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Doomed allotments, abandoned beer cans and floral excess - Stephen Gill's eerily moving photographs capture the urban idyll of the Lower Lea valley before it is swallowed up forever by the Olympic Park development. Robert Macfarlane walked the site's perimeter with Iain Sinclair

Robert Macfarlane

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'Given time, the wild will reclaim the Olympic Park and its structures' ... Two images by Stephen Gill. Photographs: (c) Stephen Gill, extract from *Archeology in Reverse*

The day's aim was simple. We would walk the perimeter of London's "Olympic Park" - the 500-acre site in the Lower Lea valley that has been requisitioned, fenced off and depopulated in preparation for its Olympian redevelopment.

The idea was Iain Sinclair's: "Perhaps you'd fancy a few miles moving through the Hackney-Stratford marshes: a complex transitional ecology of CGI imagery, doomed allotments and virtual arcadias?"

For years now, Sinclair has been working on a book about Hackney: a deep history of that borough, whose final chapters will detail the damage done to it by the coming of the Olympics. Our circumambulation of the park was to be a part of this survey - his continued logging of what will be lost. If it were possible for us to infiltrate the Olympic site, we would. Otherwise, the day would be a ritual pacing-off of London's new Empty Quarter.

We met at King's Cross, early. Out through Islington, with Sinclair as dark-minded tour-guide: here is where Kathy Acker drank canal water, there is where Joe Orton was murdered.

Sinclair doesn't carry a map or pause at a junction: he has walked this area for more than 30 years and knows every turning, cut-through and side-path. Near New North Road, he led me to the Gainsborough Studios. In the courtyard, a 15ft-high rusted boilerplate head of Alfred Hitchcock sits on an iron bunker - filmmaker as Buddha, or tank commander. I tried to climb Hitchcock's ear, but security intervened.

"Right," said Sinclair, straightening up. "Are you ready for the zone? From here on in it's pure Tarkovsky." And so it was. Light-industrial spaces, car-wrecker's yards, square-windowed studios, haulage depots. Then, a mile further on, we hit the fence.

The perimeter of the Olympic site is now secured by a plywood fence that is 10ft high, around four miles long, bright blue in colour and chinkless. In places it is double-banked, in others it is topped by razor- or barbed-wire. The ODA began its construction last spring, and the last sections were put into place in July.

The fence is a barrier designed to exclude not only access, but also vision. There are no viewing windows built into it, no portholes for the curious stakeholder. To see inside the zone, you must ascend a Stratford towerblock, hire a helicopter, or - the desideratum - visit the ODA's website, which provides stills of the construction process and mocked-up futuramas of the park (light-glinted buildings, sparkling water features, happy munchkin people).

From our first encounter with the fence, we walked widdershins: south past the Big Breakfast House, east over Stratford marsh, north up through Stratford New Town, before returning west

across Hackney Marshes. Sinclair told me about the work of the photographer Stephen Gill, a friend and fellow Hackney resident. Three years ago, Gill bought a camera for 50p in Hackney Wick market. He began using it to document the lives and spaces of his borough: its birds, flowers, roadworks, signs, cashpoints and people. One result of this was Hackney Wick, a photostudy of the area. The book was published in a small print run and became a cult success. Copies change hands for several hundred pounds. Jon Ronson and Geoff Dyer are now among Gill's on-record admirers.

Gill's new book is *Archaeology in Reverse*, and its 100 uncaptioned images were taken on the same cheap camera. For about a year - between the beginning of work and the completion of the fence - Gill haunted the Lower Lea on bike and on foot, watching as the first stages of the Olympic vision were rolled out. The result is a remarkable book that, in Gill's phrase, records the "traces and clues of things to come". His subject is the imminence of mass construction, rather than its realisation.

Among the first signs were the Compulsory Purchase Orders, which began to be served to the residents of the Olympic Park site soon after London won the Games (around 1,000 people have now been moved). The opening photograph in *Archaeology in Reverse* is of a CPO, plastic-wrapped and strung to a drainpipe. The string has worked loose, and the package has slipped to the ground. It resembles a body executed by firing squad: bound to the post and slumped.

After the CPOs came the surveyors and the labourers. Dozens of images are of men at work: planners, drillers, diggers, drivers, banksmen and the other footsoldiers of large-scale "regeneration". A man in a boilersuit bags and tags soil samples. A surveyor squints, sniper-like, through a theodolite's crystal. Another holds an 8ft spirit-level vertically, measuring what appears to be empty

air. A pair of men in an inflatable dinghy attempt a landing on a canal island.

Concentrated on by Gill, these figures become eerie. Their tasks are mysterious, of inscrutable purpose. There are hints of fetish from the rubber of the dinghy and the gloves, to the Hi-Vis jackets and the hard hats. His images also invoke the police procedural: these men seem engaged in acts of forensic analysis, delving at an unspecified crime scene. The most memorable of these "workmen" photographs shows four dirty orange boiler-suits that have been hung on a wire fence to dry. Slung there, sagged and grimy, they look like four human skins: whole-bodied, flensed with intricacy and skill, then displayed as warnings to others.

