LIMINAL MIND
Research Notes Series

Always Yearning for the Time That Just Eluded Us

Memory, Cooperative Life, and the Olympic Erasure of Clays Lane

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> *'Savage Messiah is written for those who could not be regenerated, even if they wanted to be. They are the unregenerated, a lost generation, always yearning for the time that just eluded us: those who were born too late for punk but whose expectations were raised by its incendiary afterglow; those who watched the Miners' Strike with partisan adolescent eyes but who were too young to really participate in the militancy… those, in short, who simply did not find the "reality" imposed by the conquering forces of neoliberalism liveable.'*
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> Mark Fisher, introduction to Laura Oldfield Ford's Savage Messiah (Verso, 2011)

Abstract

Between 1982 and 1990 I lived in Tweedale Court, one of ten residential clusters forming the Clays Lane Housing Co-operative in Stratford, East London — at the time one of the largest purpose-built housing cooperatives in Europe, established and managed by the Society for Co-operative Dwellings (SCD). I was a member of the SCD steering committee. In 2007, the entire estate was compulsorily purchased and demolished to make way for the 2012 Olympic Park. My former front door now lies beneath the grounds of Chobham Academy or the East Village residential development. The street has been erased from every modern map.

This research note documents that erasure from three intersecting positions: as a former resident and steering committee member who witnessed the co-op's life from the inside; as

a photographer who documented its allotment-holding neighbours for ES Magazine during the late 1980s; and as an artist whose current practice — specifically the Quantum Memory installation project — is concerned with how embodied memory is lost when physical place is removed. The note also reads the Clays Lane experiment through the framework of Mark Fisher's hauntology: as a failed attempt to live outside neoliberal reality, whose failure was not only internal but was systematically produced by the institutions that ultimately demolished it.

I. How I Got There

I moved to London in 1981, arriving not with a plan but with a connection. A friend from my home town of Llantwit Major — James Richardson, a potter who had trained at what I believe was Emmanuel Cooper's Fonthill Pottery in north London — was living in a shared house on Steele Road in Leytonstone. He had come through the north-east London Polytechnic network. I stayed with him while I found my footing.

James told me about Clays Lane. The rent would be incredibly cheap. No deposit required. Those two facts, in 1981 London, were not minor details. They were the difference between staying and leaving, between beginning a practice and abandoning one before it started.

Emmanuel Cooper — if I am right about the connection — is significant here beyond the biographical. He was a radical craftsman and a founder of the Gay Left collective, a figure who bridged studio ceramics, gay politics, and a broadly socialist understanding of creative labour. The world James inhabited was Cooper's world: craft, mutual aid, alternative economics, the conviction that how you lived was as political as what you believed. That world knew about Clays Lane because Clays Lane was built for exactly that world — people who existed outside the deposit economy, who needed cheap space in order to become who they needed to become.

> *The co-op didn't advertise. It circulated through networks of trust. You couldn't find it unless you already knew someone who knew someone. That invisibility was not a flaw. It was constitutive of what it was.*

Through the winter of 1981 I attended SCD training sessions. These were structured introductions to cooperative housing principles: how the model worked, what tenant governance meant in practice, what rights and responsibilities came with living in a self-

managed estate. I moved into Tweedale Court in spring 1982, while construction was still completing on some of the other courtyards.

II. The Place and the Experiment

The Clays Lane Estate was built on an artificial plateau — the West Ham Tip, a mound of compacted industrial waste rising above the flood plain of the River Lea. It was bounded by the East Cross Route (A12) to the west, the Eastway Cycle Circuit and Manor Garden Allotments to the east, and the Temple Mills railway marshalling yards to the north. An edgeland in the precise sense: a territory at the margin of competing jurisdictions, uses, and logics.

The design was intentional and ideologically specific. Red and yellow brick cluster houses, shared kitchens, communal courtyards. No corridors, no lobbies, no anonymous vertical stacks. Each courtyard elected its own representative to the estate management committee. The architecture was anti-hierarchical in its ambition: Tweedale Court was its own small republic.

I shared a house with two women from West Indian backgrounds and Steve, a white East Ender. The estate was racially mixed — roughly fifty per cent of residents were students, almost all of us in our twenties. There was one older man, divorced, who didn't quite fit the predominant energy. It felt, in those early years, genuinely experimental: a community that had been designed to include people the conventional housing market excluded, and that was actually doing so.

