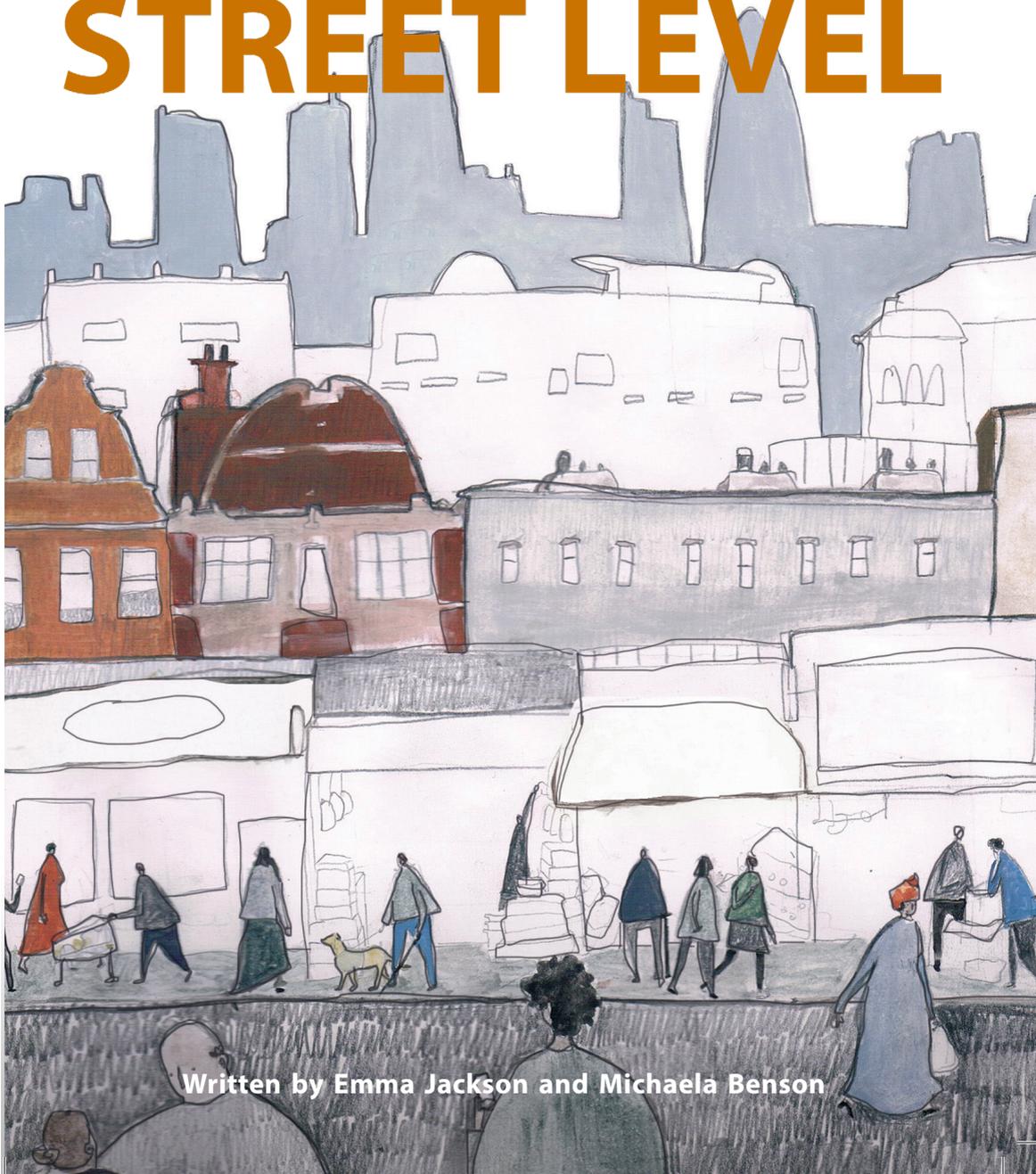


ABOVE STREET LEVEL



Written by Emma Jackson and Michaela Benson



Above Street Level





Above Street Level is a research project based at Goldsmiths, University of London, examining processes of place-making through a focus on the upper tiers of Rye Lane in Peckham, London – a busy high street catering to a multi-ethnic and socially mixed population.

