

EMBRACE ME WHEN I'M WALKING: SOME PERSONAL NOTES IN NON-JARGON

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After being in school benches for a couple of days and listening to a dozen people saying that Bromley-by-Bow is the most deprived area in the UK, I went out for a walk in Bromley-by-Bow. Because I couldn't confirm or deny what was said. Because I wanted to see it myself. Because I have always been attracted to deprived areas. To swap jeans in a butcher shop downtown Joburg. To walk and eat in Belsunce, Marseille. Parts of New Orleans. Real-life scarcities, daily scarcities. I had great expectations.

And Bromley-by-Bow showed its sad side that rainy day. Sad houses, sad shops, sad people walking by, sad cars on wet streets. A sad breakfast with beans swimming down Stroudley Walk. Poor whites gambling their bits of money at Ladbrokes. Women with burkas and tender but discrete eyes walking out the beauty salon. A post office with an ATM, a vegetable shop, some women wearing plastic bags with whatever. No real British English but English as a mix of many tongues. Something beautiful. And it actually wasn't too bad at all; despite the rain Bromley-by-Bow actually looked alright that rainy afternoon. No beggars, no hustlers, no streetwalkers, no kids scraping for food. People with families and houses and yes, possibly poor and with hard lives in bad working and housing circumstances, but it didn't seem to be too bad...

Met Henry in a pub. He wore a jacket of the Belgian army and he had a four day beard. He wasn't Belgian and he wasn't very well-mannered but he was alright. A bit of a disappointed socialist. Unemployed, divorced twice, accumulation of things. Henry told me some things about Bromley-by-Bow, a place where he has lived since twenty years. You know, pub talk, not too personal and not too subtle. About East London, that it is poor, that it has always been poor and that it will always be poor. It's a matter of geography. East London was boggy and thus unused and thus cheap land outside the city walls, where the industry was placed when the factories became bigger and unhealthier. Moreover, East London was downstream and the prevailing wind direction in the UK is southwest so the rich in the city wouldn't have the stink of the industry in their gardens. But the working-class was placed close to the factories too. And although the industry is disappearing in London, the social structure has been laid and that won't change. A few pints later I thanked Henry for his interesting evaluation and evolution of a place over time. Time to hit the road.

I walked on, caught a bus that took ages to Central London. Hopped off, walked through the rain-rainer-rainst and saw the speculative side of London, cold modern buildings and unappealing Victorian buildings (was Victoria a relative of Dracula?) and I crossed the Thames



and the undefined colour reminded me of the Scheldt back home and I walked on and London wasn't very nice to me and I begged her to embrace me because I have longed for her (London is female to me, but a cold one) but she didn't and finally she wouldn't and stinking tube corridors and two tubes brought me to my hotel where I dried up.

A few days later I walked through Bromley-by-Bow again. The sun shone and the neighbourhood wasn't bad at all, in fact, it looked alright, I mean, it was a nice place to be. Shops with market stalls in front, locals knowing each other and chatting and flirting, gentle double-deckers stylishly dancing down Bow Road. Et cetera. I met John who ran a coffee shop in an alley north of Bow Road (his name probably isn't really John, but he looked like a John to me in such convincing way that it could have been his own nickname too). 'You're not from around, are you?' he asked me when I studied a map. Some words later I explained him I'm an urban planner attending a summer school with scarcity as its theme. John didn't really understand. I told him I was interested in how Bromley-by-Bow could be improved. Spatially, socially et cetera. 'Ah yeah, I see', he replied. He then told me he had just started his coffee shop a few weeks ago. Why here? Because it is 'affordable in London terms'. John also told me about the London climate of so-called gentrification developments that jumped up like mushrooms all over the city. 'You know, those private developments for the wealthy few who want to engage in relationships to afford their overpriced homes'. Gated blocks, anonymous apartments that could be anywhere. I stirred my coffee. 'I saw gentrification as a more or less spontaneous development', I told him, 'creative minds settling in poor neighbourhoods and attracting shops, bars and so forth, as in Berlin for example'. John said there were areas like that in London too - and actually he is one of the



pioneers in Bromley-by-Bow himself, you know, with his fancy coffee and all that. Some more words later John said there might be a lack of shops and bars in the neighbourhood. He referred to Hackney as a place where the creative minds have gentrified the area. 'But behind the lively main streets in Hackney there are blocks of social housing too'. As I went out I saw Bromley-by-Bow differently. Does it have potential to become a liveable place?

