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Bow Road

THE MEDIUM STREET

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: THE MEDIUM STREET

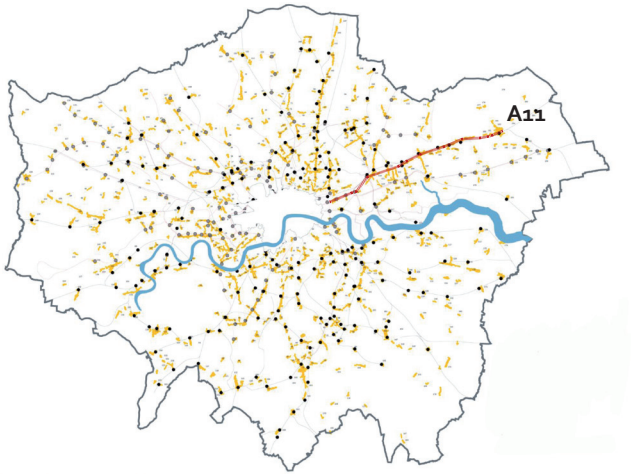
Mile End Road / Bow Road

In contrast to the vital retail corridors of Whitechapel and Stepney and the intense buzz of construction around the Stratford Olympic site, the A11 as it passes through Mile End and Bow provides little to recommend itself to the casual observer. Almost wholly ignored in the High Street 2012 scheme and in Tower Hamlets' planning strategy, this area is characterised by short retail strips, residences fronted by private or semi-public gardens, educational institutions, and long stretches of inactivity marked by blank walls and auto-centric businesses (LBTH, 2010a; LBTH, 2010b). Not far from the Mile End Tube, the derelict St. Clements Hospital site presents an imposing gap in the urban fabric of the street and the neighbourhood. But although the street fails as a traditional retail corridor and is not officially conceived of as a neighbourhood hub, it plays an important role in the life of East London. The area's relative affordability, easy access to Tube and high-frequency bus lines, and the street's high concentration of educational institutions have attracted a diverse mix of students, immigrants, middle-income residents, and a prominent South Asian community.

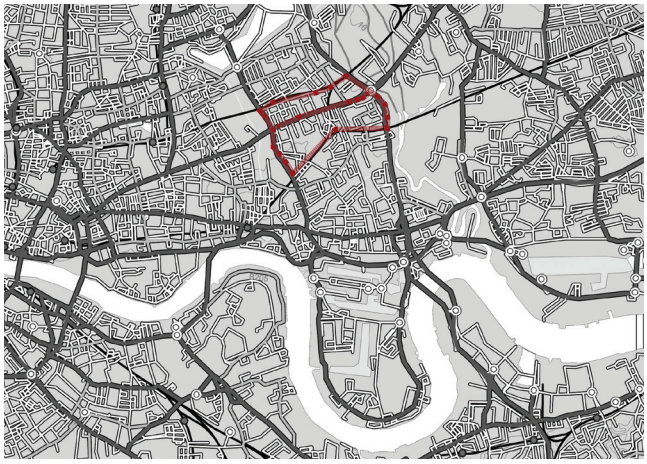
Rather than seeking to change this street's character, our project seeks to emphasise and reinforce its strengths as what we have called a 'medium street'—something that sits between the extremes of an Oxford Street and a purely residential street. Namely, these strengths are the street's well-used transport stops and wealth of institutional resources. Our strategy aims to take advantage of under-used spaces on the street by involving local institutions in the creation of street interventions strategically placed at or around the area's transport hubs, as well as taking advantage of the St. Clements redevelopment to serve as an asset for neighbourhood institutions. It also seeks to strengthen and enable partnerships between neighbourhood institutions and create new opportunities for interaction with the community at large. Our interventions include:

- a series of light-touch interventions at or near transport nodes to provide opportunities for increased sociability, physical convenience, and small-scale trade
- a strategy for the St. Clements site that envisions a mix of residences and new amenities for local educational institutions
- an overall street improvement and greening strategy creating spatial links between the street's institutions and St. Clements.

Through these strategies, we hope to build the social and institutional networks of the street in order to ensure continued investment in the neighbourhood's future. Ultimately, the project aims to create a place of identity and belonging beyond just a thoroughfare or conventional retail corridor.



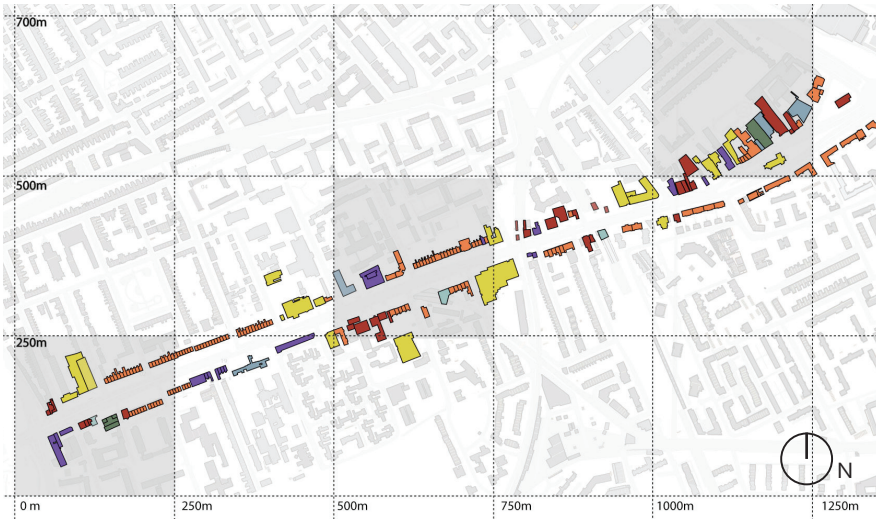
London's high streets with the A11 marked in red. Source: Gort Scott and UCL (2010)



Mile End-Bow Church. Highlighting the position of our site on the A11, marked in red. Source: Edina Maps

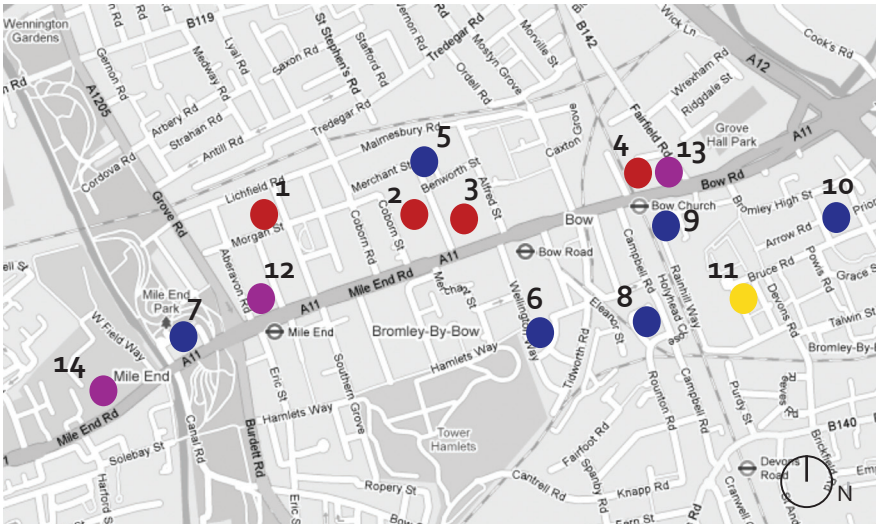
Mile End-Bow Church Figure Ground Map Today. Existing urban footprint. Source: Edina Maps

