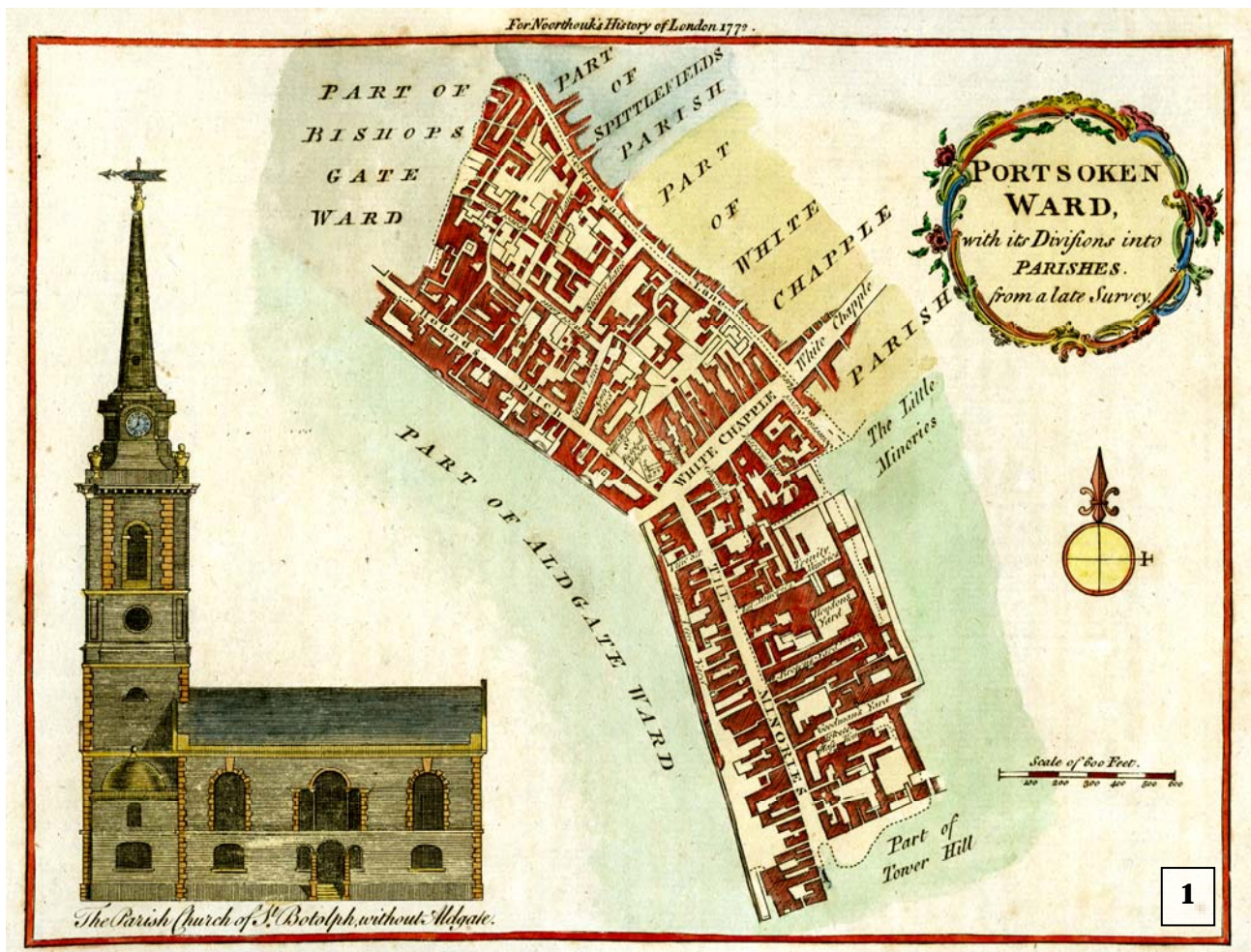


## The Paradox of City Walls: Enclosure, boundary, barrier

Words by Laura Vaughan

In his history of Western civilization, *Flesh and Stone*, Richard Sennett writes that although the Jewish inhabitants of the Ghetto of Venice were obliged to live in isolation, their manner of segregation also provided for their bodily security against persecution. This is one of several paradoxical characteristics of walls, which are typically viewed from one side or the other: either as enclosure or as defensive boundary. Viewed from the outside, the inhabitants of the Ghetto were defined by their otherness and were bound by strict rules of coming and going, yet one outcome of their enforced segregation was the fostering of a rich culture of music, language and scholarship, that might otherwise have not evolved. Another paradox of walls is that they have a thickness which itself

carries a material importance: walls can be inhabited, like old London Bridge (1) or are traversed – nowadays typically by tourists, treading the stone groove imprinted by guards patrolling the walls in days gone by, imagining what it might have been like to be besieged. The politics of exclusion mean that maintaining the boundary between who is allowed *in* and who is forced to remain *outside* creates a distancing between those inhabiting the areas *within* and *without* the walls. London's old City parishes were even named in this way, e.g. St. Botolph *without* Aldgate. Interestingly, it was, situated within the ward of Portsoken, known as the area where aliens were permitted to dwell in London. (2)



To be outside the city walls in days gone by meant not only that you were outside of the protection of the physical defences of the city, but that you were

excluded from its commercial organisations. Yet forms and norms of exclusion are not only the practices of the majority against the minority but

also the practices of the minority against the majority, as the case of Mea Shearim in Jerusalem demonstrates. Its Haredi Jewish inhabitants have put up notices controlling the modes of dress of women moving along their streets. They ask that “women and girls who pass through our

