



Railway Arches: A Refuge for London Businesses in the Context of Rising Property Prices

Author[s]: Francesca Froy

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RAILWAY ARCHES

A REFUGE FOR LONDON BUSINESSES IN THE CONTEXT OF RISING PROPERTY PRICES?

FRANCESCA FROY

Near to my home in Hackney, two adjacent railway arches host a hair salon, an exhibition space, a café, a photographic studio, a gym, a charity, and a dog walking business. Such pockets of diverse economic activity are often taken for granted. While we rightly prize the complexity of natural systems, such as rainforests, we often fail to appreciate the economic multiplicity that can be found in different corners of our cities, generated through webs of urban commerce. It deserves our attention, however, because London's economic diversity is currently under threat, with rising property prices forcing local businesses out of operation. What is more, local authorities are increasingly converting commercial and industrial spaces for residential use. Generally, 'lower value-added' firms are priced out first, especially those involved in manufacturing.

In a forthcoming article, Howard Davis and I argue that railway arches provide a life-line for many different types of commercial activity in London in the light of rising property prices.¹ We identify that urban economic diversity is often supported by spatial diversity, which

¹ This short piece is mainly based on an article, co-written with Professor Howard Davis of the University of Oregon, which will appear shortly in the *European Planning Studies* journal. See Francesca Froy and Howard Davis, 'Pragmatic Urbanism: London's Railway Arches and Small-Scale Enterprise', *European*

in turn involves the use of residual and informal city spaces, such as railway arches. Developed in the nineteenth century with the construction of the first London-bound tracks, the arches have long belonged to a 'parallel rental market', with rents being set by Network Rail and Transport for London. As few people like to live underneath an arch, rents have been kept relatively low. These spaces have, therefore, provided affordable and adaptable accommodation for many firms that would otherwise be priced out of the capital.

The types of activity hosted by London's railway arches are highly varied. These unique spaces accommodate bars, cafes, cinemas, theatres, gyms, car washes, music practice venues and tourist attractions, amongst other enterprises. In 2013, research on three sets of arches in Bethnal Green, Bermondsey and Hackney revealed that many of the businesses are small-scale; of the 50 firms interviewed, roughly half identified that this was their only location². The arches were also found to house a disproportionate amount of manufacturing and production: 23% of the firms in the arches were engaged in manufacturing or producing goods, while only 10% of London-based firms overall carried out such activities in 2013.

While they are adaptable to many different types of business, railway arches often seem to attract clusters of similar and interrelated activities. The arches in Three Colts Lane and Dunbridge Street in Bethnal Green, for example, mainly specialise in servicing taxis. Nineteen local firms directly rent out and repair taxis, or provide specialist parts, insurance, and advertising. Proximity to a main route (Bethnal Green Road) is likely to have influenced the location of this trade, but the cluster has since had a multiplier effect, attracting customers through critical mass.

Planning Studies Special Edition on Culture and innovation: Implications for SMEs and Micro Firms, ed. Hugo Pinto (2017 forthcoming).

² Francesca Froy, 'Railway Arches: A Lifeline for Manufacturing in London?' (unpublished master's thesis, UCL, 2013).

In Bermondsey, likewise, the food and drink industry dominates, benefitting from spinoffs of Borough Market. The arches were once mainly used for storage, but are now used by businesses for the manufacturing, wholesale, and retail of their products. In addition, an enterprising architectural salvage firm, LASSCOs, has taken a long-term lease on the arches in Rope Walk, using them for storage during the week and renting them out to food market stall holders on Saturdays (see Figure 1). Over the past few years, this market has become increasingly popular.



Figure 1: Railway arches in Maltby Street, Bermondsey. © the author

In addition to being relatively affordable, railway arches offer a number of other spatial advantages to their tenants. Their adaptable interiors and open structure invite business owners to experiment with the available space. Hence the inclusion of partitions and mezzanines (see

Figure 2). As they expand, it is possible for businesses to move easily into adjacent arches. This is evinced in Neal's Yard Dairy, in Bermondsey, which uses two adjacent arches for their business (one for the maturing of cheeses and the other for managing distribution). London Field Brewery in Mentmore Terrace also uses several arches: as brewing facilities for thirteen different beers, an office (constructed as a mezzanine), a music venue, and a bar with both indoor, as well as outdoor, areas.



