

Review Article

Bankside Urban Forest: Walter Benjamin and City Making

Stephen Witherford

Just a short walk from the numbing pace and noise of train and underground stations, of the buses and couriers at the northern end of Borough High Street, and the new shops and restaurants around the market, is a narrow street heading south, away from the river. Turning into this street we quickly become aware of the profound change in the feel of the city around us. Under the shadow of the wide viaduct we pass, as if through an iron and steel city gate, into a different world. On our left is a metal mesh gate where many hands have woven ribbons, trinkets and name tags. This shrine is to remind us that Cross Bones, the graveyard for prostitutes and the destitute that used to occupy this site, is not to be forgotten or erased by new development. Moving a little deeper we encounter the obsessively arranged leaves of fine art papers in the shop window of R. K. Burt and Company. In this buried location, discovered by only the most determined wanderer, all manner of exotic species can be found. Here you can run your fingers over the different surfaces: hand-made, hot-pressed, cold-pressed, rough, rag, Fourdrinier machine-made, the superior felt side of mould-made. Exceptionally strong lightweight papers from Japan, rough textured from the mountainous regions of the Himalayas near Kathmandu and the smooth surfaces from the ancient mills of Hahnemühle in Germany; the woods and plants of the world can be felt here.

With each step the acoustics soften. We are no longer shouting to be heard. Immersed deeper in the block the chattering songs of goldfinches high in

the plane trees call our attention skywards. These quieter streets are conducive to conversation, our minds wander and we share unthought thoughts.¹ The voice of a young singer escapes from an open window opposite Burt and Co's yard. A student at the Centre for Contemporary Music, accompanied by a keyboard, crafts and caresses the lyrics of youthful desires and freedoms. At some distance behind her, hoisted in the air on thick brick arches, the screech of metal rises above the tangle of old yards and works, the wild squeal of trains slowly arcing into and out of the station at London Bridge.

Our whole body is alert as we pass from street to passage and from passage into a small clearing, the bombed out nave of All Hallows Church. The ruin has been colonised by a thick web of vines and ivy. A few steps lead us to the hollow gothic doorway through which we can penetrate into this grotesque garden of stone and plants. The city feels a great distance away, few would find us here amongst the distorted figures of broken window mullions and the twisted trunks of trees. A flash of light draws our eye. The smooth concrete floor of a railway arch is momentarily lit up by the blue flare of an arc welding torch like a burst of sunlight on moving water between trees. Outside mechanics sit on the stumps of stacked rubber tyres smoking and chatting. Near the river bank the head of an elegant golden female deer catches the light, the carved figurehead on the replica galleon. We pass along Bear Lane and at a bend in Great Suffolk Street a White Hart stands, painted onto the pub nestled

here. Deeper still we edge along Bittern Street. All of these small incidents – signs, marks, places to perch, the corners and the edges – offer visual clues to the wanderer through this intense landscape. To the uninitiated, these are signs of a quiet otherness, a surprising depth, a disorienting richness; the more we return, the more we lose sight of streets and buildings and navigate instead by these markers. As Walter Benjamin observed of Paris:

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. [...] But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its centre.²

Despite London's size, there are not many places where one can lose oneself in the sense that Benjamin describes. Bankside is, however, one of these places, where one can wander off the beaten track and quickly encounter a city of intense historic depth and whose ancient topography remains close to the surface.

Beyond the limits and law of the City, the southern foot of London Bridge has always been deeply entwined with its movements and trade. Churches, coaching inns, brothels, a prison, hospital, theatre and market all jostled for prominence to form the shifting line of Borough High Street. A little way west along the ragged edge of the Thames' south bank another bridge, Blackfriars, was begun in 1760. As part of a bold piece of Georgian town planning a grand boulevard was laid out across the marsh to the south. Extending alongside the recently rebuilt Christ Church, this road cut across the islets and ditches to a new stone obelisk marking St George's Circus, the intersection with the road leading to the third bridge over the Thames at Westminster. From

St George's Circus, London Road continued south across fields and market gardens to converge with Borough High Street just over a mile south of the river at the Elephant and Castle.

