



# On Ilford's High Road

Exploring the ecology of urban coral reefs

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The following photographic survey is divided into thematic chapters, showing some of the unique characteristics of Ilford's High Road. The aim is to reveal the intricacies of this place and to define some of the processes at work. Without attempting to make this a scientific account of this experience, the ambition is to understand this linear object as an ecological system. In turn, this will inform the ongoing research into defining the concept of the 'urban coral reef'.

All photos are edited using Ilford Ltd. Delta 400 digital filters, paying homage to the town's eponymous photographic film maker.



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**Facade**

There is a variety of street frontages along the High Road reflecting both the historical development of the area and the cultural diversity of the neighbourhood today. The incoherence of signage, and colour schemes conveys a sense that each shop owner can express themselves independently.

The shopping parade in Seven Kings is particularly contrasted although the stretch is unified by the unitary width of Victorian terraced houses. With a south facing orientation and few buildings on the opposite side of the street, this segment of the High Road is busy with shoppers and pedestrians walking to and from the station. However, The High Road does not consist of evenly engaging frontages. The south side is rarely used except to access the bus stop. Car-oriented strip development surrounded by parking lots are set back from the pavement edge collapsing any sense of street scape. Behind the Seven Kings station, the road is walled off from the residential streets on one side and constrained by the railway on the other.

The mid-point between Ilford and Seven Kings presents us with yet another condition. Here, the plot sizes are much larger, reminiscent of past industrial activity. Recently, warehouses have given way to dense residential developments, where seven story facades have narrowed the street profiles.

While there are no ground floor occupants at this stage, this contained street space has the potential to provide a moment of intensity in what is otherwise the quietest segment of the road. At the furthest point from either town centre, this is where the suburban character of Ilford is most prevalent. At this point, we come across the cemetery which gives directly onto the High Road. Surrounding St. Mary's Church, the cemetery is a generous expanse of tombstones punctuated by the occasional centennial oak tree. It creates a visually enjoyable emptiness, a place of solitude which seems to draw you back to its rural past.

Like all high streets, Ilford's High Road is strongly defined by the activity of its shopfronts. Pedestrian activity clusters along vividly coloured shopping parades, where the visually stimulating environment causes people to pause and interact. The more unique qualities of this road occur where the shop frontage collapses, revealing the pre urban history of the site.







































# Juxtaposition

As you wonder along the High Road, one cannot help but notice the stark contrast between the low-lying Victorian terraces and the soaring tower blocks and apartment complexes breaking the skyline behind them. This dichotomy is particularly evident when looking at Ilford town centre from a distance. The familiarly shabby brick terraces fronted with garish shop signs seem to fall away as the pristine high rises come to symbolise the era of transport driven urban development.

The visual juxtaposition also occurs in more localised ways. A striking example of this is the myriad of architectural styles that dot the High Road. The eclecticism of the road is generated by both the historical and cultural context of the site. The Sikh Gurdwara built of red stones imported from Rajasthan could not be more out of place next to a two-storey semi-detached Victorian house. Yet, the lack of any kind of point of reference means that nothing can be considered 'normal'.

In this compressed infrastructural space, we find contrasts of scales between the local and the regional. The Lidl supermarket is dwarfed by the hulk of the Bombardier train maintenance facility. In the centre of Ilford the fourteenth century hospital chapel disappears in a cluster of towers catering to the needs of the global commuter. Church steeples

are now competing with the bulky silhouettes of shopping malls, cinemas and luxury apartment complexes.

Lastly, but for the continuous stretch of tarmac that makes up the world of the automobile, the street space is an incoherent juxtaposition of different elements of street furniture. Lamp posts appear to change every three hundred meters and the patchwork of pavement surfaces reveals several attempts at improving the pedestrian experience. In a way, this set of fine-grained observations convey most vividly the pace at which this part of the city continues to evolve.

Juxtaposition is visible everywhere. From the cityscape to the pavement surfaces, the High Road is undeniably a patchwork of individual views and ambitions. For this reason, there cannot be a single interpretation of the essence of this place. It is an eclectic mix of people's cultural expressions that somehow create a coherent whole.





































# Rooms

Would you say corridors were also rooms? We often think of them simply as 'circulation spaces' but that suggests they have no other purpose. From above, Ilford certainly qualifies as an infrastructural corridor. It is dictated by the uncompromising lines of the road and the railway. Yet, at street level, this space of defined mobility becomes increasingly confused.

