

# Contemporary Archaeology and Art: methods and practice

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LEVERHULME  
TRUST



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH  
Edinburgh College of Art

# Structure

- Introduction to contemporary archaeology
- Links between art and archaeology
- Its usage as method for art and object/materials research
- Archaeological methods as creative process/praxis
- Art, archaeology and waste











# Contemporary Archaeology

- Studies the **recent past** and the **present** (sometimes speculating on the future)
- Usually 19<sup>th</sup>- 21<sup>st</sup> centuries
- **Interdisciplinary**, with a strong emphasis on issues relevant to present-day societies
- Considers **how the contemporary world was/is produced** (both literally and figuratively)
- Often connected to issues of justice, conflict, human rights, counter narratives, power-relations, ecology/environmentalism
- How archaeology and archaeologists are themselves implicated in constructing **narratives about the past** (reflective)
- Often argues that our **knowledge of the past is generated according to our interpretations of its remnants in the present** (“the past is not over”)

# Some methods of archaeology in general

- Survey (measuring, taking notes, formal or informal, 'walkover' survey)
- Excavation and collecting materials (and then analysing 'finds' or environmental samples)
- Photography both formal/'scientific' (rectified, structure from motion/photogrammetry, multi-spectral imaging (UV, infrared, magnetometry etc.) or informal ('working shots', documentary etc.)
- Analyses (artefactual and zoological or forensic analysis, X-rays, scientific dating (e.g. radiocarbon), isotope analysis)
- Experimental archaeology (recreating objects or materials and using them to test theories of how they may have been used/understood in the past)
- Many others!

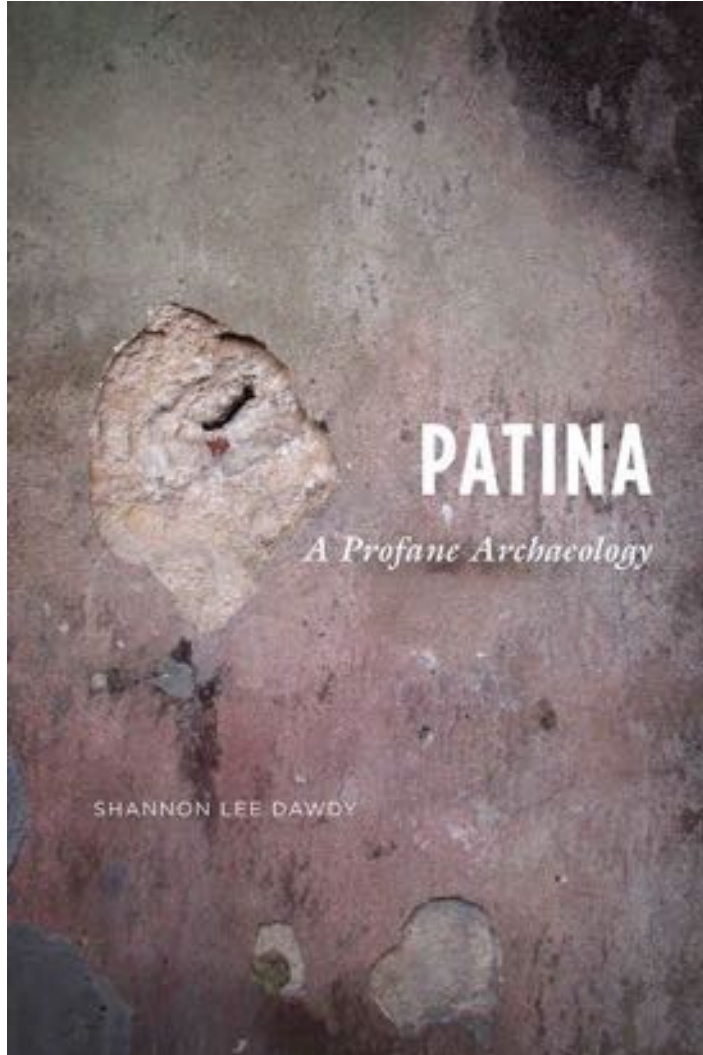


# *Some* examples of contemporary archaeological methods

(normally several used together along with ‘traditional’ methods too)

- Documentary research and analysis (including archives, media, literature, planning records, financial records), sometime using discourse analysis or semiotic approaches or more often ‘close reading’
- Phenomenological and experiential approaches to sites or landscapes
- Ethnography including interviews and participant observation
- Autoethnography (of the self)
- Oral testimony/history
- Participatory methods (mapping, drawing, digital co-creation etc.)
- Visual methods (analysing images, films, visual culture etc.)
- Creative practice

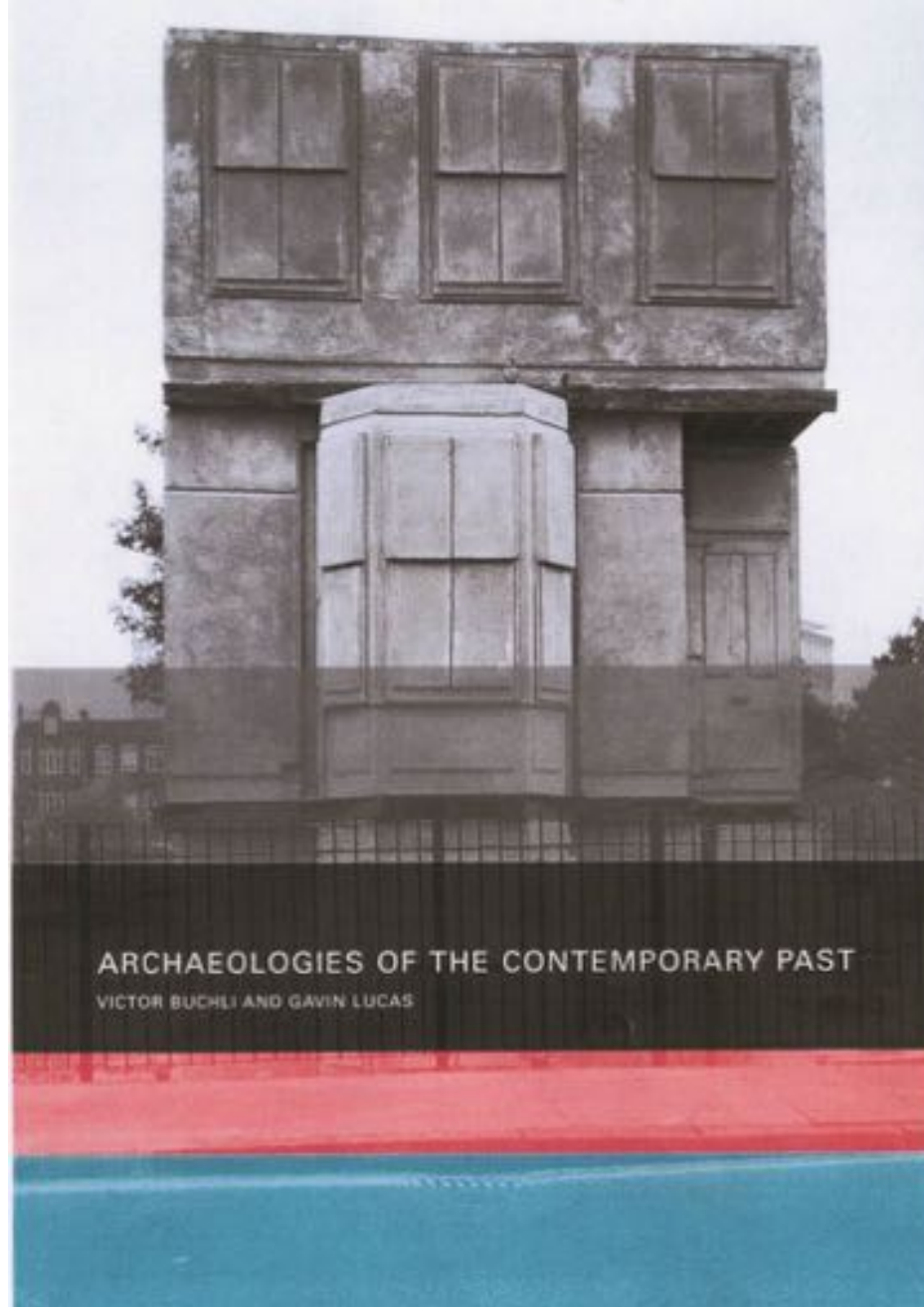
Some key themes:  
**Time, depth, scale**



**an archaeology ‘in and of the present’:** use archaeology to ask how the past intact with the present and recognising we encounter the past *now*  
See Harrison, 2011

**Heterotemporality:** where the past, present and future co-exist in our encounters with one another and the materials and spaces we inhabit  
Dawdy, 2016





Buchli, V. and Lucas, G., eds., 2001. *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past*. London and New York: Routledge.

‘Garbology’ –  
Bill Rathje on a  
garbage tug on  
his way to Fresh  
Kills landfill





# Why undertake a contemporary archaeology?



- Material traces are powerful, whether as ‘evidence’, or for what they offer us now (e.g. heritage value, memorialisation)
- Documentary, materials-based or oral history and ethnography rarely provide a full account
- Archives have gaps, both intentional and accidental (no matter how recent)
- Material traces can capture the unnoticed or forgotten
- Good at rapid recording, temporary events
- The practice itself can be more important than ‘results’ (e.g. acts of remembering, revealing the hidden past)

Marshall, Y., Roseneil, S., and Armstrong, K., 2009. Situating the Greenham Archaeology: An Autoethnography of a Feminist Project. *Public Archaeology*, 8 (2–3), 225–245.

# As 'evidence'



*Figure 3* Satellite image of eastern edge of Camp Delta in April 2003, showing a group of small structures (Google Earth, DigitalGlobe and Europa Technologies 2010).



*Figure 4* Satellite image of eastern edge of Camp Delta in November 2004, showing Camp Echo (two compounds of rectangular structures, bottom of image) and Camp Five (five-winged structure, top of image) (Google Earth, DigitalGlobe and Europa Technologies 2010).



# Hidden histories – producing the modern world



Maxwell, R. and Miller, T., 2013. The material cellphone. *In*: P. Graves-Brown, R. Harrison, and A. Piccini, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 699–712.



## Recording temporary events: Burning Man

**‘In recording the event *as it occurs* and soon after it is over, contemporary archaeology can provide insight into the material culture, organization, and practices of participants in the events and in the sites that are created and destroyed by participants.’**

White, C., 2013. The Burning Man Festival and the archaeology of ephemeral and temporary events. *In*: P. Graves-Brown, R. Harrison, and A. Piccini, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 595–609. See also: White, C., 2020. *The Archaeology of Burning Man: The Rise and Fall of Black Rock City*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.