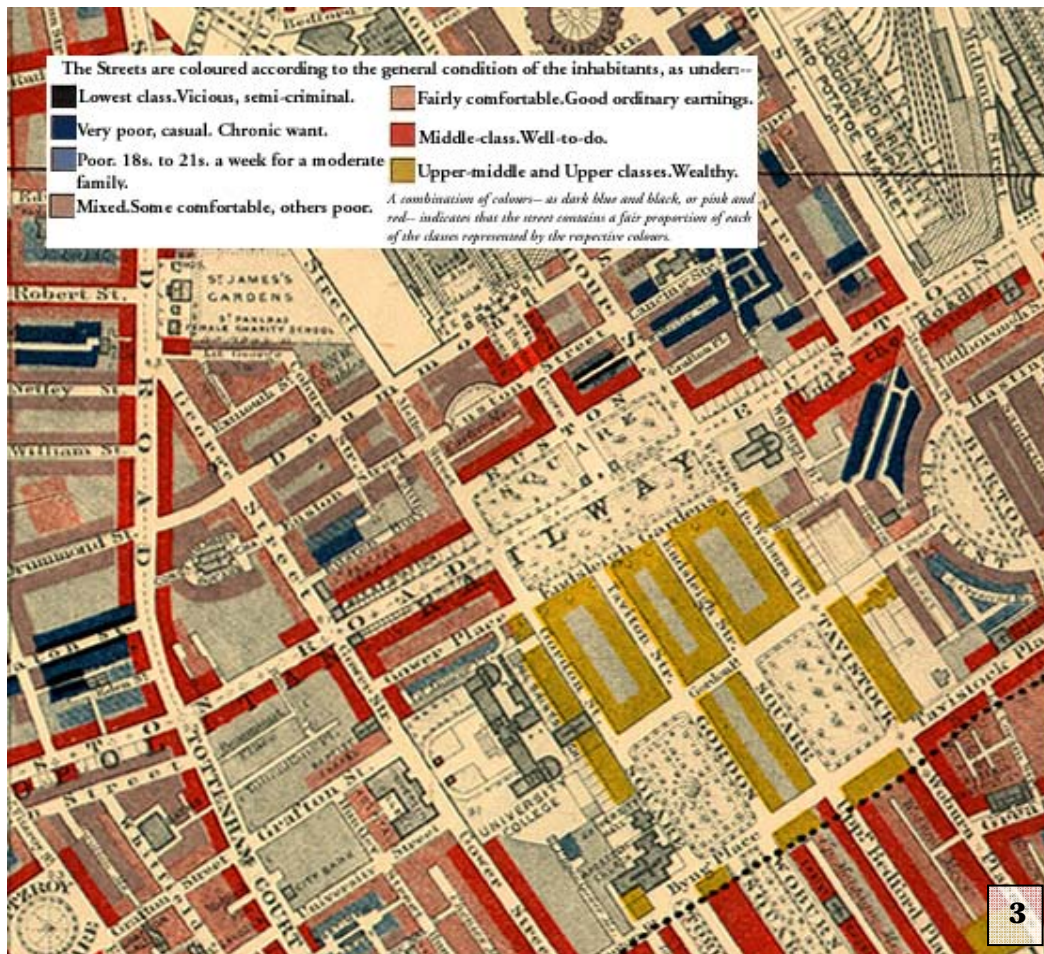
neighbourhood... [do] not pass... in immodest clothes”, using their self-determined boundary for surveillance and determination of behaviour by their own norms, despite the fact that on the face of it the streets in question are thoroughfares as open as anywhere else in the city. (3)



Just as being forced to live within the Venice Ghetto walls paradoxically enforced separation, but also fostered a blooming of Jewish culture, to be forced to live outside of the walls can become a matter of choice. So immigrants finding their way to the East End of London – seen as a place of refuge for three centuries – have used their apparent position of vulnerability to build networks of self-support a short distance from the heart of the city.

Although city walls are relatively rare in modern cities, there is nowadays a growing number of gated areas that form islands of privilege within the heart of the city, creating spatially isolated areas apart from the throng around them. Their interruption to the city grid also creates barriers to movement: so to get from one street to the next, a person has to make a circuitous route around the privatised space. This

is strikingly different from, say, the traditional London square, which has always allowed the rich merchant to step away from the teeming thoroughfares to the quiet solitude of the square, yet still maintaining access thorough the surrounding streets. Charles Booth's late 19<sup>th</sup> Century poverty maps illustrate this well: Tavistock and Gordon Squares were situated just a few turnings away from University College London and would have been the preserve of the rich. (4) However, they did not inherently displace the poor in the same way that gated 'communities' do today, given that their surrounding streets could be roamed freely. Streets are not after all purely benign devices connecting one place to another. Indeed, as scholars of space syntax will be aware, they can range from being highly integrated roadways to segregated back alleyways and all the range in between.



Living outside the city walls can create a place apart. What has transpired in many cases is that the areas of poverty, the squalid courts and dark alleyways on the city edges, can become a fertile breeding ground for new forms of organisation to take shape – whether it is the labour movements that formed in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century London, or the more radical movements of socialists and anarchists that also

sprung up at the time, many organised by political refugees from Russia. It is not merely a matter of poverty that allowed for dissent, rather, being situated in a place apart of the mainstream of city life can create a sense of being away from mainstream society, whether a physical wall is in place, or there is simply a wall in the mind.

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## Figures

1. Portsoken Ward with its divisions into parishes from a late survey, from Noorthouk's History of London 1772. Copyright Jonathan Potter Ltd.'
2. Street notice in Mea Shearim, Jerusalem
3. Section from the Charles Booth map of London poverty, 188

**Note:** This is the author's version of: Vaughan, L., 'The Paradox of City Walls: Enclosure, boundary, barrier', *Lobby magazine*, 3 (2015), pp. 100-3. Publisher's version: <http://bartlettlobby.com/articles/lobby-no-3>