The rerouting of car traffic around Ilford's town centre and the pedestrianisation of the High Road has redefined the thoroughfare into a stretched out urban square. It becomes a room in a network of spaces that connects the shopping mall, the theatre and the library. This non linear sequence of spaces contrasts with the mono directional morphology of the road and creates a rupture in the continuous space of the street. Charity collectors and one man shows dot this new room, generating moments of intensity as people walk by. A central tent selling groceries provides a point of gravity.

Similar attempts to improve the pedestrian experience appear in and around the Seven Kings station. However, they are seldom used because of the lack of surrounding active frontage. This is most depressingly apparent in front of the large Sainsbury's supermarket opposite Ilford's town centre. Such places miss the fundamental

characteristics of containment and proportion that make a room appreciated. The over exposure to roaring traffic appeals only to the pigeons it seems.

Less evident places of encounter include the entrance to the Lidl supermarket, the lobby of the Redbridge Council office and the forecourt of library. These points of contact occur because of the compression of the space from outside to inside. Unlike the purpose-built fragments of public realm, such interstitial spaces prove to be vibrant rooms for social interactions. We should ask ourselves if the success of seemingly unattractive places is not out of desperation considering the visible lack of quality public realm.

Further along the High Road we find a variety of semi defined rooms, often making use of the wider pavements. Shops spread out onto the street, positioning grocery stands and signs to entice passers-by. This practice blurs the boundary between inside and outside, which encourages pedestrians to pause. These informal and sometimes unintended urban rooms create variety and engagement along what is otherwise a monotonously straight road.















**Backs**

Every street front has a back. Hidden away, out of sight, these spaces operate as subordinates to the logistical needs of the high street. Little thought is given to their existence which often results in cramped service yards or alleyways, where lorry drivers hurriedly unload their goods between rows of parked cars. Yet, as service spaces, these 'backs' are a vital part of the local economy.

Veering into a side street, we venture into the world behind the busy high street and the attractive shop fronts. Here, it is dark and uninviting, a narrow and gloomy yard that can only be described as Dickensian. This is one of many service spaces, 'backs', that feed the relentless needs of the High Road. Together, they form a support network, like arteries funnelling blood to the body's vital organs.

Whereas most of these 'backs' have remained concealed, others have been exposed to the disapproving looks of local residents. When the bypass was created to circumvent Ilford's town centre, it had the unfortunate effect of revealing several service spaces such as the vacant lots behind the old hospital chapel and the town hall. With nowhere to hide, fences were quickly erected to protect the visual integrity of the fronts. But now, are those backs becoming fronts?















Routes

When we speak about routes, it is the route of the pedestrian. Unlike the car, the walking person is not confined to a linear trajectory of a road. Even in the context of the unusually straight High Road, we find that people travel in very different patterns.

Walking habits are in part influenced by cultural backgrounds. For instance, most of the White British residents navigate the street from one recognisable institution to another, typically from the church to the town hall to the theatre. Conversely Indian communities have claimed several strongholds along the High Road including temples, religious schools and restaurants. In this way they create their own network of routes linking each establishment, which leads to an appropriation of certain parts of the street.

Routes are also defined by the daily commute. In this context, everyone congregates along station platforms and at bus stops. The veterans of this phenomenon tend to bypass the busiest sections of the High Road, deviating onto small service streets, such as Clements Lane, before re-emerging at the station ticket gates. Commuting is not culture specific; it groups together a different segment of the population, which in turn engenders other types of social interactions.























Speed Space

This is above all a place of high velocity. Ilford's corridor has a primary function of delivering people to and from their homes as efficiently as possible. The topographical condition of the site is inextricably linked to the requirements of providing uninterrupted mobility. Lateral pedestrian circulation is secondary and confined to underpasses and bridges. It is a 'speed space'.

The railway is the extreme example of 'speed space'. It is a deep trench surrounded by fences and barbed wire, where only the train can operate. This creates an impenetrable zone that can only be bypassed over bridges and through tunnels. Paradoxically, it occupies a central position next to the High Road, yet it is also dissociated from it. The presence of this rupture in the urban fabric has a profound effect on the way people navigate the area because there are only few crossing points. In this way, movement is restricted to longitudinal trajectories.

By contrast, the High Road is an infrastructural space shared by multiple users. Cars and buses run alongside the occasional cyclist, while pedestrians take advantage of generous pavements for their daily journeys. From a planimetric perspective, the road appears to be a major artery, joining town centres to central London. We might brace ourselves for a congested and polluted corridor, with little in the

way of pedestrian infrastructure. On the contrary, the division of space between vehicles and pedestrians is reasonably balanced. It is a single lane road for the most part with the occasional bus stop and cycle lane.