Figure 2: The interiors of three railway arches at a) FieldWorks, March 23rd, 2017, b) Neal's Yard Dairy, 2013 c) London Fields Brewery 2013. © the author

Since arches often have continuous facades, they can function like 'industrial high streets', making them more accessible to the passing public³. What is more, this street-facing quality encourages arch tenants to supplement their production and wholesale activities with retail. Unlike industrial estates, which are usually segregated from their surrounding streets, arches are found within residential areas. By being embedded in the heart of the community arch-

³ Froy and Davis.

based businesses are able to foster greater retail opportunities. This community-focused approach is also realized in the architectural design of the arch entrances; that is, large doorways make them inviting to customers and facilitate communication between businesses. Lee and Lipuma refer to this openness as ‘cultures of circulation’, whereby movement of not only people, but ideas and commodities, occurs at an increased rate.⁴ In the 2013 study, arch tenants were found to be more likely to communicate with other businesses in neighbouring arches, rather than with surrounding businesses. Such communication networks may help small businesses to innovate and grow. This growth has been achieved by the market stalls that operate from the railway arches in Maltby Street. Here, they regularly share foodstuffs, allowing them to create innovative products for their customers.



⁴ Benjamin Lee and Edward Lipuma, ‘Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity’, *Public Culture*, 14 (2002), 191-214 (p.192).

Figure 3: A railway arch in Druid Street, Bermondsey, 2013. © the author

Arches also offer their tenants a certain 'symbolic value'.⁵ Owing to their history, arches would seem to offer notions of 'authenticity' and an 'experience of origins', both of which are particularly attractive to London's bohemian movement.⁶ In Hackney, one successful sourdough bakery in an arch close to London Fields Station – the E5 Bakehouse – has recently been joined by several new cafes, restaurants and a cultural institute-cum-cinema, all of which attract a local bohemian clientele. During the summer, this is furthered by pop-up restaurants and bars taking over the yards behind the arches. The self-generating spirit of 'authentic' arch-based businesses in the above area fulfils Zukin's analysis that the 'drive for authenticity' leads to the development of new spaces of 'aspirational consumption' in cities. She points out, however, that the rhetoric of authenticity can quickly become one of exclusion when it leads to the provision of expensive goods that are inaccessible to many.⁷ The wide variety of niche products being produced under London's railway arches in Hackney and Bermondsey may come at the expense of social diversity, as these products are sold to a fairly homogenous group of middle-class Londoners. Thus, while the arches have long provided a refuge from commercial pressures, they themselves may now be helping to fuel the gentrification process in certain neighbourhoods.

The success of railway arches in certain locations in London is also coming at the cost of rising rents, as Network Rail tries to extract more value from the arches to plough back into

⁵ Juliana Martins, 'The Extended Workplace in a Creative Cluster: Exploring Space(s) of Digital Work in Silicon Roundabout', *Journal of Urban Design*, 20.1 (2015), 125-145 (p.132).

⁶ Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.3.

⁷ Martins, p.4.

national railway infrastructure. A number of owners in Mentmore Terrace arches have recently been asked for significant rent increases.⁸ Such spikes in rent have led to protests elsewhere in the capital. Plans to inflate prices in Brixton as part of an arch-redevelopment project came up against fierce public criticism, with one commentator suggesting the council had "voted to kill the backbone of Brixton".⁹ Local people feared that new chain stores would come in to replace the local small-scale firms that had long thrived under the arches. It is important that Network Rail and Transport for London do not blindly increase rents to the extent that the arches become inaccessible to London's small enterprises. Local authorities could also step in to take long leases on the arches in order to offer them to start-up enterprises at affordable rents.

Managed effectively, the arches will remain a refuge for economic diversity right in the heart of London, while offering great opportunities for new enterprises as well as experimental modes of production and distribution.

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⁸ Mark Chandler, 'Network Rail in new rent rise row with businesses after 200 per cent hike', *Evening Standard*, 19 February 2017, p.1.

⁹ Keyan Milanian, 'Brixton railway arches protesters glitter-bomb council meeting after decision to approve redevelopment', *The Mirror*, 3 August 2016, p.1.

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