LBTH RESEARCH
URBAN STRUCTURE AND CHARACTERISATION STUDY

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PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This report has been prepared by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets by Neil Double, Melissa Silvester and Matthew Randall. The report has been written to inform the Local Development Framework and other documents.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Path - these are channels of movement - streets, alleys, footpaths, motorways and the like.

Activity node/node/nodal point - these are focal places, such as junctions of paths.

Landmarks - these are external point references which people experience from the outside, often buildings or structures.

Districts - sections of the city recognisable as having some particular identifying character.

Edges - these are elements not used as paths or not always seen as paths, limiting movement e.g. building edge or canal.

Public space network - a place where everyone has the right to be there without being excluded because of economic, social or cultural reasons.
INTRODUCTION

Background Statement

Tower Hamlets is an important and spatially unique inner London borough, famous for its East End heritage, vibrancy and multiculturalism. However, Tower Hamlets is not without its challenges and particularly its spatial challenges, the growth agenda, widespread regeneration and the value of the built environment are of particular significance.

Historical growth has significantly shaped the physical morphology of Tower Hamlets. The Hamlets grew around key movement routes and connections between the East of England, the City of London and the Thames. Each Hamlet was distinctive, having its own economic function, purpose and role to play, and eventually these Hamlets began to merge together to form part of the greater London metropolis.

The connection to these distinctive places and their centres has been lost over the years (post-WW2). The function, variety and role of each place began to weaken with their centres being dispersed, fragmented and loosened. This has had an impact on social cohesion and interaction and has contributed to the falling of reinforcing a shared sense of place, connecting to our history; its distinctiveness and identity.

Aim of Study

To identify, analyse and characterise the spatial structure of the borough in order to help formulate future spatial planning recommendations.

Study Objectives

- To undertake a literature review, building a knowledge framework to assist in analysis;
- To identify the historical growth of the borough since 1700 and build into this the knowledge framework;
- To perform a structural analysis of the borough based upon this knowledge framework;
- To perform a brief characterisation of the places that constitute the borough; and
- To present a series of spatial planning recommendations.

Study Methodology

This study aims to identify, analyse and characterise the urban form and structure of the borough. By adopting an urban design led approach, a detailed understanding of the qualities and character of the borough can be presented.

Best practice and guidance from a number of key urban design sources has been used, including: Urban Design Compendium 1 and 2; By Design: urban design in the planning system towards better practice and Towards an Urban Renaissance. These key documents and the wider literature review on urban structure have informed a series of criteria that have been used to characterise the structure and form of the borough.

Structure of study

The study is divided into chapters. The first part sets out background research into urban structure and public realm.

The second chapter sets out and analyses the historical growth of the borough and its impact on the image, shape and identity of Tower Hamlets today.

The third chapter presents a present day borough-wide analysis from a series of urban design perspectives, including movement routes and block pattern. This borough-wide analysis alongside the historical analysis provides a basis on which to present the places of today.

The places of today are then explored and analysed in brief and graphic character assessments, setting out the historical and built processes that have come to form the townscape and identity of that place.

Chapter five draws together all the previous analysis to present a series of recommendations for spatial planning in Tower Hamlets.

This study provides part city analysis and part characterisation of the borough. It is rooted in an appreciation and understanding of urban design and how it can assist in creating locally distinct spatial planning. It is therefore not exhaustive in its scope but selective in its critique, appropriate to the needs of supporting the creation of a spatial Core Strategy DPD.
POLICY CONTEXT

National Guidance

Using urban design as a tool to create high quality, liveable, balanced communities has become a significant factor in national government policy guidance; some of which is discussed below.

Planning Policy Statement 1

PPS1 states that ‘good planning ensures that we get the right development, in the right place, at the right time’. These should form the components of a strategic, coherent planning framework.

One of the more relevant principles from PPS1 states that ‘ensuring that development supports existing communities and contributes to the creation of safe, sustainable, liveable and mixed communities with good access to jobs and key services for all members of the community’. Planning needs to recognise its role in helping creating places, communities that will stand the test of time, where people want to live, and which will enable people to meet their aspirations and potential.

Local Development Frameworks need to provide a robust framework to assist in the creation of sustainable communities based upon a shared vision and a clear strategy of how to achieve that vision and put sustainable development into practice.

‘Good design should contribute positively to making places better for people. Design which is inappropriate in its context, or which fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions, should not be accepted.’

By Design: urban design in the planning system: towards better practice

This document placed urban design at the heart of the planning and development process, arguing that good design should be the aim of all those involved in the planning process and should be encouraged everywhere.

It also placed a strong emphasis on ‘placemaking’ bringing together different actors and factors that influence the creation of place at the earliest stage of the process in order to create places that work.

The qualities of place were identified:

- A place with its own identity,
- A place where public and private spaces are clearly distinguished,
- A place with attractive and successful outdoor area,
- A place that is easy to get to and move through,
- A place that has a clear image and is easy to understand,
- A place that can change easily; and
- A place with variety and choice

Urban Design Compendium

This document expanded greatly upon By Design and provided detail and examples of a number of good urban design principles, it has shaped and guided development significantly since it was produced jointly by English Partnerships and the Housing Corporation.

It placed urban design and the tools and knowledge it yields at the forefront of making successful, thriving places across the different scales, from the strategic to the detailed local scale.

‘Urban design is about creating a vision for an area and then deploying the skills and resources to realise that vision’.

It questions the success of modern post war development, its failings in creating great places creating instead banal monotonous development, humdrum in design and dominated by traffic. It highlights the need to appreciate the context of areas in order to shape and develop local identity and places that people feel proud of and value.

Additionally, it makes strong reference to understanding and creating the urban structure by which is meant:
The pattern or arrangement of development blocks, streets, buildings, open space and landscape which make up urban areas. It is the interrelationship between all these elements, rather than their particular characteristics that bond together to make a place.

Urban Structure does not imply any particular kind of urbanism. It applies equally to the centre and to the suburb and everything in between and of course it applies equally to the city, the town and the village.

It linked the understanding and utilisation of urban structure to objectives or place qualities such as:
+ integration and connections
+ functional efficiency ensuring individual elements work together as part of an efficient whole
+ environment harmony ensuring energy efficient and ecologically sensitive urban form
+ a sense of place that strengthens local identity
+ commercial viability responding to the realities of market influence on development mix and delivery

Understanding urban structure can allow the creation of a coherent framework which can guide, shape and direct individual developments in order for them to contribute and work together in forming an efficient whole which embody the qualities of successful, thriving places.

Regional Guidance

The London Plan places great importance on design as a tool to realise the high quality of environment needed by a world city. Good design is central to all the objectives of the London Plan and the success of London as a whole, it is an essential ingredient to ensure higher densities and compact city living works long term and promotes sustainability, inclusiveness and health and well being.

‘London must achieve more intensive development in the right places. It must be designed and managed to ensure long-term efficient use, and in forms that are safe and sensitive both to their own operational needs and to their surroundings.

‘Design quality is central to this and poorly designed schemes will squander London’s valuable resources and can blight the lives of users and neighbours’.

Ensuring the right amount of development is located in the right places designed to a high standard is a pivotal objective and one which requires a strategic outlook.

The London Plan begins to identify the hierarchy of town centres across London in order to support the development of those town centres and guide the location of retail and leisure. Canary Wharf is classified as a Major Centre. Wentworth Street is part of Central Area Activities Zone, and the following are district centres: Bethnal Green (3), Chisip Street, Poplar, Roman Road (east), Waltham Market, Whitechapel, Cressingham, Bow, Elephant and Nunhead.
Local Development Framework

Tower Hamlets is set to build 31,500 new homes by 2016 and further growth is expected beyond this date as London fulfills its potential as a world city. This requires the borough to think carefully and strategically about becoming denser, more compact, making better use of its limited space, regenerating low intensity industrial areas, its economic vitality and retail offer, its infrastructure provision; it shows how to become a better place for people to want to live and work.

The physical growth that is occurring and will continue to occur in Tower Hamlets will have a real and physical impact upon the city. This change in the urban fabric will have an impact upon society, as one cannot change without the other one also changing.

The Local Development Framework offers the Council an opportunity to develop a clear, proactive, spatial vision and strategy for how the borough will look in 15 years and identify means and ways to deliver its vision. Developing a robust understanding of the nature of the physical environment, its form and arrangement and how it can improve people’s lives is an important consideration for a spatial strategy.

This report therefore will form part of a wider, extensive research pool which will inform and shape the emerging spatial vision and strategy of the Core Strategy, the principal document of the Local Development Framework.

Sustainable Community Strategy

Much of the feedback from the Community Plan consultation has implications for the form and function of the borough, how we move around, places where people can meet, feel safe, comfortable and enjoy.