# Recording temporary events: Burning Man

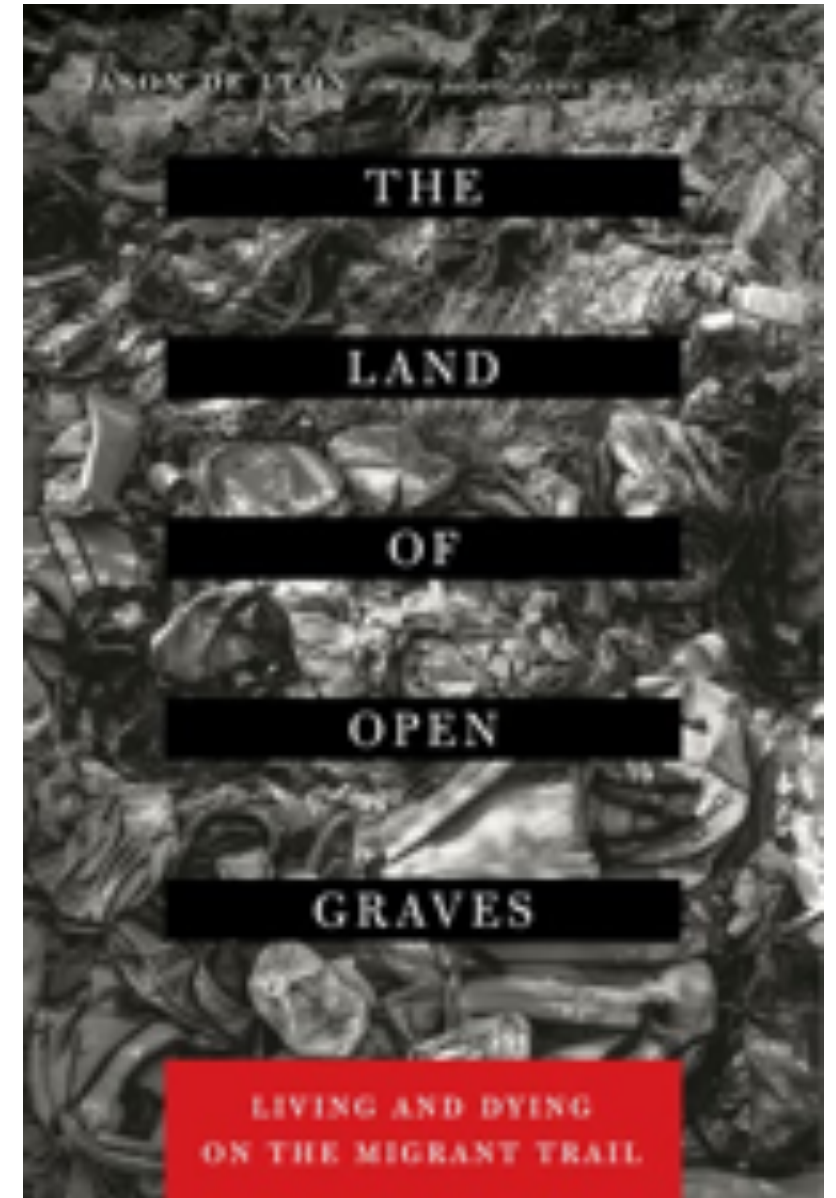


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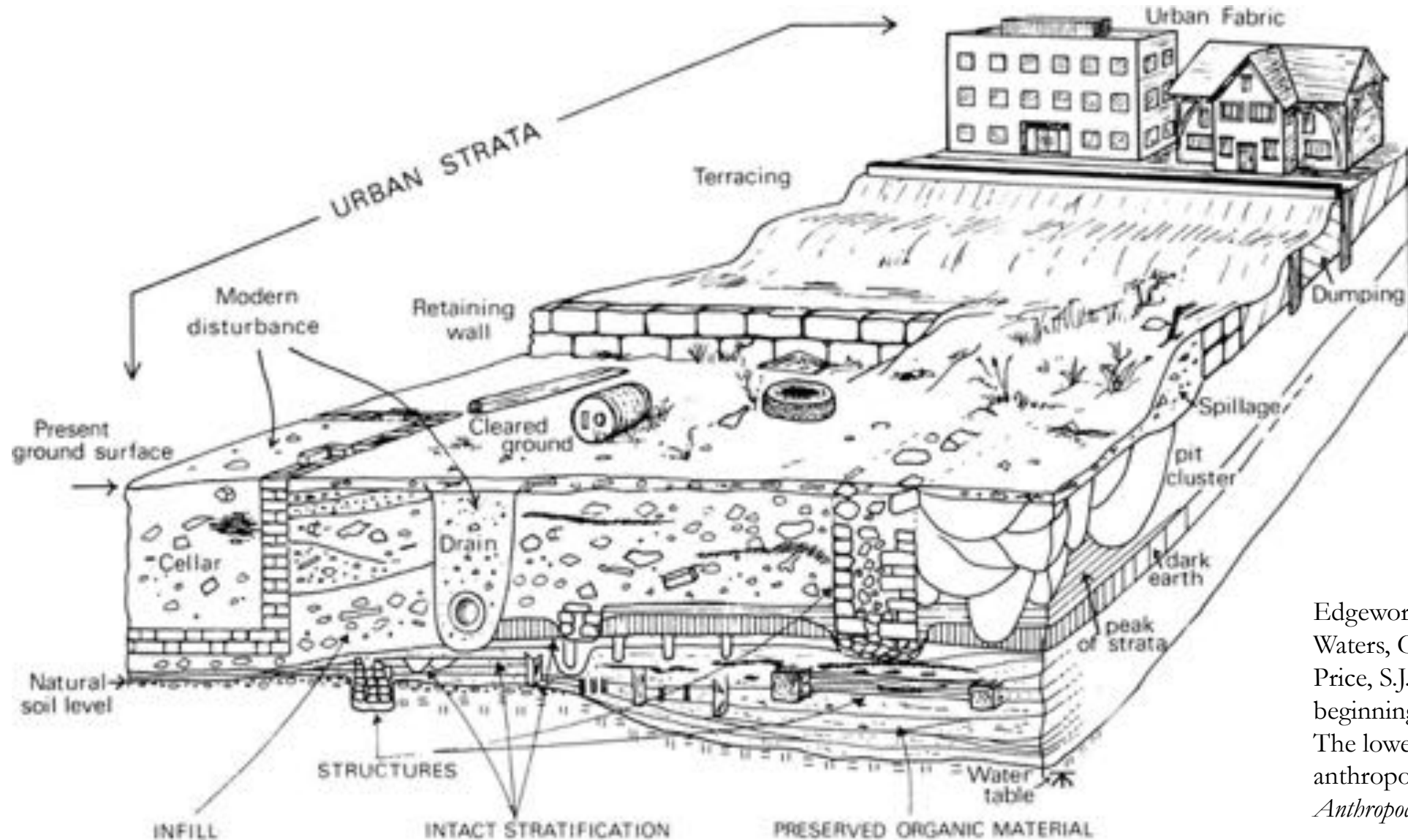
White, C., 2013. The Burning Man Festival and the archaeology of ephemeral and temporary events. *In*: P. Graves-Brown, R. Harrison, and A. Piccini, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 595–609. See also: White, C., 2020. *The Archaeology of Burning Man: The Rise and Fall of Black Rock City*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.



# Migration and Homelessness



# The Anthropocene and the archaeosphere



Edgeworth, M., deB Richter, D., Waters, C., Haff, P., Neal, C., and Price, S.J., 2015. Diachronous beginnings of the Anthropocene: The lower bounding surface of anthropogenic deposits. *The Anthropocene Review*, 2 (1), 33–58.



# The Anthropocene and the archaeosphere





# Technofossils



**1957**

905 g



**1978**

1,808 g



**2005**

4,202 g



# Archaeology/Art

- Many crossovers, past and present
- Many artists take on an archaeological persona or sensibility
- Increasingly, archaeologists and heritage researchers also take on artistic practice as ‘creative’ research methods
- Part of a broader ‘creative turn’ in social sciences/art and humanities
- Not without issues



See:

Bailey, D., 2014. Art//Archaeology//Art: Letting-Go Beyond. In: I.A. Russell and A. Cochrane, eds. *Art and Archaeology: Collaborations, Conversations, Criticisms*. New York, NY: Springer, 231–250.

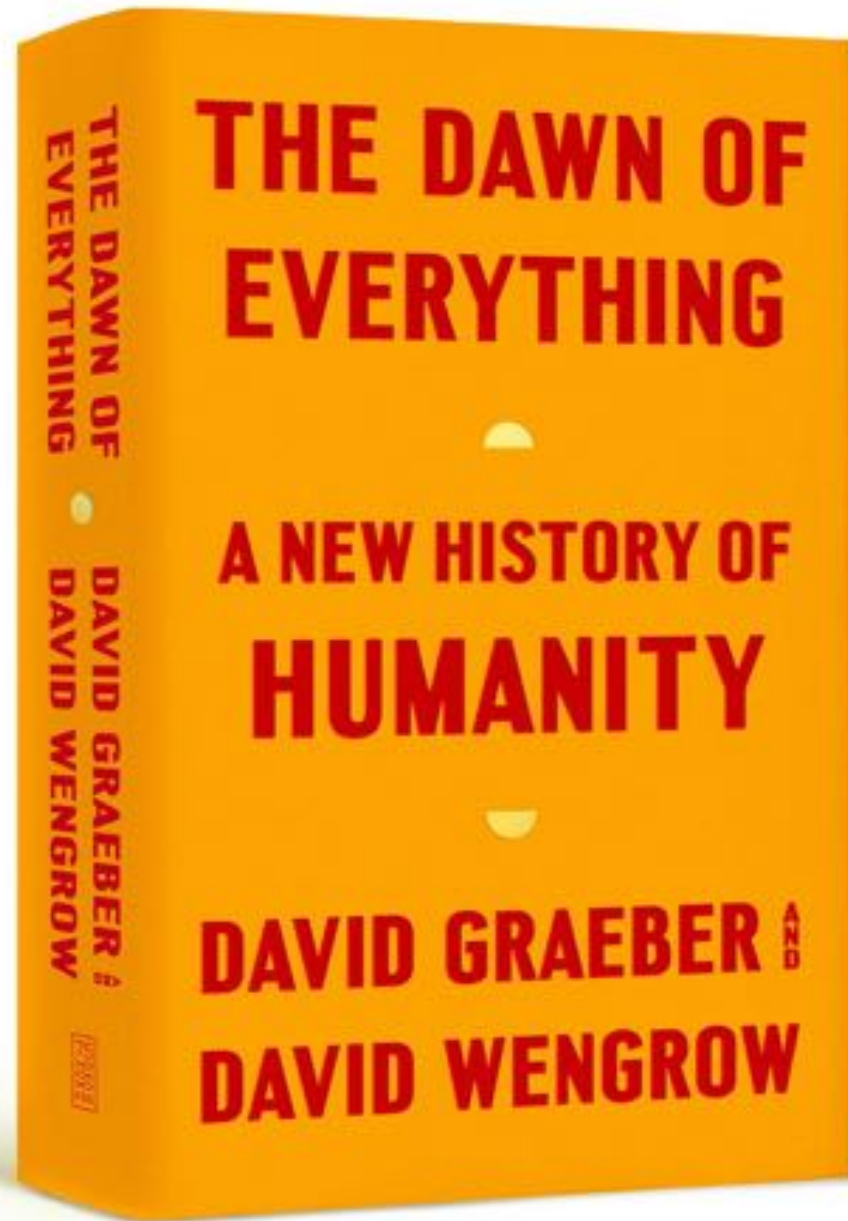
Lippard, L., 1995. *Overlay: contemporary art and the art of prehistory*. New York: New Press.

Thomas, A., Lee, D., Frederick, U., and White, C., 2017. Beyond Art/Archaeology: Research and Practice after the ‘Creative Turn’. *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*, 4 (2), 121–129.

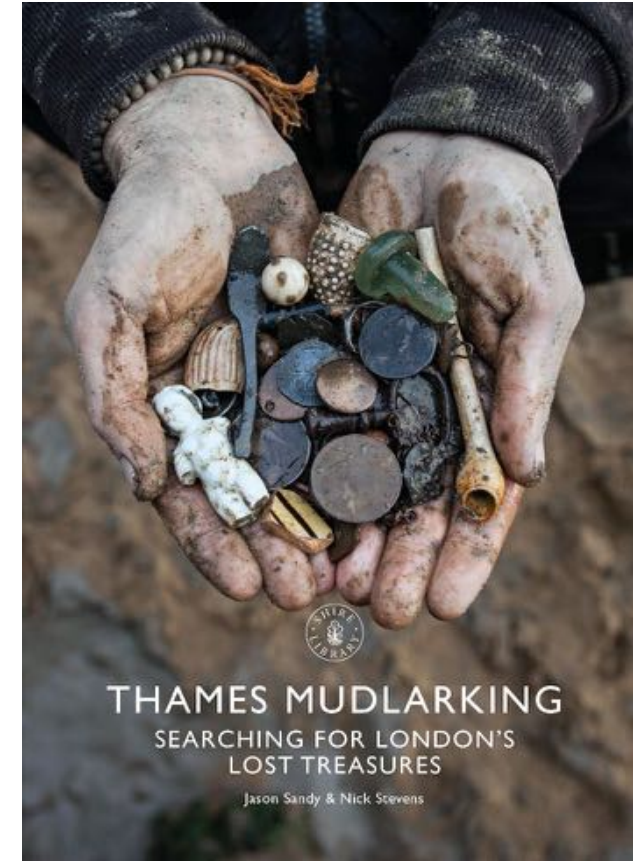
*Tate Thames Dig*  
Mark Dion (1999)







Graeber, D. and Wengrow, D., 2021. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. London: Penguin.