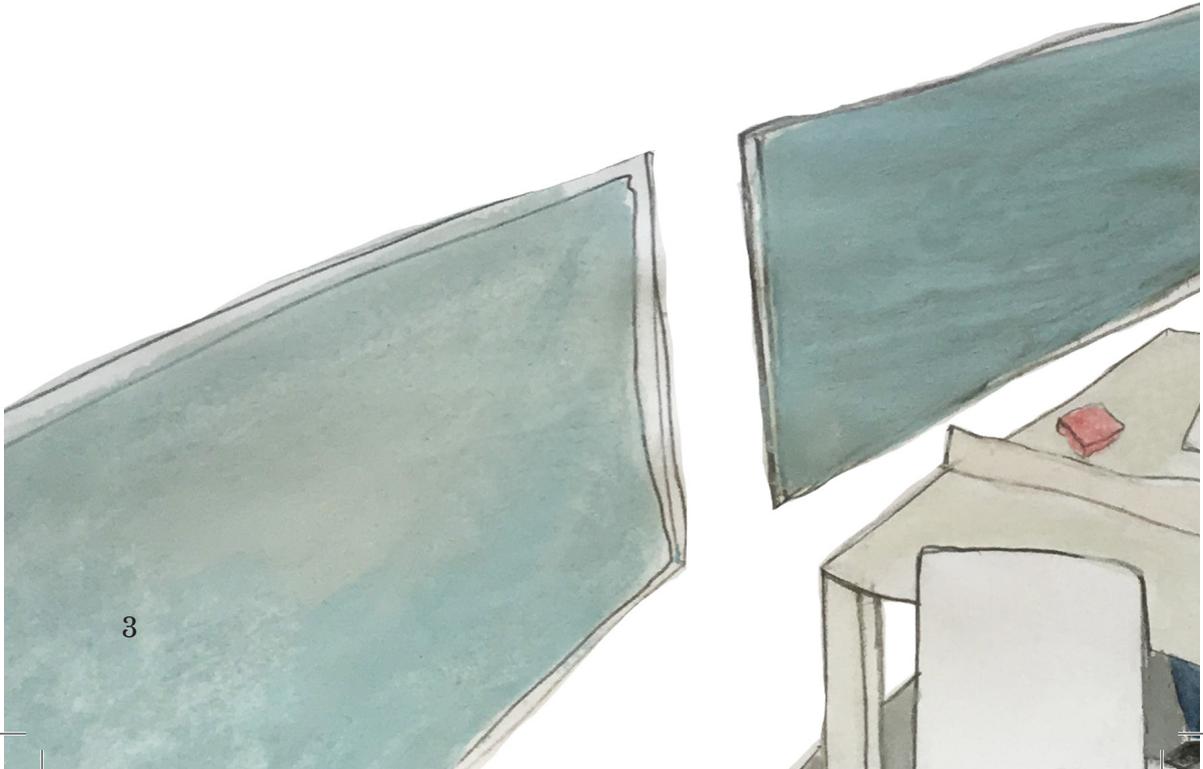
On this street, empty spaces have been variously converted into places of consumption and sociality to meet the needs of a changing population. These include roof top bars and art spaces replacing factories and warehouses, as well as the conversion of industrial spaces and storerooms above shops for use as evangelical churches. While these spaces of consumption and worship have moved upwards, high-density social housing has been pulled down. And new plans to build luxury high-rise housing have been contested.

This vertical transformation of Rye Lane is complex, embedding and reinscribing social divisions, raising questions about regeneration, gentrification, social and ethnic mix, class and the politics of place. In our research, we ask: Who are these new places for and what kinds of encounters are possible in these elevated spaces? And how do these relate to reconfigurations of power resulting from and feeding into contemporary urban transformation?

Through participant observation and semi-structured interviewing, the project documents how and by whom these spaces are being appropriated, with what consequences for social relations in the area. Above Street Level also explores the concerns and investments of local people and businesses, activists, and stakeholders in these processes. In these ways, it contributes towards understanding contemporary urban change and its consequences for people and places.