Identifying and analysing the urban structure affects and relates to the needs arising out of the community plan process; some of the key points are:

- Need for common ground and space to meet people
- Safe and lively streets
- Reducing social exclusion
- Opportunities for everyday interaction
- Shared sense of place
- Local identity
- A place being distinctive
- Access and liveliness of centres

How the structure of our urban environments shape and influence the above qualities will be explored within this study as they directly affect the liveability of the borough and its neighbourhoods.
RESEARCH

The Physical Order

Urban Structure and the Living City

"Cities are large collections of buildings linked by space: buildings represent experience, natural, social and functional opportunities. Space connects them into a system of mutual accessibility."" Hillier describes the structure of cities in the above quote. From this, it is clear that the elements of buildings and space are the fundamentals of urban structure. Interwoven with buildings and space is the possibility of opportunities, which a successful city can offer. Opportunities can bring prosperity, choice, growth and a means to solve problems.

Urban design can be viewed as a way to look at parts and wholes and how they combine to form places, good and bad. Hillier suggests that the spatial form of cities and particularly their part/whole structure may have been misunderstood in modern planning.

We have separated urban form from movement patterns, thinking that these entities can be neatly separated out and still form a coherent whole. Hillier argues instead that movement powerfully shapes urban form and always has done. Most urban movement is what Hillier calls "natural movement," movement which is determined by the grid (public realm network) itself rather than by specific attractors or generators. This is because all buildings create some sort and level of movement; they are all nodes in a sense. Therefore all movement is from somewhere to somewhere else, this creates a situation where most movement is "through movement." When street patterns create dead ends and cul-de-sacs and fundamentally do not integrate into the wider movement network, we are seriously limiting this "through movement." Through movement which is so vital in ensuring legible, connected, vibrant neighbourhoods and cities.

When such a connected system exists, which allows and encourages through movement from all places to all other places at all scales of movement, it creates the multiplier effect. This happens when the urban structure exploits the fact that all trips produce a by-product in that each must pass through a certain number of intervening spaces. Hillier argues that this can create patterns of natural co-presence which can be turned to economic, social and cultural advantage. Such as people taking a certain route to somewhere, the tube station for example, these people will attract shops and other commercial uses to locate along that route to take advantage of their purchase power; this is a natural ordering law. This is what in turn creates urban life, activity, vibrancy and over time, a sense of place.

Dis-urbanism has created dead environments where bits have been separated out to the point where they don't interact and fail to form any activity and vibrancy in the city. Buildings sitting in space, a typology often found with much post war housing are so disconnected from the public realm that they can no longer form the vital edge of activity, entrances and surveillance with natural implications on perceptions of safety. Such development types are concerned disproportionately with internal layout and do not consider the relationship with internal and external structure, how it fits into the city fabric.

The deformed grid structure or the deformed wheel as Hillier refers to it was the generic structure of London different (not better or worse) to the grand, planned boulevards of Paris, or unique grid pattern of l'exemple in Barcelona. This gave London its unique 'big' city feel but also its local sense of place arising from all its little hamlets and villages that eventually merged. This to some extent has been lost in East London due to modern, post war developments failing to integrate into this deformed grid-like structure.

"Good urban space is used space. Most urban space is movement. Most movement is through movement. the by-product of how the grid aligns routes from everywhere to everywhere else in the grid. Most informal space is movement-related, as in the sense and fact of urban mobility."

Understanding, and designing the city's urban structure in order to make connections is fundamental to the life and vibrancy of the city and the success of urban neighbourhoods. When done correctly, a connected street system can bring the whole system of land uses, densities, building heights, active public spaces, town centres into a structure that maximises opportunities, everyday interaction, economic prosperity etc.
THE PHYSICAL ORDER

Salingaros argues that there is a need to understand the city as a complex interacting system with hierarchical components that combine to form its structure; only by doing this can we begin to reinstate some sort of urban spatial structure.

“A living city, differs radically from what we have built in the twentieth century”

A living city, one that is vibrant, lively, full of vibrancy and vitality depends upon an enormous number of different paths and connections.

Salingaros refers to something termed the Urban Web, which links very strongly to Hillier’s concept of the wheel like grid structure.

Salingaros discusses the inverse-power scaling law, saying there should be only a few components of large scale, several of intermediate scale, and very many of small size. As humans our minds automatically scale our environment, we recognise what feels natural by its scaling hierarchy and react accordingly.

“In a living city, different types of urban systems overlap to build up urban complexity”

This layering and overlapping of systems can be witnessed in successful urban areas, with local shops, workshop spaces, green parks, streets, bus stops, offices, tube stations, housing co-dependent on each other as each operates as a particular type of node creating and attracting movement.

“Coherent city form emerges from assembling components hierarchically, using intense local couplings together with long-range connections that reduce disorder”. As Salingaros puts it “urban coherency can only come about from the correct combination of geometry and connectivity”.

Nikos Salingaros

The Urban Task Force highlights how important good urban design is to the success and functioning of the city, its districts and for citizen’s quality of life. The physical environment can provide the positive framework on which other social, economic, civic functions come together to make a place feel alive, vibrant, successful and self-sustaining.

“We consider urban districts and neighbourhoods, successful because they recognize the primary importance of the public realm – the network of spaces between buildings that determines the layout form and connectivity of the city. The shape of public spaces and the way they link together are essential to the cohesion of urban neighborhoods, and communities. When the framework is well designed and integrated – as in the traditional compact city – it plays a fundamental role in linking people and places together. When it is fragmented and unstructured – as in so many modern urban environments – it contributes to social segregation and alienation”

We as city dwellers know instinctively when a place feels good, safe, comfortable, and lively and makes us want to stay and enjoy it, and we know when a place does the opposite.

Urban design should be used not as an abstract aesthetic tool but as a way to improve people’s lives and their urban experience.
There are some very definite urban qualities which when combined successfully can help to achieve a successful urban street, quarter, district etc. These have been outlined in various books, reports and best practice guidance and are summarised below:

- A sense of character and identity
- Continuity and enclosure – clear distinction between public and private
- A successful and attractive public realm
- Ease of movement
- A place that has a clear image and can be easily understood and navigated
- A place that can change and adapt easily
- A place with variety and high level of choice

Urban Structure can be described as the framework of routes and spaces that connect locally and more widely, and the way developments, routes and open spaces relate to one another. The layout provides the basic plan on which all other aspects of the form and uses. In other words, it's how the bits of a city can and should be put together to form a liveable, lively, safe and enjoyable place.

"So first come urban life (routes), then space (public realm) and lastly buildings (form)."
Jan Gehl, urban designer

Understanding pedestrian movement patterns and how they built form shapes those patterns is therefore important, and how the quality of space encourages or hinders pedestrian life and movement. It’s very much about activity and accessibility.

There is an important inter-relationship between these elements. When combined successfully they can enliven our urban experience making places understandable, coherent and vibrant. How this understanding can be applied to analysing the urban structure that we experience in Tower Hamlets will form part of chapter four.

Creating opportunities for higher levels of urban intensity in appropriate locations can be a key tool in delivering an urban renaissance. Often space is under used, poorly watched and perceived as unsafe as a result; increasing the intensity to which this space is used should be a clear objective. Transport hubs and urban centres are examples of where this can be achieved, but also along key movement routes.
THE PHYSICAL ORDER

Generating Activity

Accessible places, ones which are easy and understandable to move around are only valuable if there is a reason to move around. Hence, uses and activities play an equally important role.

An approach to mixing uses is an important step in assisting in creating viable, robust and thriving places. Creating variety of uses encourages varied people, at varied times, for a variety of reasons to use, enjoy and spend money in a place.

"Many activities can – with careful design and good urban management – live harmoniously side by side. Except for certain industries or activities that attract very high traffic volumes or create noise at unvariable hours, most businesses and services can co-exist with housing."

Mixing at the right scales is important, from the street to the block, to the neighbourhood, to the district, to the major centres. Achieving this optimum mix is a careful balancing act and one which needs to be explored on a place by place basis.

The greatest mix of uses should combine with the most accessible locations, close to public transport facilities, easy to get on foot and bike, be read as a centre with higher densities, landmarks and as a meeting place for all kinds of people.

Having a diverse range of small shops, services, markets, art galleries and other unique, local uses is one of the main attractors and benefits of city living. As densities increase and more people live in a certain area, the greater viability there is for a diverse mix of uses, as more people equals more spending power who want greater choice.

The social mix of the population is a related issue, a good mix of incomes and tenures ensures that centres can thrive. There can be a healthier distribution of wealth within a place, spending can be recycled and transferred within a place rather than having only high income households or low income households in an area.

Variety and diversity in the city is a central quality in creating successful neighbourhoods, and one which Jacobs expressed in her analysis of city neighbourhoods in America.

"...the fact is big cities are natural generators of diversity and prolific incubators of new enterprises and ideas of all kinds. Moreover, big cities are the natural economic homes or immense numbers and ranges of small enterprises."

The complex variety and mix of activity that naturally occurs in cities is what makes them so inviting and enticing for large amounts of people, the city is more than just for living, it is the meeting point for different people.

