The sectors of a city are, at a certain level, readable. But the meaning they have had for us personally is incommunicable, like the clandestinity of private life, of which we possess only a few pitiful documents.

Guy Debord

BEARINGS

The word ‘psychogeography’ was increasingly in vogue in 1990s London, but what does it mean? It originated in the 1950s with the French avant-garde-cum-revolutionary group the Lettrists, who later became the Situationists, and it first appears in Guy Debord’s ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography’ (1955), where a compact definition is given: it is the ‘study of the effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals’.

Debord adds that the adjective ‘psychogeographical’ has a ‘rather pleasing vagueness’, and anyone reading recent usages would discover that it is about Jack the Ripper, ley lines, why tower blocks are bad, Hawksmoor churches, the places we remember from earlier in our lives, landscape gardening, Stonehenge and the Kray twins.

And it is indeed about all those things. Most uses of the word now involve three or four main ideas, separately or in combination: the emotional and behavioural effects of the environment, and its ambience; ‘cognitive mapping’ (the city in our heads, with the places that have special meaning for us); and what might be more prosaically called ‘local history’.

Chinatowns, cemeteries and red-light districts all have their own distinct auras, and this idea of different ambiances is central to psychogeography. The zones and quarters of a city are made up of distinct psychic micro-climates; places attract and repel us, or feel psychically warmer and colder, in a way that can be mapped. This emotional effect of place can be extended to single buildings, or even rooms. In different hands it can be supernatural, tending to ideas of something like haunting, or entirely materialistic.

At its most down to earth it might include this description of the Broadwater Farm Estate:

The Hardcastle estate seemed to have no other purpose than to stage endlessly repeated dramas of public disorder. It was what it was designed for. Its labyrinth of forecourts, low-rise walkways and access balconies, blind alleys of fear and danger. Its high-rise vantage points a silhouette of menace. Its whole architecture was a solid fortress of deprivation...
At its more esoteric it would include Iain Sinclair’s argument, in *Lud Heat* (1975), that Hawksmoor churches exercise an occult malevolence that causes violent crime.

Debord’s Lettrist comrade Ivan Chtcheglov pushed the idea of ambience to extremes in his ‘Formulary for a New Urbanism’ (1953). Chtcheglov came to the attention of the authorities after attempting to dynamite the Eiffel Tower, but before he disappeared into the psychiatric system he left this brief but inexhaustible tract. It shows his sense of zones and quarters, and his vision of a purpose-built psychogeographical city divided into distinct zones (fulfilled, in dystopian form, by Disneyland), along with his enthusiasm for the colonnades and deserted squares of Giorgio de Chirico, and an element of belated Surrealism:

Certain *shifting* angles, certain *receding* perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought in the magical locales of fairy tales and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, little forgotten bars, mammoth caverns, casino mirrors.⁴

Chtcheglov was at the forefront of the Lettrist interest in the affective environment, and the construction of emotionally determinant ambiances by decor. There would be ‘rooms more conducive to dreams than any drug, and houses where one cannot help but love’.⁵ This aspect has largely fallen away from later notions of psychogeography, but Lettrist-Situationist psychogeography would include Dr Caligari film sets, Piranesi’s prisons (Piranesi was ‘psychogeographical in the staircase’, according to Debord⁶), visionary, amateur and ‘wild’ architecture (Postman Cheval, Mad King Ludwig), and even interior design.

The feeling of place is inseparable from the meaning of place, often within personal cartographies that have their own landmarks.

Her aura transfigured for me the whole upper part of Gloucester Place, so that I could not willingly go there for two or three years after I had lost her. Often, however, she would meet me at what we called The Object. The Object stood in an arcade off Baker Street, and looked something like a large bollard . . . ⁷

There is a more extensive private map at the heart of Georges Perec’s ‘Places’ (c. 1969–75), a description of twelve Paris locales that he associated with a former girlfriend. It turns the city into a personalized memorial, and commemorates what he called ‘dead places that ought to survive’.⁸

Psychogeography is not interested in ‘objective’ panoptical mapping, but only in the private cognitive maps of our customized cities. Debord’s cut-and-pasted collage maps of Paris, *Discours sur les Passions d’amour* (1957) and *Naked City* (1957), have become definitive examples of this ‘renovated cartography’,⁹ but defaced Tube maps are another instance, with three southern stations on the Victoria Line labelled ‘dump’, ‘dump’ and ‘dump’, for example, or three stations on the District Line replaced with ‘Ali’s House’, ‘Drugs Here’ and ‘Sex Town’.¹⁰