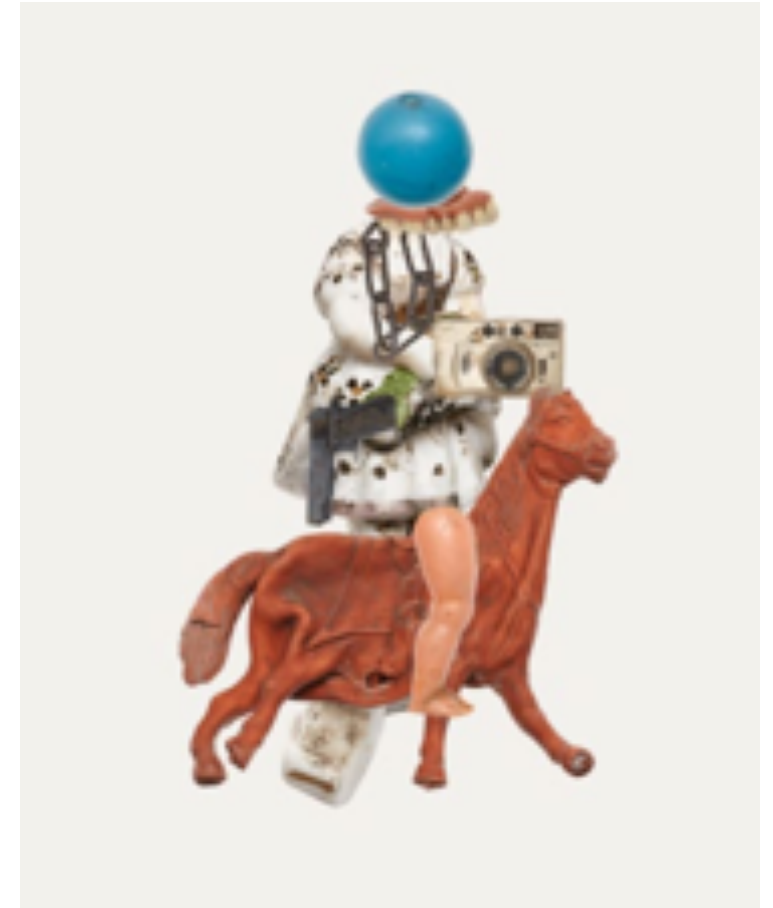


# North-South Line Excavations, Amsterdam, various (2003–12)



<https://belowthesurface.amsterdam/en/rokin>

<https://belowthesurface.amsterdam/en/vitrine/concept>





# The absurdities of archaeology





# *Sacrilege*

Jeremy Deller  
(2012)

See also:  
*Wiltshire Before  
Christ* (2019)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DURU6M8XfNY>





*The Rock Cycle*

Ilana Halperin (2021[2016])





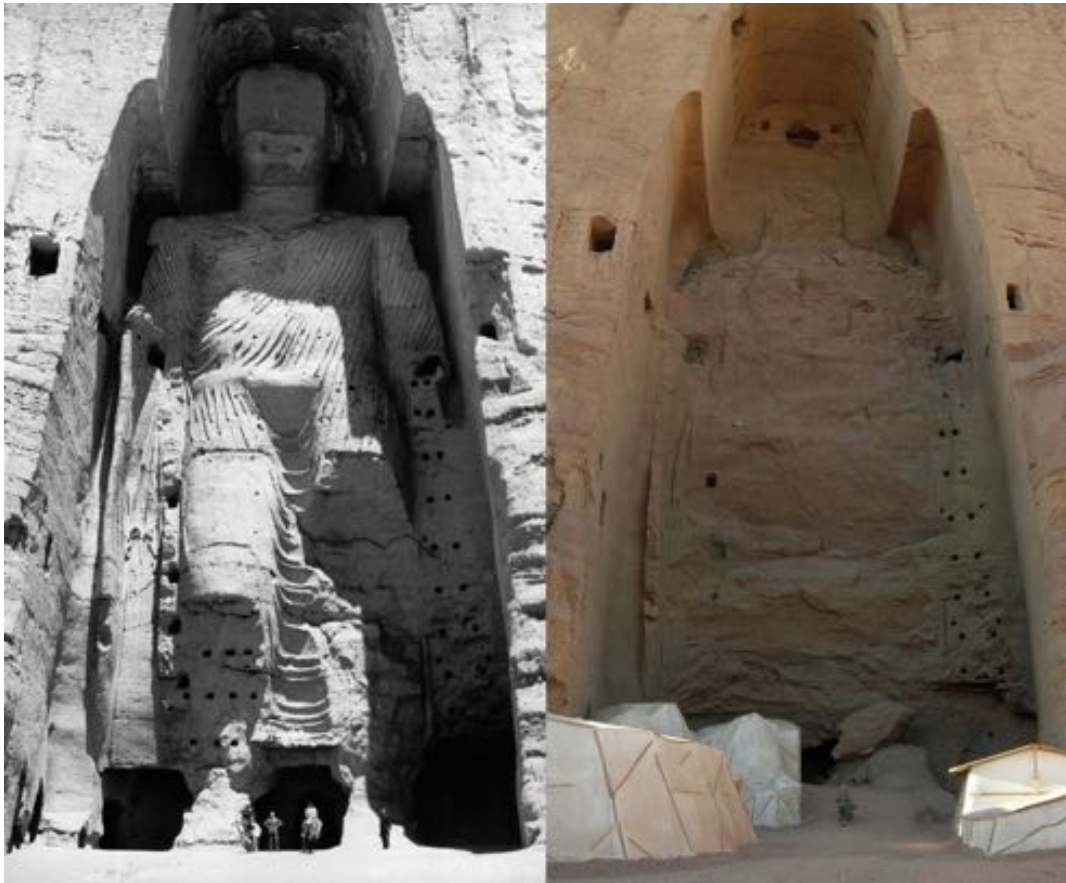
*Archaeology in  
Absentia*

Larissa  
Sansour/Søren  
Lind (2016)



*What dust will rise?*

Michael Rakowitz (2012)

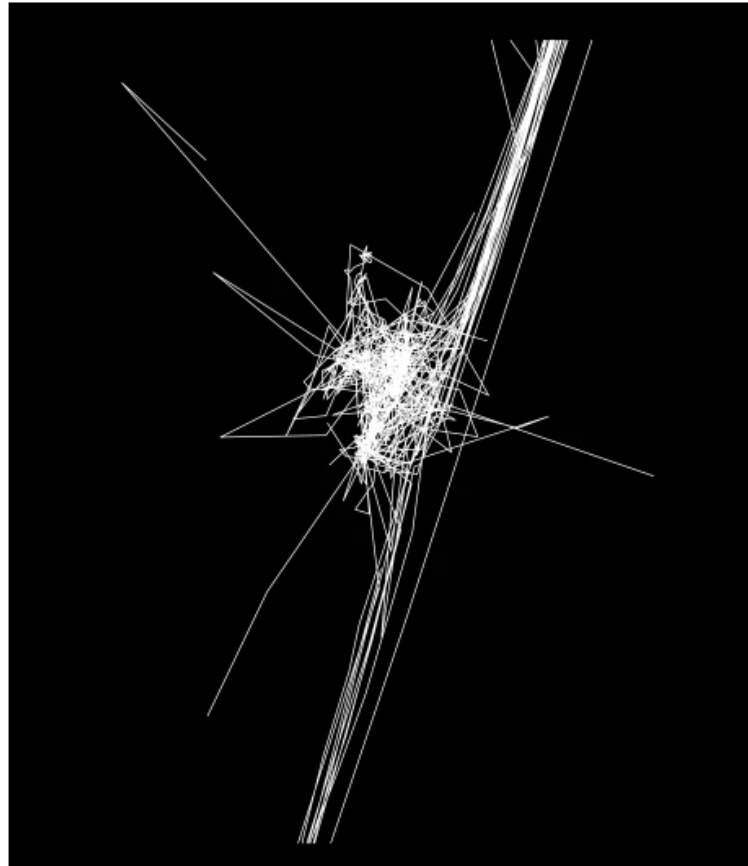




# Archaeologists in Residence

See

<https://archaeologistsinresidence.wordpress.com/2013/11/16/archaeologists-in-residence-at-papay-gyro-nights-experience-expectations-and-folklore-in-the-making/>



*Map of Papay by Walking*, Dan Lee, Antonia Thomas and collaborators (2013)

‘you have got to use **inductive reasoning**, to take you from comparison and analysis of observed phenomena to the human activity that once produced them.

**How easy will you find it?’**

(Hawkes 1954, 162)



Nature of  
religious  
institutions and  
spiritual life

Type of  
socio-political  
institutions

Type of  
subsistence-  
economic  
system

Techniques  
(e.g. how a pot  
was made)

**Harder/impossible**

**Easier**

↑  
Inferring/educated guessing

Hawkes’ ‘ladder of inference’  
(simplified) [not a *real* ladder]



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2015





2015









# HEADS AND HOOFS

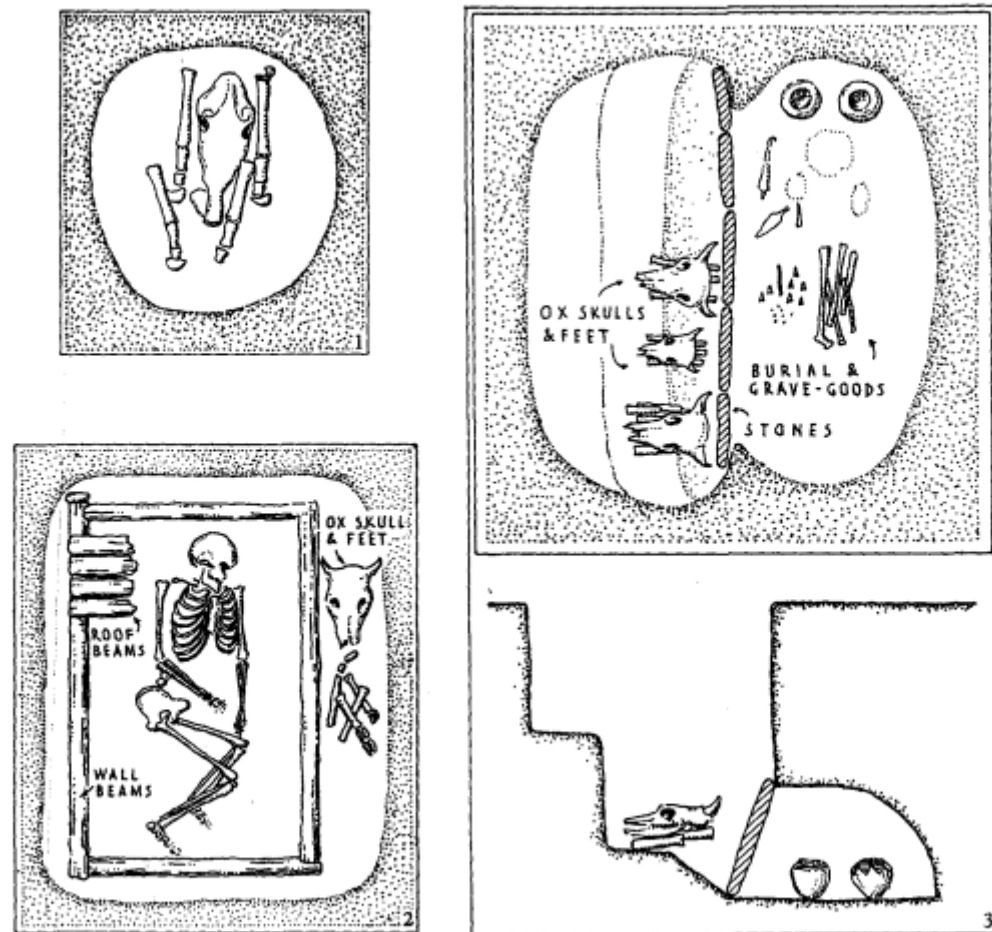


Fig 2. (1) Sorte Muld hide-burial, Bornholm. (2) Burial with ox-hide, South Russian Timber Grave culture. (3) Burial with ox-hides, South Russian Catacomb Grave culture.