The quote below criticises modern planning techniques, of separating functions and uses of the city into neat, simple parcels and its creation of dead, soulless and boring places.

"Perhaps the city was not after all an assembly of well planned housing units, but something that required a different kind of inquiry."

The Seduction of Place, Joseph Rykwert
Centres of Activity

Highly accessible urban centres of great variety and diversity, located in and around public transport nodes of buses, tube etc can offer real choice and opportunities for interaction. They should be clearly accessible by foot to ensure social inclusiveness.

"The purpose of promoting variety is to increase choice. But choice also depends on mobility; people who are highly mobile can take advantage of a variety of activities even if these are spread over a wide area."

If we are to achieve real social inclusiveness then we need variety close to people, in walking distance. Otherwise people without high mobility are going to remain socially, physically and economically isolated, these people include:

- children
- poor people
- disabled and sick people
- elderly people
- parents with young children
- people without cars
- people without a lot of local knowledge

As a rule of thumb people should be able to easily access a network of different centres of different sizes offering a wide variety of choice, opportunities and uses.

- Local (100-250 metres) your local corner shop, pub, dry cleaners, take away etc perhaps located on the ground floor of a corner building.
- Neighbourhood (250-500 metres / 5 minute walk)
- District (500-1500 metres / 10 min walk) restaurants, shops, offices, workspaces, cafes, library.
- Major (1500-4000 metres / 20 min walk) extensive variety of shops, restaurants, offices.
- City (London) access to the entire metropolis – theatres, venues, specialist providers, famous department stores.

The above is meant to be a rough guide, as different centres have different functions, uses etc and often change, overlap, grow and shrink to suit social and economic circumstances. Centres also do not sit in isolation, they interconnect and overlap, they support one another, and thus they need to be understood as such.

Access to a number of centres is an important thing for local people, they want to feel belonging to their neighbourhood and have access to a wide range of shops, services and other things you can find in a modern city like London. Interconnection is vital between centres, to encourage a walk-able urban environment and for people to be able to read the scale and hierarchy of centres in their mind.

Things that can limit the walk-ability of a place:

- Streets that are dominated by the car
- Poor quality, cluttered and dirty public realm
- Poor legibility – easy to get lost and hard to find your way round
- Poor permeability – disconnected street network, such as dead ends and cul-de-sacs.

All these elements in isolation or in combination can restrict a person’s ability to reach the centre of their choice, having a knock on effect on commercial vitality, opportunities for interaction, sense of isolation etc.
THE PHYSICAL ORDER

The Public Space Network & Social Interaction

The street network should allow people to move from where they are to where they want to go: it should allow them to do this in a multitude of different ways.

The public realm can be described as the space between buildings, the space where urban dwellers come together.

"The public realm is a place for all people, regardless of ethnic background, age, socio-economic class, disability, religion, or the like. Residents, visitors, students, workers, children, and the elderly must all be invited to meet in the public realm."

Abstracting out different types of open space into isolated units only segregates out activities from one another but not from the movement routes that make them viable, active, dynamic and safe places. Often the public realm we experience is dead, unloved, poorly connected with little or no natural surveillance severely limiting its potential as a meeting place for local people.

"Some urban areas have too much public space, much of which is poorly designed, managed and maintained. Many 20th century residential developments have a public realm which is simply "SLOAP" (Space left over after planning) - soulless, undefined places, poorly landscaped, with no relationship to surrounding buildings."

The Urban Task Force have clearly recommended an integrated, overarching spatial approach.

"Public space should be conceived of as an outdoor room within a neighbourhood, somewhere to relax and enjoy the urban experience, a venue for a range of different activities, from outdoor eating to street entertainment, from sport and play areas to a venue for civic or political functions; and most importantly of all as a place for walking or sitting-out."

In order to make streets and spaces attractive for people to use and stay in, they have to be of exceptional quality and based on pedestrian scale. Often quantity is given precedence over quality, resulting in large amounts of under-used, unattractive and unsafe open space that fails to add value to local people; this can be seen in many post-war housing estates.

Creating a quality environment for people is paramount and must be considered before anything else in order to achieve a lively and sustainable public realm.

"There are two main metrics of categorising squares - by function and by form. There are numerous examples of recent plaza design where one or other of these two equally important criteria of excellence have been neglected. The empty, windswept place surrounded by under-utilised buildings is all too common in the modern city, while its opposite or counterpart, the busy trails, bound or faceless car parks around which are scattered collections of non related buildings, is also endemic in the urban scene."

(C. Maughlin & M. Merlen, Street and Square)

Jan Gehl through much of his research argues for a clear people-based approach to spatial strategies.

Firstly he states the need to establish the human dimensions - where people move and why, where they want to stop and why and the complexity of interactions in the public realm. This then goes to shape the public realm network of streets and space, which in turn dictates and shapes the urban form and arrangement of buildings. This is needed to ensure the relationship between people and buildings support public life and animation.

Jan Gehl has been critical of modern post-war planning and architecture for failing to understand the physiological needs and wants of urban citizens, the reason why we all come together, but he also states that "They had good intentions, he says. From the 1930s, the prevailing wisdom in planning was that it was healthier to take people out of the cramped conditions of the city and house them away from workplaces, in multi-storey structures (to ensure healthy cross-breezes) which were clean and sun-facing."
but they neglected the psychological and social aspects of design, so we ended up with the bland, soulless tower blocks that spoil cities all over the world. As Gehl puts it, truly literally built like a box.”

Gehl recently termed this notion of the 'invaded city' where cars, inhospitable developments, sideling of pedestrians have created an urban environment where people would rather not be turning them into ‘abandoned cities’ so unpleasant, boring and inhospitable that no one lingers in the streets and squares than is absolutely necessary.

Gehl states that there are three types of outdoor activities:

- **Necessary Activities** – includes those that are more or less compulsory, going to work, school, the shops, waiting for a bus etc. these are generally everyday task in which the majority of people need to partake in to a lesser or greater extent regardless of the conditions and external environment.

- **Optional Activities** – these are activities which occur if there is a wish to do so and the environment and place make it possible and pleasurable to do so.

- **Social Activities** – these activities occur when there is sufficient optional activities to generate enough people, as these activities require other people to be in close proximity. Wanting to be around other people in a pleasant environment – hearing, seeing, playing, chatting, people-watching and other passive contacts is a characteristic of a successful public space. It offers the chance for spontaneous interaction, chance meetings, informal chats, communal activities, and can entice more people who just want to around other people in a safe, pleasant, comfortable and stimulating environment, the epitome of city living.

Successful places will allow the optional and social activities to occur in highest amounts. When the quality of the public realm and exterior environment is of a hostile, harsh, unfriendly, poorly maintained nature then these higher-end social interactions will not occur, or at least not to a great extent.

There is a real and strong inter-relationship between the quality of a city’s public realm and the quantity and quality of the social interactions that occur.

“Safe, well maintained, attractive and uncluttered public spaces provide the vital ‘glue’ between buildings, and play a crucial role in strengthening communities.”

Where do people go? Is a question we should be constantly asking ourselves, as without this understanding development strategies and frameworks may be focusing the wrong development in the wrong place, this has often been the case in modern development.
THE SOCIAL ORDER

Concept of Place and Community

Place has 6 key components according to Farrell:

- There is far humans a generic, almost DNA sense of place for all places
- But urban design and placemaking can only deal with place as specific, not utopian; analysis of existing form, its history and context and what makes the place what it uniquely is, is the starting point. Place can be seen as culture frozen in time.
- Place is always a silent client and often the best clue is what it ‘wants to be’.
- Mono-cultural entities like shopping centres, hospitals and airports are kind of half places but they invariably revert to the natural DNA of human places diversifying and layering with shopping, chapels, housing etc and become structured with a hierarchy of streets and squares

- Place is always changing. city planning and designing is invariably about recognising directions and rates of change.
- But in the end of nature and global changes will prevail over all less than 10,000 years ago London’s river, the Thames was a tributary of the Rhine and the UK was not an island. Climate change and changing sea levels have been, and will be, the norm.

If in Tower Hamlets the Community Plan is looking at ‘Community’ then the Core Strategy needs to understand and look at ‘Place’ as an urban manifestation. Places are real and experienced areas of urban geography and there is a need to understand urban change on this smaller, neighbourhood level from which the community understand and experience it.

Place Identity

Place identity is the connection and relationship that exists between people and place over time. (Professor Ian Bennett)

The temporal element is often overlooked, it takes years and decades for places to develop and gain identity from its users.

Collective memory of place is important. It connects the people to the place in which they live, to its history, the people who have helped develop the place over the years. This is particularly true of the East End which has a very strong sense of itself, its history, its past citizens and its civic growth, understanding, identifying and connecting. Exploiting this facet is a key element of developing and strengthening a sense of place.
"Memory of place does not mean re-mliving the past, but drawing on its memory to recast over the paths and landscapes of past generations, guided by topography and the weather which traced the very structure of the city. It also means that in re-reading the city for the present and the future we must create places that will store new memories for the next generations."