Between the river's edge and these two great approach routes to London was caught a low-lying and haphazardly organised quarter of the city. Immediately behind the long yards and intimate streets that braided Borough High Street and Blackfriars Road, any sense of a coherent urban structure immediately dissolved into a patchwork of marshy fields, tenter grounds for drying animal skins, glass works, breweries, foundries and timber yards. Named after the street along the bank of the Thames, Bankside had no direct routes across its vague terrain. Long skinny courts, wiry streets and oddly-shaped yards were casually connected by narrow passages and alleys. These intensely labyrinthine places were characterised as rookeries, warrens and stews, their inhabitants as slightly less than human. These borderless spaces, where work, life, and sociability were too tightly intertwined provoked in visitors a fear of promiscuous mixing. It would have taken courage and significant local knowledge to navigate your way through this place.

Bankside has long been an area without a coherent form or a singular use, which is not the same thing as it not having an identity. In London many areas have become defined by the dominant activities that have developed there: the West End, Covent Garden, Belgravia, the City or Canary Wharf. Focused on a concentration of certain activities, theatres, expensive residential properties or financial institutions, these areas have come to be increasingly influenced by corporate interests. They are highly regulated, controlled by a few powerful institutions or investors. These have an interest in developing a culture of exclusivity, creating a territory that can gradually be purged of unwanted conflicts. This process has become increasingly self-conscious and self-determining. The urbanism