The atmosphere at the SCD steering committee meetings reflected this. We met above a wholefood shop on West Ham Lane in Stratford — The Whole Thing, at number 53 — which housed Page One Community Bookshop and functioned as a hub for alternative culture, LGBTQ+ organising, and left-wing politics across East London. Benjamin Zephaniah was associated with the bookshop during this period. The Workers Revolutionary Party held meetings there. Before 'safe space' was common terminology, The Whole Thing was one of the few places in the East End where gay and lesbian people could gather without hostility. Meeting there was not incidental. It was a statement of affiliation.

> *The wholefood shop, the cooperative housing committee, the allotments, the traveller site, the cycle track through the broken fence — these were not separate things. They were the same attempt to live differently, distributed across a landscape that the city had not yet decided what to do with.*

Below the hill, on a plot of land by the side of Temple Mills Lane, a Romany Gypsy family named the Lees had lived for generations — long before the housing estate was built around them. At night, freight trains carrying nuclear waste flasks from Sizewell A to Sellafield screeched through the sidings. The GLC had posted public warnings acknowledging that irradiated material was being shunted through residential backstreets. The trains ran regardless. Through a loose panel in the Eastway fence, residents could access the cycle circuit and climb the contaminated hill beyond it. At the top, looking west toward the City, you understood exactly where you were: in the gap between what London had been and what it had not yet decided to become.

Adjacent to the circuit, the Manor Garden Allotments occupied a narrow island between the River Lea and the Channelsea River. A hundred years old. The sheds built from railway carriages, corrugated iron, salvaged doors. I photographed the people who worked those plots — their knowledge of soil and season, their unhurried hospitality, one gardener named Hassan who offered tea to anyone who passed. Those photographs were published in ES Magazine, the Evening Standard's Saturday supplement. I still have the tear sheets. I still have the images.

III. The Unregenerated

Mark Fisher's introduction to Laura Oldfield Ford's Savage Messiah identifies a specific generation and a specific structure of feeling. The unregenerated: those for whom the 'reality' imposed by neoliberalism was simply not liveable, who could not adapt, who carried the memory of other possibilities — punk's afterglow, the Miners' Strike watched with partisan adolescent eyes, rave's future-rush — and who found themselves stranded when those possibilities closed.

Fisher is writing about a feeling. But Clays Lane was an attempt to build the infrastructure of that feeling — to make it material, institutional, inhabitable. The co-op was not nostalgia. It was a serious attempt to construct an alternative social architecture within the existing city: cooperative governance, communal space, affordable housing for people the market had excluded, self-determination over who lived where and how.

> *Fisher writes that 'so many dreams of collectivity have died in neoliberal London.' Clays Lane was one of them. It died twice: first from within, through the slow failure of its own governance, and then from without, through compulsory purchase and demolition.*

I was inside the first death. The chaos of the early years was generative — the racial mix, the student energy, the sense that we were building something. But the structure that sustained that energy was inadequate from the beginning. We had meetings constantly, but too many of them were about structure itself rather than the practical work of running an estate. People were unpaid. The committee attracted left-wing idealists without expertise in housing management. The practical infrastructure — maintenance, financial controls, formal allocations policy — was neglected in favour of endless procedural discussion.

It was, in the end, not a learning organisation. And it attracted, over time, people who were drawn to the informality rather than the ideal — who found in the absence of formal process not freedom but opportunity. I became disillusioned. I lost motivation. I moved out in approximately 1989.

After I left, I heard what happened. The Housing Corporation and the Audit Commission eventually delivered a Zero Star rating — the lowest possible score for any housing provider. The verdict was damning: no written allocations policy, poor financial management, lack of transparency. The Housing Corporation had to use rare statutory powers simply to establish who was on the management committee, because the co-op had stopped providing basic regulatory information. The estate was transferred, against residents' fierce resistance, toward the Peabody Trust. Residents proposed transfer to a Scottish cooperative called Tenants First to preserve mutual status. The courts sided with the regulators.

> *The informality that made Clays Lane feel like a community in 1982 had become, by 2000, the legal basis on which it was shut down. The freedom was the vulnerability.*

Many former residents believe the Zero Star report was politically motivated — that the estate was rubbished to lower its value and smooth the path for the Olympic compulsory purchase. I cannot confirm this. What I can say is that the sequence is consistent with a pattern Quantum Memory has identified across multiple institutional contexts: first you delegitimise, then you demolish, then you build something that makes the demolition look inevitable. The Audit Commission report in that reading is not a finding but a preparation.

IV. What the Photographs Are

I did not know, when I photographed the Manor Garden Allotment holders in the late 1980s, that I was photographing something that would be erased. I was working without a theoretical framework I could name — I had not yet encountered Heidegger's account of dwelling, or the phenomenological tradition that would later give language to what I was

doing. What I understood intuitively was that the people in those allotments carried a form of knowledge that existed nowhere in any institutional record. Knowledge of soil, of season, of neighbour, of place. Knowledge that could not be archived. It could only be witnessed.