MBK Architects

Memory and meaning form the creation of a place, an image of a place: what constitutes it, where its boundaries lie, where its edges are, where its centre lies.

The built form of cities should be designed to encourage its users to develop a sense of:

- Empowerment
- Rootedness
- Transculturality
- Co-dwelling with nature

Producing an urban environment which engenders positive connotations and meanings requires the citizens to develop an attachment, liking and is an important step in assisting the creation of neighbourhood well-being.
THE VISUAL ORDER

When we experience the city we use all our senses, and the image we get is a result of all these senses forming a picture, whether its bad or good. Legibility of the city is a crucial element in making places more enjoyable and successful. An image is composed of three components: structure, identity and meaning, these all appear together to form a clear or unclear image.

Image quality

Understanding the parts that combine to form the cityscape of Tower Hamlets is an important output of this study. Citizens make sense of their neighbourhood whether it is Bethnal Green or Bow. They know the best ways to get around but for people who are not so familiar with an area, its legibility is an important component of its ease of use and enjoyment. Getting lost in a place is rarely an enjoyable experience.

A clear, vivid and integrated physical setting produces a coherent image for the citizens and encourages social life too. It encourages people to use their environment, to move around on foot. People feel comfortable and connected and are more likely to spend time on their streets and spaces. Places may be organised around a set of focal points, named regions or linked via remembered routes, these elements build an image.

There are 5 principal physical elements that contribute to creating a city image.

Paths

Paths are the channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves. These are the predominant elements in their image. They form the majority of the cityscape. They observe the city while moving along them, and along these paths the other environmental elements are arranged and related.

Edges

Edges are linear elements not considered as paths by the observer, a wall or railway line for instance. Such edges may be barriers to movement but they may also be seam lines which two regions are related and joined together, such as a canal perhaps. Although not as important as paths, they are important organising features for citizens.

District

These are the medium to large sections of the city, conceived normally of having two-dimensional extent, which the observer recognises as being ‘inside of’ or ‘outside of’. They have some common or identifiable character, which generates the observer to think of it as a place.

Nodes

Nodes are the points, the strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter. These are the intensive loci to and from which he or she is travelling. They are often formed by the crossing or convergence of paths, transportation stop, concentrations of activity related to some use or physical characteristic, such as a market or public square. Nodes, or their wider role as forming centres are typically the intensive loci of the district in which it sits. They are often the dominant feature for the observer, viewed often as the heart of a place.

Landmarks

Landmarks are a point-reference. They are usually a physical object such as a building, sign, shop or mountain. They are singled out as one element within many elements. They may be distant, strategic landmarks seen from many places like a tower or dome or they may be more local visible from a certain angle in the street such as a pub on a corner.

Reading the urban environment

Each piece of city has a level of clarity or ‘legibility’ which means the ease with which its parts can be recognised and be organised into a coherent pattern.

Lynch suggests we need to begin developing a clear and comprehensive image of the city, one which is coherent and legible; this has direct implications for urban form and the role it plays in creating a wider piece of city. This environment should reflect the citizens who live there, it should hold meaning and be symbolic, it should promote civility and cohesion as well as allow ease of movement, multiple use and order.

The places that make up a city need to be imagined and read as welkift, together, remarkable pieces of city, connected into the whole yet rich in local history, meaning and tradition. This is what creates the ever elusive desire for ‘sense of place’.

Character, richness and distinctiveness

It should be noted that the city is a product of many builders. It is constantly in flux and change being rebuilt as time passes, and there is no final result, just a direction that can be promoted. A successful piece of city therefore manages to conserve its urban form and shape that has significant value, that people have embedded meaning and affection into as this is what builds up a places character and distinctiveness.

There needs to be a reconnection to the art of shaping cities, to create a form that promotes sustainable living and neighbourhood level well-being. Creating a city form that is legible and coherent is a crucial condition for the enjoyment, use of the city and its desirability as a place to live.
SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

The knowledge and understanding of the qualities and components of urban structure can be taken forward in order to use as an analytical tool. The following points can be drawn:

1. Activity nodes are points of interest that attract people to visit. These nodes can be places where events are held, such as parks, squares, or public buildings.
2. Activity nodes attract people to the area, creating a sense of place identity.
3. Activity nodes can be places where social interaction and activities can occur, such as markets, cafes, or community centers.
4. Activity nodes can be places where public transportation or a cluster of services are located, making them easy to access.
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HISTORICAL STRUCTURE

Urban Structure over time

By exploring the historical structure of Tower Hamlets from the sixteenth century through to the present day allows a story of urban structure to form.

This story is an important link between place identity, historical associations and the role and success of neighbourhoods in Tower Hamlets today. Settlements have history, they have grown and been formed over many years, by many hands which contributes to our understanding of urban structure and place identity.

Why is it important?

Understanding the processes which have shaped and created the settlements and urban form over the years is an important step in understanding urban structure. Structure comes about by many processes and over many years, taking a chronological approach allows a deeper understanding of where we are today.

You can begin to see the key movement routes that have shaped the accessibility of the borough over the years. Some routes have remained constant and important over hundreds of years, and remain to be our main thoroughfares. How we understand these routes is important in how we plan for them in the future.

The layers of historical development

The years that are presented cover the period from 1755 to present day which covers a snapshot of the recent historical development of the borough. However it should be noted that Tower Hamlets has a long history of settlement of which this analysis only begins to scratch the surface.

“Tower Hamlets has been inhabited for 2000 years, with a detailed history going back to the Roman invasion of 43AD. Developed on marshlands, Tower Hamlets grew from a small cluster of communities, known as the Hamlets around the faws - which is the origin of the borough’s name - into the vibrant and dynamic borough of today.”

(www.towerhamlets.gov.uk)
1755

The three key routes connecting London to the countryside of Essex are apparent along with Old Ford Lane and a route running north-south through the Isle of Dogs.

Farmland comprises much of the landscape in this period along with settlements of various sizes. Much of the landscape therefore has been humanised in some form, whether by the building of dwellings or by using it for agriculture. The urbanisation process is emerging at this stage, a process which becomes more apparent in later years. There is a significant amount of non-humanised land in the form of natural marsh land which covers much of the eastern side of the borough and the Isle of Dogs.

Places such as Wapping, Stepney, Lime, Ratcliffe, Mile End, Bow, Brumley and the Isle of Dogs are all evident in this period in some form or another.

1755
adapted from the Stonis Survey 1755
Original sourced from Tower Hamlets
Local History Library
1809

During this period there were a number of small settlements (hamlets) closely connected to the landscape. Generating a living from the land through agriculture and from the City of London which can be seen to be growing eastwards.

The key routes are becoming increasingly important as thoroughfares, trade routes and gathering spaces. From the diagram we can see the hamlets growing around these movement routes, interconnected yet developing their own distinct identity.

The growth of London eastwards can be witnessed from maps in this period. Along the three main routes that span out of the City of London development has clustered around and alongside creating very much a bigger piece of townscape.

This can be seen in the area we now know as Stepney which is developing around Stepney Church and the streets that go through the area.

The importance and connection to the River Thames is clearly apparent in this period, with buildings right up to the edge of the bank. These are places to accept and trade goods, getting them off and on the boats quickly and efficiently.

The Docks have also started to take shape, with West India Docks on the north part of the Isle of Dogs being built catering for the larger ships which were increasingly entering London.

1809

adapted from Laurie and Whittle's New Plan of London with its Environs 1809-10
Originally printed by John Bentley Printers Ltd
Original sourced from Tower Hamlets Local History Library
The expansion of urbanisation of the area is evident during this period, with much of the previously undeveloped marsh and farm lands becoming urbanised with new housing and industry.

The industrial expansion of London led to huge demands for industry and housing growth of which this area with its strategic river access and proximity to the City of London delivered a great deal.

The public gardens and parks movement is beginning to become evident with the creation of Victoria Park alongside other smaller parks and gardens.

1880

adapted from Landmark 1:2,500 1st Series 1869-1880 London
Original sourced from Tower Hamlets Local History Library
1938

The entire area is now fully urbanised, with marshlands and farmlands all but disappeared. The extent and growth of the Docks displays London's and Britain's shipping, trading and colonial power. The beginning of the 20th Century was a period of growth, change and urbanisation, supporting the country's wider aspiration of the British empire.

From the morphology highlighted on the map, the compact, tight built form can be witnessed. The way it creates a permeable network of blocks of varying sizes framing a well connected street network which is vibrant and full of activity due to the building frontages that edge the public realm.

North-South movement routes are clearly more apparent and legible in this period than they are today, many of the long, connected north-south streets have been cut, disconnected and isolated post WWII.

1938
adapted from Landmark 1:10,000 4th Series 1938 London
Original sourced from Tower Hamlets Local History Library
1968

During this period a great deal of post-war redevelopment had either been undertaken or was about to be undertaken. The urban landscape and structure of the borough was changing significantly with a new type of development typology.