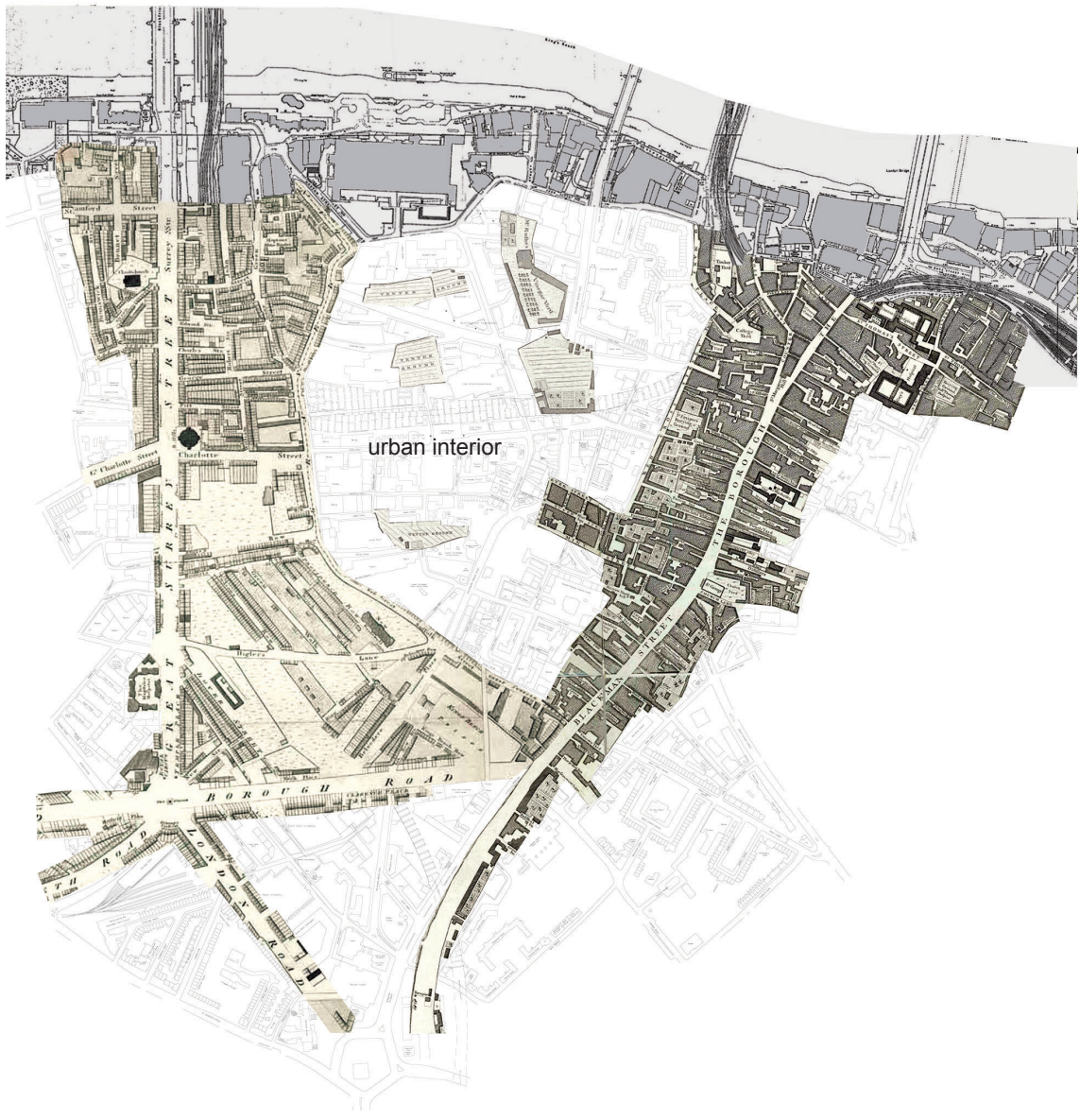


Fig. 1: Collage of the three historic urban structures – Borough High Street to the east, Blackfriars Road to the west and the river edge to the north – that enclose the urban interior. © Witherford Watson Mann Architects

of these places is largely based on the formal models that London adopted in late eighteenth century: squares, boulevards, and regular urban blocks defining grids of streets. Bankside is very different. Free of any dominant controlling interests, it is more multiple, identifiable by the almost complete absence of these familiar London urban models.

Walking around Bankside today, the co-existence of the archaic and modern metropolis can be vividly experienced, and indeed, this contrast is sharpening. London's insatiable development market fuelled by global finance and corporate interests is clearly visible along the three historic edges that enclose the area: Borough High Street, Blackfriars Road and the river edge. [fig. 1] The 'Shard' is just the highest of a series of towers under construction around London Bridge Station. There are several further towers planned or under construction along Blackfriars Road and the river edge. Where the two bridge approach roads converge at the Elephant and Castle, the complete clearance and reconstruction of the huge Heygate Estate is underway along with a series of residential towers and plans to demolish and re-build the large shopping centre with further towers on top. Although hemmed in by these powerful forces acting along its edges Bankside remains deeply resilient to extensive clearance. Its tangle of streets and viaducts, web of smaller building plots, houses, businesses and historic institutions are like dense undergrowth blocking the path of large-scale redevelopment.

Benjamin's 'to lose oneself' was born out of his vivid encounters with Berlin and Paris. Both these cities were, at the time, more intact than we know them today, before the fragmentation caused by bombing, modernist planning and traffic engineering. The block structures of both cities conformed to the deep institutional models of the European city. Here the busy café-lined streets forming the urban exteriors would have quickly given way to passages into

the depths of the block. Slipping into these urban interiors would have resulted in vivid encounters with the activities and spaces that situated themselves away from the busy streets: workshops, factories, small theatres and quiet church gardens.³ Buildings and activities filled the voids through a combination of improvisation and adaptation. Awkwardly shaped yards lined by shallow rooms gave rise to artists' studios, tailors and furniture makers. To Benjamin, these unexpected encounters within this labyrinthine network of passages and yards must have felt like another world, one where his imagination was heightened through a sense of vulnerability within the sublime metropolis. When Benjamin writes in 'A Berlin Chronicle' of the city as a forest, his reading of the city's unfathomable depth echoes Aragon:

Let us take a stroll along this Passage de l'Opera, and have a closer look at it. It is a double tunnel, with a single gateway opening to the north on to the Rue Chauchat and the two gateways opening to the south on to the boulevard. [...] The gateway to mystery swings open at the touch of the human weakness and we have entered the realms of darkness. One false step, one slurred syllable together reveal a man's thoughts. The disquieting atmosphere of places contains similar locks which cannot be bolted fast against infinity. Wherever the living pursue particularly ambiguous activities the inanimate may sometimes assume the reflection of their most secret motives and thus our cities are peopled with unrecognised sphinxes which will never stop the passing dreamer and ask him mortal questions unless he first projects his meditations, his absence of mind, towards them.⁴

Bankside does not fit into preconceived images of the city. On our walks, we noted and drew to try to digest its complexity. [fig. 2] Back in the studio, we traced our steps in trails of graphite, piecing together the labyrinth in our heads, distilling a sense of structure where at first there had appeared to be none. Following the analogy of the forest, we discerned streams, rides and clearings. Moving along streets



Fig. 2: Drawing recording the topography of Bankside with the river edge running along its top. Small clearings, gardens and historic fragments are located within this topography. © Witherford Watson Mann Architects

that meander and twist feels like following streams, converging and dividing as they head south. Setting across the area from east to west are a series of cuts that allow you to travel more directly, like the ancient rides made through dense woodland for hunting. Caught in this web of streams and rides are a multitude of small clearings, historic spaces and odd buildings that mark the accidents of incremental growth: railway lines and lanes, bomb damaged ruin and street, cathedral nave and turbine hall, abutting yards that have been connected together over time. [fig. 3] The sense of the vast metropolis beyond the edges, the presence of the ancient brooding river, the spatial structure of streams, rides and clearings all combine to heighten our awareness, like being deep in a forest. Navigation is possible through small clues. The smell of the timber yard, the shrieks of children in the small playground, the feel of sunlight cutting between the viaducts, the tiny garden with the painted stone Virgin Mary, a fragment of medieval priory wall, all mark pathways through the depth of this place. This urban interior is rich with unexpected encounters, time seems to slow down as the noise and busy activity along the edges are left behind and you become consumed by the sublime intensity of this interior. Bankside's depth is also a legacy of its local jurisdiction that long set it apart from the law and order across the river.

If [forests] 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 [...] the forest appears as a place where the logic of distinction goes astray.⁵

Is this sense of a different order, an order more recognisable in the wilder nature we encounter in our woods and forests, the very thing that fires Benjamin's imagination within the urban intensity of Paris and Berlin? Could cities be made with

districts that have this kind of depth anymore? Cities are increasingly designed or extended with diagrammatic strategies, greater degrees of logic, management structures and rhetorical promises – more than can be delivered. Distinction underpins the location of activities into organised clusters, the brand of a large-scale development, the self-image of a new district and who might live or work there. The societal benefits of the 'mixed city', the 'diverse city' are frequently invoked but seldom delivered. The dominant tendency is to exert greater degrees of control through the making of new neighbourhoods by clearing what existed and starting again, either wholesale on larger sites, or through the piecemeal construction of increasingly familiar individual 'products', like hotel groups, supermarket chains, offices and corporate public spaces. This type of action seeks to erase the awkward and messy parts of the past that violate the logic of efficiency and legibility – yet these transgressive places are often the very things that stir collective curiosity and imagination.

But when such a complex depth of urban interior already exists, a different set of tactics is needed to engage in its physical and social structures. When our studio was commissioned to prepare a public space strategy for Bankside, we developed a specific set of tools to respond to its depth. Our sensual and imaginative understanding grew out of and embraced this district's unusual conditions, the things that resisted current forms of distinction. Wandering and losing ourselves led us to make a series of drawings which were not about mapping in an abstract or factual way. We were gradually gaining a sense of the deep structure of the area. We recorded what we noticed, we noted what others said was important and we observed where sociable activity took place. We started with these experiences and observations and from them we grew an idea that had its roots in this place, rather than projecting an abstract formal concept onto the area for these physical and social conditions to fit into.