Where the road begins to behave more like the railway is at the Winston Way, a traffic engineer's contribution to the city. A series of gyratories distribute vehicular traffic as it converges on the town centre, while circumventing the pedestrian high street. The axis was a violent incision into the urban fabric as it bisected streets of terraced houses, effectively cutting the southern neighbourhoods from the town centre. The amputated streets were then walled off as if to preserve some flailing sense of intimacy.

The urban fabric of Ilford is heavily defined by the lines of infrastructure that dissect it. However, road and rail environments behave very differently to one another. The High Road is a multi-functional infrastructural space that serves several scale levels whereas the railway is a mono dimensional, single purpose zone, segregated from the rest of the city.





















# Extraordinary Objects

The strip maintains its identity because it opposes the generic space of suburbia. The Victorian terraced housing blocks disintegrate as they approach the High Road, giving way to a disparate cluster of point blocks, institutional buildings and sacred spaces. The amalgamation of these quintessentially unique architectural expressions is what characterises the corridor space of Ilford's principle thoroughfare.

We define these individual structures as 'extraordinary objects', the embodiment of a constellation of the views and ambitions that have contributed to the making of this place. Extraordinary objects can be classified in historical terms so that we may begin to understand their significance to the people who live here.

Objects of the pre urban era include St Mary's Church and the Cauliflower Inn. They were amongst several buildings disseminated along the road at a time when the rural landscape of farms and fields extended to the horizons. Today, only a handful have survived as urban development began to encroach on their territory. The abandonment of the Cauliflower Inn marks another turn in the history of these objects. They have become endangered.

Next to appear are the 'civic' objects, which represent an ambition to make 'Ilford more London'. Examples of these are present in the town centre such as

the Town Hall, the Library, the Theatre and the Department store. For the most part, they have adapted to the changing demands of the high street. Currently, Gibson and Harris department store is being refurbished as a mixed use complex, largely occupied by a hotel.

Lastly, the emerging cluster of high rises around the stage becomes the newest addition to the catalogue of extraordinary objects. Their existence is driven solely by the opportunities of the free market economy. Standing awkwardly next to the remanence of Ilford's medieval hospital, they have yet to find their grounding in the town's suburban context.

Extraordinary objects can be considered as selfish expressions in a city, but in the case of Ilford's High Road they are the very ingredients that give life to the space.























**Spirituality**

Spirituality is not always a concept that resonates in contemporary society. As André Malraux once said, 'The 21st century will be religious, or it will not be.' On Ilford's High Road, sacred spaces and place of religious teaching are plenty. From Anglicans to Sikhs, the spiritual landscape is diverse. This plurality reinforces the cultural variety that can be observed the whole way along the road.

There is undoubtedly a competition between religious groups. Recently, Sikhs and Muslims have made territorial gains by taken over Ilford's County Court and the St. Cedd's Catholic school building respectively. Most Christian congregations are in full retreat except for the occasional entrepreneurial parish. The changing face of the area is no more apparent than in the colonisation of sections of the High Street by other religious groups.

Some religious institutions tend to cluster together along the High Road. The most notable example of this is the section of Christian churches just beyond the town centre which includes places of worship for Baptist, Roman Catholic, Anglican and Jehovah's Witnesses. Conversely, the Sikh community have created a far-reaching network of institutions along the High Road to cater for their growing community.















**Civicness**

The civic space of the High Road was once defined by the public institutions that embodied it such as the Town Hall, the Library and the Theatre. Today those places struggle to survive amid the pressures of real estate development. Nonetheless, there have been some inventive localised solutions to enhance the sense of 'civicness'.

A series of refurbishments in the town centre which include an art space in the Town Hall and an exhibition area in the Library have contributed to maintaining civic spaces for the residents. The vacant lot in front of the cinema is currently being transformed into a community market and the upgrading of the shopping mall will provide vital places for the neighbourhood to congregate.

There are also signs of civicness on an intangible level. The area has maintained a certain provincial attitude, whereby people are more likely to greet each other in the street; talking to fellow neighbours is common place here. Furthermore, businesses and shops at street level provide a constant surveillance of the High Road. Employees will use the pavement as the breakout space to their office, exchange with colleagues from the business next door.

The civic fabric of the High Road has suffered from a visible lack of planning. Successful public spaces are rare, and the existing network is at risk

of being overridden by private development. Yet, the resilience of this community's spirit is an asset worth protecting. Many of London's inner boroughs have lost this sense of solidarity, which was once the binding agent of urban neighbourhoods.



