The structure of the path network was significantly altered with the comprehensive redevelopment projects and housing estates. Traditional streets flanked by terraced housing were being replaced in many places by modernist housing estates, characterised by towers and long horizontal slab blocks. These were surrounded by open space and criss-crossed by footpaths, and were beginning to radically change the urban structure of this part of the East End.

Many of the paths that cross through these estates are not seen or read as public streets, and as a result are rarely used by the general public who prefer to go around the estates using the traditional street network that remains.

Additionally post-war redevelopment led to a de-intensification of land uses and a depopulation of people. Housing estates were built at densities much lower than the housing that they replaced. Many of these estates turned their backs on the street network, which were becoming more and more dominated by vehicular traffic, the once close relationship between residents and their street was being lost. Retail and commerce was often provided within these estates detached from the wider street and movement network, this discouraged passing trade and many of these clusters of shops and services failed to thrive due to a lack of trade.

Also during this time, the docks were starting to suffer from larger container ports and the changing nature of shopping which meant the docks and River Thames were too small for the ever-increasing ship sizes. This led to rising unemployment and eventually led some years later to the closure of the docks which provided not only a livelihood for local people, but contributed to the identity and sense of place of these neighbourhoods.

Bromley had a recognisable identity during this time, this though has been lost in recent years as large motorways were ploughed through where Bromley is. It has lost its position and place identity. The same can be said for Bow Common, where a process of urban form loosening, de-intensification and loss of any focal point has led to this being seen and thus becoming a non-place.

Cable Street is a particularly important street during this period linking the Tower of London to Rotherhithe and Limehouse and to the docks and workers that lived and worked alongside the Thames. Canon Street is also a key street, linking Rotherhithe and Wapping to Whitechapel area, linking people to the activity of the Thames.
HISTORICAL SUMMARY

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets is a political boundary formed in 1963 that contains a collection of old village hamlets linked and dependent on the Tower of London, which gave rise to the borough's name.

The hamlets which grew and expanded over time eventually formed the larger conurbation of London, giving rise to the area known now as the “East End” in the 19th century. The East End, although having no formal boundaries is known by most Londoners and if asked would probably identify the areas listed below, which are the original historical Hamlets:

- Spitalfields
- Wapping
- Bethnal Green
- Mile End
- Poplar
- Bromley-by-Bow
- Bow
- Whitechapel
- Shoreditch

These Hamlets: outside the city walls were and still are located along the key routes that connected the growing metropolis of London with the East of England and to Harwich, the gateway to Europe. Each hamlet had its own economic role and purpose which sustained its location and prosperity. There was a reason for people to settle there, to build a community and to become economically thriving, and this over time developed a strong sense of place, pride and attachment, which we still recognise today.

These hamlets soon began to rapidly expand in the 19th century and the spatial characteristic of small, individual hamlets surrounded by farmlands and marshes connected by thoroughfares between the City and the countryside changed; the Hamlets eventually grew and merged to form part of the wider metropolis of London whilst retaining their unique character and function.

The invention in around 1880 of the term “East End” was rapidly taken up by the new halfpenny press:

“...and in the pulpit and the music hall ... A shabby man from Paddington, St Marylebone or Battersea might pass muster as one of the respectable poor. But the same man coming from Bethnal Green, Shadwell or Wapping was an “East End” ... the box of Kealby’s bug powder must be reached for, and the spoons licked up. In the long run his cruel stigma came to do good. It was a final incentive to the poorest to get out of the “East End” at all costs, and it became a concentrated reminder to the public conscience that nothing to be found in the “East End” should be tolerated in a Christian country.”

(The Nineteenth Century XXIV, 1888)

The East End eastern boundary is usually considered to be City Wall in the west, River Lea in the east, river Thames in the south and Hackney to the north. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets therefore encompasses all these East End “places” which are known to Londoners, but ask someone where Tower Hamlets is or where you enter or leave it very few people would be able to answer.

The Second World War brought chaos and destruction for the East End, but also displayed the strong “East-End spirit” of not letting the war and bombings get in the way of everyday life.

“A knocked, burnt out East End. The people shattered and exhausted after six years of war. The streets devastated. Forty per cent of houses in the borough at Stepney destroyed by German bombs. 85 per cent of properties near the dock wiped out! Tens of thousands homeless.”

(Glinert, E (2005) East End Chronicles. Allen Lane)

From the post-WW2 period modern planning, comprehensive redevelopment, slum clearance, depopulation, de-intensification, housing estates and urban motorways brought about a radical physical and social change in the East End. Many families were moved out of the east end into Essex, long formed relationships, kinships and sense of community was lost, as communities were re-planned and redesigned based on new planning methods. Redevelopment came above rehabilitation, with much good-quality housing including late nineteenth century apartment blocks needlessly demolished.

“The planners put to one side notions that many East End communities, though unique, were successful socially, that people enjoyed where they lived, that they simply wanted better houses, not a new community.”

(Glinert, E (2005) East End Chronicles. Allen Lane)

Tower Hamlets was created in 1963 from the amalgamation of the Metropolitan boroughs of Stepney, Poplar and Bethnal Green, and therefore comprises most of what is commonly known as London’s East End. The use of this term continues to this day.

Rebuilding and development in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s led to a gradual de-intensifying, fragmenting and dispersing of urban form, population and uses. Modern
urban planning and architecture set about removing the urban complexity the typified much of the pre-war East End, resulting in bland, lifeless, desolate urban environments which now populate our cities. Building new roads, widening existing ones making the public realm for car movement, zonimg out uses separating residential from business, creating large mono-tenure housing estates all featured in this new Le Corbusier/ CIAM inspired Tower Hamlets.

"A new townscape started to appear. Instead of the interesting tangle of roads, alleys, ways, side streets and junctions that made neighbourhoods such as Spitalfields, Stepney and Whitechapel so visually interesting, the new estates were set in a poor man’s version of the late nineteenth century garden city ideal: ‘access’ roads that dissolved into empty cul-de-sacs, sprinkled with concrete slabs or low rise rabbit-hutch ‘cottage’ dumped arbitrarily on bare patches of grass."

(Ginnett, E 2005) East End Chronicles, Allen Lane)

There has been a disorientation and disconnection of ‘place’ name and management from the actuality of Tower Hamlets on the ground. Political boundaries from the Borough down to individual wards have caused this disconnection process and spatial planning needs to link back to place for the purpose of the urban planning, design, growth and change.

This reconnection to place for the purpose of proactive future spatial planning and placemaking is important to assist in creating sustainable communities, a key part of the government’s urban agenda.

A diagram showing the interconnected relationship of the places known collectively as the East End. Note the relationship of the Tower of London set as a landmark within the collection of hamlets.
URBAN STRUCTURE TODAY
THE SITUATION TODAY

This section of the report will go through the elements that combine to form a place's urban structure, by diagnosing and analysing the borough based on the research and historical understanding.

By using a set of guiding criteria as outlined in the methodology section, an understanding and analysis of Tower Hamlets’ urban structure can be formed. The criteria is based around a morphological approach, looking at the physical layers that make up the city.

The key criteria are:

- Bigger picture - the strategic scale
- Paths
- Activity nodes
- Public transport and social infrastructure network
- Public space network
- Block pattern
- Urban edges
- Green landscape
Tower Hamlets set within its London context and showing some of the places that make up the borough.
THE BIGGER PICTURE

Tower Hamlets is a piece of London, which itself is a global, multi-cultural city. Tower Hamlets is an expression of this on a small scale. Its communities are rich in history, multicultural and diverse in nature and sit side by side with other places that make up London. London has always been a city of villages and hamlets, which have over time merged together as the city grew, prospered and expanded. This pattern is a particular characteristic of the city and can still be experienced and witnessed today which each ‘place’ still having its own unique character and identity. This is one of the main positives of London, local communities set within a metropolis of opportunity and choice.

Tower Hamlets sits within central London as the diagram below shows, it is characterised by relatively high levels of global accessibility. It functions as a place to move through, with routes crossing through the borough connecting the West End and City of London to the rest of East London and East Anglia. This central location continues to shape growth and regeneration in Tower Hamlets, including affecting land values, property prices, investment decisions, accessibility and land uses.

Tower Hamlets and the places that make up this part of London have, to a degree lost some of their global and local connectivity at a pedestrian level. Ease of movement through and to some parts of Tower Hamlets can be difficult and unintelligible. This affects the boroughs connectivity at a strategic scale often reducing the potential accessibility advantages that shape central and inner London locations.

This global accessibility affects the accessibility and quality of place at a local scale. Some of the places within Tower Hamlets have been affected by reduced global accessibility and have impacted upon the viability and vibrancy of their network of centres and the historical relationships of location advantage that came to form these places.

