

“Ignore the playground...”

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This paper is dedicated to St. Mary Baptist Church, Greater Union Baptist Church, Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, and Notre Dame de Paris each in equal measure. Your stories may have burned, but your memory will not.

“Ignore the playground...”

Deeply haunted cities are a massive cerebral turn-on for me. Coming from a city where buildings are considered old if they are from the ‘60s, the idea of entire blocks dating back to the 1600s provokes a number of questions both architectural and historical, most of them concerning just how many ghosts there are per square foot. What is difficult then is finding out that people actually live in these locations and require things like places to live and work and drink. Enter London, or rather have me do the honor of entering this landmark across the pond. A continuously evolving and preserving city where cranes loom over the polished rows of Victorian townhomes wielding a window pane or a steel bar. Massive columns which line the square hosting the British Museum are adorned with diner signs for Indian eateries. I was entranced by this dissonance and by the possibility of ghostly encounter on one of our first stops. The Jack the Ripper Walking Tour.

For those uninitiated, the story of Jack the Ripper features a sea of unanswerable questions mixed in with exact known trivia. Five working women were murdered between August and November 1888 in increasingly vicious ways. Gory details about the lacerations on their bodies litter History Channel specials coupled with mass speculation about the identity of the killer.

The places have their gory history remembered only by deranged tourists. Our group had near a dozen of said maniacs: a few young couples more interested in the city light in their partner's eyes than in crosswalks, a couple of single men in their forties either working on a very specific thesis or a very specific fetish, and lastly my father and me, steeply jet-lagged and pleasantly fuzzy from a few rounds of ales. After stepping off of charter buses at the Tower of London on a traditionally brisk November evening, we stood in a huddle all awkwardly looking among ourselves, a creepy camaraderie forming between us. Our guide arrived promptly at 5:30. Not much taller than me and equally round, he slowed down in front of our group.

“This the lot then? Well, let's hit it.” I truly wish I could just say he “said” this, but he most definitely “piped” it. He was off before he had begun and we manic tourists were left to clumsily follow along. We emerged from a tunnel and saw a wall. Massive bricks cemented by time and aged plaster. It is here where we were informed that we stood at the oldest landmark of the city, a remnant of a wall which used to divide Whitechapel from its elite, holier-than-thou surroundings.

“S'important that we begin here, see, because you have to understand how little history stands.” The guide piped. There was a moment to contemplate. Then back to pounding the pavement, the small group huddling in anticipation of visiting the haunted sites.

Calling the locations “sites,” while correct, may invoke a grander image than the truth allows. The term’s general use as being synonymous with “areas” has molded in the mindset due in large part to road signs. If the phrase “historic site” hangs on a road sign next to the nearest gas station and hotel it is expected to have, well, something commemorating a historic event. At the very least some kind of plaque is needed, dusty but distinguished as it outlines who exactly came to this place, how they did so, what they found, when they died, and why it matters. In order for history to be real or really remembered, it must be written.

At least, that was Victor Hugo’s concern. His first goal with writing what English readers know as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is made clearer by the original title *Notre-Dame de Paris*.

Despite eventually being known and recognized as a prolific author, his own view was “This will destroy That. The Book will destroy the Edifice.” Essentially, the concern was that the new fad of reading among the masses would erase the historic, narrative elements of the cathedral’s architecture. Public knowledge of the significance of that particular style of buttress or the function of this grotesque (here meaning a gargoyle-like statue) would all be lost with the introduction of a new medium. This fear, however, was based on forgetting the history of a building centuries old and religiously significant. So perhaps it is a mere matter of elder superiority that earns Notre Dame its standing frame and these gruesome sites nothing.

Look at any list of monuments and the gruesome is difficult to avoid. War memorials, battlegrounds, internment camps, there seem very few subcategories of these pedagogical markers that do not carry with them violence. If the violence involved with an event determines the size of the marker, however, one would think a serial killer’s trail could at least earn a shoe-box-sized plaque. Instead, the speedy Londoner guiding the tour had to add proper context when

arriving at a crime scene. Someone in our group had gotten momentarily lost taking pictures for Instagram and so came running up just in time for the guide's next sentence.

“Right, now, ignore the playground...”

