TESTING-GROUND is a design research journal focused on research, experimentation and design of landscapes, cities and territories. It provides a platform to critique established urban theory and a place to investigate emerging architectural, political and ecological concepts. The focus of each issue emerges from collaborative workshops which explore specific ideas and concerns. This first issue focuses on trajectories of change.
For my part, I cannot conceive of any large community surviving without this ceaseless influx of new wants, new ideas, new manners, new strength, and so I cannot conceive of a city without some section corresponding to the Path.

Nearly sixty years ago, J.B. Jackson wrote one of the most insightful essays about landscape ever written, “The Stranger’s Path.” Jackson’s warm, gentle, and wise voice and keen observation have been constants in my career as a landscape architect and writer, and I offer the following piece as a kind of fugue, a flowing together of Jackson’s voice into mine, in the way that so many stories flow together in the city along the Stranger’s Path. Our shared hopes for the future will always evolve from the places and the voices of our past. The city is a cosmopolitan story we write together, and so many of us have come here to write the strangers.

Spokane, Washington, 1986

In what was, I think, the spring of 1986 my good friend Lisa and I ran away from the small town of Moscow, Idaho where we lived and went to high school together, and spent the day in Spokane. Spokane in the 1980s was a city only in shape, hollowed out by suburban expansion as well as an economy depressed over most of the twentieth century, though it had briefly shattered into forming recovery in the late 1960s and 70s. For young lefties like us, with sarcastic anti-establishment attitudes, vertical hair-sprayed hair, and cassettes of obscure German industrial music in our Walkmans it was precisely Spokane’s grittiness that gave us both something to sneer at and to revel in. In Spokane, my friends and I would spend hours mucking around by the railway tracks and exploring abandoned grain elevators and empty farmhouses, participating in the birth of an aesthetic based in the blasted remnants of post-belly style decline and the demise of the small farm and farmer’s cooperative.

In Spokane those same forces were not quite as large and the modern and postmodern buildings and landscapes produced in its short recovery were also empty and decaying. Spokane possessed one of the most extensive “skywalks” systems in the USA, built around the time it hosted the environmentally themed World Expo of 1974. Presumably grown from the Carusian ideal of the “death of the street”, but also in defence against the city’s frigid winters, this shopping-mall-in-the-sky had first killed the streets below, then slowly killed itself. Lisa and I wandered its empty corridors eating chocolate-covered espresso beans and contemplating a seemingly post-apocalyptic cityscape from which all the citizens had simply disappeared.

A few streets away, at the Greyhound bus station, which was full of travelers, but of people trapped by permanent transience and precarity, and the smell of urine and fear, we wondered together whether bus stations, once plumed, would spread their black flecks of decay into the neighbouring soil. Sad seeds that would ensure a continuously poisonous urban harvest for an era. Lisa and I got on the pavement and sang a comic jingle together from the Sixties: “Sid and Nancy, I want a job, I want a job.”

We are welcomed to the city by a smiling landscape of parking lots, warehouses, pot holes and weed grown streets, where isolated filling stations and quick-lunch counters are scattered among citizens like survivors of a bombing raid.

No matter how blessed we pretended to each other to be, though, this was one of our first, rare moments of escape from home without our families. Rather than being swept solaciously past the insipid and ubiquitous head shops and adult book stores of the Stranger’s Path, we were now free to stand and stare at them, even enter them. Though we pretended we’d seen it all, we hadn’t really seen anything yet, certainly not in Spokane, Idaho. We were both making a life-honoured exchange with the city of Spokane. Its secrets and lures for our quiescence and invention. But poor Spokane—where Jackson’s ideal Stranger’s Path would lead us from portholes to a clean, bright city centre, Spokane’s Path at the time only led to a gaping absence where that centre should have been.

“Is it not one of the chief functions of the city to exchange as well as to receive?” These characteristics are worth bearing in mind, for they make the Path in the average small city what it now is: loud, tawdry, abominate-at-the-fist, full of dr viscous and small-castletown businesses, and in the eyes of the upmarket residential white-collar-avenue more than a little shady and dangerous.