Spatial Analysis



Ground Floor Land Use Study. By imposing a 250m grid on the land use map, it becomes clear that the street cannot be conceived of as a retail corridor

- Mixed Use
- Cultural / Religious
- Residential
- Commercial
- Vacant
- Light Industrial
- Parks & Open Spaces



1. Central Foundation Annex (Girls)
2. Central Foundation Main (Girls)
3. Phoenix School (Mixed)
4. Bow School of Maths
5. Malmesbury School (Mixed)
6. Wellington (Mixed)
7. Guardian Angels RC (Mixed)
8. Cherry Tree Special (Mixed)
9. St. Agnes (Mixed)
10. Old Palace (Mixed)
11. Children's House (Mixed)
12. eCollege London
13. College of Technology London
14. Queen Mary University

- Nursery Schools
- Primary Schools
- Secondary Schools
- Tertiary Educational Institutions

Educational Assets. The high density of educational institutions is scattered along the street and in the adjacent neighbourhood

Existing Assets

The street and its buildings provide a number of public and semi-public spaces, but these fail to activate the street as a public space where people can come into contact with each other. Many of these spaces adjoin institutions such as schools, police stations, housing associations, transport stations, disused hospitals, and the Thames Magistrate Court, which provide vital services for the community but which fail to take advantage of their place on the street to promote interaction there. The neighbourhood is well-connected, with two Tube stops and a DLR station located within just a 1500-metre stretch of the street.

The neighbourhood is, in several places, undergoing intense redevelopment—most notably in Eastend Homes' regeneration schemes in their large holdings near Mile End station. These schemes will bring some increased density to the area as a response to the growing development pressures on this site in particular and Tower Hamlets in general. In the context of this pressure, it is perhaps more imperative than ever that Mile End Road/Bow Road be used to its fullest potential without imperilling the assets that attract newcomers to the area.

Pedestrian Movement Study

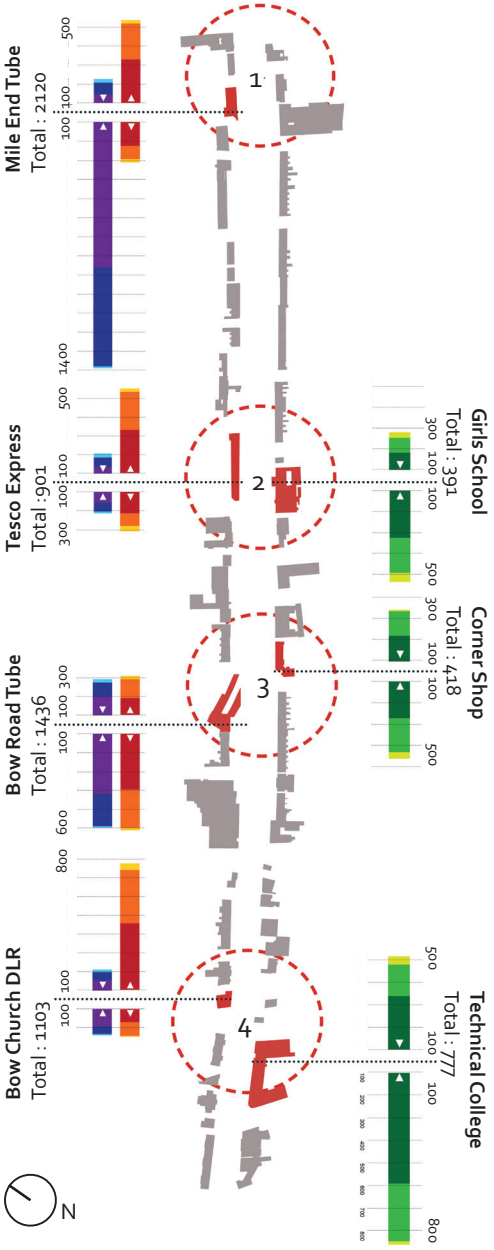
Friday 29 October, alternating 15 minute intervals, 3-6p.m., showing pedestrian intensities along the street

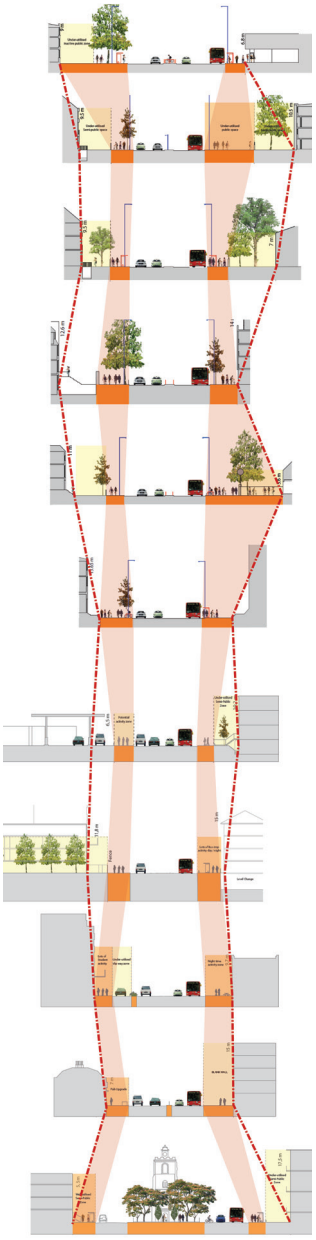
Sectional Typology Study

This shows the varying pavement widths in orange and semi-public space in yellow as well as building heights and road widths

What the locals have to say...