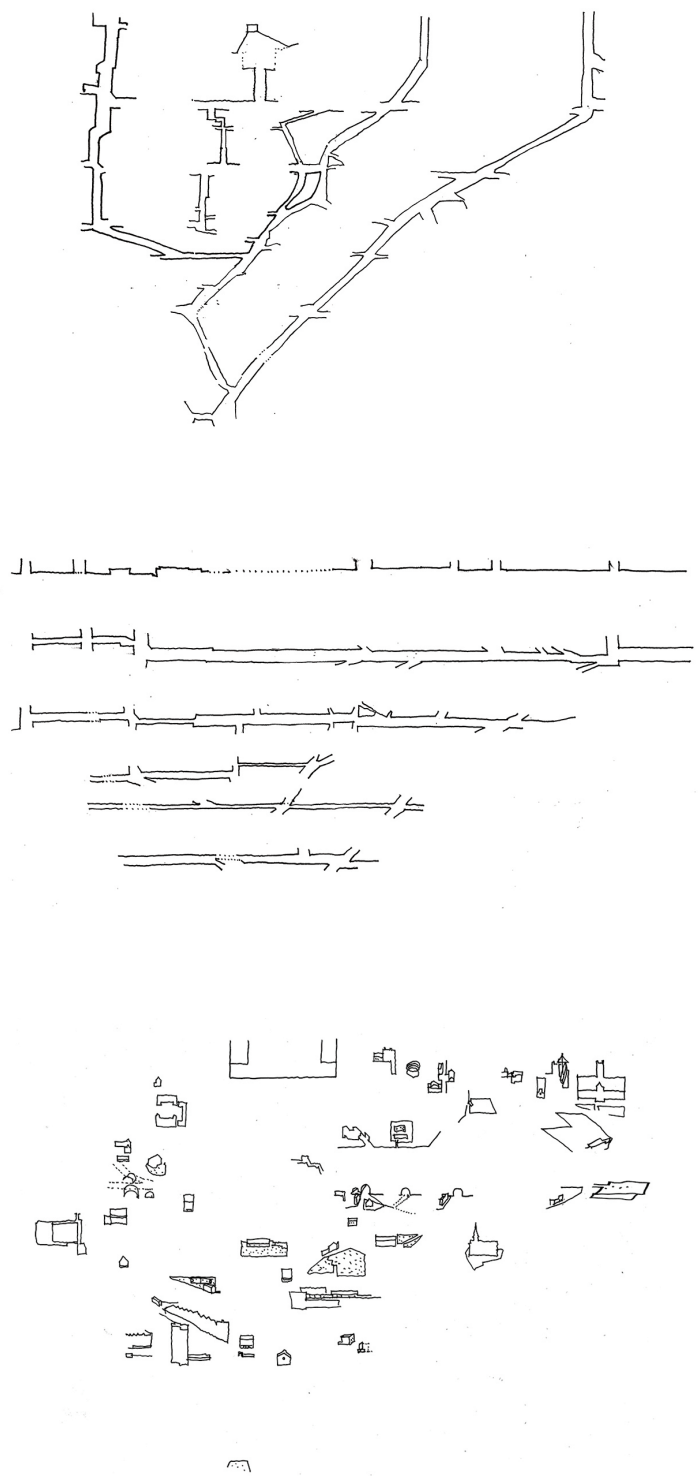


Fig. 3: Drawings mapping the three deep rooted structures encountered in Bankside: the streams – a series of historic meandering streets, the rides – a series of east-west cuts and the clearings within the weave of the streams and rides.
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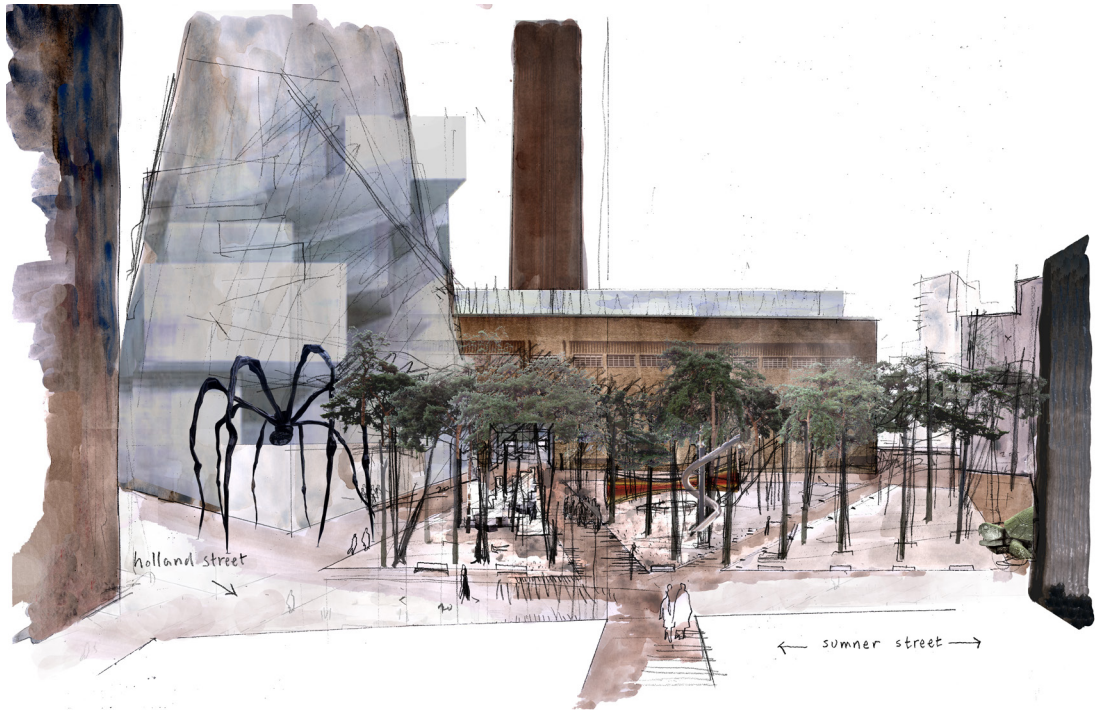


Fig. 4: Drawing of an imagined new public playground on the south side of Tate Modern, occupied by previous Turbine Hall Commissions beneath a grove of scots pine trees. © Witherford Watson Mann Architects



Fig. 5: Drawing of the reimagined Flat Iron Square; the ground is extended to connect to the shops and the café roof is wrapped with a planted canopy to bind in the two existing plane trees, like a woodland hut in a clearing. © Witherford Watson Mann Architects

We developed an incremental framework for how the public spaces – streets, passages, gardens small parks and odd squares – could be improved and added to. We drew on the interpretive world of metaphor to re-imagine this interior as the Bankside Urban Forest.

We imagined new projects and combined these with ones already planned or underway for both modest and significant improvements to public spaces: increasing their extent by laying new surfaces and changing vehicle movements; adding trees, additional seating and safer cycling routes within existing clearings; increasing the planting and enabling some public access within small gardens; and creating more vivid public places within proposed new developments. [fig. 4] At Flat Iron Square we encountered a small island between three streets within which stood a café occupying the former public toilets. The canopies of two enormous plane trees filled the sky above this café. The northern edge of this modest clearing is cut at an angle by the steel latticed bridge carrying the railway over Southwark Bridge Road. We re-imagined the café as a woodland hut, a hybrid of the natural and man-made, situated in its own small clearing. [fig. 5]