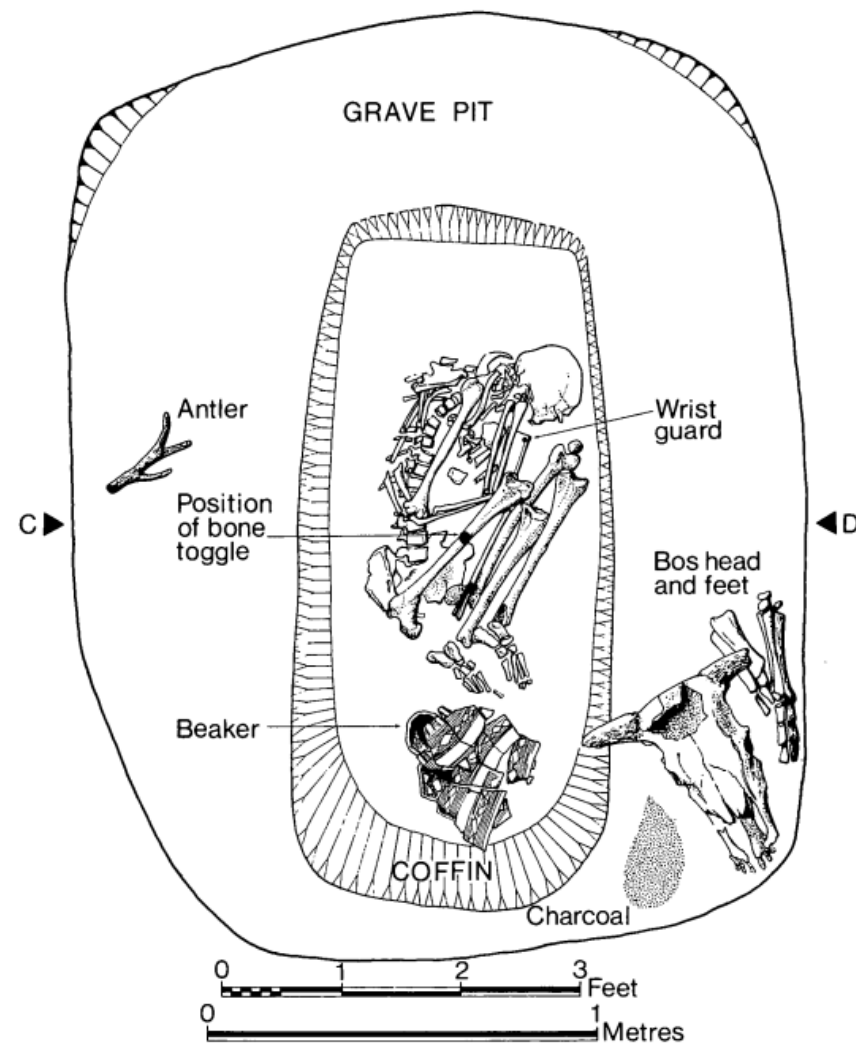


Fig. 7  
Hemp Knoll. Plan of the Central Grave, showing the coffin and inhumation with ox head and feet.



2022



Fig 2. (1)



# Reimagining waste landscapes 2020–23





# Aims

- To examine how landscapes have been ‘made’ entirely or partially from waste materials since the industrial revolution in the UK
- To study how such sites are used today and particularly as generative spaces of creativity
- To investigate how materials and places move from being seen as worthless can become valued (and how they can sometimes then become devalued once more)

# Example 'waste' materials of the project

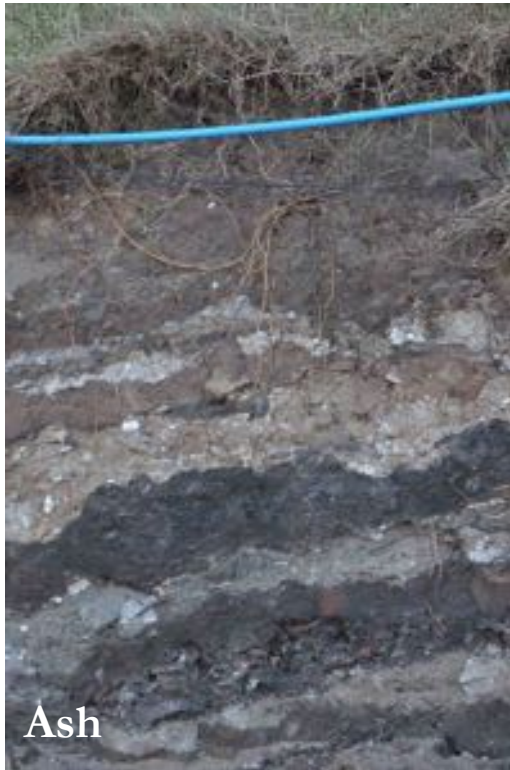
Spoil



Demolition rubble



Ash



Garbage



Oil shale waste (blaes)



See also:

Quivik, F.L., 2013. Nuisance, Source of Wealth, or Potentially Practical Material: Visions of Tailings in Idaho's Coeur d'Alene Mining District, 1888–2001. *IA. The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archeology*, 39 (1/2), 41–64.  
Taft, C.E., 2018. Shifting shorelines: Land reclamation and economic blackmail in industrial South Chicago. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 1(1–2): 186–205.



Artificial hills:  
**Oil Shale Bings (near  
Broxburn, West Lothian)**



Artificial hills:  
**The Beckton Alp (East  
London)**





Reclaimed and infilled land:  
**Royston Beach, Granton (Edinburgh)**





Reclaimed and infilled land:  
**Hackney and Leyton Marshes**  
(East London)





# Object/material itineraries

An object itinerary,

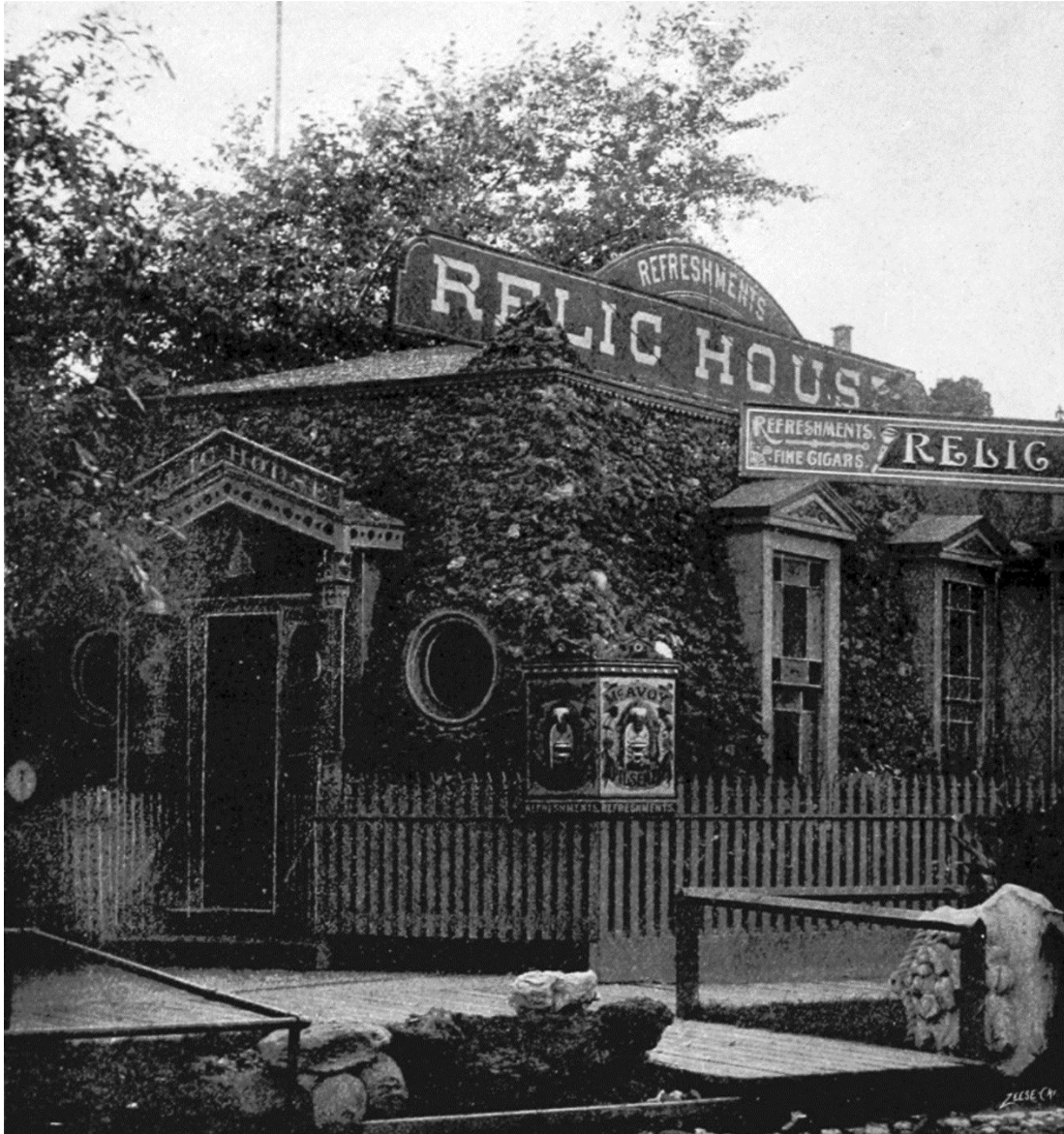
**‘traces the strings of places where objects come to rest or are active, the routes through which things circulate , and the means by which they are moved.’**

‘Itineraries are spatial and temporal, and they converge with sites and routes singular, multiple, virtual, and real. They have no real beginning other than where we enter them and no end since things and their extensions continue to move.’





## Revenance, Spolia

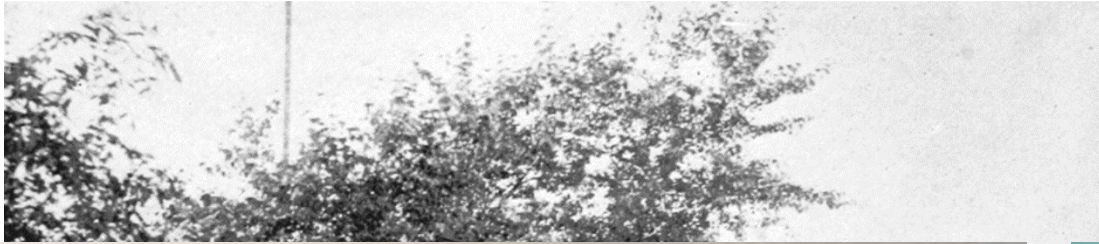


‘What is the relationship between the creative reuse of architectural fragments and the social memories of those who view them?’

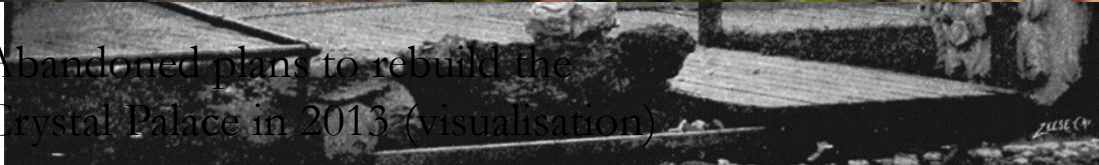
Graff, 2017.

