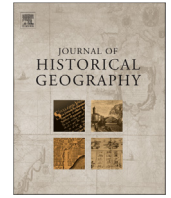




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The making of urban ‘healtheries’: the transformation of cemeteries and burial grounds in late-Victorian East London[☆]



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Abstract

This paper focuses on the conversion of disused burial grounds and cemeteries into gardens and playgrounds in East London from around the 1880s through to the end of the century. In addition to providing further empirical depth, especially relating to the work of philanthropic organisations such as the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, the article brings into the foreground debates regarding the importance of such spaces to the promotion of the physical and moral health of the urban poor. Of particular note here is the recognition that ideas about the virtuous properties of open, green space were central to the success of attempts at social amelioration. In addition to identifying the importance of such ideas to the discourse of urban sanitary reformers, the paper considers the significance of less virtuous spaces to it; notably here, the street. Building on Driver’s work on ‘moral environmentalism’ and Osborne and Rose’s on ‘ethicohygienic space,’ this paper goes on to explore the significance of habit to the establishing of what Brabazon called ‘healtheries’ in late-Victorian East London.

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‘An’ now, said the sweated one, the ‘earty man who worked so fast as to dazzle one’s eyes, ‘I’ll show you one of London’s lungs. This is Spitalfields Garden.’ And he mouthed the word ‘garden’ with scorn.¹

Jack London took his description of this site, a garden that can still be found alongside Christ Church, Spitalfields in East London, further: ‘There are no flowers in this garden, which is smaller than my own rose garden at home. Grass only grows here, and it is surrounded by sharp-spiked iron fencing, as are all the parks of London town, so that homeless men and women may not come in at night and sleep upon it.’² London’s portrayal of this space was not limited to its size, aesthetic appeal, nor its defensive boundaries. He also casts a critical, though some would argue sympathetic, eye over the characters that he identified with it. These were not just homeless men and women locked out of this so-called green lung; they were the masses of ‘miserable and distorted humanity... [with] all manner of loathsome skin diseases, open sores, bruises,

grossness, indecency, leering monstrosities, and bestial faces’ who had come to represent this part of the metropolis.³ This should come as little surprise; after all, such representations of East London’s inhabitants as the literal embodiment of urban degradation and vice were reinvigorated in the 1880s and continued on and off well into the following century.⁴ Indeed, even more scientific social surveys such as Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour* reflected social assumptions and prejudices of the day.⁵

Jack London’s account, and especially the images that accompanied it (see Fig. 1), is of interest here, though not primarily because of what it reveals about such representations of East London. It is rather because the garden that he was referring to was one of many disused burial grounds and cemeteries that had been converted into public gardens or playgrounds over the course of the previous 30–40 years. Moreover, if we look at sources other than London’s *The People of the Abyss* quite contrasting images of the same space can be found. For example, a few years later Mr Basil Holmes, who was secretary of the

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¹ J. London, *The People of the Abyss*, Norwood, 1903, 61.

² London, *The People of the Abyss* (note 1), 61.

³ London, *The People of the Abyss* (note 1), 62.

⁴ G. Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, London, 1971; A.S. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London*, London, 1977.

⁵ D. Reeder, Representations of metropolis: descriptions of the social environment in *Life and Labour*, in: D. Englander, R. O’Day (Eds), *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain 1840–1914*, Aldershot, 1995, 323.



Fig. 1. 'A Lung of London'. Source: J. London *People of the Abyss*, Norwood, 1903.

Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA), offered a very different image of the garden at Christ Church to the participants of the Town Planning Conference, 1910.⁶ As Fig. 2 reveals, in this image there is evidence of the flowerbeds that London had suggested were absent. Further, the garden depicted is one that is neat and ordered, and whose occupants were kept under the watchful eye of a park keeper. The point here is not to dispute or challenge London's image, which depicts a different part of the same garden. Instead, it is to suggest that we can see two narratives at play here: one that, in Osborne and Rose's terms, sought to shine a light on the 'dark continent' of poverty and illuminate the degenerating effects of urban living especially on the abject poor, and another concerned with the remaking of urban space and on the possibilities for social amelioration.⁷

While London's account and others like it act as an important context which helps to explain the emergence of social ameliorism as a form of liberal governance, this paper focuses on projects that aimed to promote the moral and social improvement of the urban population through the production of 'healtheries'. While the precise etymology of the term 'healtheries' is a little uncertain, it was applied to the International Health Exhibition held in South

Kensington, London in 1884.⁸ This exhibition was dedicated to showcasing advances in the scientific study of health and education and in many ways reflected the progress that the sanitary science movement had made over the course of the century. Around the same time, Lord Brabazon, who, amongst other things, was founder and Chairman of the MPGA of which Basil Holmes was Secretary, utilised the term in one of his many publications on the subject of children's playgrounds. In a plea to the readership of *The Quiver* (an evangelical magazine directed at a largely middle-class audience), Brabazon highlighted their benefits in places such as Manchester and Salford: 'If these towns have found advantage from the establishment of such "healtheries" in their midst, why should not all our large cities, and especially London, follow their example?'⁹

In making this plea for London to follow in Manchester and Salford's footsteps, Brabazon also drew readers' attention to work that his own organisation had begun. As he recorded, '[t]he 5th of May last was a red-letter day in the life of many a poor child living in the neighbourhood of the crowded district which surrounds the Borough Road, in the south of London. On that occasion a large playground, about one and a half acres in extent, provided with

⁶ B. Holmes, Open spaces, gardens, and recreation grounds, in: The Royal Institute of British Architects, *Transactions: Town Planning Conference, London 10–15 October 1910*, London, 1911, 478–498.

⁷ T. Osborne and N. Rose, Governing cities: notes on the spatialisation of virtue, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 17 (1999) 741; see also F. Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire*, Oxford, 2001, 170ff.

⁸ This was drawn to my attention by an anonymous referee and is also noted in A. Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way: Doctors, Houses, and Women, 1870–1900*, Montreal, 1996, 11.

⁹ R. Brabazon, A plea for public playgrounds, *The Quiver* 20 (1885) 338.

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