This was one of the early projects that we were able to realise. The café was extended by the addition of a new oak canopy thickly planted with woodland flowers that enjoy the dappled light through the crowns of the two plane trees that rise above them, whose trunks the new structure binds into the café. Like the roots of the towering trees, a new web of granite stretches across the ground, in-filled with new and reclaimed paving to weave together floor, café, canopy and shops. The kerbs, road crossings and cycle route were all bound into this triangular web that echoed the lattice structure of the viaduct. The closure of one short street and removal of vehicles enabled the island to be connected to the existing shops on the south side. Responding to the qualities we encountered, we

shaped a vivid public space that has now become the setting for new activities: children's parties, art exhibitions, small music performances, and a jazz club. These activities can thrive deep within these forest conditions, sheltered from the busy commercial life at its edges.

Intervening in the public spaces within this deep urban quarter continues through many small and a few larger-scale projects, temporary, completed, underway and planned for the near future. The re-making of the river edge walk, the Union Street Urban Orchard, the connection of Redcross Gardens to the primary school entrance, new footways and seating at Great Suffolk Street, a new public garden at Cross Bones Graveyard and sports garden at The Marlborough, new public spaces at Tate Modern and within the Neo Bankside and St George's Circus residential developments and a large new public space, Elephant Square, at the re-configured northern roundabout of the Elephant and Castle. Many different authors, architects and local organisations, such as the Bankside Open Spaces Trust and Southwark Council, are all contributing proposals and making projects within this open framework. [fig. 6]

Our wanderings into the interior of Bankside immersed us in the depths of this district. We didn't simply lose our way, we submitted to its complex structure. Through the metaphor of the forest we opened the possibility for a profound metamorphosis – from a city into a natural metabolism. Working with this deep structure and within the fine grain of the neighbourhood we have implanted an idea in the public consciousness, and provoked others to make individual projects that add to the quality and diversity of life in this place. Through mostly small-scale interventions we have sought to establish a relationship between the depth of the urban interior and exterior, responding to the rich diversity of these physical settings and the nature of human interactions that these support. This

