

Street photography

Phil Maxwell

The photograph opposite, taken in 1918 by William Whiffin, epitomises dock life in the first half of the twentieth century. The busy streets of the Isle of Dogs (Manchester Road in this case) overshadowed by a thriving docks industry. Phil Maxwell has continued the tradition of street photography through this period of massive change. Some of his pictures, focusing on Docklands and the Brick Lane area of East London, are featured here. Also, his comments on how they came about and his view that despite the great changes to the area some things stay very much the same.

I've been photographing the East End for nearly twenty years and have never become bored of the visual feast that its streets offer. I still get a sense of excitement each time I go out because I know there will be something new to discover. I think I am a street photographer, fascinated by the way people interact with their environment. Photography enables me to explore issues around class, human relationships and society. In essence, photography is a powerful political tool, which vividly lays bare essential

truths. These truths are reflected all over the world and transcend the superficial and transient images pumped out through the media. I have been fortunate to photograph in different parts of the world and to realise that people everywhere have to deal with the same abuses of power. The street, be it Whitechapel, Naples or Dhaka is a theatre which invites visual documentation and provides endless material for the photographer. For me, all aspects of human life and emotion can be found in the streets of East London.



The person who designed the Canary Wharf tower has said that it's meant to be a symbol of capitalism. But for me the silhouette of this girl running across the road eclipses this symbol. It's the juxtaposition of the two that intrigues me. All the changes, all the investment has not really touched the lives of the indigenous population. The people still living in the area give it the character that it's always had.

I like photographing architecture. This is the new Canary Wharf station. The roof is designed quite sensitively. I like the contrast between the bold squares of the building behind and the softness in the curves. I feel however that architecture in Docklands has occurred without a great deal of reference to the history of the area and the needs and aspirations of the local people.



This was a hairdresser's built into the side of Princes Lodge in Commercial Road. It was a council homeless centre which has since been converted into commercial apartments. I've got fond memories of this picture because one of the first political meetings I went to in Tower Hamlets was to do with providing better accommodation for the homeless there. This is in the early 1990s when the council was disposing of it. The fact that The Ideal Hairdressers - in a less than ideal building to start with - was derelict and boarded up just captured an era for me. I had a habit of always carrying a camera with me and in fact took this from the top of a double-decker bus as it was going past, hence the angle.





This is a recent photograph taken in Brick Lane. One of the great things about East London is the feeling of cultural inheritance. I was in a Bengali restaurant and these two men were standing outside the door. It's timeless in that some people might assume it to be an image from sixty or even a hundred years ago. But the truth is that there remain people from the Jewish community who haven't changed their attire or demeanour for generations. Wherever I go I find commonality between people who spend a lot of time on the street, walking, working, doing their shopping or whatever. Whitechapel is a place for buying and selling and the skills you need to buy and sell are the same throughout the world.



When I exhibited this in Syhlet I realised that people in Bangladesh are more visually aware than those of us in the west. This is a paradox because we are bombarded with images through television and elsewhere. Yet people there spent much longer looking at the images than when I exhibited them in England. They were fascinated by this one because they saw someone encased in concrete. The subject has a very happy face. When I'm photographing people in what may appear to be a depressing environment they are often the antithesis of that inner-city lifelessness that they're supposed to have. It's the people that bring an area to life.



This was taken in the Brick Lane area. Amongst the street furniture, dumped milk bottles and graffiti there is this woman with an incredible dignity. She is obviously someone who has worked hard all her life. There's a nobility about her that eclipses everything else that's going on in the picture. Your eyes are drawn to her because she's such a magnificent figure.

This was featured in a local Unison magazine called Tower Power in the 1980s. The guy pushing the pram saw it. His wife is just out of the picture behind him. They fed a message back to me that the child was doing well. For me, it encapsulates what was happening around Docklands at that time. The majority of the children who lived on council estates were never going to be in the position or be given the opportunity to actually live in the new houses that were being built by private development companies. I think developers today would probably have a more sensitive sign up.





It's all about change and the effect it has on people. The dock cranes that are no longer used. The wind surfer. The tower blocks in the background. The guy in the car, who I didn't actually know at the time, said to me, 'It's driving me mad, I can remember the car, the time, the place. But I can't bleedin' remember who the bird was!'