Photography, for me, has always been an act of friction. The camera slows the encounter. It forces an acknowledgement of the specific weight of a moment: this person, this light, this arrangement of things that will not recur. The images I made at the Manor Garden Allotments were not documentary in the journalistic sense. They were attempts to register the texture of an ongoing human presence — to make visible what institutional processes render invisible: the embedded, embodied, slow-accumulated intelligence of people in long relationship with a place.

> *The photographs are not the memory. They are evidence that the memory existed — and evidence, now, of its loss. They survive. The place does not. The people are dispersed. The soil has been cleaned and replaced.*

Laura Oldfield Ford, whose work Fisher introduces in Savage Messiah, describes her practice as diaristic — reading the city as a palimpsest of layers of erasure and overwriting, driven by the urgency of documenting the transient and ephemeral as enclosure and privatisation continue. My ES Magazine photographs were made in exactly this spirit, before I had access to that language. They are a samizdat record of a community that the city had not yet decided to erase — made at the moment just before the decision became irreversible.

The tear sheets survive. The negatives survive. The question they now pose — one that Quantum Memory is attempting to address — is: what would it mean to return those images to the community they document, now that the community has no place to gather? What form of restitution, or at minimum of witness, might be possible? And what does it mean that the technology required to attempt this did not exist when the community was intact?

V. Hauntology and the Vanished Postcode

Fisher's concept of hauntology — drawn from Derrida, applied to culture — describes a condition in which the past does not recede but haunts the present as an absence: not as nostalgia for what was, but as a mourning for what was promised and never arrived. The unregenerated do not miss the past. They miss the future the past seemed to make possible.

Clays Lane was, in those terms, a hauntological space before it was demolished. It was already haunted by its own ambition — by the gap between what the cooperative model

promised and what the daily reality delivered. The endless meetings, the neglected practicalities, the drift toward informality-as-corruption: these were not accidental failures. They were the symptoms of attempting to build collective life in conditions structurally hostile to it, without the resources — financial, professional, temporal — that collective life requires.

My postcode — E15 2RB — now maps to a point in the middle of a park, or inside a modern apartment block marketed at prices that would have been incomprehensible to anyone on the estate in 1985. The East Village, the Velodrome, Chobham Academy: these are not the future that Clays Lane was reaching toward. They are the future that replaced it. The Olympic Park is not a legacy. It is a substitution — of one social imaginary for another, performed with such totality and speed that the substitution is nearly invisible.

> *The Carpenters Arms is still standing. The Theatre Royal Stratford East is still standing. What was erased was the community that existed in the space between them — the tissue of relationship, mutual governance, and shared experiment that constituted a specific attempt to live differently in a specific place at a specific moment.*

Fisher notes that Oldfield Ford's work is for those who 'simply did not find the reality imposed by the conquering forces of neoliberalism liveable.' Clays Lane was built by and for exactly those people. Its failure to sustain itself does not invalidate the attempt. It illuminates the conditions under which such attempts must operate — underfunded, under-professionalised, ideologically isolated, and ultimately subject to a state apparatus that could withdraw recognition and impose compulsory purchase at the moment the land became valuable enough to warrant it.

What haunts Clays Lane now is not the buildings — they are gone — but the question they embodied: whether it is possible to build genuinely collective life inside a city organised around the opposite principle. The answer the Olympic Park gives is: no. Or at least: not here, not now, not at this price per square metre.

VI. Connection to Quantum Memory

Quantum Memory — currently in development as an Arts Council Wales R&D application (deadline: May 2026) — uses RFID technology to create a distributed memory system embedded in objects, spaces, and bodies. Its central argument is that memory is not a cognitive phenomenon stored in the brain but a physical process distributed across people,

objects, environments, and relationships — that consciousness itself is the friction generated when a system attempts to process infinite reality into finite data.

The Clays Lane material connects to Quantum Memory at every level. The allotment holders I photographed were carriers of what the Quantum Memory framework calls Grey Knowledge: embodied expertise held in bodies rather than manuals, in practices rather than records. Hassan's soil knowledge, the plotholders' generational relationship to their specific strips of land, the Lees' tenure on their plot below Temple Mills Lane: these are precisely the forms of human intelligence that institutional processes cannot capture and do not attempt to preserve.