We conducted 48 interviews with local institutions, residents, and people on the street





'They are here for the development, not the neighbourhood '
-Bow Quarter estate agent

'... people from all over the world.'
-Shop owner

'...Our main focus is on getting boys an education, some have never been on the Tube.' -Bow Boys School estate manager

'The Tube and the university have brought people to the area.' -Restaurant owner

'The young kids have nowhere to go so they sit in the park and smoke pot...'
-Resident

'... kids will not cross postcode boundaries from fear of getting beaten up...' -Various

'The area has improved..' -Various

'It's safe...' ' It's not safe...' -Various

'...Huge change in 15 years '
-Bow Arts Trust CEO

'... there are less play spaces today...' -Resident

' [Mile End]...has no pauses.'
-Bow Arts Trust CEO

C = Child **F** = Female **M** = Male

C F M Exiting East / West

C F M Entering East / West

C F M Passing through East / West

STRATEGY AND THEORY

We decided to focus our interventions on the street itself as it is both the most well-used public space and the area's main dividing line. Because so many of the buildings along the street are residential or not conducive to retail, we concluded that transforming the area into a retail high street would take decades at best or be completely inappropriate at worst. We chose instead to improve what already worked on the street – namely, its institutional and transportation density. Specifically, we chose to improve the street's public space using institutional and transport assets in order to improve the conditions we identified in our analysis.

Our project seeks to create nodes of activity that take advantage of existing transport nodes and institutions that already attract activity to the street throughout the day. One precedent for this kind of urbanism is Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*. Alexander writes:

> One of the greatest problems in existing communities is the fact that the available public life in them is spread so thin that it has no impact on the community. It is not in any real sense available to the members of the community. Studies of pedestrian behaviour make it clear that people seek out concentrations of other people, whenever they are available…
>
> To create these concentrations of people in a community, facilities must be grouped densely round very small public squares which can function as nodes – with all pedestrian movement in the community organised to pass through these nodes (Alexander, 1977: 164).

Although the existing infrastructure in our site does not function to produce these nodes in the way that Alexander goes on to prescribe, we believe the pedestrian infrastructure here could be improved to better take advantage of the street's existing assets and foster the kind of hubs he describes.

Our aim is not to take a prescriptive approach to how this street should be used; rather our project aims to create public spaces that generate constructive activity (rather than crime or disuse). This follows the idea that, 'while urban designers might create potential environments, people create effective environments. Rather than determining human actions or behaviour, urban design can be seen as means of manipulating the probabilities of certain actions or behaviours occurring' (Carmona, et al., 2003: 107).

The ideas behind our interventions further draw from Richard Sennett's concept of the 'open city.' Sennett warns against inflexible urban forms and systems, arguing instead for flexibility and the creation of what he calls 'democratic space' that fosters informal mixing and ease among strangers. We believe the spaces we have identified can embody this kind of thinking and provide this street with improved and functional public space where now there are only blank spaces (Sennett, 2006: 294-297). The interventions also embrace the concept of the public realm as a process which allows the street to become the backdrop for new social and economic opportunities shaped around the changing needs of the neighbourhood.

Our strategy, then, seeks to improve the sociability and sensuality of the public realm, while not being overly prescriptive, and conceives of the site as a major educational, cultural and recreational node for Tower Hamlets. It further seeks to turn the A11, which currently serves as a neighbourhood boundary, into a more permeable border by improving pedestrian access and creating new incentives for people on both sides to take advantage of the street itself. As Sennett points out, 'Whenever we construct a barrier, we have to equally make the barrier porous; the distinction between inside and outside has to be breachable, if not ambiguous' (Sennett, 2006: 3).

Site Selection

Basing our intervention strategy around the existing assets of institutions and transport stops, we conceive of the street as a series of interventions of various sizes that act as activity nodes along the street while creating an overarching strategy for general street improvement. The site selection maximises the overlap between the physical and social opportunities that we found along the street.

The site selection provides the framework for a four-tier strategy that addresses the issues of the street at various scales:

1. **St. Clements**: The main activity node will be a new neighbourhood centre, which will be a connector for institutions and residents.
2. **Transport node interventions**: The second tier of nodes on the street will be medium-sized catalytic interventions near transit stops that also involve institutional partnerships.
3. **Integrated green streetscape**: An overall streetscape renovation of 'green connections' between St. Clements and local institutions.
4. **Community gardens**: A series of community gardens on and around the street in unused greens on social housing estates will provide even smaller pausing points.

All of these multi-scalar interventions will work together to increase the number of activity 'pulses' on the street, give the area more of an identity, and add to the social and institutional networks of the street.

SITE SELECTION

URBAN FABRIC

PHYSICAL OPPORTUNITIES

SOCIAL OPPORTUNITIES

Mile End Tube and Bus Stops:

Physical: Ample unused space, wide pavements.

Social: Significant pedestrian traffic generated by transport nodes and neighbouring institutions (40,000 people per day)

St. Clements Hospital Site:

Physical: Vacant historical site to be redeveloped for the benefit of the community.

Social: A central location close to neighbourhood services such as schools, housing, and Tesco.

Bow Road Tube Station:

Physical: Extremely wide and empty pavements with many blank walls.

Social: Significant pedestrian traffic generated by transport nodes and neighbouring institutions (16 000 people per day)

Technical College and Bus Stop:

Physical: Large under-utilised slipway, future potential use of Bow School yard as a public garden.

Social: Already a gathering place for students and bus users. The low wall next to the petrol station is currently the only place to sit.

Bow Church Bus Stop:

Physical: North-south connecting point at intersection. Unused semi-public space adjacent to bus stop.

Social: Already a gathering place for bus users. Close to social institutions such as churches and Bow Arts Trust.

IMPLEMENTATION

Phasing

Although St. Clements is an important part of this overall strategy, there are other components that should take place before ground is broken on any redevelopment work there. Most of the site interventions that we identify later can be implemented in only a few weeks' or months' time, whereas construction on the St. Clements site is still a year or more away at best. The implementation of these smaller-scale interventions is crucial both for drawing community attention and engagement to the street, as well as forging an initial set of partnerships and sense of investment in the neighbourhood among community institutions. These modest interventions will also provide an affordable start to this project during difficult financial times and will allow institutions and the community to evaluate their initial success. Such a strategy has been pioneered by architects such as Jan Gehl, who has introduced gradual phasing for projects in places like New York City in order to 'make changes sustainable and to give people time to adapt to physical changes, adjust their life styles, and experiment with the new ways of using the city' (Project for Public Spaces, 2010). The partnerships instrumental to this plan and new-found attention to the street are crucial in forging norms and relationships that could lead to a flourishing community use of the St. Clements site. They are also important for lending coherence and vitality to a broader streetscape improvement strategy, which will be described later. A detailed schedule of the phasing is listed below, starting summer 2012:

1. Temporary transport node interventions and gardening boxes **(Months 0-6)**
2. Open front building or front court of St. Clements site to temporary uses and pilot projects with institutions while construction on affordable housing and facilities takes place behind **(Starting month 3)**
3. Evaluate temporary transport stop interventions and transition to permanent infrastructure **(Months 6-18)**
4. Install permanent streetscape along street **(Years 1-3)**
5. Opening of St. Clements housing and permanent public facilities **(Years 5-10)**

Although the above phasing structure could take place at any given time, we believe it would be advantageous for an overarching community organisation or the borough itself to time the first phase to coincide with the 2012 Olympics. Such timing could potentially allow the co-ordinating body to take advantage of any remaining funding from High Street 2012. Further, this could take advantage of the area's proximity to the Games by allowing the area to host a kick-off event highlighting local institutions and the local community, as well as showcasing the initial street interventions and the overall project as a whole.