The relic house in Chicago (from Graff 2017)

# Revenance, Spolia



Abandoned plans to rebuild the Crystal Palace in 2013 (visualisation)



The relic house in Chicago (from Graff 2017)

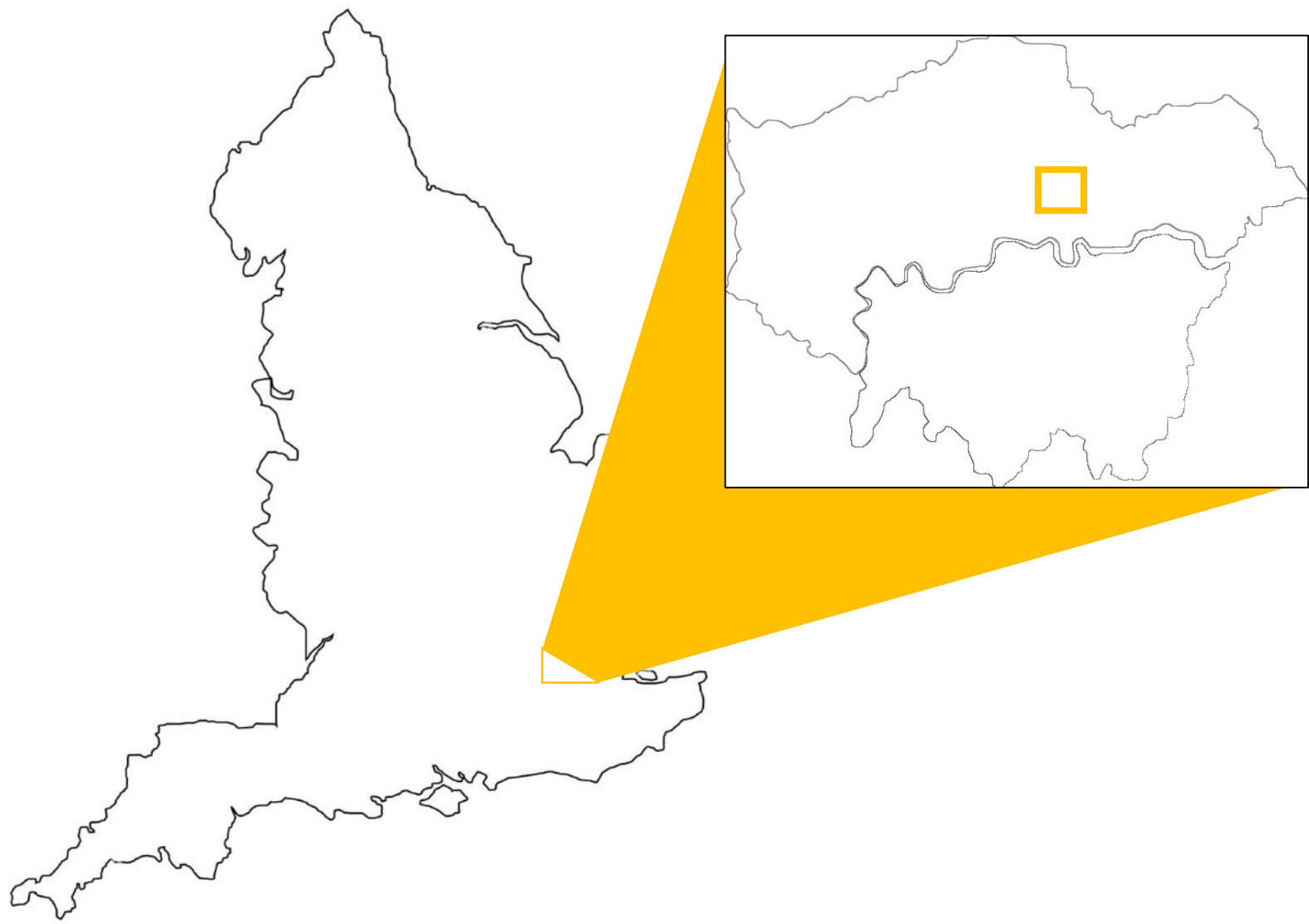


Part of the human Health Separation Layer – a membrane placed over the whole 2012 Olympic Park, East London to protect from buried contamination – this is the main stadium site in 2007/8

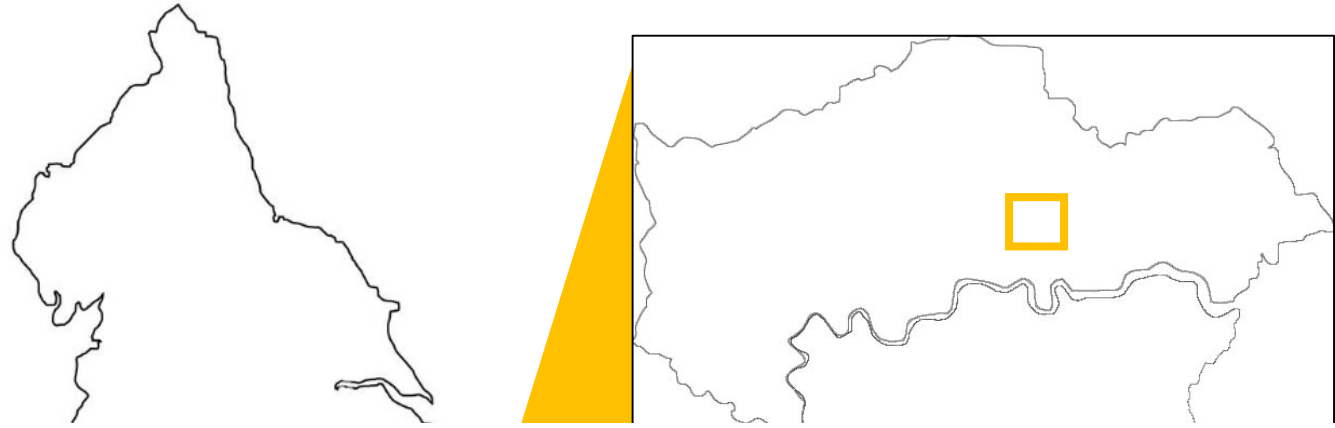


# Approach/methods

- Historic map research
- Map making (e.g. combining maps, historic aerial photos, LIDAR)
- Archival research and planning records
- Art historical research
- Site fieldwork, collecting, and photography
- Observation of uses of spaces
- Interviews with artists and others that use these spaces or their materials
- Creative research methods







# Hackney Marshes, London





View east-south east from St Paul's Cathedral over the City of London towards Tower Bridge.

Approximate  
location of  
Hackney  
Marshes  
(6.5km (4  
miles))





© IWM D 21223

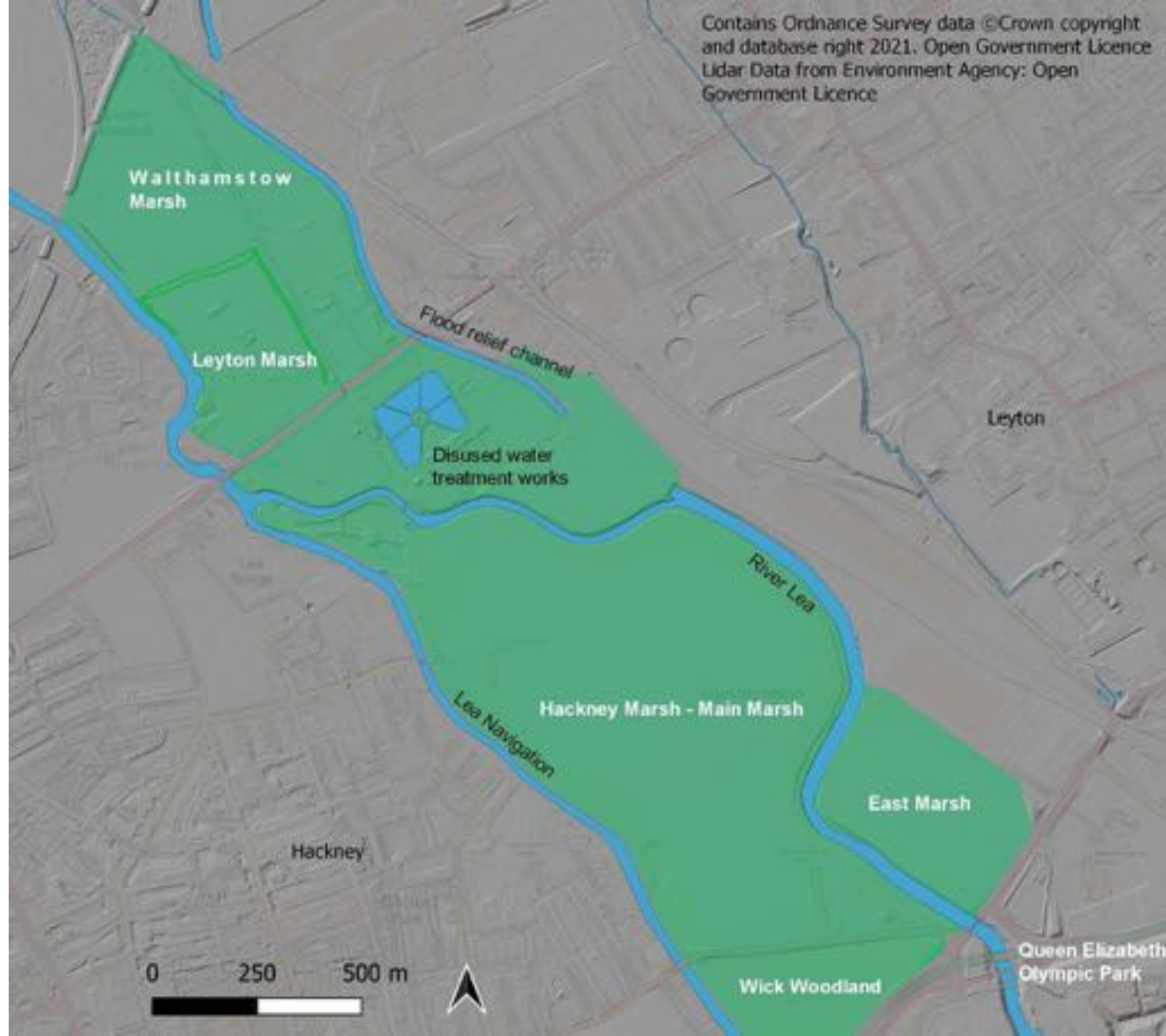


© IWM HU 131382





Contains Ordnance Survey data ©Crown copyright  
and database right 2021. Open Government Licence  
Lidar Data from Environment Agency: Open  
Government Licence



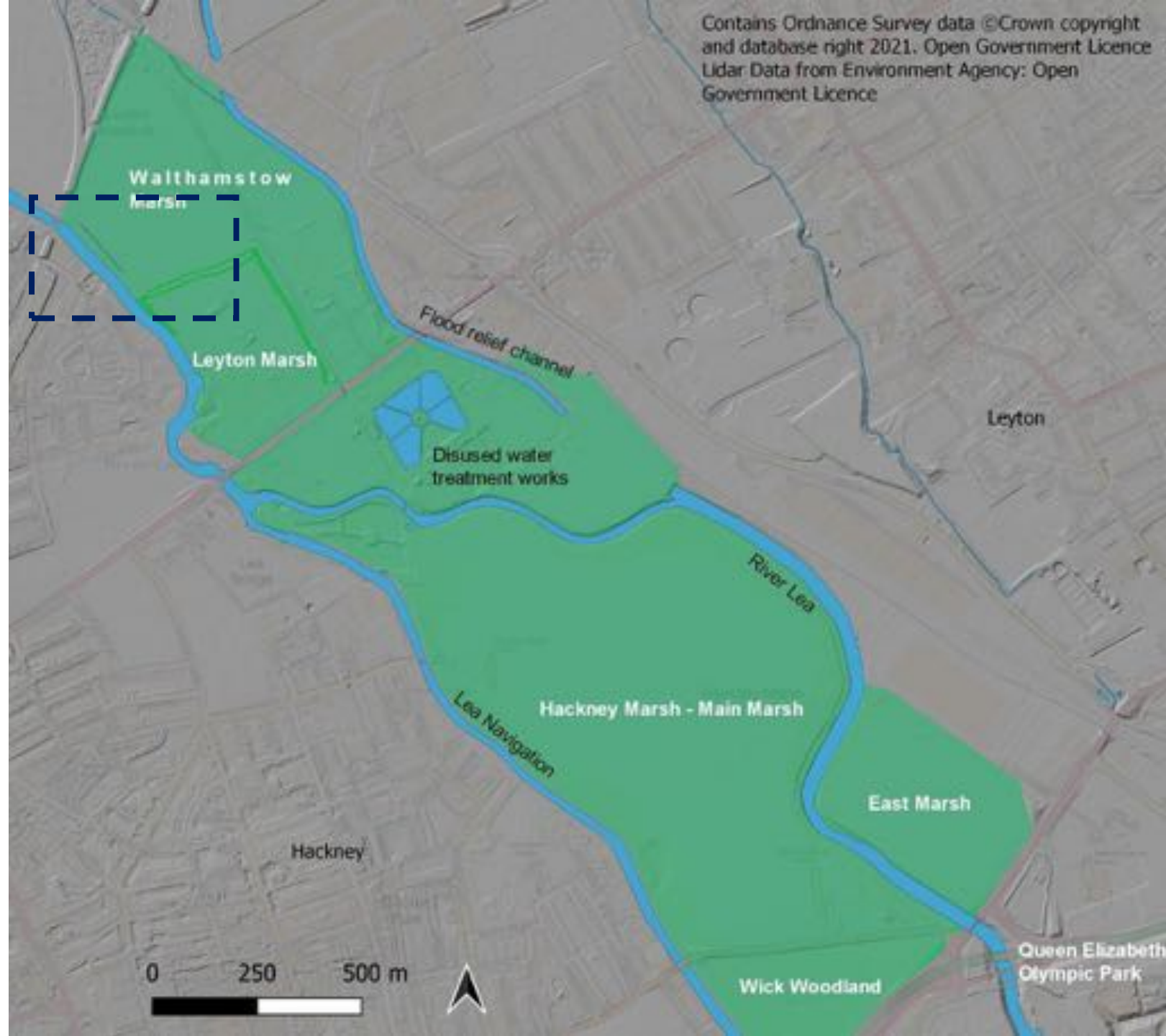


‘Above all, this field now contains within it thousands upon thousands of what was once people’s homes.