CITY

edge

central

HINTERLANDS

edge

Tower Hamlets set within its Greater London context and its relationship to the hinterlands of Essex and north Kent.
PATHS

As can be seen from the paths diagram, there is a hierarchy that operates across the borough based upon pedestrian accessibility and the connectivity of that route. The most connected streets such as Bow Road down to less connected streets. Generally the longer the path the more connected that path is, it will take you to a greater number of places via a greater number of other places. People now travel when they are on a street that is well connected, it has more people, more activity and the buildings are usually of a larger scale.

Tower Hamlets urban structure is heavily dependent upon the three key paths that run west to east through the Borough. These paths have existed for hundreds of years (see historical maps).

- Bethnal Green Road which turns into Roman Road,
- Whitechapel High Street which turns into Bow Rd
- Commercial Road which turns into East India Dock Road

Unconnected paths

Some of the paths in Tower Hamlets do not connect which limits the connectivity of those routes as people cannot use them to get access to other paths. This impacts upon the overall accessibility of a place. People want a whole variety of movement routes, different ways to get from A to B. The movement network should accommodate this and promote connected, permeable and accessible environments.

There are many instances where paths create dead ends. This impacts upon the intelligibility of a place, in which a pedestrian walks down a particular path which is a dead end which makes them have to back-track in order to find a new route to where they want to go.

Car-only paths

There are a number of paths in the borough that do not allow or encourage the pedestrian to use them. Aspen Way and the A12 are examples of this, purposefully excluding the pedestrian in order to fulfill the movement needs of vehicles. They do not function as multipurpose paths. Due to there inaccessibility for the pedestrian, these paths actually end up forming barriers to pedestrian movement, with people having to go over or under them in order to get where they want to go. This can be seen in places such as Blackwall, Poplar Riverside, Bromley-by-Bow and Fish Island.

Quality of paths

The quality of paths can at times be poor for a number of reasons, often because the pedestrian comes second to the car. The right balance in some cases is not achieved. The pedestrian environment needs greater priority. It is harder to create a quality environment for the pedestrian than it is for the car, therefore greater care, design and importance should be placed upon the pedestrian experience with the car being accommodated in this balance. Paths such as the Highway, Commercial Road, Burdett Rd, Westferry Rd are all unfriendly to the pedestrian thereby discouraging people from walking or cycling which impacts upon health and well-being.

Primary paths

The paths that run north-south through the borough are fewer and less connected than those paths that run west-east. This makes movement in a north-south direction more difficult and complex, as well as impacting upon diagonal movement (south-east to north-west for example). Paths such as Globe Road, Burdett Road, Cambridge Heath Rd do not function as primary paths. The built form alongside these paths often fails to frame the space affecting the clarity and intelligibility of their connection. The supports and partly explains the issue of how poorly connected the borough is to the Thames, it is physically close yet often very inaccessible. These north-south paths do not make the logical conclusion of connecting to the river and opening up access.

Secondary paths

Primary paths such as Bethnal Green Road, Whitechapel High Street and Commercial Road are relatively coherent, connected and intelligible. This is less the case with many secondary paths in the borough, many create dead ends, do not read as secondary paths, poorly connect to primary paths and are too few in areas like the east of the borough.

This impacts upon neighbourhood accessibility and quality of pedestrian movement. Making it hard for the pedestrian to go from a local path via a secondary path to a primary path, it discourages through movement and limits the walkability of the neighbourhood.
ACTIVITY NODES

Nodal points, often created by the convergence, cross-over of paths serve to act as focal points in the urban landscape; they are places where people come together. As they are interlinked to paths, they also share a similar hierarchy, when two or more primary paths cross or converge then a major node is created, similarly when two more local paths cross a smaller, less intense node is created.

Many parts of the borough have these nodes which have a strong relationship to the paths that create them. Tower Hamlets has many linear centres, which run along key movement routes, forming high streets, a typically English urban condition. Shops and businesses locate around and along these nodes due to their high accessibility and high levels of footfall, they locate where they are likely to create economic and social transaction.

Historically markets locate along these key routes (Roman Road, Bethnal Green, Whitechapel) supporting and establishing a unique relationship with the shops that operate helping to create a greater degree of vibrancy.

Unconnected paths create few meeting places

As discussed under the paths analysis, much of our path network fails to connect up, creating dead ends and cul-de-sacs. This has implications for the creation of nodes, which function as places where people can meet as they are predominately only located at the convergence or crossing of paths. Limiting accessibility and thus the creation of activity nodes impacts upon the opportunity for social and economic transaction.

Lack of nodes

There is a lack of smaller and medium nodes across the borough, which impacts upon the creation of successful and connected neighbourhood centres. This has in some cases resulted in a fragmented dispersal of commercial and civic uses which collectively fail to form a critical mass of shops and services which can support one another.

Unfocused nodes

Many existing nodes fail to take advantage of their primary role as frames of activity. Often buildings do not enclose public space adequately, cars dominate the public space combined with very little ground floor activity or uses. This can contribute to an empty and inhospitable atmosphere, these nodes do not function as places you would want to meet and linger in. The junction of Commercial Road, East India Dock Road, Burdett Road and Westferry Road are good example of such a condition.

What can be seen from the map opposite is that many areas in the east of the borough have failed to form and capitalise on their nodes. Failing to form highly accessible, viable centres which provide a focal point to a place. Commercial and civic uses have instead been dispersed or introverted from the key paths activity and nodes, disconnected from pedestrian footfall and limiting economic and social transaction. Bromley-by-Bow is such an example, where commercial uses are separated from the path network making it hard for pedestrians to access the supermarket.

Quality of nodes

In the instances where the nodes do function as places of activity, with a mix of uses, like in Bethnal Green and Cambridge Heath the quality of the space between buildings discourages people to stay and linger. Cars often dominate the space, there is a lack of outdoor seating, places to eat and drink combined with poor quality public space. To function as meeting places, they need to be hospitable, comfortable, enjoyable and safe for pedestrians and cyclists.
PUBLIC TRANSPORT AND SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE NETWORK

Successful centres need a complex layering of activities and infrastructure, all coming together to reinforce the centrality of a place. Public transport and social infrastructure forms a critical component in creating accessible, vibrant centres. They attract and concentrate activity as well as offering transport connections to other areas.

The public transport and social infrastructure network in Tower Hamlets sometimes reinforces existing centres, usually historical ones: as is the case with Bethnal Green, Mile End, Stepney, Whitechapel and Wapping. However, in other cases there is less of a relationship to centres as is the case with many areas that run alongside the DLR network which was built in the 1980s. This network brought improved accessibility to many formerly inaccessible areas such as Poplar, Blackwall and East India.

Public Transport & nodes

There are new nodes that have been created as a result of new public transport stations. Often these nodes do not connect very successfully with the path network, and limit pedestrian access. DLR stations like Blackwall and East India are examples of where new stations fail to connect into the boroughs path network, thereby limiting their potential as activity nodes. Canary Wharf is another example where most people travel in and out via the public transport network, the local path network fails to connect very successfully into Canary Wharf, limiting its accessibility to surrounding areas.

Integration of public transport hubs and centres

In some places such as Limehouse, Shadwell and Westferry the public transport hubs do not visually or physically connect and link up with the key paths/mix of uses. The opportunity to link up these elements is missed, and impacts upon the vitality and vibrancy of centres.

Through movement and potential passing trade is not maximised. Creating centres where all elements interlink and are visually and physically connected will help assist in creating meeting places.

New growth areas

Partly as a result of new public transport infrastructure and demand for new housing there is considerable growth in locations which previously were fairly inaccessible. Places such as Poplar, Bow Common, Poplar Riverside have seen new or improved DLR stations and are experiencing growth in both resident and working population.

With this comes a need to improve the local accessibility of the path network. Linking up the new stations, with the street hierarchy and activity nodes to assist in creating new centres to these places is an important component of creating sustainable communities. There is a need for new and improved centres, located around these new public transport hubs, creating the multi-functional centres we see elsewhere in the borough. However, the role, size and function these new centres perform needs to be understood in relation to their location within the path/nodal hierarchy. Having centres only accessible by public transport is not sustainable. There is a need to promote walkable neighbourhoods with centres accessible by foot and bicycle.

Accessibility of social infrastructure

In line with principles of centrality, social infrastructure and civic buildings should be located in central and accessible locations such as centres in order to maximise opportunities for people to access them. However, as the map opposite shows, much of the borough's social infrastructure is spread across the borough, not reinforcing areas of centrality.

Collectively this has contributed to the loss of focus on centres as places to access social services and facilities. This has therefore had an impact on their economic vitality, the quality of public space and, to a degree, social cohesion and sense of wellbeing.
PUBLIC SPACE NETWORK

How are public spaces in Tower Hamlets used? This is an important question if we are to begin to promote quality of life for our residents, the public realm in which our local people spend most of their time in, the streets, squares, alleys and green spaces can either encourage or discourage interaction.

To create meaningful and vibrant public spaces there is a need to understand the subtle and definable qualities that encourage people to meet and use public spaces.