Site Investigation

The St. Clements site, currently owned by the Homes and Communities Agency, has been vacant for years, but proposals for its redevelopment should be submitted this spring. Its listed status could be a challenge, but it seems that some less significant buildings might be altered or demolished to accommodate necessary redevelopment, and the boundary wall might be opened in order to make the site more permeable. We think this site, given its sheer size and potential for community access, could play a major role both in activating this part of the street, dealing with its overall lack of identity, and creating an opportunity for institutional partnership building as a site for shared community assets.

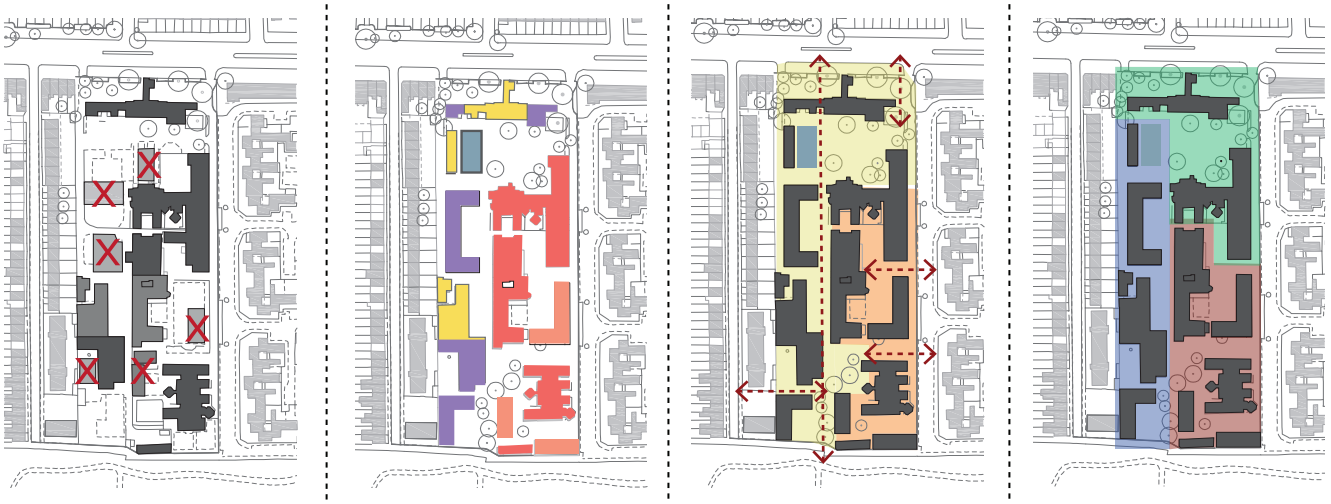
Housing

Tower Hamlets' 2005 planning brief for this site requires that development contain 450-700 habitable rooms per hectare (LBTH, 2005). Under London Citizens' proposal, the site will be one-third affordable family housing of three, four, or five bedrooms, with another third as social housing and a one third market-rate housing. Queen Mary University (QMUL) and the Central Foundation Girls' School have identified a shortage of family housing in the area, especially for large South Asian families who are often overcrowded in existing housing stock. London Citizens proposes an ownership scheme that incentivises families to stay in their homes longer and sell for below market prices when they leave, in exchange for more affordable ownership. This helps to ensure both affordability and continuity in the community. The remaining units will be split evenly between social housing and market rate housing. The latter will provide additional funding for the project (interview, David Smith, London Citizens, 21 January 2011). We would also suggest that market rate student housing be considered for this portion, as many students from QMUL live in the area and are in need of housing.

A Central Meeting Point

Apart from the housing component, we believe St. Clements provides the opportunity for a new asset for the community at large. By making St. Clements a centre for local institutions as well as local residents, institutions can increase their visibility in the area and increase access for residents. Creating an agglomeration of public facilities could lead to benefits such as cross-institutional learning and cost savings from shared facilities. A central meeting point of people from different institutions and parts of the street would facilitate intermingling and casual encounters that could help create connections that are otherwise unlikely given the physical and social fragmentation of the street. This could help address the north-south divide on the street and issues of deprivation.

St. Clements Hospital Land Use and Phasing



Status of the Existing Buildings

- Grade 1 Listed buildings
- Grade 2 Listed buildings
- Buildings to be demolished

