CHARACTERISATION OF PLACES

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CHARACTERISATION OF THE PLACES OF TODAY

A character assessment has been undertaken for each of the identified places of today.

A detailed characterisation of each place can help to inform strategy and vision drafting, ensuring it reinforces the positive character of an area, and reduces the negative.

By using a mixture of text, historic maps, diagrams and photos, a picture begins to form of the character of each place.

The characterisation is structured along four strands:

• Historical character and identity
• Landscape and open space
• Heritage and townscape
• Block pattern and movement

The four strands have been adapted from best-practice publications including:
1. By Design: urban design in the planning system towards better practice: DETR
2. Urban Design Compendium: English Partnerships & The Housing Corporation
3. Towards an Urban Renaissance: Urban Task Force
historical character & identity

Shoreditch arose on the north-east fringe of the City of London around the junction of two Roman roads, present day Kingsland Road and Old Street, where the parish church of St Leonard still stands. Shoreditch was the site of a nunnery from the 12th century to the 16th century, and afterwards it became a wealthy neighbourhood home to traders and factory owners.

However by the mid-17th century Shoreditch was a disreputable place, frequented by criminals. By the 19th century the area was considered a slum ruled by criminals and prostitutes – one that reflected the East End’s perception as “other”, having a separate identifiable character.

The post-war era saw Shoreditch remain a place of deprivation, poverty and working-class culture. However, the last 20 years has seen the transformation of its cultural status into an artistic and bohemian quarter, in which a vibrant nightlife meets with the northern borders of the Square Mile.

landscape & open space

Shoreditch is a densely populated area in close proximity to the City of London. Due to this, it includes a limited number of neighbourhood parks, which are all classified as such due to their small size. The neighbourhood parks in Shoreditch include Ravenscroft Park, Jesus Green, Boundary Gardens and Virginia Gardens. Boundary Gardens in the Boundary Estate is Grade II listed, and is one of only three listed parks and gardens in the borough. The bandstand in the gardens forms the centrepiece of the Boundary Estate and many of the mature trees radiating from Arnold Circus are protected by Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs). The view from the bandstand along Calvert Avenue towards Shoreditch High Street is considered important.

Shoreditch also includes a number of children’s play spaces distributed throughout the area, which provide vital recreation areas for children and their parents.
heritage & townscape

There is a mixed typology of built forms in Shoreditch, demonstrating the constant change and growth that has characterised this area for centuries. The housing stock includes Victorian terraces, London County Council housing estates and post-war estates – all sitting side by side. The scale and density of the area is also greatly varied with two-storey terraced housing, five-storey mansion blocks and 15-storey-plus tower blocks.

The Boundary Estate and Jesus Hospital Estate are two well known conservation areas in Shoreditch. The Boundary Estate, built by the LCC, is an example of successful medium scale, high-density social housing and remains to this day a well-loved collection of buildings. The Jesus Hospital Estate is lower rise and medium density, consisting of rows of mainly two-storey terraced houses, which today are well-kept and sought after properties. Much of the lively Columbia Road Flower Market is also located in the Jesus Hospital Estate and the market draws large crowds of tourists and locals on Sundays.

A considerable number of listed buildings are located in Shoreditch, of which the majority are within the Boundary Estate. The Bishopsgate Goods Yard site is also listed.

block pattern & movement

The urban grain in Shoreditch is a mixture of fine and coarse, with the majority of the smaller blocks to be found in and around the Boundary Estate and Brick Lane area. Although in general the area is easy to navigate on foot, pedestrian movement is often hindered by very large blocks and post-war housing typologies. These estates often display a fragmented block pattern with no clear distinction between street and building. These blocks also create significant barriers to pedestrian movement, often due the use of cul-de-sacs rather than through roads.

Three highways border Shoreditch, Bethnal Green Road, Hackney Road and Shoreditch High Street. These highways are primary routes and function as busy traffic corridors. The secondary routes in Shoreditch include Columbia Road, which is lively on market days and more friendly in design to pedestrians.
historical character & identity

‘Spitalfields’ was named after a hospital and priory known as St. Mary’s Spital, founded in 1197. Standing a little way outside the Bishop’s gate, its lands stretched back over the area where the remnants of Spitalfields Market are now.

Spitalfields is historically famous for providing refuge to those fleeing persecution from all over the world. One group that helped to define Spitalfields were the Huguenots that arrived from France after the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Most Huguenots were skilled tradesmen with particular skills in the textile business. The massive influx of immigrants precipitated Spitalfields becoming “all town”, and substantial three- and four-storey houses were built to house the cottage industry. It was at this time that the area became world famous for its silk and brocade.