...a fitting tribute and memorial of the sacrifices made.’

(LMA LCC/CL/PK/02/039: Letter to Parks Department of LCC from J.A. Ward, 17/5/1945)

Contains Ordnance Survey data ©Crown copyright  
and database right 2021. Open Government Licence  
Lidar Data from Environment Agency: Open  
Government Licence







N

‘natural’ marsh level (Walthamstow marsh)

River Lea Navigation

V2 rocket crater

Rubble slope

Leyton Marsh +3m





























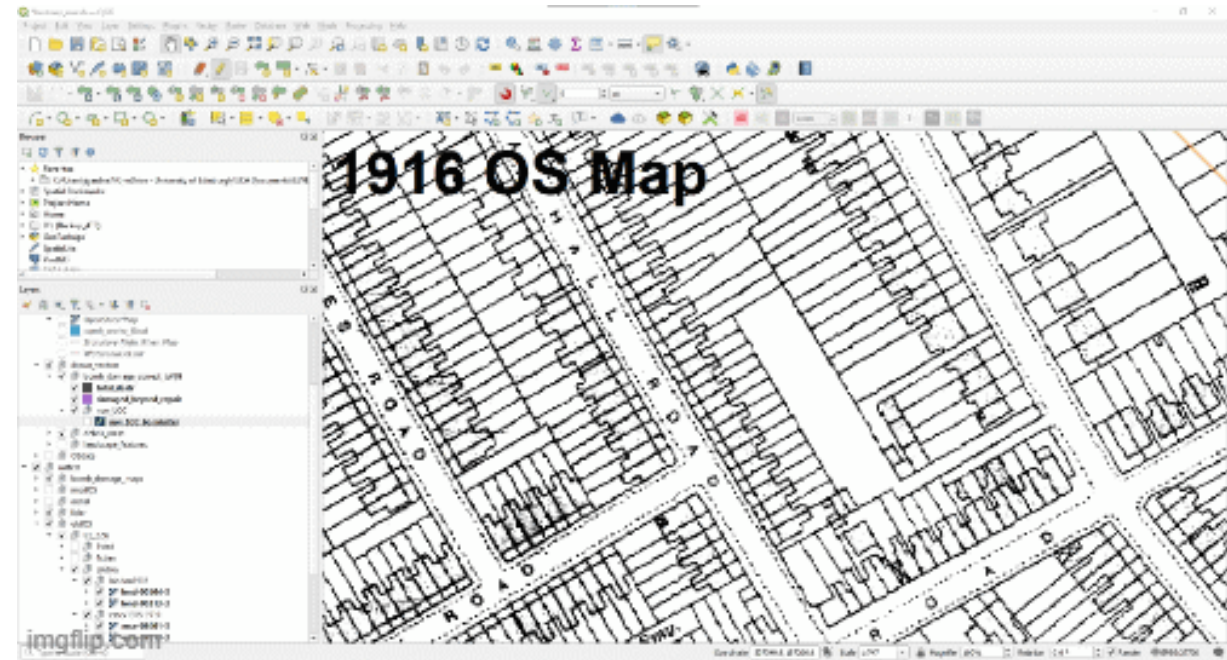
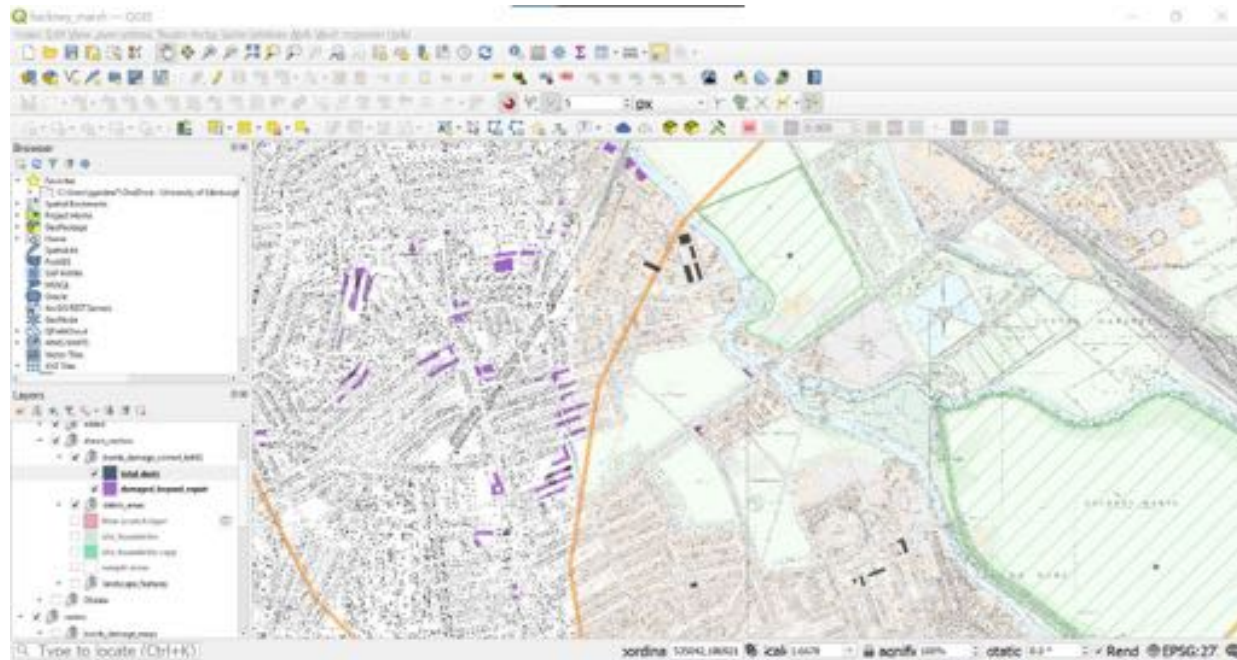
# 'Dig up Hackney Marshes to save lives from floods'

[VIEW COMMENTS](#)