Well that wasn't likely to work. It's like telling someone not to think of an elephant. At the site of Elizabeth Stride's death stood, indeed, a playground in faded neon hues. The absurdity was tangible. Not only was it impossible to ignore the construction, now the two were molding together in some expressionist catastrophe, helped in no part by my buzz at the time. I could just picture the battered woman in rags draped over the plastic tunnel, rattling as kids crawled through to get to the monkey bars.

The guide added that the playground had intentionally been built at the site of a devastating bombfall during the Blitz which had devastated the block, the three slides and accompanying swings a sign of resilience and grace. He said the builders didn't know about the other murder. You build over the bombs without even knowing about the bones. It's not intentional. It's something closer to inevitable. The centuries of history in each square yard furrowed into the ground with layers of concrete, asphalt, gravel, brick, and eventually return to dirt, or was it ash. History radiates from these layers up, confirming the sense of authenticity to the sites with the ever-present edge of the questions still unanswered. Statues saluting great figures and plaques bestowed with facts are given heavier weight from their foundations. It is easy then to spot a fake, not from the events it covers, but for how long it has stood the test of time. Most possible equivalents in the U.S. were destroyed through rampant colonialism disguised as crusades, claiming our destiny of others land and history. Our statues, buildings, and memorials are adolescent when faced with great preservations abroad. But we are a hardy crew Americans, and we want to join the adults. If not in policy or attitude, we can at least steal the

aesthetic. Whether the Parisian tints of Monticello or the Alp-like snow resorts of the Rockies, the tradition of appropriation reigns across the pond, even in the least remembered places.

Seemingly plopped from an Italian plaza into the center of Indianapolis is a neoclassical tower dubbed the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. Surrounding it is a brick-paved roundabout holding a library, several chain eateries, and a looming skyscraper. At 286 ft. tall, the white obelisk is adorned with bronze statues and elegant stonework etched into its sides. To claim it is new is to put it in the global context, as the construction lasted from 1888 to 1901. From the downtown entrance to the street, the memorial appears to be for the Union in the Civil War. A trip around and a knowledge of history being written by the victors paints an increasingly warped picture. On the next side is a tribute to defeating the Mexicans. The third entails the success of "CONQUERING THE INDIANS." With each rotation the tower proudly declares historic winners and losers, unapologetically coining a legacy. Each side is adorned with cherubim and etches as accessories reaching for the Renaissance edge but falling short. When I asked about the history of the site specifically, there were few answers other than praising pioneers and wet soil. It is here where the pretense becomes evident the assumption that building such a figure on such fresh ground is doing the same thing as our neighbors across the pond. The lie is in the ground. This location was not selected specifically, nor has it endured trauma since its installment. Had it born witness to battle or triumph its existence could be justified, as is it is a bit of plaza dressing disguised as something more significant. It simply was a way to make the area look nice. Claiming history as art is a proposition near guaranteed to backfire.

Perhaps it is better than that not one spot along our tour was marked. In recalling the tour for this very essay, the only images that come to mind are gray windows, worn cathedrals, and cracked concrete where once a slaughtered prostitute lay. With, of course, the exception of the

playground. Rather the knowledge both of killings and of context came from stories told. While walking down an alley the guide mentioned a former sweatshop essential to Charles Dickens writing *Oliver Twist* with the same offhanded nature of someone mentioning where they had eaten a particularly tasty pastry. The Roman stones of our first stop have seen a millennium of change around them and now are overshadowed by skyscrapers. A fence obstructed the site of Jack's final and most brutal murder, reserving the land for an upcoming construction. In our proper direction, back toward the Tower of London, silhouettes of steel monoliths starred with fluorescent office lighting loomed. It was equally tragic and appropriate, the city still continuing to wipe the evidence of its wounds—military, criminal or otherwise—from existence. Or, at least, attempting to.

“What is key here is that everything gets built over.” The guide said, “But it cannot be forgotten, this I charge you.” He then bid us farewell pointing to a pub frequented by Ripper theorists and disappeared into the crowd. And so we were left in this dissonant city. Catty corner to us was the mentioned bar, a picture-perfect rendition of a period piece pub complete with wooden, hand-scrawled signage and a boisterous atmosphere. Behind us was a shuttered shop taking residence in a well-maintained yet shabby 19th century complex. In our proper direction back toward the Tower of London, silhouettes of steel monoliths starred with fluorescent office lighting loomed. And so, path unseen, we took our next steps.