In the 18th century Spitalfields accommodated a thriving and prosperous community with the 1720 Hawksmoor Church adding grandeur to the elegant nearby streets. However, the weaving community flowered for only a short time and by the 19th century was in terminal decline. By the 1850s the weaving industry had completely collapsed. Already run down, the area once again witnessed significant immigration, this time in the form of the chronically poor eastern Jews.

Up to the present day, an emblem of the area’s history is the mosque in Brick Lane which has been a place of worship for different faiths over hundreds of years. At present, the mosque serves the Bangladeshi community, whose culture and cuisine imbues Spitalfields with a cosmopolitan feel. This influence is so striking that the area has been dubbed Bangla Town.

In general, Spitalfields’ physical image was crafted after the Great Fire of London in 1666. The character of the area is underpinned by the contrasting narrow lanes and alleyways which typify the bustling street life of Charles Dickens’ Victorian London. Spitalfields’ covered market, which was built in 1682, remains a fine example of this historic hamlet’s architecture.

landscape & open space

The area of Spitalfields incorporates a limited number of parks, which is typically characteristic of a dense and built-up area in close proximity to the City of London. The majority of the parks in Spitalfields are also of a small size and are therefore all classified as neighbourhood parks. The largest park in the area is Allen Gardens, while smaller parks include Christchurch Gardens. The area includes a number of children’s play spaces and an urban farm known as Spitalfields Farm, which is located adjacent to Allen Gardens. Due to the built-up nature of Spitalfields, the open spaces in the area also consist of paved open spaces, such as Bishops Square, next to the busy Spitalfields Market and shops on Brushfield Street. This is an open space, well-used by office workers and tourists, as well as a busy pedestrian thoroughfare.
heritage & townscape

Spitalfields is a lively, diverse and historical area that has a rich and complex character. Spitalfields and Petticoat Lane markets, Brick Lane and Truman’s Brewery are well known landmarks in the area and contain a diverse mix of fashion, art, restaurants, night-time entertainment and retail.

A large proportion of Spitalfields is located within conservation areas. The Fournier Street Conservation Area is the largest in Spitalfields and contains some of the most architecturally and historically significant buildings in the borough, including both the listed Spitalfields Market and Nicholas Hawksmoor’s Christ Church. The ruins of the Priory and Hospital of St Mary (also known as St Mary’s Spital) are listed as an Ancient Monument and fall partly within the Elder Street Conservation Area. The Artillery Passage Conservation Area contains historic narrow passages, lanes and courtyards and a 17th-century street pattern.

The scale and densities vary greatly in Spitalfields, from terraced housing to large, modern office blocks built along the western edge of Spitalfields next to the City of London. The proximity to the City of London has led to the character of Spitalfields bearing similarities with the Square Mile, alongside the more residential character within Tower Hamlets.

block pattern & movement

Spitalfields is a pedestrian and cycle-friendly area, with few main roads and excellent public transport links – Aldgate, Aldgate East and Liverpool Street stations being located nearby. Pedestrians are drawn to the area by Spitalfields Market, Petticoat Lane Market and the Backyard Market and Sunday UpMarket in Truman’s Brewery on the weekends, as well as the diverse mix of shops and restaurants around Brick Lane.

Bishopsgate/Shoreditch High Street and Commercial Street are the busiest roads in the area and are hence classified as highways. Bishopsgate/Shoreditch High Street acts as an important north-south link from the City northwards. Commercial street is a busy road in the area, though it is also an active street for pedestrians, which contributes to the character of the area.

Spitalfields has a fine urban grain which is seen throughout much of the City and the City fringe areas. Throughout much of Spitalfields, the blocks are small to medium in size and generally follow an irregular grid pattern. This type of block pattern allows for ease of movement for pedestrians and cyclists, due to clear sight lines and increased access points.
Bethnal Green was once a quiet rural hamlet within the Manor of Stepney. In the 16th and 17th centuries wealthy merchants or courtiers built mansions here, within easy reach of the City. Many of the buildings, streets and locations within Bethnal Green echo the social circumstances and character of a particular period. Of 16th-century origin, Netteswell House in Old Ford Road is a reminder of rural Bethnal Green and its elevated status during Elizabeth times. While the impressive 1839 church of St John on Bethnal Green, designed by Sir John Soane, was built in response to the area’s swiftly growing population.

Bethnal Green’s suburban status began to change in the 18th century through the immigration of Huguenot weavers, whose centre was the nearby hamlet of Spitalfields. During this period Bethnal Green changed more markedly than any other East End village, and by the end of the century it was an overcrowded place with an extremely high mortality rate.

