**Walking W8 in Manolos[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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In mediating the sensory footwork of dwelling[[2]](#footnote-2), in connecting us with the ground on which our lives are lived-in-motion, appropriate shoes are needed. Few would countenance leaving home without shoes when embarking on the mundane journeys of everyday life: and this underscores their central, if rarely explored, function in mobility. Shoes need to fit the walker *and* the territory. Flip-flops,[[3]](#footnote-3) the world’s cheapest shoes, are for the beach, and for the poor in the global south who can’t afford other shoes. Manolos are London W8. If postcodes could be shoes, W8 would be a fabulous pair of high-heeled Manolos, suitably elegant, appropriately expensive. Plutocratic shoes: suitable for navigating one of London’s uber wealthy neighbourhoods, shoes for delicately stepping around the tensions between the concealment and exposure of wealth and erring on the side of exposure in an expensive pair of shoes. Shoes both express and co-compose urban social morphology and social distinction.

Walking serves many of the same social functions: it endlessly, unconsciously repeats learned behaviour, bodily apprenticeships shaped by class and culture [[4]](#footnote-4), emerging urban dispositions. W8 calls forth a gait shaped by a sense of entitlement. Walking is a mode of mobile urban occupation, a way of inhabiting the streets, of wrapping them around the feet of a body-in-motion on the routines of everyday life. The inhabitation of the streets co-composes them, so walking produces urban form[[5]](#footnote-5) as well as urban subjectivities, ways of being in the world. Walking is also a sensory method of urban knowing: we know the streets as we feel them, experience them, beneath our feet; their fleeting ephemerality and their regulated forms revealed in our constant circulation of them[[6]](#footnote-6). Where we can and cannot walk[[7]](#footnote-7) where streets have been sequestered as exclusive enclaves of privilege and exclusion is infused with urban politics. W8 summons the leisured outsider status of the flanneur[[8]](#footnote-8) observing bourgeois urban life, just as Benjamin through his famous *Arcades Project* did in Paris. Walking is no innocent by-product of urban life; it is both constitutive of it and a way of knowing about it at the same time.

W8 is part of the *alpha territories.* This refers to a spatially calibrated estimate of wealth based on the mosaic classification of people from a range of big data sources. The four most prestigious of which are collectively called the *alpha territories*: ‘*groups of people with substantial wealth who live in the most sought after neighbourhoods in the UK’*[[9]](#footnote-9). Average house (and flat) prices in W8 are in excess of £3 million. It houses one of the highest intensities of high net worth individuals (HNIs) - with investible assets of over one million pounds - and Ultra HNIs – with investible assets of more than £20 million pounds - on the planet[[10]](#footnote-10). In 2015 there were 80 individuals with wealth of more than a billion pounds resident in London, more than in any other city in the world. London attracts plutocratic capital[[11]](#footnote-11) and W8 is one of the places where it is consumed and parked, with residential property operating as a safe store of value.

The royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea’s library, just off its main commercial artery, Kensington High Street, is the best place to begin walking W8. Cities are inevitably work-in-progress and the library archives its past. Here we learn that the W8 of today arises from a Victorian imagination and numerous forays into land speculation by wealthier builders. It was created on land occupied by the great country houses; part of the fashionable world gathered around the court of William and Mary at Kensington Palace in the late 17thC, and some distance from the city. Transformed by Victorian builders, developers like James Freak who built Onslow Square (1845-65) and urban designers like Thomas Wood, it was intended for ‘*persons of good worth and quality*’[[12]](#footnote-12). It exhibited the benefits of the practical application of arts and sciences with a mid 19thC imperialist confidence. Nearby on the banks of the Serpentine stood Crystal Palace (1851) exhibiting the best in raw materials, decorative arts, machinery and jewellery as city spectacle, in the Great Exhibition. Extending and grounding this display of mastery and expertise, the Victorian and Albert Museum opened nearby (1852); the Royal Albert Hall (1871) followed where the Royal Geographical Society (1830) was already disseminating the benefits of the exploration on which empire was founded. From the 1840s the canals and railways connecting it to London ended its status as a fashionable suburb. The extension of the underground to South Kensington and Kensington High Street (1865-9) and the emergence of the great department stores such as Harrods (1861) and Harvey Nichols (1850s) and a cluster lining Kensington High Street, made it what it is today. Cities it seems are as restless as the (mobile) populations co-composing them.

From the library we pick our way along the streets to the North of Kensington High St., along Phillimore Gardens. Victorian (and earlier) versions of what much later became W8 linger in the biographies of long-term residents. Harriet, who first moved into the neighbourhood in 1952, was presented as a debutante at court; she ‘did the season’, the royal enclosure at Ascot, the rounds of dinners, balls, luncheons, and coffee mornings young women did at that time. For several years now she has been selling off the lower floors of her house and moving up until she now lives, in comfortable if rather cramped conditions, on the floor below the attic in which she stores much of the contents of her former house. Houses on her street now sell for around £10 or £11 million and new kinds of uber wealthy neighbours are moving in. She knows that the banks dominate the neighbourhood; they rent properties for their executives, often Americans, or French families wanting to be close to the Lycee. It is not that many of them are foreigners; but that they are rich that changes the casual convivialities of the street, she thinks. People who can afford staff don’t need to lean on the reciprocities of the neighbourhood. And so it becomes a different kind of place.