Land Use

- Mixed Use
- Public Facilities
- New Residential
- Converted Residential

Public vs. Private

- Semi Public Space
- Public Space
- Pedestrian Access

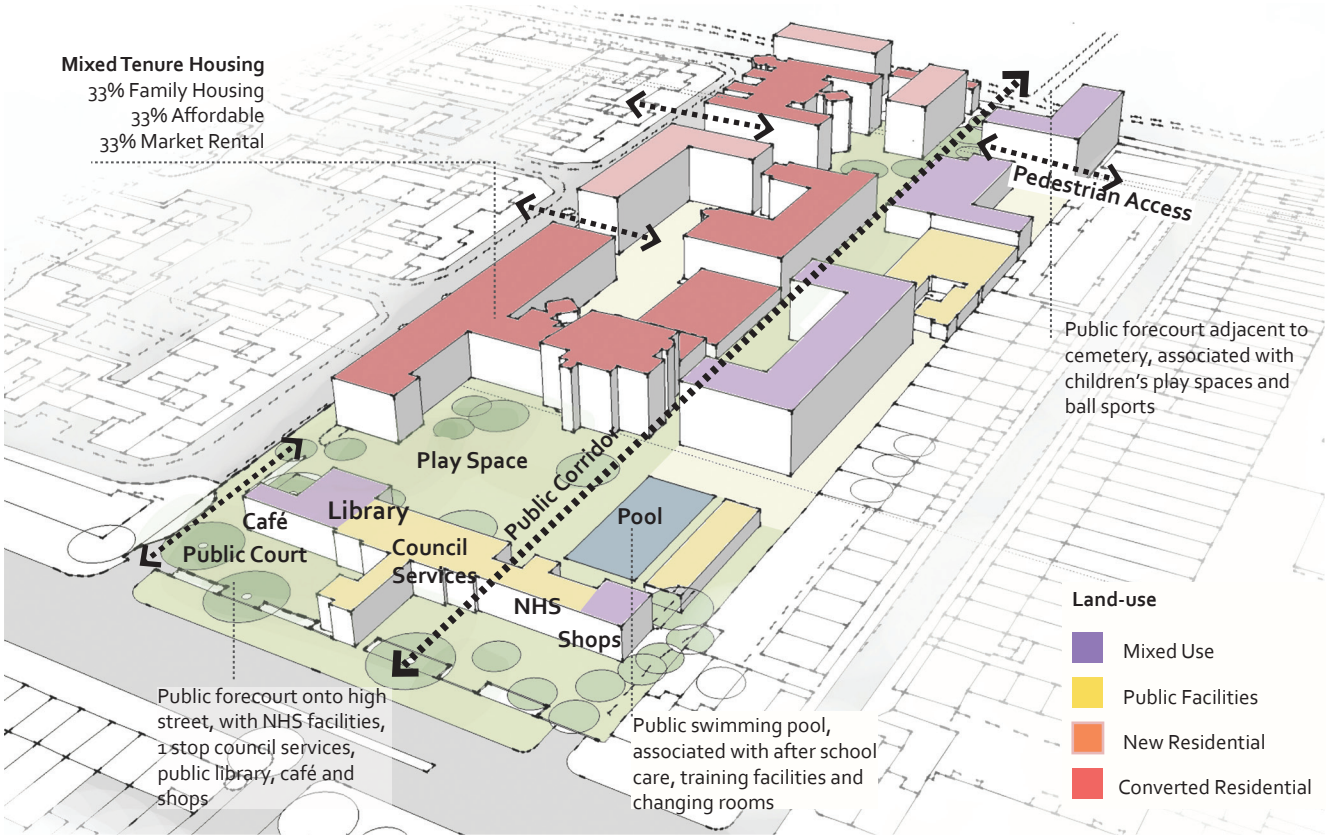
Phasing

- Phase 1
- Phase 2
- Phase 3

Redeveloping St. Clements Hospital

Illustrating possibilities for housing, shared resources and connected pedestrian through routes

Note: Mixed-use buildings will have public or commercial facilities on the ground level and residential units above



TRANSPORT NODES

As the illustration below shows, each intervention site is located near a well-used Tube and/or bus stop and is tied in with appropriate local institutions involved with setting up and running the sites. Many transport stops in London support meaningful exchange through permanent and temporary retail ventures or lively public spaces as shown in the images of Temple and Holborn stations on the right. However, these kinds of opportunities are largely absent in our area of study.

Where they do exist, they could be improved or used to activate other under-utilised spaces nearby. Through the partnerships we have proposed, local institutions not only receive added value from the street and greater visibility in the neighbourhood, but also build or strengthen partnerships with other local institutions.

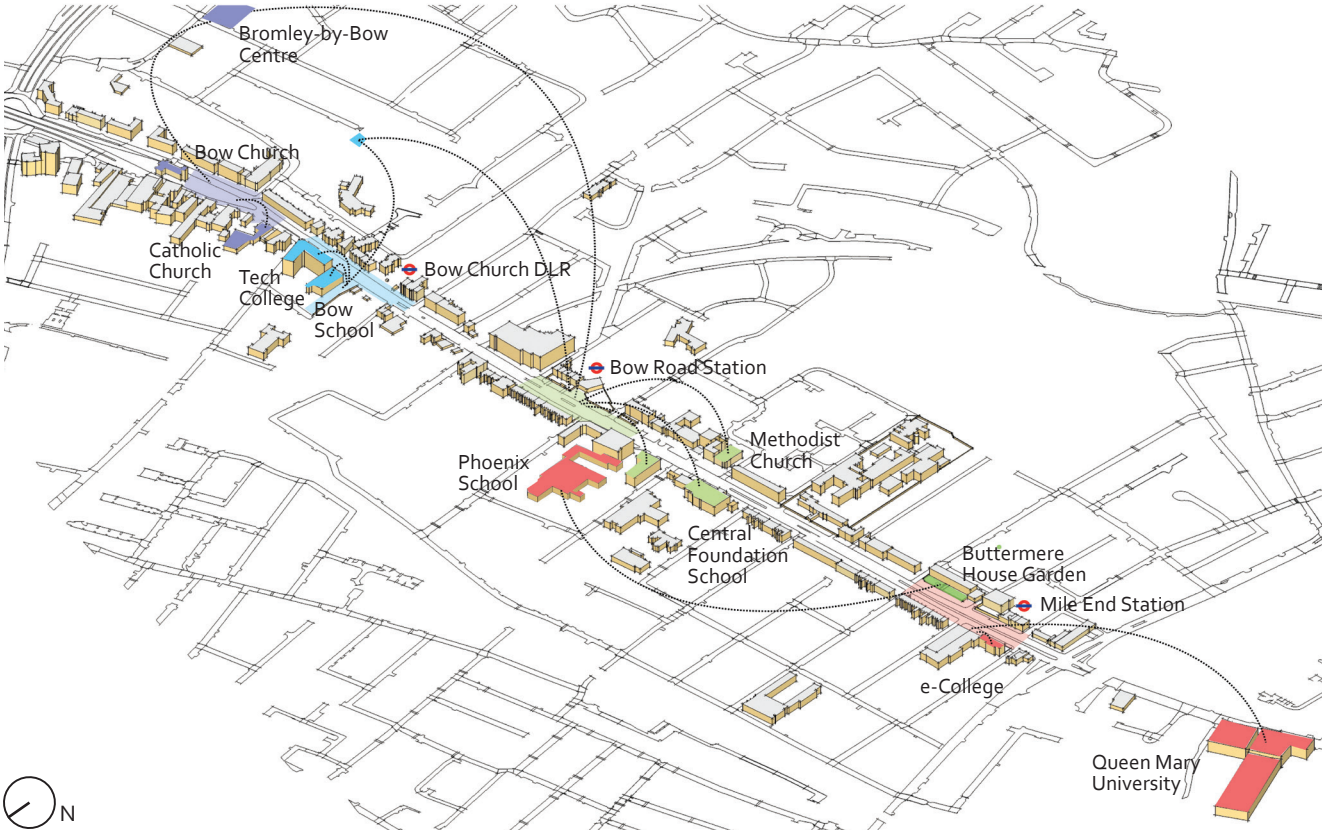
Holborn Tube Station

Temple Tube Station

Location	Institution
Mile End Tube Bow Road Tube	Queen Mary University Schools / Public Institutions / Bromley-by-Bow Centre
College of Technology London/Bus Stop	College of Technology London / Streets of Growth
Bow Church Bus Stop	Bromley-by-Bow Centre, Poplar HARCA

Building Institutional Partnerships

Various institutions come together to reimagine the public spaces around transportation nodes