Standing in a busy open pedestrianised square, Peckham Library is a bustling place used by a cross-section of the local community. The library occupies the 4th and 5th floors of this large award-winning building and until now has commanded views over London. This is changing as the Mountview Theatre school is being built on the library's north side blocking the views of St Paul's Cathedral and the city skyline.

Listen to our podcast about the library here...





Today the railway connects Peckham to central London, Kent, and East London, the tracks carrying freight and passenger trains elevated above Rye Lane. Opened in 1865, the station is notable for its Victorian facade. It is central to current plans for the regeneration of Peckham town centre, the arcade in front of the station torn down to make way for an open square in which the station will be the piece de resistance. But this is a change that will see many local businesses displaced.

Listen to our podcast about the railway here...





The converted car park is set back from the busy shopping street of Rye Lane. It is owned by the council and houses the 'Peckhamplex' cinema on the ground floor and a new multi-use space 'Peckham Levels' on the middle floors. In the summertime a sculpture park and rooftop bar occupy the upper levels.



During the evening in summer, the high-up night time spaces such as the rooftop bar bring a young, affluent and predominantly white crowd to Rye Lane.



Listen to our podcast about the car park here...



Researching high-up spaces in Peckham offers a view onto contemporary urban transformation and how this creates and perpetuates inequalities. This is as much a story about London and other global cities as it is about a particular place. It highlights the processes through which some places and people become valued and others devalued, and makes visible in whose image these places are made.

Our take-home messages from this project explore how value is made, for whom, and in what ways through a focus on three elevated landmarks in Peckham—the library, the railway line and station, and the multi-storey car park. Each in their own way should be understood as a contested space.

What is valued and who is allowed to access this value?

The library can be used to explore the politics of the view. While the sounds of the construction work ongoing next door are a temporary aberration to the otherwise hushed tones of the library, just a few metres away and rising above the library the resulting building will completely obscure the sightline to the City, and diminish the quality of light in this space made for books and reading. Atop the new neighbour, a rooftop bar will offer uninterrupted views of the London skyline, the latest addition to the exclusive night-time economy that brings visitors from all over the world to high-up spaces in Peckham after dark. The view might be valued, but this view is increasingly reserved only for those who can enter such high-up spaces with ease.

Who is valued?

Infrastructural change, signalled by the advent of the East London Line and the planned transformation of the station square, bring new populations and people to Peckham. In their wake, others are displaced as rents are driven up, as spaces are reclaimed and revalued in anticipation of these incoming populations, their interests and values. As grocers and hair and beauty salons that cater to a multi-

ethnic population – and that make Peckham an important hub for West African London in particular – are replaced by creative pop-ups and boutique coffee shops, it becomes clear that these processes of transformation are racialised. The commercial spaces and population of Peckham are noticeably whitened as place-making unfolds.

How is value made?

The car park offers us two ways into thinking about the value of high-up spaces in Peckham. The first lies in our reflections on value creation. It is misleading to think of the car park as just a car park. In the basement, there is a cinema, on the roof top a sculpture park and bar that have been drawing visitors to Peckham for over ten years. The investments of the creative industries in this space in Peckham have undoubtedly enhanced the value of the car park and played a role in both the decision of the council to offer a lease for the middle floors of the car park, but also in its listing as an Asset of Community Value. The car park then, offers insights into value-making and signals the significance of this to contemporary urban transformation.

Which encounters are valued?

But the car park also offers another view; one that celebrates the possibility for social mix and encounter while shutting down opportunities for this to take place. The cinema in the basement, with its low ticket prices, is a space accessible to a wide cross-section of the local community, and yet it rarely features in how Peckham is promoted. The newly-opened commercial spaces within the car park attract a similarly diverse population. Despite the high cost of food and drink there is no cost to entry and—so far—no barriers to entry. To us, this signals the potential of the space but we are concerned that, just as we have witnessed in some other high-up spaces in Peckham, over time such potential will be shut down as the space becomes more exclusive.

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