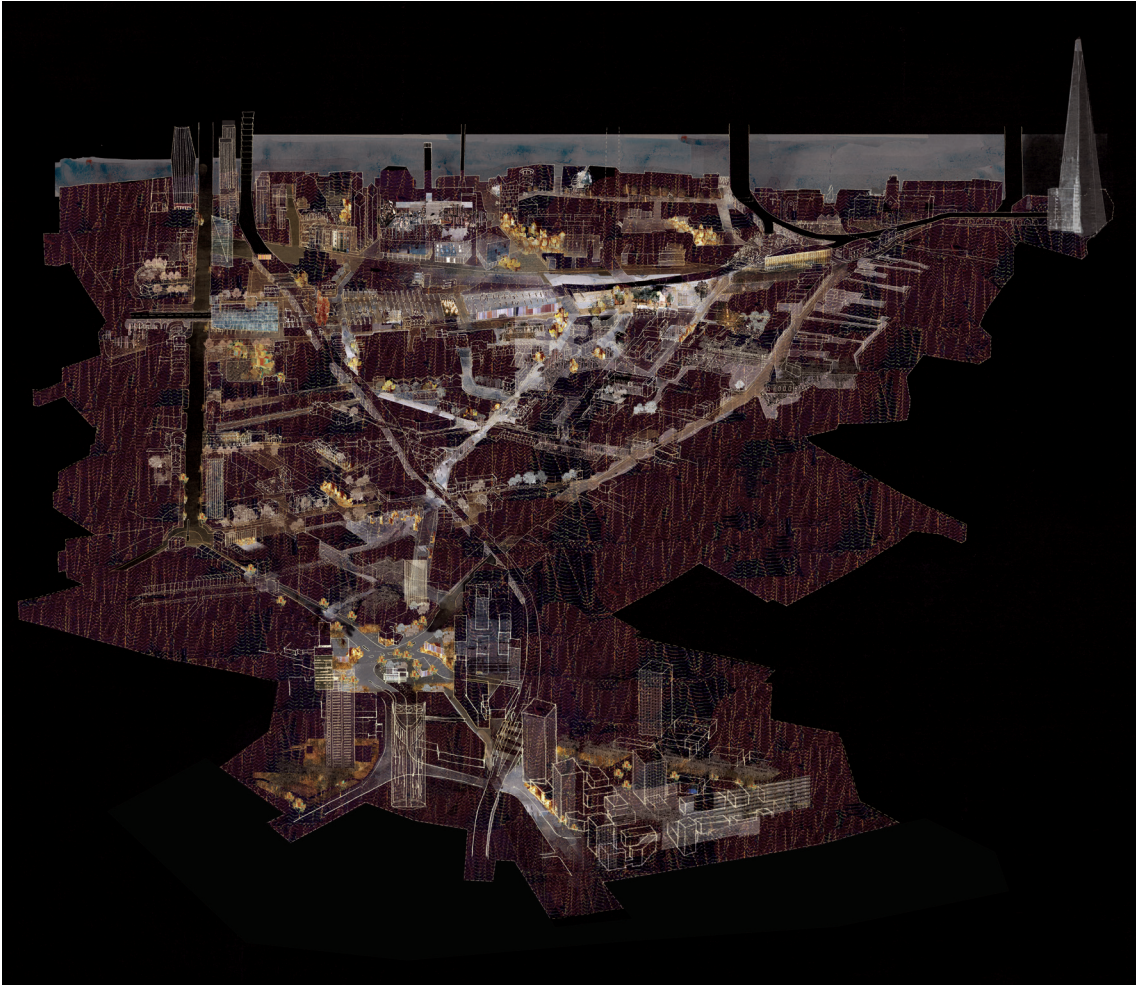


Fig. 6: Drawing of the Bankside Urban Forest, as imagined once the public spaces gradually evolve and intertwine. The river edge runs along the top and Blackfriars Road and Borough High Street converge in the south at the Elephant and Castle where a huge public square is under construction. © Witherford Watson Mann Architects

approach opens up further opportunities for social exchange and public life. Bankside Urban Forest enabled us to lose ourselves and by doing so, recognise and commit to the diverse ecologies and exchanges that make our cities vivid landscapes of the collective imagination.

Notes

My special thanks to William Mann for his critical support and suggestions in key aspects of structuring and phrasing this essay.

1. 'Unthought thoughts' here refers to the relationship between our feelings and the world, thus the deep associational and analogous imagination stimulated by a heightened sense of awareness of a situation.
2. Walter Benjamin, 'A Berlin Chronicle', in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, (London: Verso, 1979), 298.
3. 'Urban interior' refers to a term used by Dalibor Vesely during a private conversation on the Bankside Urban Forest in 2007. Vesely articulated the meaning of this term more fully in his essay 'Between Architecture and the City' in *Phenomenologies of the City*, ed. Henriette Steiner and Maximilian Sternberg (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).
4. Louis Aragon. *Paris Peasant* (London: Pan Books, 1971), 28, as quoted in Vesely, 'Between Architecture and the City', 153.
5. Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). With thanks to Ken Worpole for bringing this quote to our attention in his excellent essay 'The Bankside Urban Forest' – published in *Topos* 61, *Urban Space* (2007): 51.

Biography

Stephen Witherford is the founding director of Witherford Watson Mann Architects, with Christopher Watson and William Mann. The practice was established in 2001 and has focused on exploring the spatial and social relationships between public buildings, public spaces and public housing through a series of built designs, masterplans, urban frameworks, exhibitions and articles. The practice was awarded the 2013 RIBA Stirling Prize for the construction of a contemporary house within the medieval ruins of Astley Castle. Stephen is a Trustee of Tate Gallery, a member of Tate Modern Council, the Mayor's Design Advisory Group, and the British School at Rome Faculty of Fine Arts. He was a Visiting Fellow in Urban Design on the London School of Economics Cities Programme and continues to write and lecture on architecture and urbanism.