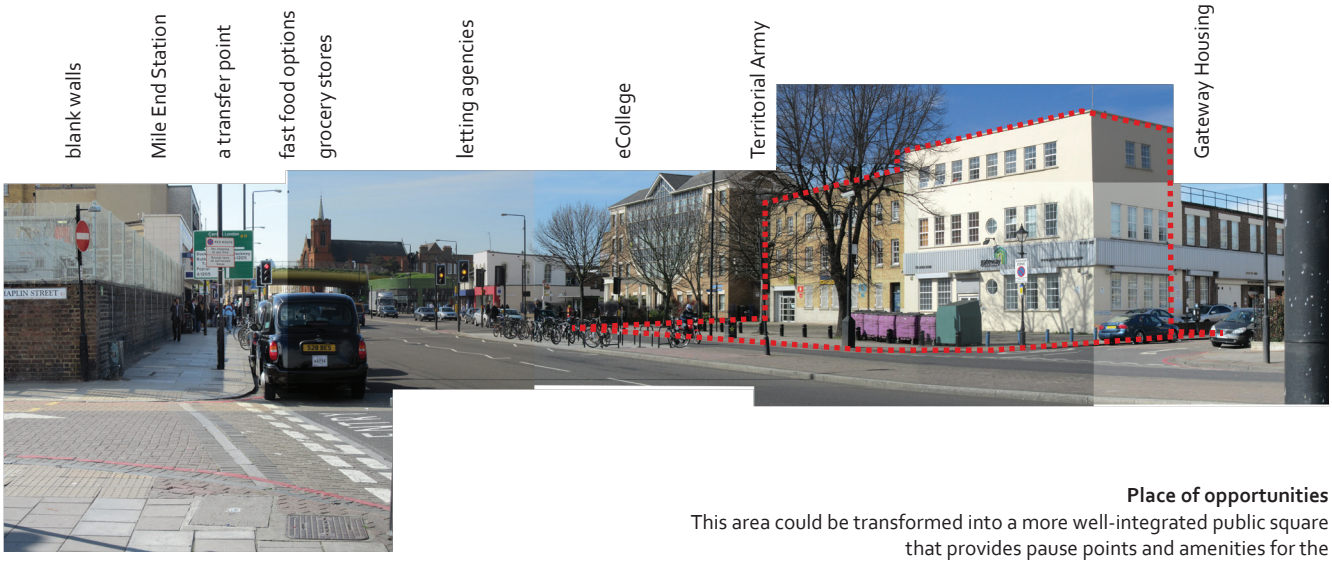


Mile End Tube and Bus Stop

The Mile End Tube stop is a central hub for the neighbourhood and is the only Central Line stop on the entire road. It sees 40,000 daily users—the same number as Whitechapel, which has much more intense activity in its vicinity. The area's many main bus lines nearby make it a transfer point between bus and Underground. The area offers several fast food options as well as letting agencies and grocery stores. From interviewing people who live, work, and study in the area, issues such as safety and lack of healthy food options were frequently identified as possible areas for improvement.

Directly across from the Tube is a space that presents an opportunity for a new public space at this busy interchange. A large piece of blank pavement sits in front of the Territorial Army and Gateway Housing Association buildings. It is much wider than any other part of the pavement around it and has a line of trees running along the edge. The entrance to Gateway Housing is only a staff entrance and the only activity comes from pedestrians occasionally walking through on their way to the bus stop a few metres west.

Given the lack of activity in this space, we propose that a casual seating area and small-scale trade units should be installed on the site. A grid of laptop plug-in points would also be installed. Lunchtime and later evening would be optimal times for the kiosk, copy shop or news stand. Many QMUL students complained that their on-campus dining options close early and there was a lack of night-time activities in the area. A possible institutional partnership for the site would be Queen Mary University. They could run the site and staff it with students.



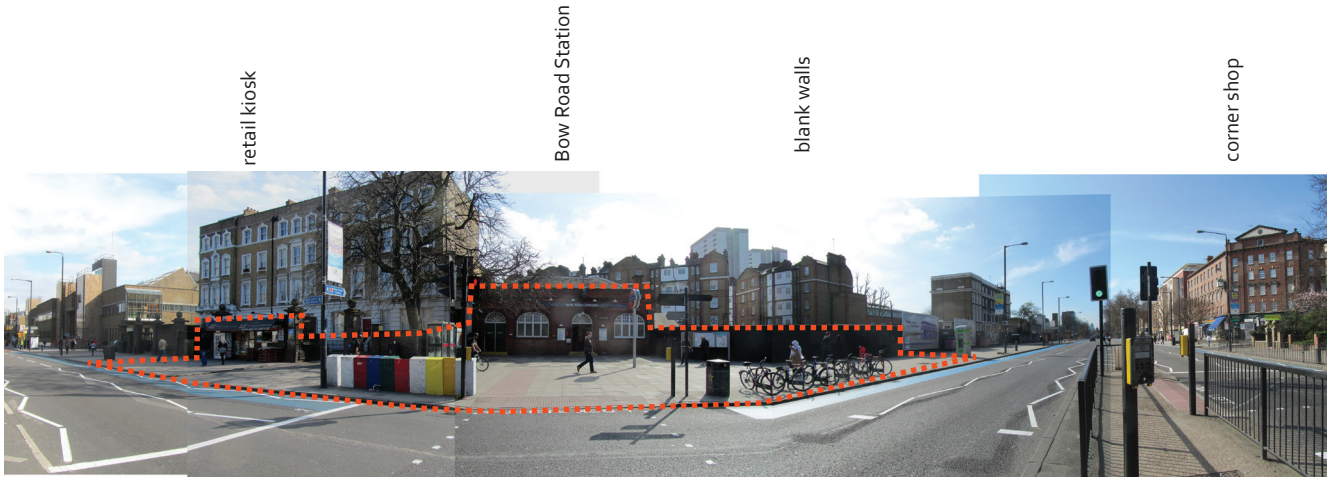
Place of opportunities
This area could be transformed into a more well-integrated public square that provides pause points and amenities for the pedestrians passing by or waiting at the bus stop

A large public lounge
Casual seating area and food kiosk. Free Wi-Fi and a grid of plug points for laptop users

Bow Road Tube

The area around the Bow Road Tube typifies many of the problems endemic to our site as a whole. It has large, blank walls where the District and Hammersmith and City lines come above ground and a massive, unprogrammed sidewalk space. Although the Tube stop is reasonably busy and well used, it fails to promote much in the way of activity and serves only as a commuter hub into and out of the neighbourhood. While other Tube stations in London support meaningful exchange in the form of small-scale trade stands or even simple benches, this station encourages users simply to pass through, and does not serve as a neighbourhood asset beyond its transport value.

We propose adding seating facing a new small-scale retail stand, along with an information board that could be used by local institutions to publicise neighbourhood events or display artwork. This information could help to strengthen existing community assets. Bow School of Maths, for example, offers an English as a Second Language programme used by local women (Peter Rook, Bow School of Maths, 28 February 2011). Likewise, Eastend Homes provides community centre space for use by groups that provide English language programmes and a women's sewing group, among other activities. Events like these could reach many more people and strengthen community ties if they were advertised on the boards.