These cognitive maps overlap with larger histories. Chris Petit’s essay of 1993 on Newman Passage (‘Jekyll and Hyde Alley’, a sinister location that he terms the ‘secret heart’ of Fitzrovia) situates it in a personal cartography of film locations:
When I first came to London twenty years ago and didn’t know anyone, I haunted cheap movie-houses that were soon to vanish – the cartoon cinema in Victoria Station, the Tolmers, the Metropole, the predominantly homosexual Biograph in Wilton Road, Classics, Jaceys; these were not selective days – and, almost unconsciously, as something to do on Sundays, I started to track down London film locations: a sinister park near Charlton Athletic football ground from Blow-Up; a crescent house and a riverside apartment in The Passenger; the house on the corner of Powis Square in Performance; the Covent Garden pub and Coburg Hotel in Frenzy. I would visit these places and feel a little less anonymous, a little more specific, and by patiently stitching them together I made my own map of the city, a limited (and superstitious) one, albeit with more meaning than the official ones ... 11

Another private map uses the familiar trope of city as text:

My own personal copy of the West End is now covered in marginal notes and amendments which have transformed its meaning for me: the street corner on Shaftesbury Avenue, a little way down from Cambridge Circus, where Edgar Manning shot three men one day in 1920, for example; or the building in Gerrard Street that is now a Chinese supermarket and restaurant, but used to be the notorious 43 Club; or the tiny dining room in Lisle Street that today offers 'The Cheapest Chinese Food in Town', but in 1918 was a shady chemist’s from which Billie Carleton’s circle got their cocaine.12

‘All cities are geographical’, wrote Chucheglov, ‘you cannot take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends’. Much of what is now called psychogeography is resonant and marginal local history, including a good deal of the material in Sinclair’s middle work, such as Downriver (1991), Tom Vague’s Entrance to Hipp: A Psychogeographical Guide to Notting Hill (1997), and numerous books on curious, low, dated or unknown London before the term psychogeography came into vogue; for example, The London Nobody Knows by Geoffrey Fletcher (1962), Evil London by Peter Aykroyd [sic] (1973), London’s Secret History by Peter Bushell (1983) and The Black Plaque Guide by Felix Barker (1987).

Psychogeographical history often tends towards a combination of the esoteric and arcane with the deviant and sordid, or antiquarianism with crime and lowlife. Jack the Ripper and the Elizabethan magus John Dee are of psychogeographical interest (the Ripper has, for better or worse, become central to the psychogeography of Whitechapel, while Dee is part of the psychogeography of Mortlake), whereas Cromwell and Pitt the Younger are not. It is also more fully psychogeographical if there is a sense that history affects ambience, and that the character of place inheres and affects feelings and behaviour, or if it challenges the mainstream contemporary reading of a place. In that sense it can be an alienated and recalcitrant form of history, and one that resists being recuperated into ‘heritage’. Alienation was an important factor in the recent popularity of psychogeography. Even in its most basic aspect, the feel of place, ‘psychogeography’ is a useful shorthand for aspects of place that are not reducible to economics, and for the effect of the built environment on the quality of life, which has been the subject of unprecedented anger and dissent. As for cognitive
mapping, it is universal and inescapable. But its recent fetishization has accompanied a post-consensus, post-societal sense that society as a whole (famously declared not to exist in 1983) offers no salvation, only one's own routes and places. Its overlap with histories and myths of place is a further way of gaining a purchase on the inhospitable environment of the metropolis. People want to inscribe marks and find traces in the city, like the stories they used to tell about the stars and constellations, in order to feel more at home in an indifferent universe.

LANDMARKS

Classic urban psychogeography could almost be said to begin – retrospectively, and from a Situationist-influenced perspective – with Thomas De Quincey, and it can be traced through the Surrealists, Walter Benjamin, and the Lettrists and Situationists. But London psychogeography over the past 25 years owes less to all this and more to Iain Sinclair, whose work is inspired by a completely different tradition that surfaced during the hippy era. Take the opening of a book of 1970 on Carnaby Street: 'The girl said, “Carnaby Street is a happy place. I think it must be on dragon lines.”'...