Surveyors are of particular interest to Gill, as are the street graffiti of surveying. You will know this graffiti, though it is unlikely that you will be able to read it. Alpha-numeric sequences scrawled onto asphalt. Arrows and rings dashed down with a spray-can onto brickwork or paving slab. Repeatedly in *Archaeology in Reverse*, Gill records these sigils. A single white 'O' on a bridge, circling a rivet. A red paint stripe smeared across a stone in the undergrowth, like the residue of an orderly murder. Woadish blue paint slathered onto the wreck of a willow tree. Seen in serial, these marks become disconcerting. You become suspicious of their heavy encryption, the landscape interventions that they annotate and enable.

James Joyce declared that his ambition in writing *Ulysses* was "to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city suddenly disappeared from the earth, it could be reconstructed out of my book. Gill shares none of Joyce's hubris, but some of his desire. The book's title alludes to this project: Gill's aim is to archive the codes of demolition, in order that - at some unlikely future point - the codes might be run backwards, and east London reversed to its pre-Olympian state. But there is a knowing hopelessness to his

task. He is aware that his dataset is uselessly incomplete, and that the political machinery of the ODA is crushingly powerful.

The book's other intent is to record the people, culture and creatures of the Lower Lea: its dog-walkers, sunbathers, cormorants, swans, marriages and cars. In this respect, Gill's work should be aligned with that of the radical-pastoral photographer Jason Orton, with artists such as Patrick Keiller and Emily Cole, with musicians such as Saint Etienne and with writers such as Ken Worpole, William Mann and Sinclair himself: all of whom attempt to locate and articulate the value of such debatable landscapes as the Lower Lea.

The ODA has worked hard in its literature to cast the Lower Lea as a fouled zone, culturally void and ecologically wrecked: it is "contaminated, derelict and abandoned". Such language prepares the way for a heroic clearing and cleansing of the area, and for the hygienic raptures of the Olympic Park itself. Let there be no doubt, the Lea is dirty. Among other serious problems is thorium pollution, following the illegal dumping of fissile material into a cesspit. At one vaguely pastoral stretch of the river, hot from our walking, I proposed to Sinclair that we swim. "You swim," said Sinclair, "I'll phone for the ambulance."

What the ODA will not acknowledge, however, are the many improvised ecologies - human and natural - that have long thrived in this region of "bastard countryside" (as Victor Hugo once called such city edgelands). The best example is The Manor Gardens Allotments, a plot bequeathed to the area a century ago by a philanthropist called Major Villiers. All allotments are beautifully chronic places: developed over time, cobbled lovingly into being. The Gardens' 80 plots provided food for more than 150 families during the summer months. They were also superbly biodiverse. In the phrase of their defenders, they were a "life island" of the East

End. The Gardens are now locked off behind the blue fence - and due to be bulldozed this month.

Sinclair and I walked 13 miles or so that day. Distance was hard to estimate, because our route was haphazard, loopy. Among the strongest impressions I took from the day was of the lusty, riotous vegetable life of the Lower Lea. Plant life is rampant: green algae thickening the canal water to the texture of snooker baize, massive old ent-like willows, escaped apple-tree orchards, buddleia lolling from brickwork and bridge edge, the witches' garden of rubble heaps. As William Mann has pointed out, the combination of the river's irregular meanders and the implacable lines of rail and road means that the Lower Lea is filled with "pockets of neglect", in which wildness rapidly reasserts itself. Half-acres very quickly self-seed, throwing up a mixed plant life that is, in Mann's phrase, "worthy of a meadow".

Vegetation fascinates Stephen Gill, too. At least a third of the images in *Archaeology in Reverse* are of plants: prospering in the foreground or seething in the background. A stand of phragmites hushes in the wind. Fields of Japanese knotweed are slashed by ODA workmen. Giant hogweed is cut, stoked and burned. *Convolvulus* spirals up a chain-link fence. One extraordinary photograph shows the trunk of an ash pleaching slowly round an iron railing. The tree resembles a gummy mouth, gradually eating back the metalwork. Whatever occurs here, these images suggest, whatever is lost to this development, will only be temporary. Given time, the wild will reclaim the park and its structures.

In this respect, Gill's work is reminiscent of other studies in floral apocalypse: the futuristic *After London* (where the city has been colonised by scrub, swamp and tree) by the Victorian nature writer Richard Jefferies, John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, Rose Macaulay's *The World My Wilderness* and even *The Wind in the*

Willows, which, as Richard Mabey has pointed out, occurs in a Thameside landscape of shattered and overgrown buildings.

The other apocalypse that haunts Gill's images is that of inundation. The cheap camera gives a distinctive blurriness to his photographs: as though one were looking through a rheumy eye - or as though the entire world were submarine. There are hints of flood throughout *Archaeology in Reverse*. Everywhere, things are afloat. A Coke can drifts through pea-green algae. A chimneyed structure rises from canal water like a brick U-boat. An open burger box bobs on the mucky swell. A red washing-up bowl sails along in the breeze. And, in one brilliant image, a young woman in a homemade coracle - lenticular, green-hulled - paddles herself across a stretch of canal.

A fortnight after our walk, Sinclair wrote to say that he and Gill had plans to infiltrate the Olympic Park site by means of the River Lea itself. Gill had sourced an inflatable dinghy and a couple of oars. "We're going to take to the water," Sinclair said. "Cockleshell anti-heroes."

· *Archaeology in Reverse* is out now (RRP £30)