Flood risk: Hackney Marshes in east London

# Ghost Streets (2022- ongoing)



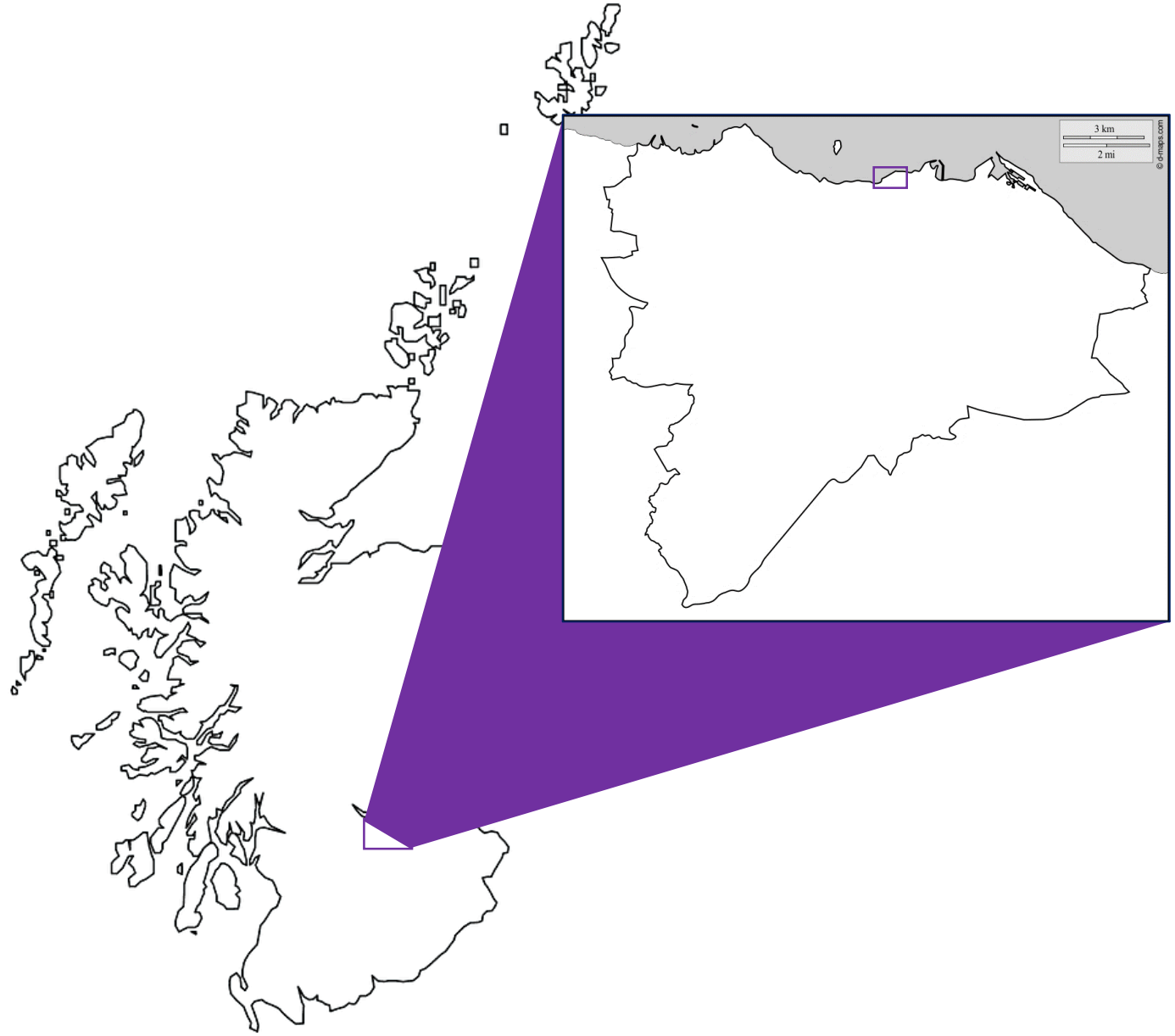


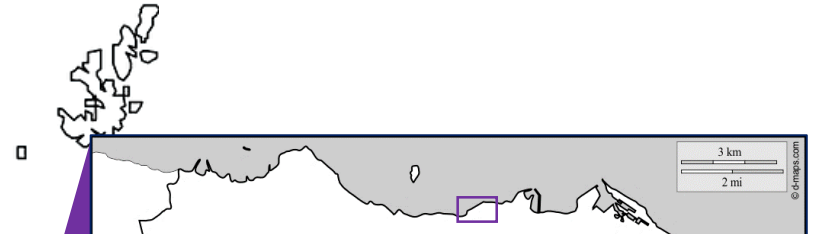


You are viewing a temporary file 









# Granton, Edinburgh







0 100 200 m







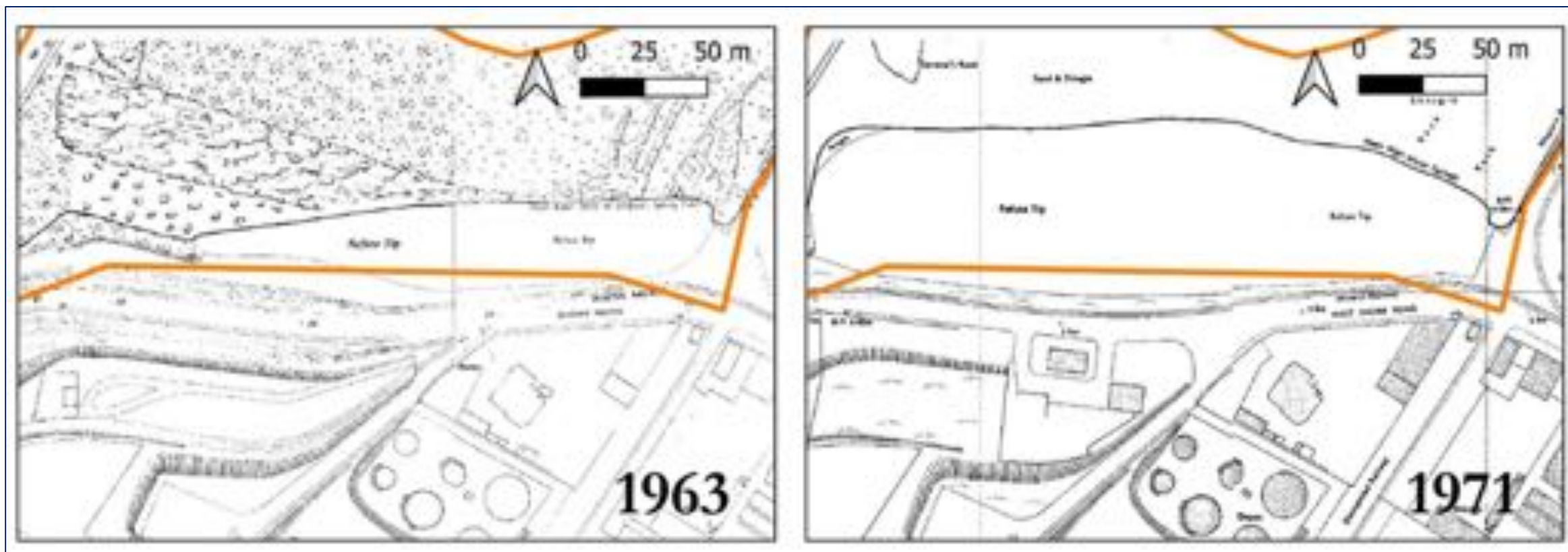
14 West Shore Road  
Edinburgh EH6 1QG

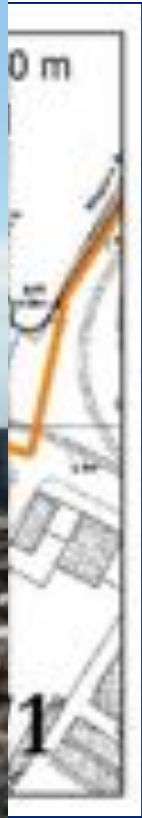














# A city built on waste

*The City & Royal Burgh of Edinburgh*

**Town Planning Brochure**

**Development Plan Review**



Clearance area



Temporary housing



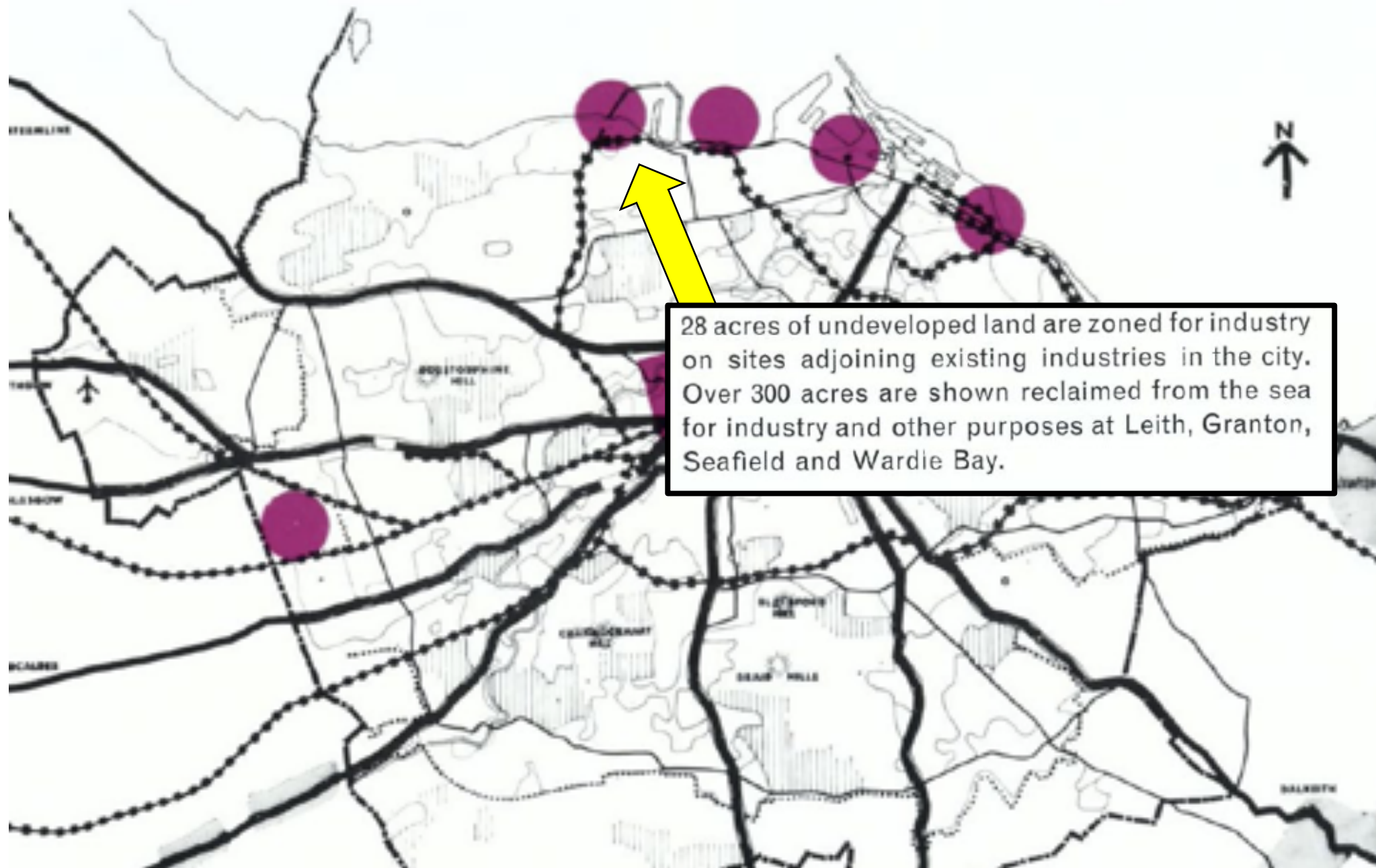
Redevelopment

Leith



New housing

Grassington



28 acres of undeveloped land are zoned for industry on sites adjoining existing industries in the city. Over 300 acres are shown reclaimed from the sea for industry and other purposes at Leith, Granton, Seafield and Wardie Bay.







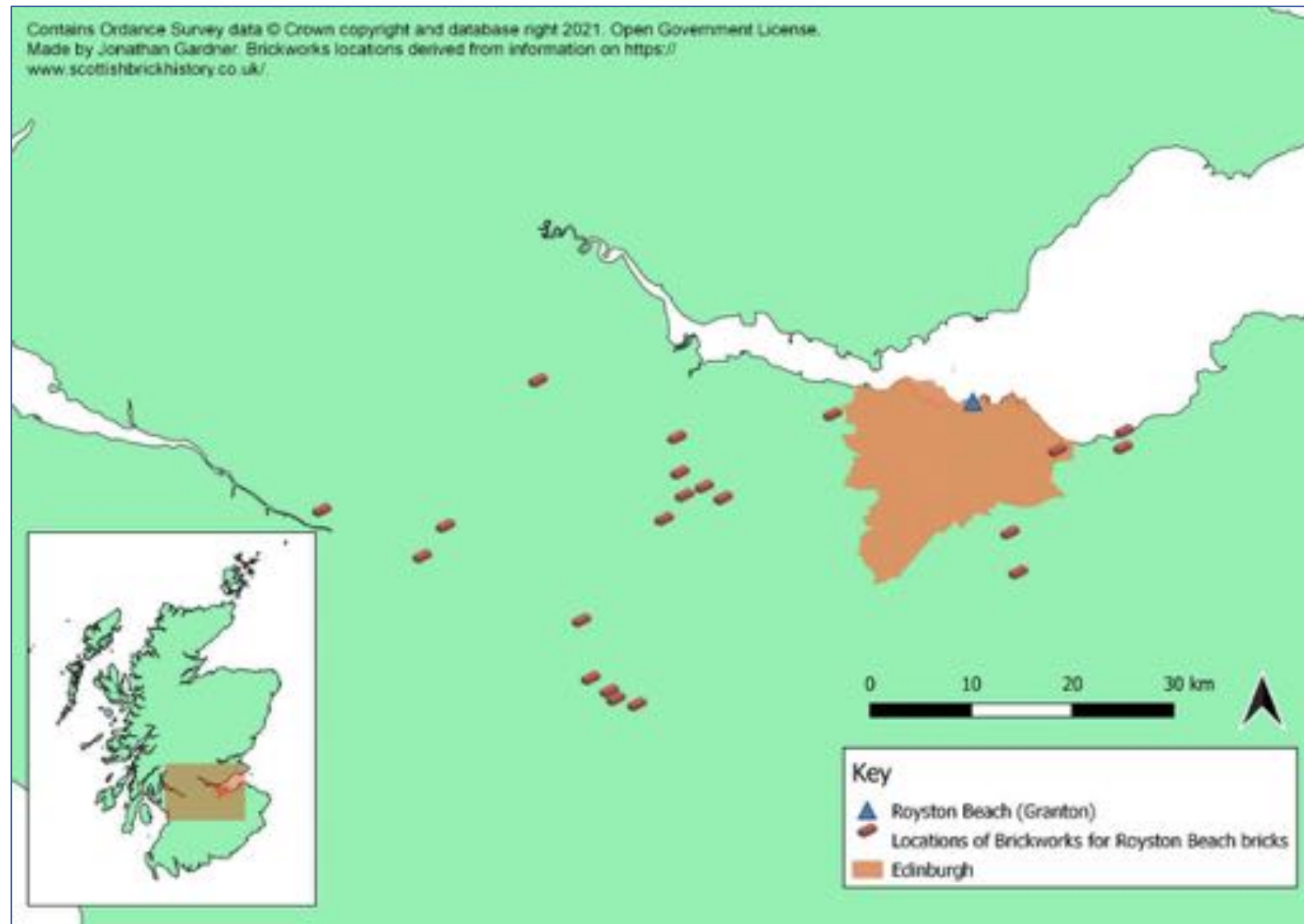












With assistance from Mark Cranston, <https://www.scottishbrickhistory.co.uk/>













DEVELOPMENT PLAN

© 2010 The Urban Development Corporation

10/10











# Brick holidays



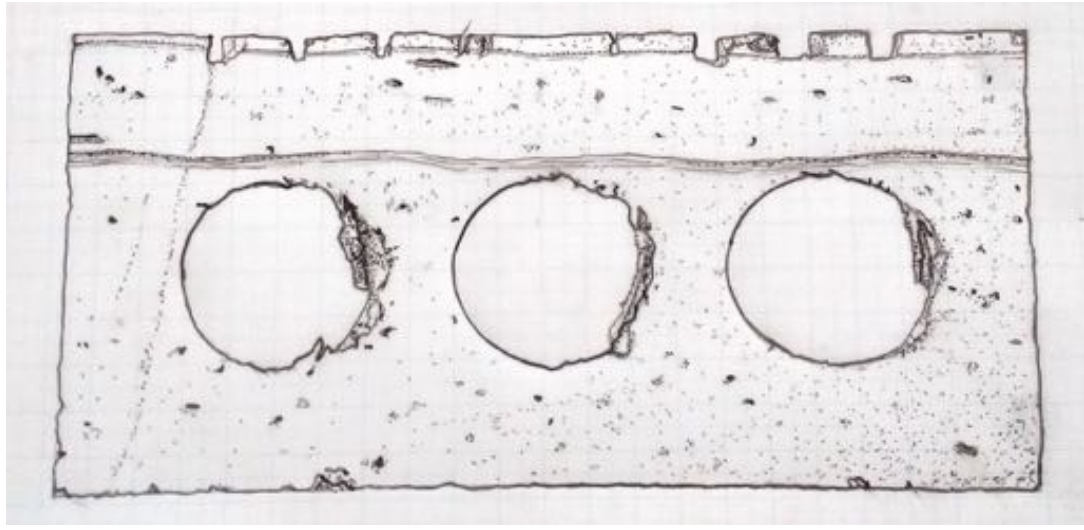
















## Brick B2 in-situ

September 2021 [deposition]