Enclosure and continuity

The way in which buildings relates to public space, the relationship between internal and external space is an important consideration in the perceived quality of the urban environment. Many buildings in Tower Hamlets often fail to relate to the public realm and its hierarchy. What is meant by that is twofold:

• Firstly, the form, scale, height and massing of buildings fail to respond to the hierarchy of that street i.e. taller buildings on main streets and smaller ones on the minor streets.

• Secondly, buildings fail to create continuous frontage to the public realm in a way which responds to the function and importance of that street, i.e. large setbacks, breaks in elevations, long blank facades fail to animate public space.

In addition, the poor enclosure of space also assists in creating a poor microclimate where wind vortexes can dominate and make the space unpleasant and uncomfortable for the pedestrian.

Inactive edges to spaces

Spaces become animated from the edges, evidence shows that people naturally populate the edge of a space. The centre of public space is usually the least used and needs other techniques to animate it, such as fountains, trees, benches, cafe.

Some buildings that frame public spaces in Tower Hamlets do not always offer active, ground floor uses. There are too many blank, dead edges which fail to encourage activity around the edge of the space and therefore never gains any activity closer to the centre.

Quality space

Much of the public space in Tower Hamlets is not designed to the quality that encourages optional activities. Many spaces are therefore poorly used comprising unattractive traffic islands, gyratory’s and wind swept spaces in which people would rather not stay and linger in.

Unconnected spaces

The inter-connectivity of the public space network is often poor and unintelligible. The main public spaces are do not always relate to the main paths that carry pedestrian flow. The paths that connect need to be of the same high quality as the squares, otherwise the opportunity for greater inclusiveness and vitality is lost.

Public squares

Much of the public space network in Tower Hamlets is linear in typology. There are less spaces that have 3 or 4 sides such as a squares, triangles, or other shapes. Often these shapes allow more lingering, calm areas and places to meet and stay. The ones we do have are dominated by vehicles. Squares set off paths can offer rest spaces for citizens, rest from the hustle and bustle of the street, being framed by buildings on many sides it offers a great sense of enclosure and microclimate.
URBAN BLOCK PATTERN

The block pattern is created as a result of the path network. Paths are set down and shaped by movement patterns, from which parcels of land are left which we can term as blocks. These blocks are then composed of plots, the individual pieces of privately owned land which buildings are built on.

The size and shape of blocks vary considerably from one area to another in Tower Hamlets, which has a direct impact upon the permeability of the borough.

Blocks which create barriers

There are instances where large blocks exist which limit the walkability of that place. Some are over 250m in length which requires a fairly large detour for the pedestrian to get to where they want to go.

Under-developed blocks

Many blocks have uses and buildings on them that do not optimise the use of the land. This is wasteful and contributes to under used and inactive parts of neighbourhoods. This impacts upon movement patterns with pedestrians avoiding under used and isolated areas.

Interface between public and private

Many buildings have their public fronts facing inwards into a block and their private back facing the public realm. This provides no active edge or sense of activity for the public realm and means blocks are introverted contributing little to the street scene.

Size in relation to centres

In many centres and activity nodes the blocks that form the structure are often very large which limits the variety of activities that can occur. Smaller blocks are better located in the centre of places, as with smaller block sizes you can achieve more built edge and more active frontages, hence more uses and activities can occur. Mile End is an example of where the block structure is large in and around the centre.

Segregation of users

With many blocks, pedestrians can move through them, along and around buildings, cars are sent another way and cyclists another one. Separating out users in distinct paths is wasteful and duplicates the land needed for movement. Through careful design integration these users can successfully use the same path in most cases.

This can lead to a situation where a path is not well used and does not have enough activity to make it feel safe, overlooked and useable. This can reduce the permeability and walkability of a place.

Fragmented block structure and estates

Many large blocks operate as segregated units in the urban fabric, with dead ends and routes that are unintelligible to the unacquainted pedestrian. This can isolate users into those which can navigate these blocks and those who cannot. This can assist in forming no-go-areas limiting the permeability of a place. This can culminate in a situation where residents of an estate feel so detached from the wider urban structure that they form isolated territories.

Movement in the East of Tower Hamlets

The block pattern in Tower Hamlets differs across the Borough. Generally the eastern edge of Tower Hamlets is comprised of larger blocks. This is due largely from the historical industrial nature of this area and to a degree from post-war housing developments from WWII bombing and slum clearance. Along the eastern edge of Tower Hamlets there are also a series of physical barriers that reduce permeability. These comprise of major roads (including the A12 and Aspen Way) the River Lea, the canals and the railway lines. Smaller block sizes are generally found in the centre of Tower Hamlets, the Isle of Dogs and along the western edge, due to the historic residential led use in this area.
URBAN EDGES

Positive edges

Edges can assist in giving distinction and definition to places. You know you are beginning to leave Bethnal Green and enter Whitechapel as you pass under the railway arches. This edge is positive, it frames your place reference but also allows you to move through it or along it, it increases your urban experience without hindering your movement.

Natural features in Tower Hamlets often act as positive edges, they offer the citizen a connection to the natural landscape. Its power, as a shaper of the city, this landscape gives us a sense of our place on the environment and puts us in context.

The River Thames is the most obvious natural edge, its edge very distinct its gives you a sense of being firstly in London, on the north bank, views across and along the River and a strong connection to the natural environment. The role of the Thames is under utilised in Tower Hamlets, its potential as an edge and as a path could be significantly promoted. At present it is hard to access, both physically and also visually, the path network does not always make strong clear links to the Thames edge. The Southbank is a prime example of where the Thames assets can be maximised.

The River Lea offers a similar function to the Thames, but is even more under utilised. Its industrial use over the years has discouraged its potential as a positive edge and natural movement path. Access to the River is very poor and the quality of the environment discourages people from using it, also connections across the River are very infrequent.

The man-made canal network also offers positive edges to places and with the towpath offers a desirable, attractive movement path for pedestrians and cyclists. Connections across them are in most cases infrequent so they do not pose a massive barrier. Their role is also changing with older industrial type uses that clustered along them moving elsewhere and more residential, mixed development being brought forward.

The man made environment also offers edges, many of which are positive. The railway arches create edges often giving a positive edge to a place, a sense of character and vitality and displaying the strategic role of the city and its transport lines. In some places the arches which allow at grade movement and activity making this piece of urban infrastructure sensitive to its surroundings, and useable to local people.

Edges as barriers

Edges, as discussed, play a wide role in the cityscape. Strategic infrastructure across the borough forms in some cases negative barriers; both physical and visual.

Bishopgate Goodsyard is an example where the railway infrastructure has created a large barrier to movement, limiting north-south routes from Spitalfields to Bethnal Green contributing an isolated feeling to the area.

The DLR tracks at grade often cause a significant barrier, stopping ease of movement from one place to another. This is also true of the A12 and Aspen Way, heavy car only motorways which require people to have to go under or over them to cross, disrupting their natural desire lines and limiting movement patterns. This has had an impact of severing the centres and hearts of places, seen at Bromley-by-Bow.
Landscape Components

The Thames

Our waterways
GREEN LANDSCAPE

A network of green spaces are evident across the borough. They provide much valued play space, access to nature, space for events, space to relax and unwind and help with general well-being of residents.

In a relatively dense, inner city part of London green spaces are extremely important. And because of space limitation, the green space network is heavily protected and valued, issues such as quality, accessibility and the range and types of green space on offer are key considerations. Green spaces in themselves are not necessarily good, they have to be well maintained, good quality, reflect the users, be integrated into local neighbourhoods and be safe and comfortable to use. If these qualities are not achieved then green spaces can be negative spaces, creating no-go areas and contribute to feelings of unsafety.

Green Spaces acting as Barriers

 Whilst green spaces can be magnets of activity and people, unloved and little used green spaces can act as barriers. This is often the case when dark fall and people are afraid to walk through or close to green spaces in fear of being mugged. It is only if green spaces are well used, attractive and overlooked with enough eyes will people tend to walk through them otherwise they act as serious barriers to movement.

Edges of Green Space

Activities and vitality generates from the edges of buildings and creeps into the central space if there is enough activity to warrant it to. The same applies to green spaces, often the edges of green spaces are dead, poorly overlooked and with a feeling of emptiness this discourages the heart of the park to be used as people don’t feel safe venturing into it.

Role & Function of Green Space

Much housing estate amenity land does not offer the qualities and benefits wanted by local from their green spaces. Much amenity land is semi-public or semi-private land, which often means that no one really thinks they are entitled to use it. The residents feel its too open and public for everyday use and the public regard it as land for people who live on the housing estate. This real confusion between public and private underpins why so much amenity land is unloved, decaying and little used.

Connecting with nature

Green spaces not only offer places for humans to relax and be close to nature but can also be important assets for local wildlife. This is not automatically the case, and green spaces have too been designed with careful regard to how they encourage biodiversity.
PLACES OF TODAY

The notion of place operates at a multitude of spatial scales from the region down to the street scale. There are a multitude of overlapping and interlinked places which can be broadly recognised and spatially identified within Tower Hamlets.