Sinclair’s roots are not with the Situationists but with the ‘Earth Mysteries’ school. The 1960s saw a resurgence of interest in the countryside, and in the land’s apparently ancient lore and sacred geometry; particularly ley lines, or long man-made alignments in the landscape. John Michell’s The View Over Atlantis was published in 1969, and Michell stimulated interest in the work of Alfred Watkins. ‘Ancient people everywhere placed their shrines and monuments on straight alignments across miles of country’, explains Michell, ‘the existence of these forgotten alignments came to [Watkins] in a flash of intuition . . .’,

[like] the sacred dragon lines of old China, secret, mystical ways across the landscape are known to exist throughout the world. There is a common principle behind them which does not yield easily to modern-minded inquiries; but if you frequent ancient sanctuaries with an inquisitive mind, you are open to the influence of ancient mentalities.

Watkins’s best-known work, The Old Straight Track (1925), was republished in 1970 and reached the mass-market with Abacus in 1974. It was in this climate, and further influenced by books such as Elizabeth Gordon’s Prehistoric London: Its Mounds and Circles (1914), that Sinclair wrote his seminal Lud Heat (1975). Complete with diagrams, this suggested that Hawksmoor churches are aligned across London in a sinister occult geometry, and that they exercise a malevolent influence by ‘unacknowledged magnetism and control-power, built-in code force’. Drawing on numerous sources from Thomas De Quincey to the lost pyramids of Glastonbury, Sinclair’s essay is an exhilarating masterpiece of paranoia.

Lud Heat inspired Peter Ackroyd’s novel Hawksmoor (1985), in which he developed a contrast between the worlds of Sir Christopher Wren (Enlightenment, rationality, daylight, procreation) and Nicholas Hawksmoor (secret disaffection, sooty darkness, old Gnostic and pagan beliefs, sterility). The most psychogeographical aspect of the book – behavioural determinism, albeit occult, by the built environment – was not widely remarked on by reviewers, but a species of psychogeography had now entered the London literary mainstream, and Sinclair/Ackroyd’s eccentric take on Hawksmoor has since threatened to become as
much a part of London as Jack the Ripper.

Disaffection had meanwhile continued to smoulder with the legacy of the Situationist International. During 1970, Malcolm McLaren (the future Sex Pistols impresario and mayoral candidate, but then an art student influenced by the Situationists) researched a documentary film on the psychogeography of Oxford Street: 'From Tyburn at the gallows to the Gordon Riots and Barnaby Rudge... The coming of the department store and crowd control. The politics of boredom... more Mars Bars are sold on Oxford Street than anywhere else.'

Associated for a while with the Angry Brigade, interest in the Situationists was a minority, under-the-counter affair. As Maclaren remembered it later, you had to go into Camden’s now defunct Compendium Bookshop and pass ‘the eyeball test’.

But it flared into a higher profile at the end of the 1980s, with Greil Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (1989) and the Situationist retrospective of 1989 at the ICA and the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

The two streams of psychogeography, Situationist and Earth Mystery, fused with the founding of the London Psychogeographical Association (LPA) in 1992. The LPA signalled its Situationist alignments by an overt use of *détournement* in the opening line of its manifesto article, ‘Why Psychogeography?’: ‘There is a spectre haunting Europe, nay the world. The spectre of psychogeography.’

Essentially a far-left post-Situationist group with a penchant for pranksterism and disinformation, the LPA claimed to believe in the wilder reaches of esoteric psychogeography, from ley lines outwards. Slippery and prickly, their stance on these things was a tongue-in-cheek strategy against ‘recuperation’ (compare Debord’s covering his *Mémoires* in sandpaper) designed to make academia keep its distance. ‘We offer no attempt to “justify” or “rationalise” the role of magic in the development of our theories; it is sufficient that it renders them completely unacceptable.’

Between 1992 and 1997, the LPA’s numerous publications included ‘Smash the Occult Establishment’, which was about Greenwich, the Royal Family and Freemasonry; and ‘Open Up the Northwest Passage’, the Northwest Passage being a navigational metaphor from De Quincey’s urban wanderings, which Debord adopted and transformed. The LPA could argue that St Catherine’s Hill is the mystical omphalos of England, relating it to planetary alignments and the possibly ritual death of William Rufus in 1100, but they could also make trenchant use of Gestalt ‘figure/ground’ reversal to illustrate the way in which the working-class population of the East End was relegated to a backdrop during the 1980s and ’90s.