November 2021

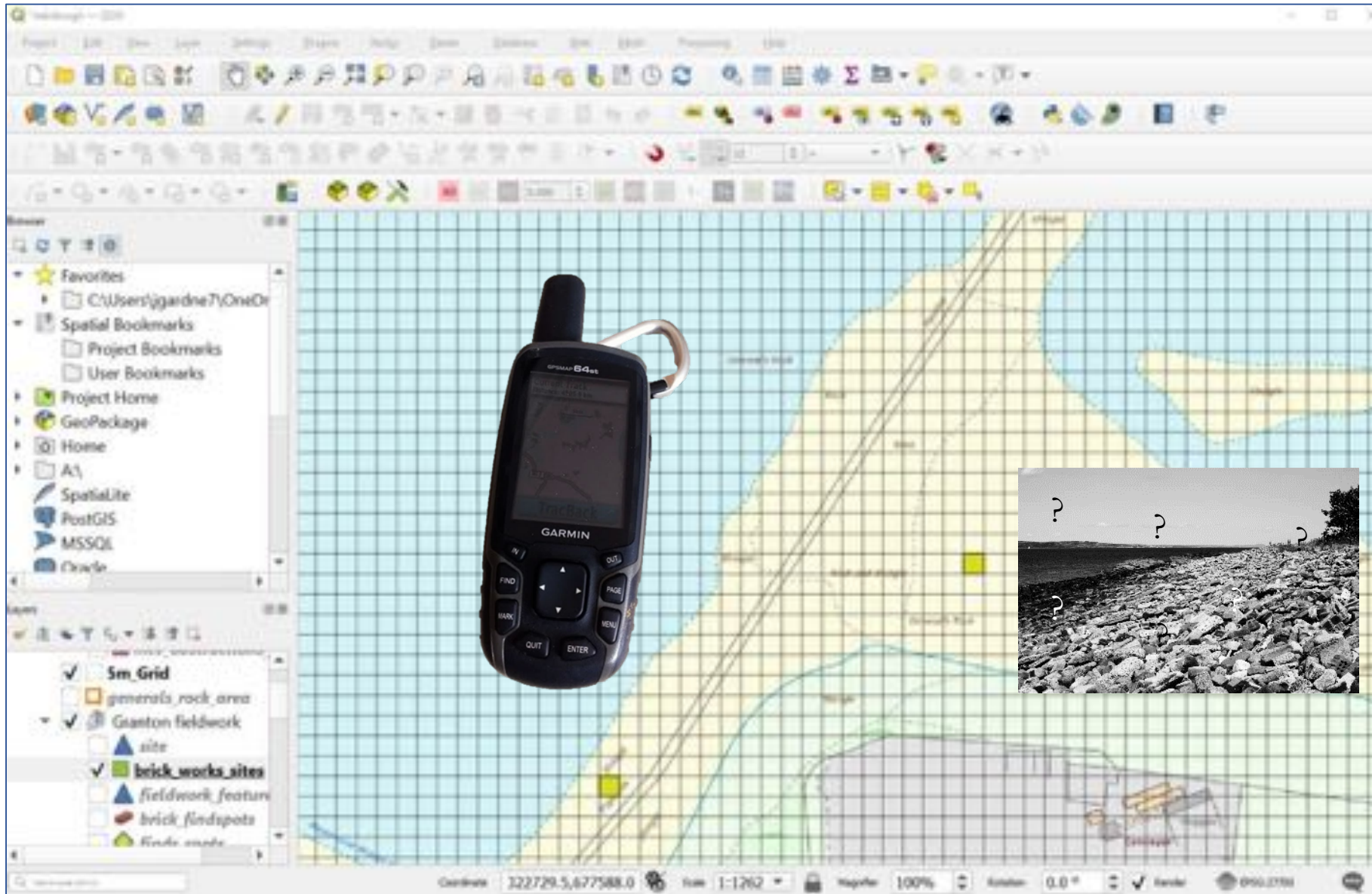


March 2022



September 2022





## Timeline

**Deposition of 'new bricks' and removal of 'old':**

*5<sup>th</sup> September 2021*

**Monitoring of new bricks and 'holidays' for old:**

*September 2021- April 2023*

**(hopeful) Retrieval?:**

*May 2023*

**Re-deposition of original bricks:**

*5<sup>th</sup> September 2023*



Edinburgh, Scotland



Google



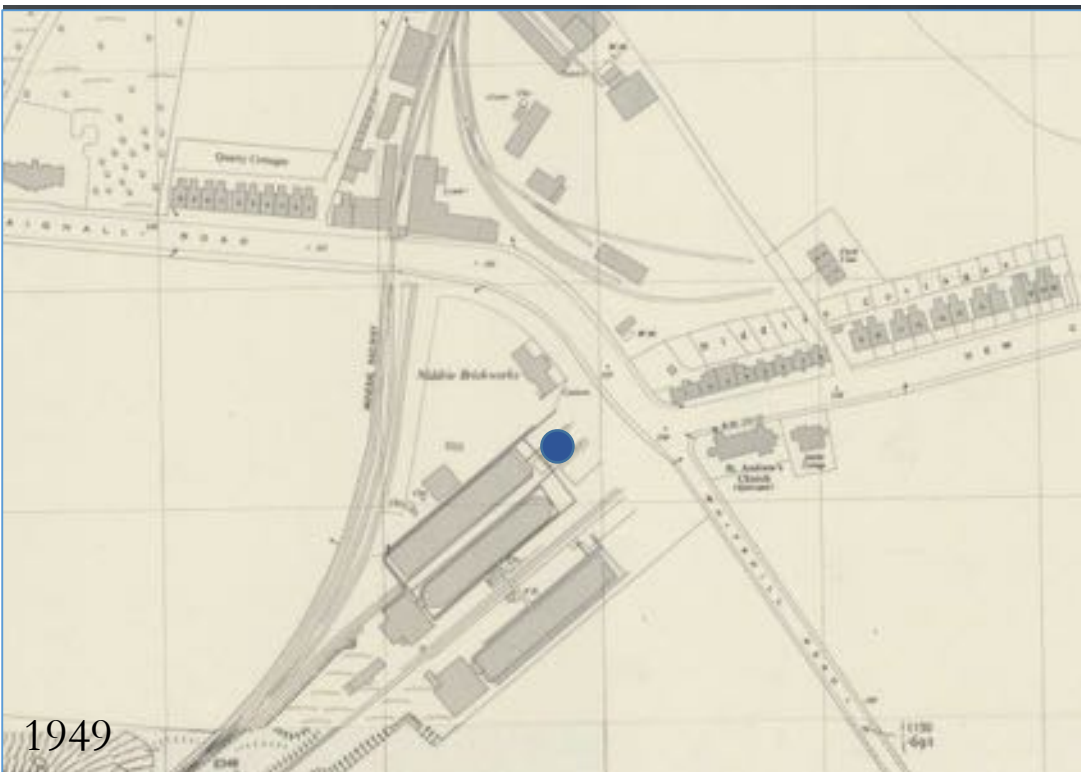
Street View



Google

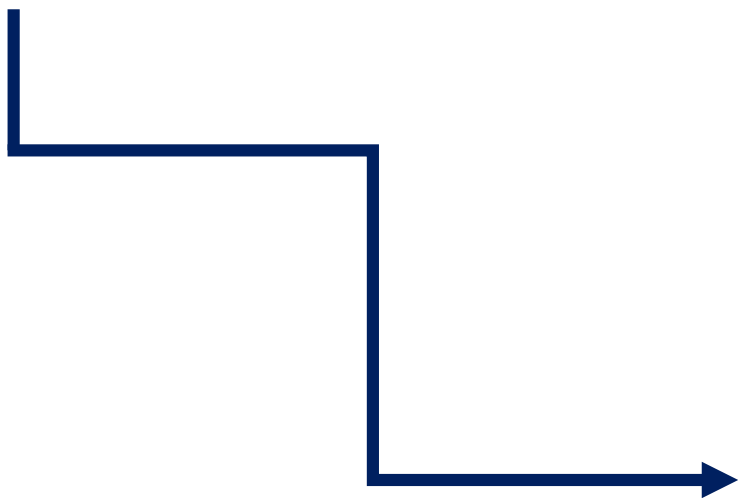
Image capture: Jan 2018 © 2021 Google





1949







# Summary

- The material discussed here is often a by-product of destruction or intensive industrialisation yet leads to processes of creation, intentional or otherwise
- These are ‘dialectical landscapes’ – where past and present are thrown into sudden juxtaposition, the traces of the past in the present revealing contradictions, incongruities etc. (*c.f.* Dawdy 2016; Benjamin 1999 conv. G)
- Generativity of waste is also politically situated: shapes how space is perceived, planned-for, used
- Waste landscapes spark off artistic or other forms of creativity

# Thanks!

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<https://twitter.com/wastelandscapes>

Blog: <https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/wastelandscapes/>

Current research funded by **The Leverhulme Trust** and  
**Edinburgh College of Art** (University of Edinburgh), 2020–23  
(ECF-2020-173). Mega event research funded by the **AHRC**  
(2012–15).





# Further reading

## Time, depth, the archaeosphere and mega and nano-scales

Dawdy, S.L., 2016. *Patina: A Profane Archaeology*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Edgeworth, M., deB Richter, D., Waters, C., Haff, P., Neal, C., and Price, S.J., 2015. Diachronous beginnings of the Anthropocene: The lower bounding surface of anthropogenic deposits. *The Anthropocene Review* 2(1), 33–58.

Edgeworth, M., 2010. Beyond Human Proportions: Archaeology of the Mega and the Nano. *Archaeologies*, 6 (1), 138–149.

Harrison, R., 2011. Surface Assemblages. Towards an archaeology in and of the present. *Archaeological Dialogues*, 18 (2), 141–161.

## Object itinerary and biography

Appadurai, A., 1986. Introduction: commodities and the politics of value. In: A. Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3–63.

Gregson, N., Crang, M., Ahamed, F., Akhter, N., and Ferdous, R., 2010. Following things of rubbish value: End-of-life ships, ‘chock-chocky’ furniture and the Bangladeshi middle class consumer. *Geoforum*, 41 (6), 846–854.

Holtorf, C., 2002. Notes on the Life History of a Pot Sherd. *Journal of Material Culture*, 7 (1), 49–71.

Joyce, R. and Gillespie, S., 2015. Making Things out of Objects That Move. In: R. Joyce and S. Gillespie, eds. *Things in Motion: Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice*. Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 3–19.

## Ruins/rubble

Gordillo, G., 2014. *Rubble*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Puff, H., 2010. Ruins as Models: Displaying Destruction in Postwar Germany. In: J. Hell and A. Schönle, eds. *Ruins of Modernity*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 253–269.

## Art and archaeology:

<https://www.artarchaeologies.com/resources> [lots of links to articles]

Special issue of *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*: <https://journal.equinoxpub.com/JCA/issue/view/1038> [search/login via library to access]

Some examples: <https://emergencyindex.com/projects/2016/412-413> [BBQueens]

The Soil is Sentient: <https://soilissentient.cargo.site/>

**Some publications of mine (accessible via [ResearchGate](#)):**

Gardner, J., 2016. How do you lose a river? *Living Maps Review*, 1 (1), 1–14. [Olympics focussed]

Gardner, J., 2018. Beneath the rubble, the Crystal Palace! The surprising persistence of a temporary mega event. *World Archaeology*, 50 (1), 185–199.

Gardner, J., 2020a. Competing for the past: the London 2012 Olympics, archaeology, and the ‘wasteland’. In: V. Apaydin, ed. *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage: Construction, Transformation and Destruction*. London: UCL Press, 45–66.

Gardner, J., 2020b. Recurring Dreams: Mega Events and Traces of Past Futures. *Archaeology International*, 22 (1), 86–99.

Gardner, J., 2020c. The industrial archaeology of the archaeology industry. *IA: The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archeology*, 43 (1+2), 13–26.

Gardner, J., 2022. *A Contemporary Archaeology of London's Mega Events: From the Great Exhibition to London 2012*. London: UCL Press. [open access book - [free download](#)]