The cooperative itself — the SCD model, the cluster houses, the elected courtyard representatives, the steering committee meetings above the wholefood shop — was an attempt to institutionalise a different kind of knowing: collective, self-governing, distributed. It failed to sustain that institutionalisation. But the failure was instructive. What collapsed was not the ideal but the infrastructure required to support the ideal. The knowledge of how to live cooperatively was present in the community. What was absent was the professional and financial scaffolding that would have allowed that knowledge to reproduce itself over time.

> *Quantum Memory asks: what would it mean to return these photographs to the community they document, now that the community has no place? The question is not rhetorical. It is a design problem. And it is a political one.*

The Olympic demolition of Clays Lane is, from Quantum Memory's theoretical perspective, a thermodynamic event: a rapid increase in entropy, a destruction of accumulated order. The buildings could be documented. The street plan could be archived. The people could be rehoused. But the embodied knowledge — the knowing-how, the knowing-where, the knowing-with that constituted the specific intelligence of that specific community at that specific moment — was not transferable. It was lost.

What the Clays Lane research contributes to Quantum Memory is a case study in the temporal gap between the availability of memory technology and the existence of the community that needs it. The RFID infrastructure that Quantum Memory proposes did not exist in 1982. The photographs I made were the available technology. They are inadequate — not because they are poor photographs, but because photography cannot capture what made the allotment community worth photographing: the relationships, the routines, the accumulated knowledge, the specific weight of a particular person in a particular place over a long period of time. Quantum Memory is, among other things, an attempt to build the

technology that should have existed before the demolition, and to ask what we would do differently if we had it now.

VII. Notes on Sources and Method

This research note is a working document built from three categories of material, which the author distinguishes throughout.

Personal testimony: the author's own memory of living in Tweedale Court (1982–c.1989), serving on the SCD steering committee, and photographing the Manor Garden Allotment holders. This testimony is primary evidence. It is not independently verifiable in all its details, and it is offered as such.

Documented history: the SCD's establishment and management of the Clays Lane Estate; the Audit Commission's Zero Star rating and the subsequent regulatory intervention; the compulsory purchase orders of 2007; the demolition of the estate and the clearance of the Manor Garden Allotments; the construction of the Olympic Park. These are matters of public record.

AI-assisted reconstruction: portions of the historical context in this note were developed through dialogue with AI systems (Gemini and Claude), which provided detailed reconstructions of the social and institutional landscape of 1980s Stratford. The author has cross-referenced this material against personal memory and, where possible, against documentary sources. Where AI reconstruction aligns with personal memory, this is noted. Where it cannot be independently verified, it is treated as a research lead rather than a citation.

> *The AI reconstruction of Clays Lane performs, in miniature, exactly the kind of confident gap-filling that the Olympic demolition performed physically. Both replace the absent original with a plausible substitute. The difference is that the AI reconstruction is revisable. The demolition was not.*

Immediate priorities: locate the ES Magazine tear sheets and establish approximate publication date. Cross-reference with photographic negatives or scans. Research the current whereabouts of the Manor Garden Allotment community — some plotholders were relocated to a site at Eton Manor within the Olympic Park in 2011; that relocation, and what was lost and preserved in it, is itself a Quantum Memory case study. Explore whether former Clays Lane residents would participate in a recorded testimony project.

The Carpenters Arms on Carpenters Road survives. The Theatre Royal Stratford East survives. The Eurostar Engineering Centre occupies the site of the Temple Mills marshalling yards whose trains screeched through my nights. The Lee Valley VeloPark stands on the site where the Lee family lived and the allotment holders grew their plums and apples. The hill I climbed through the broken fence has been levelled, decontaminated, and landscaped into something the city can sell.

The cooperative experiment failed. The land was taken. The community was dispersed. The memory survives only in the bodies of those who were present — and in photographs. This note is an attempt to hold that memory in language before it disperses further, and to ask what an art practice built on the problem of memory might owe to a community whose disappearance it is still, slowly, learning to mourn.

Note on Photographs

The author holds original photographs of Manor Garden Allotment holders, Stratford, East London, made during the period c.1985–1989 and published in ES Magazine (Evening Standard). Tear sheets are held in the author's archive. Enquiries regarding reproduction or exhibition should be directed to Liminal Mind (liminalmind.co.uk).

Key References

Fisher, Mark. 'Always Yearning for the Time That Just Eluded Us: Introduction to Savage Messiah.' In Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures. Winchester: Zero Books, 2014. [Originally published as introduction to Laura Oldfield Ford, Savage Messiah. London: Verso, 2011.]

Oldfield Ford, Laura. Savage Messiah. London: Verso, 2011.

Audit Commission. Inspection report: Clays Lane Housing Co-operative. [Date to be confirmed — research lead.]