The centre of London shifted eastwards during the later 1980s, initially during new excitement about the City financial district. The concomitant rediscovery of the East End – which was, to many people, exotically unknown and unmodernized territory – was a further impetus to psychogeography. Due to prevailing winds and cleaner air in the West, the eastern side of Northern Hemisphere cities tends to be the poor side, which in turn makes it the ‘bad’ side. East London had long been a centre of immigration, making it subject to fantastical orientalizing discourses, and it was also associated with Jack the Ripper and the kind of period criminality that has long been part of London’s image in France. In September 1960 the Situationist International held its Fourth Conference at a ‘secret address’ deep in *l’East End*, the British Sailors Society in Limehouse, *quartier célèbre par ses criminels*.23
Debord shared the Surrealists’ ugly fascination with Jacques L’Eventreur, going as far as to dub him ‘psychogeographical in love’.24 Psychogeography and Jack the Ripper seem enduringly linked. Alan Moore’s work was particularly notable in this period, including his Ripper graphic novel From Hell (1991–8; latterly filmed), which also included Hawksmoor. He extended his psychogeographical range much further with his ‘Beat Seance’ events of 1997, such as ‘the Highbury Working’, using ghostly and occult tropes for the resurrection of marginal local history.

Iain Sinclair’s career had meanwhile consolidated. A small-press novel on antiquarian book dealing and the Ripper, White Chappell Scarlet Tracings (1987), was followed by Downriver (1991), full of marginal Thameside history and observation, and by the time of Lights Out for the Territory (1997), Sinclair was at the height of his celebrity. Lights Out still featured esoterica, but it was less arcane than the earlier work, and in part constituted a sociological safari into the world of satellite TV dishes and pit-bull terriers. It is only around now that the word ‘psychogeography’ began to appear in Sinclair’s writing, usually applied to others, such as the LPA or Chris Petit.

Lights Out includes discussion of the London artist and curator Rachel Lichtenstein in terms that are applicable to Sinclair’s own project: ‘an artist who specialised in not-forgetting, the recovery of “discernible traces”’.25 In 1999, Sinclair collaborated with Lichtenstein on Rodinsky’s Room, a book about an abandoned room in Brick Lane which had, since the mid-1980s, been mythologized as a time capsule. Rodinsky also furnished Sinclair with material for Dark Lanthorns: Rodinsky’s A to Z, which included a facsimile of an annotated London A–Z owned by Rodinsky and marked with places of personal significance. It was subtitled ‘Rodinsky as psychogeographer’, in a notable instance of the ‘personal mapping’ aspect of psychogeography.

By 2000, psychogeography was fully into the mainstream with Peter Ackroyd’s London: The Biography. Although Ackroyd denigrates the word, his book is underpinned by an ultimately irrationalistic psychogeography, claiming that the character and atmosphere of different London districts inhere over time by an ‘echoic’ haunting process that controls human activity within them. It was very different from Roy Porter’s London: A Social History (1994), which concluded that London had had its day; that the Thatcher years did it serious damage; and that it had fallen to be a tourist city and a barely regulated international zone. It is, in other words, not the Eternal City, which is exactly the opposite of Ackroyd’s argument.26

Ackroyd’s almost Platonic worship of continuity is a neo-conservative attempt to contain change, and to reinscribe a city that threatens to become illegible. ‘The indigenous or native spirit which animates a particular area’ ensures, for example, that ‘the secret life of Clerkenwell ... goes very deep’, and that Bloomsbury remains steeped in occultism (Masonry, Theosophy, the Golden Dawn, astrology, occult bookselling). ‘So here again there seems to be a congregation of aligned forces ... remaining active within the neighbourhood of a few streets.’27

In the year that Ackroyd’s book was published, the old British Library dome in Bloomsbury was reopened at the centre of a newly hollowed-out white space of retailing and catering. Its ghosts exorcized, it was reconsecrated as a temple to tourism, the new centrepiece of an area burned out by it.
RUINS

Guy Debord’s *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978) mourns Paris as a place entirely vanished: ‘whatever others may wish to say about it, Paris no longer exists. The destruction of Paris is only one exemplary illustration of the fatal illness, which, at this moment, is carrying off all the major cities.’ Back when Paris existed, it had ‘a people which did not live on images’ and ‘the modern commodity had not yet come to show all that can be done to a street.’