It’s Saturday the 14th of November 2015, and there is a steady rain. I’m strolling a short walk from the base of Christopher Wren’s monument to the great fire of London, just at the intersection of London’s two most venerable Stranger’s Paths, London Bridge, for 900 years the only exit running of this reach of the Thames, and, of course, the River Thames itself. London has many Stranger’s Paths, which now include some roads coddled by public transport,
The sidewalks are lined with small shops, bars, stalls, dance halls, movies, booths lighted by acrobatic lamps, and everywhere strange faces, strange costumes, strange and delightful impressions. To walk all such a street into the quiet, more formal part of town is to be part of a procession, part of a ceaseless ceremony of being initiated into the city and of vandescaling the city itself.

The Borough High Street and the myriad alleys feeding into it are a writing and rewriting of the dialogue between congestion and commerce. A succession of narrow courts and always open up with only a building’s width between them. On a map, they appear like the teeth of combs, and they echo the parallel streets that once thronged perpendicular to the Thames, pulling with a constant flow of people and goods from across the heaving seats, and the pull of other things.

This whole place Jackson might have described as "fancy-town." And despite repeated attempts to Manhattansize the area, I have hopes that it will retain its rough-and-tumble demeanour. The incredibly fine urban grain here reminds us that not only would these streets have been congested, but so would the commercialised itself, with many businesses not wider than a person’s height — and the proprietors, of course, themselves commodities — comically even being a name for their most private parts. The prostitute’s business fits precisely the space of her body. The costs drawing goods into this city to discharge in its markets would have been constantly fluctuated and called to from these many stalls, perhaps most when the carts were returning empty and the purses were full; bricks lying, tails emptying; the city’s carnal and peculiarities fade one.

The George, down one of these narrow side streets, is a rare survivor from the seventeenth century, and its history is longer than its original building was built. It is a galleryed coaching inn, decked with bannisters on all levels from which to watch the comings and goings of horses and carriage below. Its interior rooms and snug corners and stairways that allow glimpses of laughter from floor to floor. It’s full, loud, and friendly today with big groups and corner tables. It’s a dry spot to crown a wandering of thoughts filled with food and ale. It’s a dry spot to catalogue round tables filled with food and ale.

For my part, I cannot conceive of any large community surviving without this ceaseless influx of new vants, new ideas, new manners, new strength, and so I cannot conceive of a city without section corresponding to the Path.

When I leave The George, the beer I have gone cold in my belly and a rainy day melancholy has begun to take hold of me. Just to the south a hoarding has gone up around a large building site. Signs show images of the excavations that preceded the construction; foundations and walls clearly stacked parallel and perpendicular layer after layer, generation after generation. Somewhat they begin in the silty ooze this part of the city is mired in. They are a reminder that the trajectories we inscribe have been written over centuries. As a species we don’t simply leave tracts on the surface, but also below and above. When I look through the windows cut in the hoarding, I see all that is now gone, and sheds pointing like the edge of a vest, clean pit with freshly sound concrete curving at its bottom.

At last I arrive at the Marshalsea Prison wall, a place I have brought numerous visitors and guests because it is a place where you can feel the full weight of London’s terrible past. This broken and dreadful high wall, dished with occasional spikes and rings, was the outer wall of the prison in which Dickens’ father was incarcerated, amongst many others of London’s worthies. A side resident of awe. Today, as the rain falls, I arrive to find the wall ‘restored’ and almost completely rebuilt, still solid and massive, but clean and crisp and regular. I knew I would find it this way, as I had caught a glimpse of this activity of cleansing while it was underway, again behind hoardings, but I’m still unprepared for the magnitude of the loss now that the hoardings have been removed. All its presence, its meaning, has been washed away, scrubbed away, normalised. That cruel history that called out to every visitor, “Never again” has been whitewashed. What once was oh so silent, infinitely eloquent is now merely mute. I stand in front of the wall and I can’t stop the tears welling up in my eyes.

Afterwards I wander aimlessly through the Borough Market, pushing through the crowds, and then cross the river at the Southwark Bridge, where the tide is high and the river is brimming with water that looks like cold, milky tea. Behind a glass curtain wall in a new restaurant in a new building near St Paul’s, a woman with shining hair and perfect teeth laughing in a way that shows