Scarcity. I looked at that word in July 2012 when I tried to write an article. What did it mean, a lack? Less supply than demand? Or scar city as in a city with scars? Eureka! I started to write about a city I had visited a few times, a city with scars of a certain period in its lifetime, a city where money is scarce and where people are getting scarcer, a city that had riveted me from the first time I saw it: Chemnitz in East Germany. A shrinking city where creative thinking might create liveable space. Fast forward to October 2012. London isn't shrinking. But London does have areas where creative thinking is also needed to create liveable space. Especially in times of scarcity. Although I still can't define scarcity. But I do know that scarcity means more than lack and that it means more than just a supply and demand thing. I am working on it.

So. Bromley-by-Bow.

Generally spoken people leave if there is no work. But in cities it is different. There are always places where people will live if they do not have any other possibilities. The cheapest places close to factories and motorways. Where parks are scarce and ugly et cetera. To commute every day. Long days. To get depressed, drunk and divorced. Bromley-by-Bow apparently is one of those places (although I still can't confirm or deny it). I walked around a bit, sat in bars and I spoke to some people.



Now there are a lot of things to do around Bromley-by-Bow and there is nothing to do within Bromley-by-Bow. Is that bad? Might be. Around Bromley-by-Bow you can shop, eat and drink, meet people, spend time, spend money. Bow Road in the north has big and small shops, bus and tube stations, religious facilities, administrative amenities, monuments, office spaces to let and so on. There's a park and playground down the coffee shop alley as well. In the east, beyond the motorway A12 and in the Lea River valley there's Tesco and there are businesses and parks and housing developments. Further east there's the Olympic park, although I still cannot believe this would contribute to the regeneration of Bromley-by-Bow specifically or East London generally. South of Bromley-by-Bow there's a quasi-industrial zone with wholesalers, mosques, a concrete mixing company with many trucks, an artist colony, a sandwich bar with a friendly lady and a pub with a man in a Belgian army jacket. In the west there's something beautiful too: small car handlers' shops have settled in the brick arches underneath the DLR railway track - you wouldn't dare to make a picture and economically it's very marginal but very entrepreneurial. Very fascinating, indeed.

But within Bromley-by-Bow there's hardly anything to do. And therefore it could be a nice place to live, to stroll with your kids, to enjoy a quiet atmosphere. But it isn't. It's a place where nobody wants to live (apparently). Stroudley Walk is a local centre like there are many in Europe: a handful small shops ran by struggling locals, a health centre where you do not want to be brought to if you may choose, a lot of unused space (you can't call it a square) and an overall depressing atmosphere. And although you can't really see it, Stroudley Walk is only a stone's throw from Bow Road...



So here's the deal: add things that attract people to Stroudley Walk. Because then the area becomes lively, safer, shops can flourish, people are happier. Build units that can be used to run a business. Create a mix of smaller and larger-scaled enterprises (beside John's coffee bar it would be good to have one or two bigger attractors like a supermarket or a chain shop). Just to get some locals in the streets permanently. Urban designers can think about the improvement of the spatial/physical connection to Bow Road so that people walk in and out almost automatically. And if the London condition of so-called free market is of that sort that large-scaled gentrification projects are being built, then let that be. You can't fight that, and you don't have to. Look at the bright side: there are more people living in the area, that's good for safety and local enterprises. But I still believe that a city can ask something in return for real estate development. The development company can invest in local amenities too, in public space, in big things that actually cost little money for those who have a lot of money but that are of great use for those who have little money.

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I do not have a concluding sentence because my work in Bromley-by-Bow is not finished yet. I must talk a bit more to Henry, who will still live there for another twenty years, and to John, who might stay there a bit longer, too.