This idea of ruin is recurrent in psychogeographical writing, whether it is Jacques Reda’s *The Ruins of Paris* (1977) or Patrick Wright’s *A Journey Through Ruins: The Last Days of London* (1991, with its ironic dedication to Mrs Thatcher), or indeed the exacerbated sense of decay in Sinclair’s work, as in his terminally titled *Lights Out for the Territory* of 1997.

There is an even more recurrent idea that is, I want to suggest, not unrelated. A common denominator between the esoteric and low aspects of place is that they tend to be little known, or in a sense ‘secret’, which is a favourite word of psychogeographers. Compare two recent books: Mark Manning writes of ‘this secretive borough of Clerkenwell, that only reveals itself little by little over the years, with the poetry of its secret names, its silent courtyards, churches and hidden parts’, while Bill Drummond writes of walking the outline of his name on the map:

I was playing a private game with myself and my London A to Z. But the best thing about these walks was that they took you down streets, up alleys, across back gardens, over ditches that you would never normally have visited. You would discover things: shops, cafés, old saucepans, skips full of discarded treasure . . . and secret signs. The secret signs were always the best.

This passion for the secret keeps psychogeographers off the tourist map. Louis Aragon writes in *Paris Peasant* (1926) of his dislike for Montparnasse and Montmartre. He preferred ‘fringe’ and ‘equivocal’ zones, where ‘freedom and secrecy had the best chance of flourishing’, and he found his definitive site in a decayed and soon to be demolished Arcade, the Passage de l’Opéra, where he could exercise his rare talent for detecting what André Breton termed ‘a sort of secret life of the city’.

For the Surrealists, secrecy inevitably tended to be a form of eroticism, while in Situationist terms the idea of secrecy – as well as being congenial to Debord’s paranoid grandiosity – has a more structural meaning as the opposite of the Spectacular. There is, however, a much simpler meaning of ‘secret’, because it has come to be a less trite and genteel synonym for ‘unspoilt’.

‘Unspoilt’ took on its modern meaning around 1925, as a response to urban sprawl and tourism. It is a key word for understanding the twentieth century, with its assumption that places are ruined unless they are not. Bali has become something of a paradigm here. Alex Garland’s bestselling novel *The Beach* (1996) featured the ruin of Thailand, with the season-by-season resortification of its beaches, and a group of people who are prepared to kill to keep a particular beach unknown. The notion of the secret has, of course, been recuperated to give guide books themselves an extra frisson, such as *City Secrets: London* and *Secret London*.

The value of the urban secret changes from era to era. The great secret of the late nineteenth century was the extent of poverty and degradation, giving rise to revelatory books such as William Booth’s *In Darkest
London (1886). But by the end of the hyper-transparent late twentieth century, the secret was positive, and it was desired as never before. This desire for secret places relates to perennial fantasies of places 'off the map', like De Quincey's London terrae incognitae, and of liminal zones and glimpsed paradises— in the fictions of Alain-Fournier, H. G. Wells and Arthur Machen, for example—but it gains a new, belated urgency in over-developed, over-exposed millennial London:

There are certain areas of London that I suspect retain their integrity and beauty only by becoming invisible. Threatened or abandoned, they fade slowly into an astral plane, an alternate universe where all the forgotten buildings and ruined architecture of the world still exist, still function, are still inhabited. Sometimes I think I have only to turn round suddenly at the right time to see an ectoplasmic Brookgate shimmering through all that glassy concrete Barbican stuck in its place.

'Another of London's imagined nooks and corners', commented one reviewer, 'up Leather Lane and the fourth dimension on the right'.