Nineteenth-century industrial and commercial might is reflected in the form of the V&A Museum of Childhood, with its iron frame and construction, while Bethnal Green’s social history is reflected in the 19th-century Columbia Road Flower Market. The 20th century is represented in the community hub of York Hall, while Bethnal Green station itself, which was used as an air raid shelter, was the site of a major disaster when on the night of the 3rd March 1943, 174 people died in a crush – the largest death toll among civilians during the war.

A considerable number of open spaces are located within Bethnal Green. The largest of these are Weavers Fields and Bethnal Green Gardens, which are known as district parks due to their medium size. Both these parks contain children’s play spaces, along with playing fields and pitches.

Bethnal Green also encompasses a number of smaller neighbourhood parks, including Museum Gardens, Ion Square Gardens and Warner Green open space. Two churchyards in Bethnal Green also provide valuable open space, and the area also contains a number of children’s play places. The northern section of Bethnal Green contains the least amount of open space, although this area is located within close proximity to Victoria Park and Hackney City Farm, the latter being located in the London Borough of Hackney.

Bethnal Green includes a moderate proportion of waterspace frontage, with the Regent’s Canal running to the north of the area.
heritage & townscape

The town centre in Bethnal Green is lively, with a mix of shops, restaurants and bars along Bethnal Green Road, all located within close proximity to the busy Brick Lane area. Bethnal Green Road also has a street market that operates daily. The Cambridge Heath Road area consists of a small mix of shops, restaurants and bars close to the station. Bethnal Green is also known for its museums – including the V&A Museum of Childhood – and art galleries, with a collection of small independent galleries and studio space concentrated around the Vyner Street area. The side streets in and around Bethnal Green are predominantly quiet residential streets, of which the housing stock consists largely of medium- to low-rise post-war housing estates and Victorian terraced housing.

Bethnal Green is protected by a number of conservation areas, including Bethnal Green Gardens, Old Bethnal Green Road, Hackney Road, Regent’s Canal and part of the Jesus Hospital Estate. The Bethnal Green Gardens Conservation Area contains a series of significant statutory listed civic buildings, including the V&A Museum of Childhood and the Town Hall, which, along with their gardens, are the highlights of the area – not forgetting St John’s Church (which is Grade I listed).

block pattern & movement

Bethnal Green suffers from traffic. This is primarily caused by the key east-west links of Hackney Road and Bethnal Green Road, and the key north-south link of Cambridge Heath Road. These three roads are classified as highways. Residents of Bethnal Green are, however, well connected by public transport, with two British Rail stations and one London Underground station.

The block pattern in Bethnal Green is a mix of medium and large sizes and hence suffers from permeability. In particular, north-south movement is hindered. Many of the larger post-war housing blocks also contain cul-de-sacs, in which ease of movement is often compromised for pedestrians and cyclists.

Regent’s Canal lies to the north of Bethnal Green. The northern side of the canal (which is located in Islington) is accessible via the towpath, which is a key east-west link for cyclists and pedestrians.

Historic streets in Bethnal Green

Residential streets in Bethnal Green

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Meath Gardens is the largest park in Globe Town and is classified as Metropolitan Open Land (MOL). The facilities in Meath Gardens include a playing field and a small children’s play space. Globe Town has few other parks within its borders, but is in close proximity to Victoria Park and Mile End Park (both MOL), which have a large range of recreational spaces and are known for their biodiversity. Globe Town has an even distribution of small children’s play spaces spread throughout the area.

Approach Road is well known for its tree-lined vista to Victoria Park, and the surrounding streets are rich in mature trees. The trees along Approach Road, St James’s Avenue, Servants’ Row and Old Ford Road are protected by Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs).

Globe Town includes a substantial proportion of waterspace frontage. The eastern edge lies in the Regent’s Canal.
heritage & townscape

Globe Town is predominantly a residential area, with a small town centre located along Roman Road. Roman Road is lined with medium- to large-scale post-war housing developments, intermixed with smaller retail units within the town centre. Globe Town has a central square located on the corner of Roman Road and Morpeth Street, which currently contains a small number of market stalls.

A large proportion of Globe Town’s housing comprises post-war housing estates, which are intermixed with a smaller proportion of Victorian housing and modern residential flats, located along Regent’s Canal. Approach Road is well known in the area for Victorian housing and important institutional buildings, such as the London Chest Hospital and Raines Foundation School. This area is situated within the Victoria Park Conservation Area, which encompasses much of the northern half of Globe Town, and is one of two conservation areas in Globe Town (the other being the Globe Road Conservation Area). Victoria Park Conservation Area also includes the Victorian cast iron bridge—a Scheduled Ancient Monument, like the majority of the listed buildings in Globe Town—that leads from Approach Road to Victoria Park.