Problematic crossing

Place of opportunities
Redefine the edges of the site in order to consolidate the quality of this public space through simple benches, an information board for local schools and institutions, as well as stands for small businesses

Issues
Blank wall and unused façades

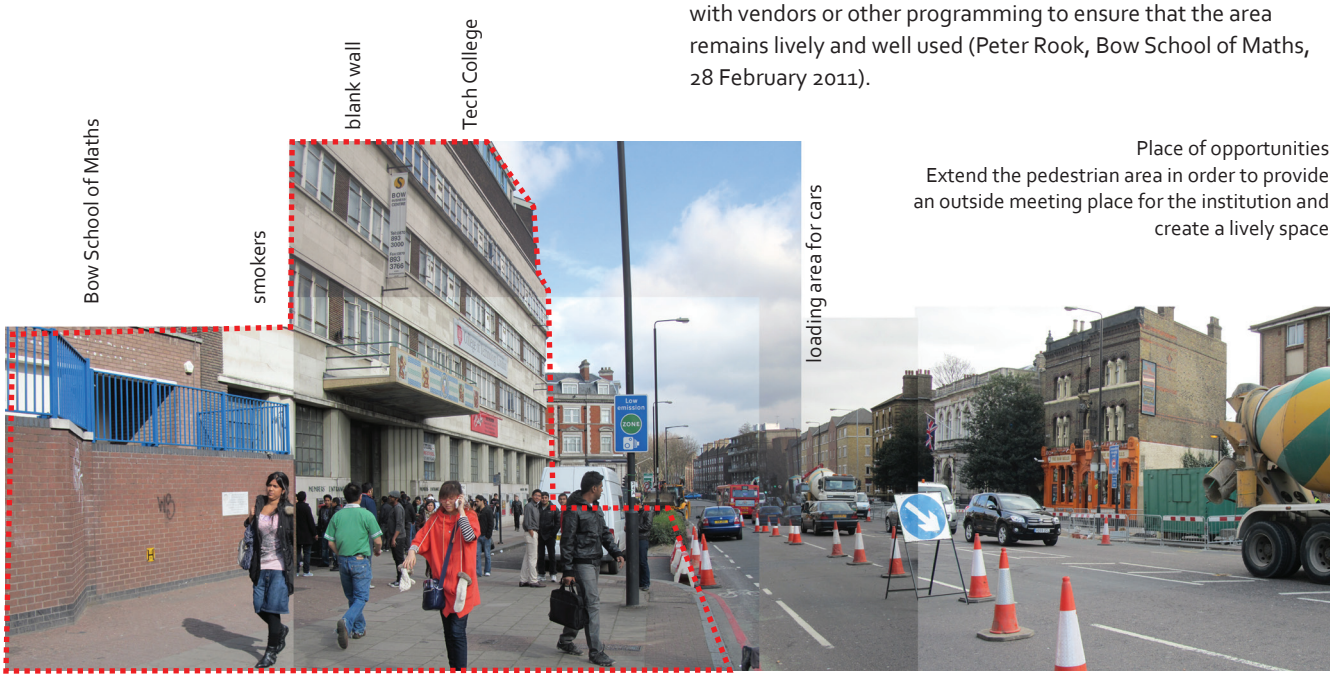
Assets
A transportation node, 500m² of space available to improve the public realm

Improved crossing

Technical College and Bus Stop

The College of Technology London presents another opportunity for added convenience, information and reprieve where these elements are currently lacking. The front of the college sits on a loading area for cars, and other than the building entrance, the school creates a blank wall along the street. The College serves primarily immigrants who commute there from across London and the South East. In talking to students, we found that few of them live in the immediate area and most seem to spend very little time in the neighbourhood apart from their time in school. Even while on campus, the students seldom patronise local businesses, as the school provides affordable lunch options inside the building. The main interface with the neighbourhood is for smokers, who stand outside the building by the dozens before and after classes.

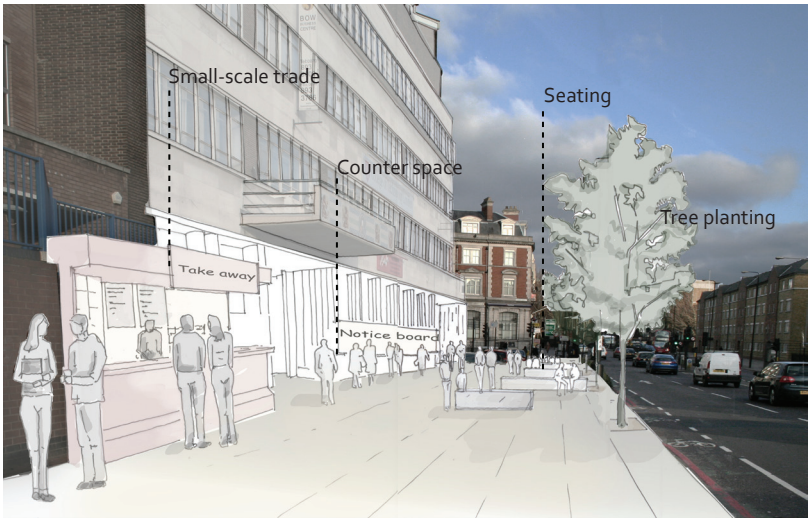
Removing the loading area and opening it up as public space with new seating could improve this space. Tree planting could help separate the whole area from the road and distinguish it as a separate 'room.' The current users of the space could be further accommodated through the installation of counter space where students could place coffee, extinguish their cigarettes, or use their laptops. An outdoor food retail outlet could provide students and non-students alike with a new eating option, which the area currently lacks. The Bow School of Maths, which will likely vacate its site within the next five years, could provide an opportunity for additional public space in this area. The school has chosen to move to a site in Bow Locks because the current school is too cramped. If the school moves, the courtyard beside it could be opened up to become a small public park, possibly with vendors or other programming to ensure that the area remains lively and well used (Peter Rook, Bow School of Maths, 28 February 2011).



Place of opportunities
Extend the pedestrian area in order to provide an outside meeting place for the institution and create a lively space

Issues
Narrow unfriendly sidewalk, fast traffic and poor crossing

Assets
Unused slipway zone and neglected pavement space amounting to 595m² that can be reimagined as a pause space for students and small-scale trade opportunity for entrepreneurs. There are no other outdoor spaces for students of the Technical College.



Bow Church Bus Stop

The wide semi-public space in front of the social housing estate just south of Bow Church is not capitalising on the well-used bus stop directly in front of it. The space is one that is owned by everyone and no-one at the same time. We propose removing the low wall and converting the ground floor flats into retail space. Due to the planned redevelopment of the Stroudley Walk area that would remove some retail space from that street, this area could support some of the displaced retailers and offer a visible location for new ones.