Hakim Bey has written lyrically in Sacred Drift of the desire for spaces off the map. 'If the modern world has been thoroughly mapped, nevertheless we now know that maps by definition cannot be accurate . . . because geography is fractal . . . '. We have to vanish into 'hidden fractal dimensions of the map of culture where the rational tyranny of Consensus and Information cannot penetrate'. For Bey, the traveller seeks 'the secret hidden spaces of real life, untouched by control and mediation, where the authentic and marvellous still flourish'. Bey's ideas of psychotopology, Temporary Autonomous Zones and nomadic drifting are recognizably built on Situationist ideas of psychogeography, 'situations' and the dérive (drift), pioneered by Chateglov and Debord as 'a technique of transient passage through varied ambiences'. It has subsequently become a paradigm in French thought, but on the street the dérive was an attempt to recover the unencompassable urban Sublime by becoming lost and disorientated, with the chance of finding unknown places.

It is harder to be lost now than it was when Walter Benjamin wrote: 'to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires practice'. Mobile phones offer 'FINDme', which will recognize your location anywhere in the country and provide information on services, leisure and tourism. And that is only option one: option two is McDonald's Locator Line: 'To find the location of your nearest McDonalds, key 1501'. Chateglov wrote that 'A mental disease has swept the planet: banalization'. The relatively widespread fascination with psychogeography in the 1990s coincided with a perception of so-called dumbing down, which had its correlative in the urban landscape. Psychogeography, the gnosis of place, was the opposite of that dumbing down, and the palimpsests of secret knowledge written up by Sinclair and others were the opposite of banalization.

Virtually unchecked market forces have reduced London to a city of tourist spectacle. A few theme park sights ('What are the must-see sights in Great Britain?') are dotted through a giant service industry, which reached self-parody in the mid-1990s with the appearance of rickshaws on the West End streets.

Ambient zones of a kind not reducible to a few
must-see sights' are particularly endangered. It would be no great loss if Shakespeare's Globe Theatre was crated up and reassembled in Austin, Texas, but the impending erasure of the second-hand book zone in Charing Cross Road, or the ambience of Pimlico Road (recently hit by its first Starbucks, and set for redevelopment) are devastating, like the loss of small Italian cafés such as Alfredo's or Boggi's. Cyberflaneurs can find such cafés at www.classiccafes.com, a website that also offers a good resumé of psycho-geography as it was up and running by 2000:

Psycho-geography is the hidden landscape of atmospheres, histories, actions and characters which charge environments. The lost social ley-lines which make up the unconscious cultural contours of places... With cafés, a sort of dowager atmosphere comes to the fore, apparently drably familiar yet full of secrets.

Time zones are a notable variety of endangered ambient zone: 'in the late Seventies the street had an air of the Forties, with an art-deco café and a non-art-deco café, a knock-down prices linen store and a bookshop which offered ear piercing'.41

Elusive temporal ambiances can still be found (in parts of Pimlico and Victoria, for example), but increasingly time zones survive only inside buildings. Roughly contemporary with Rodinsky's Room was Dennis Severs's celebrated time-warp house in Spitalfields - 'the secret house at 18 Folgate Street' - which has recently been the subject of an essay by Peter Ackroyd.42

Of course, there has always been resistance to change: as long ago as 1875 the Society for Photographing Old London was formed in response to the demolition of old buildings. Previous eras bemoaned the loss of major edifices, such as the Euston Arch in 1962, or the more widespread transition from nineteenth-century buildings to hotel and office tower blocks in the 1960s and '70s, which gave rise to books such as Goodbye London (1973). In contrast, the current banalization is less about great monuments or architecture than a more subtle and pervasive ecological loss of a whole texture at street level.

Plate glass, seen as a utopian possibility in the nineteenth century, was a dystopian reality by the end of the twentieth, when racking business rents favoured catering chains, bureaux de change and estate agencies. Consider the area around the British Museum and former British Library, long associated with small oriental booksellers such as Luzac's ('with their latent mystery', says a mid-twentieth-century writer, 'as if they were the beginning of a story by Algernon Blackwood'43). It now features an American Express bureau de change, a TEFL college and a couple of souvenir shops. On the other side of Museum Street, opposite the museum, was an extraordinary shop selling conjuring paraphernalia. It is now a Starbucks.

Further back on New Oxford Street was a shop at no. 56 called Cuba, selling mid-century clothes – old Crombies, drape coats, silk scarves – with a wooden sign outside ('Estd 1985'). It is hard to believe anything even so modestly idiosyncratic and low-budget could ever have flourished there. No. 56 is now a bureau de change. Going eastwards, its near neighbours include a coffee chain and a sandwich chain. Crossing Coptic Street, an inoffensive restaurant is holding out on the corner, followed by a McDonalds, a plate-glass TEFL college and another plate-glass pizza house.

