To engage in this debate, our goal is to pursue a pragmatic localism: a localism that it is not based on the defence of a territory, but on responding to the needs of the different citizens that live/work/transit in a territory.

Goal #1: Address Local Needs (Why Food?)

Our demographic and ethnographic research revealed deficiencies in the provision of basic needs. Access to quality and affordable food is a problem. Health and education deprivation are generally high, particularly on council estates. Many residents also expressed desires for allotments and community gardens, and some have begun to be provided, though sparsely. There is a demand for affordable/subsidised meals for pensioners (Meals on Wheels) and for basic healthy cooking skills. Addressing issues surrounding food, health and education are fundamental to improving the prospects of the area's residents, and offer a common ground for diverse populations while respecting differences and particularities.

Goal #2: Create Places of Exchange

While a basic needs approach lays the groundwork for our intervention strategy, it's not enough. Amartya Sen's 'capabilities approach' informs our strategy and offers a framework valuable in its adaptability and consideration of both basic needs and 'complex capabilities, eg. the freedom to appear in public without shame' (Sen, 1984: 78-79). This approach is valuable both as a benchmark against which to judge proposed interventions and as a framework for intervention. Strategies must build on existing capabilities and relationships, while creating new connections to enhance them. Our intervention strategy seeks to build 'bridging' capital at multiple scales, both between local groups and from the local to the regional/national (Putnam, 2000:22).

Goal #3: Leverage Existing Assets

Our strategy seeks to leverage the variety of formal institutions and the connections they provide to Greater London as facilitators of exchange and providers of capabilities. Our discourse is purposefully urban. Although the 'farm' is a rural association, we celebrate the positive benefits of density and diversity offered by high street locations. The St. Clements site represents a significant asset to leverage both for engagement and as a site on which to deliver new places for engagement and exchange. The under-used and over-designed Mile End Park also offers an opportunity to create connections and utilise space more productively; a better-programmed space could accommodate and satisfy more visitors with less space.

Goal #4: Work Across Scales

Considering projects and interventions at multiple scales is key to the creation of the capabilities set earlier as the goal for the site. Focusing our strategies around health, education and food, there are significant opportunities to connect to borough, city, regional and worldwide organisational and knowledge bases that can combine to make projects viable, offer connections across scales, and provide sources of potential funding and external involvement. Both spatial and social interventions are considered at multiple scales, given the Mile End neighbourhood's place within the city and borough, while also considering projects and impacts at the individual scale. Food strategies represent a particular opportunity for working across scales and engaging with the current policy and media contexts.



A survey of the abundant green space in the area. Approximately 200 acres of distributed green space is shown in this map