A redesign of the pedestrian crossing at the Bow Church median would also encourage more people to venture to the south side of the street. Currently a maze of barriers discourages crossings, or encourages unsafe crossings by jumping over them. A simplified crossing would be safer and more convenient.

Place of opportunities
Create new spaces for local shops in order to activate the ground floor space

Issues
Divided and under-used public space

Assets
Bus stop and ground floor directly on the street which could strengthen retail viability

Local shops in need of relocation could find space here

AN INTEGRATED GREEN STREETSCAPE

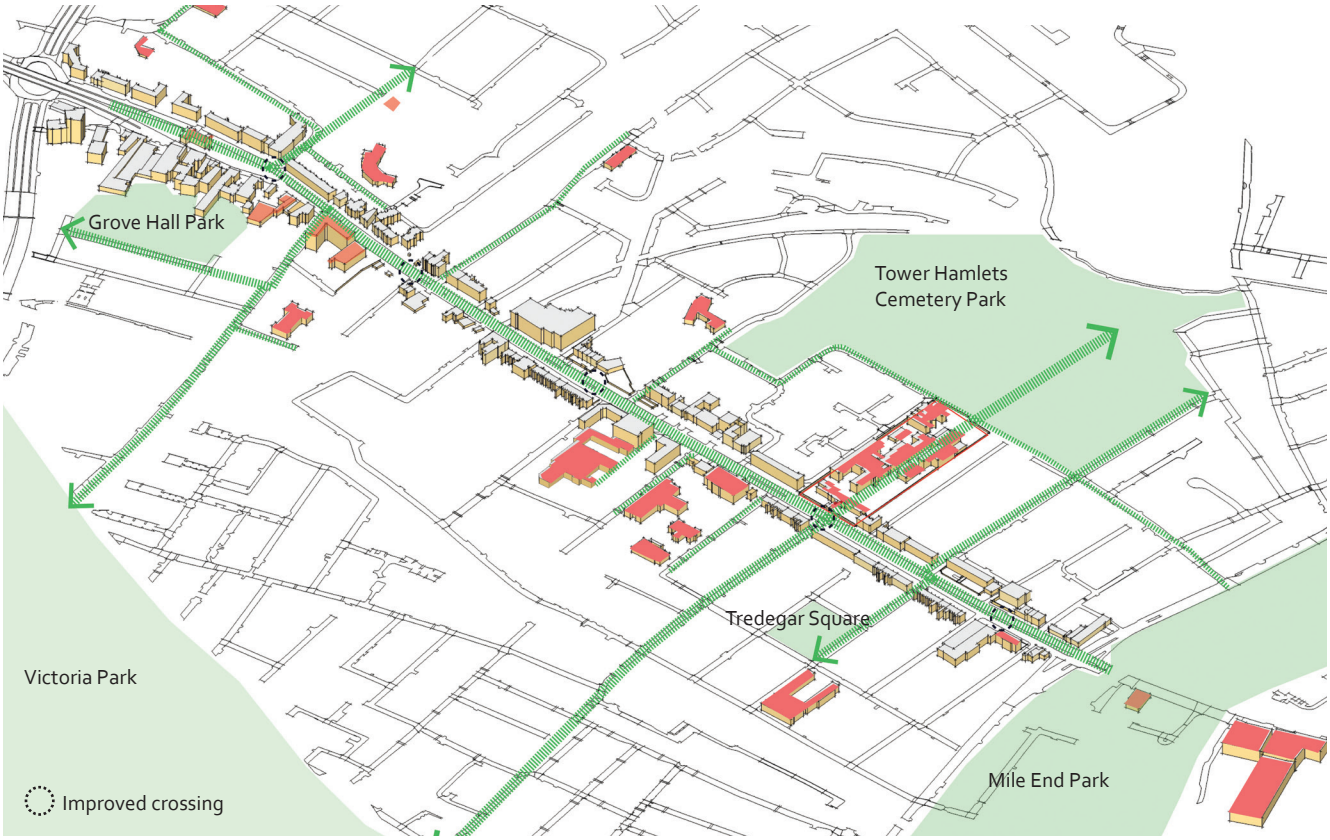
A physical connection from St. Clements to other institutions on the street would be defined by a green network of streetscape interventions that would give the street a unified physical identity as well as making it more accessible to residents and users of the street. This network will also strengthen connections between the street and the public parks in the area.
The green network would comprise:

- Improved crossings
- Tree planting
- Bicycle racks
- Wi-Fi network

Tying together these interventions would be a network of planted trees that would create a visual manifestation of the new connections formed by these improvements and the strategy more generally.

Community Gardens Along the Street
On the south side of the street and just a block east of Mile End Tube station, a lamentably blank space borders the street and fronts Eastend Homes' Buttermere House. Wide, long and bordered by a low wall, we have never seen anyone in the space. The pavement in front of it is very wide, and the estate is set back far from the street. This is a common housing typology on the street and it greatly hinders the street's capacity to generate activity. These are wasted semi-public spaces that could be used to help create a sense of identity for the street. We propose that the vacant greens of social housing estates adjoining the street be converted into gardens by installing simple raised boxes for growing vegetables or flowers. Eastend Homes has executed a similar project at a neighbouring estate, which the community has embraced.

An Integrated Green Streetscape: Creating physical connections between institutions, St. Clements, and existing green infrastructure



CONCLUSION

The area we have studied is one that fundamentally works in several important ways. Its affordability and accessibility make it a magnet for new arrivals to London and its high number of educational assets creates the possibility of upward mobility for children and adults alike. Many socially conscious organisations operate in the area, and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets itself takes pains to ensure community involvement in the development planning process (LBTH, 2010c). But while the social and governance structures at place here are, in a sense, quite robust, the physical fabric of the neighbourhood has been disrupted through the mis-steps of history, and only a systematic and sustained strategy can ameliorate that disruption.

Although our studies have revealed a neighbourhood that is one of the most deprived in England, housing associations' redevelopment efforts along with market pressures will likely change that overall character in the coming years. Nevertheless, the neighbourhood plays and should continue to play a role as an affordable and centrally located neighbourhood (of which there are increasingly few in London). To that end, efforts to make this section of street should not involve major redevelopment or change its fundamental character; rather, they should embrace and enhance its role as a medium street serving primarily local needs.

Our hope is that by combining institutional partnerships with our spatial interventions, institutions can build the social network along the street so that it can become a more defined space that provides information, reprieve, and convenience for users and institutions alike. Through gradual implementation and community involvement, we hope to create space that is truly democratic both in its implementation and its daily use. The democratic nature of these interventions not only creates more lively public spaces, but also allows for the kind of flexibility Carmona, Gehl and Sennett advocate. The networks and enhanced physical spaces thus created can help provide an identity for the area and make it a street where people want and have need to be. The interventions we have presented are not fancy, but this is not a fancy high street; it is a medium street that serves the needs of the everyday.

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