
Andrea Arnold, *Fish Tank*, 2009

In Arnold's extraordinary film we encounter the landscapes of Rainham on the London/Essex border experienced largely through the eyes of 15-year old Mia (played by Katie Jarvis).



WHERE



In the last few decades, the boundaries of London have become difficult to demarcate with intense urbanisation and increasing pressure on the green belt. **Matthew Gandy** explores the significance of the city's fringe and its 'edge' landscapes.

DOES

Underpass for the A10 near Turkey Street, Enfield, London
Roads and other transport infrastructure are often a dominant feature of London's periphery.

How do we know we have reached the edge of the city? Is it an aluminium sign? Is it a thinning-out of buildings until there is little but woods and fields? Or is it an abrupt shift to small towns and villages dotted across the landscape? Perhaps it is really none of these things since the city, or at least 'urbanisation', is now practically everywhere. In his book *The Urban Revolution*, first published in 1970, the French urbanist Henri Lefebvre makes a clear distinction between 'city' and 'urbanisation'. 'Society has become completely urbanised,' he writes, 'This urbanisation is virtual today, but will become real in the future'.¹

In the 40 years since Lefebvre wrote these words, the pace and scale of urban growth has accelerated and so has the more ubiquitous dynamic of 'urbanisation', as infrastructure and ideas have spread into the remotest locales. The urban and the rural have become increasingly difficult to differentiate despite the powerful cultural resonance of this distinction. We can never really understand cities as simply 'things in themselves' since they are manifestations of broader processes of change, connection and recombination. Cities are just a particular form of urbanisation.

If we consider London, its current metropolitan boundaries were created in 1965. For the purposes of data collection, planning and service provision these administrative boundaries are extremely significant, but they reveal only part of the story of what London is as a cultural and geographical entity. If we look within these 'lines on the map' where London's outer boroughs meet the ring of counties stretching from Kent in the southeast,

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through the affluent commuter belt of Surrey, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire, to Essex in the northeast, we find that the distinction between London and ‘not London’ is hazy in terms of identity and topography. A closer look at the 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey map of where the outer London borough of Enfield meets the county of Hertfordshire reveals the complexity of the northern edge of the city: a jumble of archaeological sites, allotments, copses, farms, golf courses, housing estates, playing fields, infrastructure installations and other features. And just a few hundred metres further north is the constant rumble of the M25 motorway that Iain Sinclair followed as his walking route around the city in *London Orbital*.²

At or beyond the urban fringe, especially in the east of London, we find spaces of intense marginalisation that alter the more familiar map of inner-city deprivation. In Andrea Arnold’s extraordinary film *Fish Tank* (2009), for example, we encounter the working-class landscapes of Rainham on the London/Essex border. Arnold not only reveals a profound sense of social and cultural claustrophobia, but also the striking significance of ‘edge’ landscapes that veer between an oppressive sense of utilitarian functionality and moments of striking revelation through encounters with ‘wild urban nature’.

The green-tinged edge of London is artificially sustained, however, by the ‘green belt’, a planning device that was first mooted in the mid-1930s and then introduced in the early 1960s in order to prevent ribbon development, sprawl and the drift

Fields near Hadley Wood, Enfield, London
London’s green belt has sharpened the contrast between the urban and the rural at the edge of the city.



CITY

Purfleet, Thurrock, Essex

Purfleet is a predominantly white working-class community on the edge of London in the ultra-marginal parliamentary constituency of Thurrock.

towards total urbanisation in which only pockets of open space might have remained.³ More recently, the green belt has come under intense development pressure from all directions: it is threatened by the ideological assault on strategic planning as an restrictive anachronism, but is also challenged as an impediment to the production of new homes that further inflates the London housing market. The real relationship, however, between regional planning, housing and development across London is more complex than these polarised debates would suggest, but there remains intense local resistance to any widespread modification of the green belt. Spaces beyond London's green belt are now being drawn into 'zones of intensification' through the extension of transport infrastructure such as the east-west Crossrail behemoth under construction or the earmarking of immense areas such as the so-called Thames Gateway to the east as arenas for state-facilitated development – in the case of the Gateway, despite its remoteness and vulnerability to future flooding.

In addition to roads and other transport infrastructure such as airports, the physical reach of London is also marked by more complex, distant and less widely understood networks. These range from the 'soft landscapes' of communications to the vast technological systems that provide energy and water for the city. In the case of water supply, London has extensive network of pipes, pumping stations, reservoirs, treatment plants and other infrastructure that is largely unseen and unnoticed by most of the city's inhabitants: only in moments of crisis or failure do these

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complex and vulnerable systems come sharply into public view.

And what of London's global imprint? Some social scientists and urban ecologists have sought to measure the impact of cities through concepts such as the 'ecological footprint' and other indicators of the environmental effects of urban consumption. In the case of London, the aggregate impact of the city is immense, yet per capita contributions reveal more local differences and anomalies: poorer parts of the city, for example, have a significantly lower environmental impact because of less car ownership as well as lower levels of consumption, long-haul travel and other factors. Similarly, if we explore per capita environmental impact at a regional or national level there are affluent rural or semi-rural communities that blur the conceptual utility of the 'city' as a focus for environmental anxiety. If we disentangle the metaphorical and ideological aspects of the environmental critique of cities, it becomes possible to focus on the urban process as a socio-environmental dynamic that transcends the often arbitrary distinctions between the city and the 'non-city'. And if we move our attention from the material dimensions of urban space to less tangible or visible threads of connection such as cultural networks, financial transactions and other elements, then what we understand London to be becomes immeasurably more complex, diffuse and pervasive. ▽

Rainham Marshes, Essex

Rainham Marshes is a former military firing range that was opened to the public as a nature reserve for the first time in 2006. It is located at the eastern edge of London, adjacent to the Thames estuary in Purfleet, Thurrock and Havering.

Notes

1. Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis, MN), 2003 [1970]).
 2. Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital*, Granta (London), 2002.
 3. David Thomas, 'London's Green Belt: The Evolution of an Idea', *The Geographical Journal* 129 (1), March 1963, pp 14–24.
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