Due to the large proportion of post-war housing estates in Globe Town, permeability and movement is often compromised for pedestrians and cyclists. The block pattern in Globe Town is generally of a coarse grain with large blocks, however exceptions to this are found around Approach Road in the north of the area, where the block pattern is of a fine grain.

Globe Town suffers from traffic, as Roman Road is a key east-west link between Bethnal Green and Bow. However, Roman Road is not classified as a highway and does not act as a major physical barrier.

The Regent’s Canal creates a significant contribution to the townscape and lies along the eastern edge of Globe Town. The eastern side of the canal is accessible via the towpath, which is widely used by cyclists and pedestrians. The Victorian cast iron bridge that leads from Approach Road to Victoria Park is a key access link into the park, as is the bridge on Old Ford Road. The road bridge that crosses the canal on Roman Road forms a key link from Globe Town into Mile End Park and beyond.
historical character & identity

Whitechapel is a historic part of London. The chapel of ease was built on the road to Essex, on the site of St. Mary’s Church, some time in the 1200s. It would have been whitewashed, typically for the middle ages, and is said to have lent it’s name to Whitechapel. Maps from 1666 show settlement outside of the city walls at Aldgate, clustered particularly at the beginning of what was to become the A11 to Essex, through Whitechapel.

In 1738, development extended in ribbon form along the Whitechapel Road. Land use in the area was still predominantly agricultural, with evidence of larger houses, and public activity focused on the Whitechapel Road. The London Hospital was built in 1757, and has expanded incrementally.

The success of the docks to the south of Whitechapel led to large-scale urban expansion with the extensive building of middle-class terraces in the area. This resulted in the turning of all the surrounding agricultural land to housing, forming what is now known as the East End. The first Whitechapel Railway Station was opened below ground in 1876, followed by the Metropolitan District Railway in 1884 (with which came the station Whitechapel and Mile End).

In general Whitechapel has been a transient place for at least four hundred years, where families did not stay for more than a few generations. Whitechapel has been viewed as something of a trouble spot for sedition and dissent in the 17th century. And somewhere that was relatively calm and ordered in the 18th century, had become by the 19th century a place of pervasive poverty, murders and Jewish sweatshops.

New housing was built in the 1920’s to replace the overcrowded slums of the East End. Further into the 20th century, post-war development and re-development saw radical changes in the urban fabric, with a shift from Victorian terraces towards 1960’s housing estate block architecture.

landscape & open space

Whitechapel encompasses a limited number of parks, which are all classified as neighbourhood parks due to their small size. These neighbourhood parks include Vallance Road Gardens and St Bartholomews Gardens.

No larger district parks are found in Whitechapel, but the area is located close to district parks in neighbouring areas, such as Weavers Fields, Bethnal Green Gardens and Stepney Green. These urban parks give residents access to trees and grass, as well as encouraging wildlife. Within Whitechapel a number of children’s play spaces are also found, largely in the north of the area.

Whitechapel Market on Whitechapel Road

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The vibrant and popular street market, the historical Royal London Hospital – an imposing modern structure – and the London Underground station form a focal point in the busy town centre of Whitechapel.

Many of the buildings fronting Whitechapel Road are of architectural and historical importance and form a stretch of fine-grain historic buildings, with a variety of architectural styles. Some 18th-century buildings survive – with examples such as the Grade II-listed Woods Buildings and the former brewery reflecting the commercial nature of the street in those times – as well as 19th-century Victorian buildings. Since its foundation in 1757, the London Hospital site has undergone incremental development and hence now has a wide range of architectural styles.

The housing stock in Whitechapel varies in age and architectural style and includes Victorian terraced housing and post-war housing estates. Conservation areas in Whitechapel include Whitechapel Market, Whitechapel Hospital and Stepney Green.

Whitechapel Road is an important and historically significant east-west movement route within east London. There is a high level of pedestrian activity along this road generated by the hospital, with medical staff, patients and visitors during the day. Whitechapel Market is also popular with residents and is a widely used street market. Both Whitechapel Road and Cambridge Heath Road are classified as highways due to their busy vehicular nature, and the roads serve as key east-west and north-south links.

Whitechapel was historically a fine-grained area, although today it contains a large proportion of large blocks. These large blocks include the Royal London Hospital, the East London Mosque, post-war housing estates, as well as large office blocks (largely towards Aldgate). The large blocks often compromise movement for pedestrians and cyclists, particularly to the north of Whitechapel London Underground station and around the hospital.