This is not a definitive list, but a basis on which to draw and promote placemaking from. There may be some that have very a strong place identity like Bethnal Green and others which have lost their identity over the years like Bow Common and others which are being created by new development and growth, like Canary Wharf.
CHARACTERISATION OF PLACES
CHARACTERISATION OF THE PLACES OF TODAY

An character assessment has been undertaken for each of the identified places of today.

A detailed characterisation of each place can help inform strategy and vision drafting, ensuring it reinforces the positive character of an area and reduces the negative.

By using a mixture of text, historic maps, diagrams and photos a picture begins to form on the character of each place.

The characterisation is structured along four strands:

• Historical character and identity
• Landscape and open space
• Heritage and townscape
• Block pattern and movement

The four strands have been adopted from best practice publications including:
1. By Design: urban design in the planning system towards better practice: DETR
2. Urban Design Compendium: English Partnerships & The Housing Corporation
3. Towards an Urban Renaissance: Urban Task Force
SHOREDITCH

historical character & identity

Shoreditch arose on the north-east fringe of the City of London around the junction of two Roman roads, present day Kingsland Road and Old Street, where the parish church of St Leonard still stands. Shoreditch was the site of a nunnery from the 12th to the 16th centuries and afterwards it became a wealthy neighbourhood home to traders and factory owners. However by the mid 17th century Shoreditch was a disreputable place, frequented by criminals. By the 19th century the area was considered a slum ruled by criminals and prostitutes. One that reflected the east ends perception as “other”, having a separate identifiable character.

The post war era saw the retention of Shoreditch as a place of deprivation, poverty and working class culture. However, the last 20 years has seen the transformation of its cultural status into an artistic and bohemian quarter in where a vibrant nightlife meets with the northern borders of the Square Mile.

Shoreditch’s diverse commercial, industrial and cultural traditions are perpetuated in its built form such as Shoreditch Tabernacle Hall St Matthew National Schools and Columbia Road whose famous Flower Market is held weekly.

landscape & open space

Shoreditch is a densely populated area in close proximity to the City of London and due to this includes a limited number of neighbourhood parks, which are all classified as such due to their small size. The neighbourhood parks in Shoreditch include Ravenscroft Park, Jesus Green, Boundary Gardens and Virginia Gardens. Boundary Gardens in the Boundary Estate is Grade III listed and is one of only three listed parks and gardens in the Borough. The bandstand in the gardens forms the centrepiece of the Boundary Estate and many of the mature trees radiating from Arnold Circus are protected by Tree Preservation Orders (TPO’s). The view from the bandstand along Calvert Avenue towards Shoreditch High Street is considered important.

Shoreditch also includes a number of children’s play spaces distributed throughout the area which provide vital play space for children and their parents.
heritage & townscape

There is a mixed typology of built forms in Shoreditch, demonstrating the constant change and growth that has characterised this area for centuries. The housing stock includes Victorian terraces, London County Council housing estates and post-war estates, that sit side by side. The scale and densities of the area are also greatly varied with two-storey terraced housing, five-storey mansion blocks and 15-storey plus tower blocks.

The Boundary Estate and Jesus Hospital Estate are two well known Conservation Areas in Shoreditch. The Boundary Estate built by the LCC is an example of successful medium scale, high density social housing and remains to this day a well-loved collection of buildings. The Jesus Hospital Estate is lower rise and medium density consisting of rows of mainly two storey terraced houses, which today are well-kept and sought after property. Much of the lively Columbia Road Flower Market is also located in the Jesus Hospital Estate and the market draws large crowds of tourists and locals on Sundays.

A considerable number of listed buildings are located in Shoreditch, of which the majority are located in the Boundary Estate. The Bishopsgate Goods Yard site is also listed.

block pattern & movement

The urban grain in Shoreditch is a mixture of fine and coarse grain, with the majority of the smaller blocks found in and around the Boundary Estate and Brick Lane area. Although in general the area is easy to navigate on foot, pedestrian movement is often hindered by very large blocks and post war housing typologies. These estates often display a fragmented block pattern with no clear distinction between street and building. These blocks also create significant barriers to pedestrian movement, often due to the use of cul-de-sacs rather than through roads.

Three highways border Shoreditch, which are Bethnal Green Road, Hackney Road and Shoreditch High Street. These highways are primary routes and function as busy traffic corridors. The secondary routes in Shoreditch include Columbia Road, which is lively on market days and more friendly in design to pedestrians.
SPITALFIELDS

historical character & identity
The name ‘Spitalfields’ was named after a Hospital and Priory known as St. Mary’s Spital, founded in 1197. Standing a little way outside the Bishop’s gate, its lands stretched back over the area where the remnants of Spitalfields Market now are. Spitalfields is historically famous for providing refuge to those fleeing persecution from all over the world. One group that helped to define Spitalfields were the Huguenots that arrived from France after the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Most Huguenots were skilled tradesmen with particular skills in the textile business. The massive influx of immigrants precipitated Spitalfields becoming “all town” and substantial three and four storey houses were built to house the cottage industry. It was at this time that the area became world famous for silk and brocade.

In the 18th century Spitalfields accommodated a thriving and prosperous community with the 1720 Hawksmoor Church adding grandeur to the elegant nearby streets. However the weaving community flowered for only a short time and by the 19th century was in terminal decline. By the 1850’s the weaving industry had completely collapsed. Already run down, the area once again witnessed significant immigration, this time in the form of the chronically poor eastern Jews.

Up to the present, a symbol of the area’s history is the mosque in Brick Lane which has been a place of worship for different faiths over hundreds of years. At present the mosque serves the Bangladesh community whose culture and cuisine imbues Spitalfields with a cosmopolitan feel. This influence is so striking that the area has been dubbed Bangla Town.

In general, Spitalfields physical image was crafted after the Great Fire of London in 1666. The character of the area is underpinned by the contrasting narrow lanes and alleyways which typify the bustling street life of Charles Dickens’ Victorian London. Spitalfields covered market, which was built in 1892 and in many ways remains a fine example of this historic hamlet’s architecture.

landscape & open space
The area of Spitalfields incorporates a limited number of parks, which is typically characteristic of a dense and built up area in close proximity to the City of London. The majority of the parks in Spitalfields are also of a small size and are therefore all classified as neighbourhood parks. The largest park in the area is Allen Gardens, while smaller parks include Christchurch Gardens. The area includes a number of children’s play spaces and an urban farm known as Spittalfields Farm, which is located adjacent to Allen Gardens. Due to the built up nature of Spitalfields, the open spaces in the area also consist of hard paved open spaces, such as Bishops Square. Bishops Square is located next to the busy Spitalfields Market and shops on Brushfield Street and is a well used open space by office workers and tourists, as well as a busy pedestrian thoroughfare.
heritage & townscape

Spitalfields is a lively, diverse and historical area that has a rich and complex character. Spitalfields and Petticoat Lane Markets, Brick Lane and Truman Brewery are well known landmarks in the area and contain a diverse mix of fashion, art, restaurants, night time entertainment and retail.

A large proportion of Spitalfields is located within Conservation Areas. The Fournier Street Conservation Area is the largest in Spitalfields and contains some of the most architecturally and historically significant buildings in the Borough, including both the listed Spitalfields Market and Nicholas Hawksmoor's Christ Church. The ruins of the Priory and Hospital of St Mary (also known as St Mary Spital) is listed as an ancient monument and is partly within the Elder Street Conservation Area. The Artillery Passage Conservation Area contains historic narrow passages, lanes and courtyards and a 17th century street pattern.

The scale and densities greatly vary in Spitalfields, from terraced housing to large modern office blocks built along the western edge of Spitalfields, next to the City of London. The proximity to the City of London has led to the character of Spitalfields bearing a similar relationship to the City of London, alongside the more residential-led character within Tower Hamlets.

block pattern & movement

Spitalfields is a pedestrian and cycle friendly area, with few main roads and excellent public transport links, with Aldgate, Aldgate East and Liverpool Street stations being located closely. Pedestrians are drawn to the area by Spitalfields Market, Petticoat Lane Market and the Backyard Market/Sunday Up Market in Truman Brewery on the weekends, as well as the diverse mix of shops and restaurants around Brick Lane.

Bishopsgate/Shoreditch High Street and Commercial Street are the busiest roads in the area and are hence classified as highways. Bishopsgate/Shoreditch High Street acts as an important north-south link from the City northwards. Commercial street is a busy road in the area, although an active street for pedestrians, which contributes to the character of the area.

Spitalfields has a fine urban grain which is seen throughout much of the city and the city fringe areas. Throughout much of Spitalfields the blocks are small to medium in size and generally follow an irregular grid pattern. This type of block pattern allows for ease of movement for pedestrians and cyclists, due to clear sight lines and increased access points.