The Library itself has been decapitated from Bloomsbury and relocated to the relatively meaningless locale of Euston. Its Internet catalogue carries an ad from Amazon ('Buy great books at great prices: buy
books NOW from our sponsors’) and outside the Library is a statue of Blake's Newton – a negative figure in Blake’s system, oddly enough, if anybody bothered to remember Blake - on a plinth bearing the proud legend: 'Grant aided by the Foundation for Sport and the Arts funded by subscriptions from the football pools Vernons Littlewoods Zetters’. No doubt that is what he is doing with those compass points: he is picking no-score draws.

Small flowerbeds in Islington are overshadowed by large unsightly signs announcing their sponsors. The slow death of quality public space, and the hyper-capitalized banalization of the cityscape, threatens to produce a psychic disinvestment in the street, conducive only to greater urban anomie. Nobody would walk for pleasure through a McDonald’s landscape of proliferating estate agents, Kwik Foto developers, American college London programs, offices in the shells of former shops and endless plate-glass catering.

Since the 1980s there has been a concomitant rise of interest in private, controllable decors, such as interior design and city gardening. These autonomous zones are a dystopian fulfilment of Chircheglov’s vision that ‘Everyone will live in his own personal cathedral, so to speak’. The aspirational magazine World of Interiors appeared in 1981, with ‘tablescapes’ and organic paint (‘you can actually hear the difference’), presaging the decade that closed its doors on the outside world. The magazine’s extraordinary success, unlikely a decade or two earlier, has been persuasively related to middle-class alienation. 

For those of us not in the market for organic paint, soundscapes – a portable and temporary ambience, not without a psychogeographical dimension – were a less expensive alternative to an uncongenial environment, along with more specialized leaps into fetishism: ‘All our paradises on Earth are becoming cluttered vacation centers . . . but there are still some nice labels left . . . It has come time for me to dive into this sardine can label."

Places change. But London is being razed by something more radical, in the erasure of place by ‘space’. Overcrowding, property prices, cramped flats unsuited to ‘clutter’, and a not-unrelated fashion for minimalism all combined to make space an ascendant concept by the late 1990s (‘Isn’t space the ultimate luxury?’). Place has meaning, but space is an interchangeable commodity.

As an assertion of history and memory, and of the value of ambience and atmosphere, the 1990s popularity of psychogeography was a last-ditch assertion of place against space. It often took refuge in interstitial zones of private meaning and esoteric knowledge, but it was at least an attempt to maintain a psychic investment in the street. It accompanied an alienation of an almost unprecedented kind from the built environment, responding to anxieties perhaps definitively expressed in Marc Augé’s book Non-places. 

Augé critiques the global spread of the non-place, and suggests that contemporary life tends towards the condition of the corporate lobby, cafeteria or airport departure lounge. Three recent books, chosen almost at random, show how ambient this perception of erasure and ruin has become.

... Nevsky Prospect, a street of ghosts if there ever was one. Jerome says that every city has its street of ghosts. Past the Stroganov Palace and the Kazan Cathedral. Past the Aeroflot offices, and the scrubby Armenian Café. Past the flat where I made love to my Politburo member. It’s been turned into an American Express office
now. All these new shops, Benetton, The Haagen-Daaz shop, Nike, Burger King, a shop that sells nothing but camera film and key-rings, another that sells Swatches and Rolexes. High streets are becoming the same all over the world, I suppose.

I returned to Key West in 1991 . . . A high rise resort had replaced the Sands and the Half Shell [bar] had quadrupled to accommodate college kids who had made Key West a binge-drinking destination. . . . Mallory Square had become a honky-tonk of t-shirt shops and touts hawking time-shares and excursions to a dying reef . . . At dinner, a man at the next table took a flash photograph of his entrée.

. . . Six years later . . . Key West now had a Gap, Banana Republic, Planet Hollywood, and Hard Rock Café, with more mass market emporia promised, including a Hooters, with its franchised big-bosomed waitresses. . .

. . . you've got to understand it's not just talk, we have action against all this shopping, all these yuppy bars, all that plate glass that's taking over most of Berlin right now.49

Of course, none of these places is London; but that, in a sense, is my point.