Crossing over Kensington High St and walking gracefully along Wrights Lane and Marlow St heading south, past oxblood coloured purpose built mansion blocks built at the turn of the century. We walk past the new serving class: nannies pushing small charges in prams; young women cleaning windows and polishing front door knobs; a cacophony of brown feet passing through London, navigating routes through their own lives. There are deliveries and pick-ups; elaborate forms of domestic management hold sway, overseen by the wives of English, French and American bankers, who may once have been bankers themselves. The occasional hedge fund manager with flexible working hours steers a little girl in a traditional 1950s style private school uniform struggling with a violin and bulging school bag. A young woman tripping along in rival Manolos relives last nights’ cocktails in a loud phone conversation with her friend: ‘*I was sooooo tharsty*….’.

Turning east, we walk along Launceston Road. Pillars and beautifully groomed window boxes frame its well-appointed early 19thC four-storey stucco houses with impressive steps up to the front door. A relative of the Queen lives on this street when he’s in London, and royalty has long been part of this neighbourhood. Residents can tell you how long it takes to walk from here to Kensington Palace, thus making it part of the neighbourhood. An ex-premier league footballer and his family moved in and then moved out again.

Walking just off Victoria Road, high-end bistros that were once pubs reveal the delicate morsels tackled by ladies who lunch. A smattering of art shops and estate agents fill in the gaps created by rising real estate values and the rents that reflect them. Corner shops, places where it was once possible to buy milk and newspapers have disappeared; even resilient Asian grocers have moved on to avoid the rising costs of trading.

The renovation of elegant period properties is the most relentless activity of these streets: the sounds and the debris of building, the disruption to parking from the skips now mark these otherwise quiet back streets. London housing is now valued by the square footage. Whether they are needed or not, basements were dug three storeys down until recently when the royal borough stepped in and limited basements to one story; games rooms, swimming pools and spa areas were slipped into the gaping caverns builders and mining engineers created. While the historical character of the area is carefully stewarded in protecting with regulation the appearance of the outside of these houses, their interiors are another matter. Highly skilled craftsmen, often at cost in excess of a million pounds, carefully recreate these in high quality materials and finishes. Housing is a store of wealth as well as a key avenue of consumption and the financialisation of living space deepens.

On rounding the corner into Victoria Road we walk straight into an invisible block on the building ambitions of the neighbourhood’s house owners in the form of the Kensington Society, which one of the long-term residents describes as ‘*the essence of Kensington*’. Its remit is the preservation of the historical character and aesthetic appearance of the area. Under its influence the Victoria Road Residents Association upholds the character of the block of streets around it. As part of its federal structure, each street has a representative. It is well organised and scrutinises planning applications, changes to parking caused by building work and other developments in the area like the potential sighting of hotels. They monitor the empty properties – part of the buy to leave schemes of absentee investors who are interested in capital returns not neighbourhood conviviality. In parallel, the Friends of Holland Park try to prevent it from being turned into an events space rather than a public park for everyone to use: valuable land is the most difficult to protect from commodification.

From the south end of Victoria road we wind through further period elegance until we hit the rush of the Cromwell Road and the feel of the area changes abruptly as we run up against the W8 /SW7 borderlands of Earl’s Court. Earl’s Court is not appropriately navigated in Manolos, it needs a different kind of shoe entirely; a more serviceable workaday shoe is called for in order to traverse the fraying and encroaching edges of plutocratic London. Trainers perhaps?

1. This essay is inspired by an ESRC funded investigation of London’s super wealthy called *The Alpha Territory.* The author was a member of the research team. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tim Ingold 2004 ‘Culture on the Ground: the world perceived through feet’, Material Culture vol.9(3) 315-340 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Caroline Knowles (2014) Flip-flop: *A Journey Through Globalisation’s Backroads*, London: Pluto [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Marcel Mauss (1934) essay Techniques of the Body’ cited Edward Tenner (2003) Our Own Devices, NYC: Knopf, Random House: pp8-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Michel de Certeau (1988) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, Henri Lefebvre (1996) *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alexandra Boutros and Will Straw (2010) ‘Introduction’ in Boutros and Straw (eds.) *Circulation and the City*, London & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Anna Minton (2012) *Ground Control*, London: Penguin; Raja Shehadeh (2007) *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape*, London: Profile Books [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Walter Benjamin (2002) *The Arcades Project*, Harvard University Press [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Richard Webber and Roger Burrows (2016) ‘Life in an *Alpha Territory*: Discontinuities and Conflicts in an Elite London ‘Village’, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Roger Burrows (2016, forthcoming) ‘The Plutocratic City: Elite Formation, Power and Space in Contemporary London’ using the 2015 World Wealth Reports produced by Capgemini and RBC Wealth Management for the financial sector says that globally there are 14.6 million HNIs and over half a million of them are in the UK and concentrated in London and the SE. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This comes from the Sunday Times Rich list 2015 cited in Roger Burrows, ‘The Plutocratic City: elite formation, power and space in contemporary London’ (forthcoming) *Urban Studies*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Annabel Walker with Peter Jackson (1987:17) *Kensington and Chelsea: A Social and Architectural History,* London: Antler Books [↑](#footnote-ref-12)