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The Transnational Biography of ‘British’ Place: Local and Global Stories in the Built Environment

Jennifer Burns

Commenting on how humans in the digital age leave marks of their presence, John Urry notes that ‘individuals […] exist beyond their private bodies, leaving traces of their selves in space’.1 This chapter elaborates upon Urry’s emphasis on individual traces to examine how diasporic communities create a presence in space which exceeds the duration and the physical locality of the community’s material residence in a given place. Observing the spaces of the everyday in a community in the UK identified as bearing Italian heritage – London’s ‘Little Italy’ – the discussion explores how traces of Italian-ness are present in the fabric of the urban built environment, and in the commercial and community activity of the everyday in these locations. It will examine in particular how the site articulates a notion of belonging or connecting to Italian culture within the complex visual and experiential matrix of ethnic and cultural performances which characterizes contemporary community in a global city such as London. In the context of the histories of Italian migration which pre-date population movements – largely post-imperial – into the UK from a global range of countries and cultures since the 1950s, the discussion pays particular attention to the ways in which city space negotiates the layered memory of transnational communities.2 It will consider first present-day urban space and practice, identified through a reading of architectural features and usage, and then place this into dialogue with the narrative practices of observer-residents from within the historic community, contained in a selection of textual and photographic life histories. Together these elements assemble the collective biography of a community and of a place.

The area of Clerkenwell in Holborn, east central London was known as ‘Little Italy’, from the mid nineteenth century to the 1970s-1980s, and housed one of the highest concentrations of Italian population in London (in the UK) over that period.3 It is quite conceivable that someone living in Clerkenwell now, working there, or passing through, would be unaware of this presence of a

2 See Nancy Stieber, ‘Microhistory of the Modern City: Urban Space, Its Use and Representation’, in Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 58.3 (September 1999), 382-91. The method I adopt recalls Stieber’s discussion – something of a manifesto – of microhistory in relation to architectural history; she calls for ‘the close reading of evidence in case studies, fulfilling the promise of microhistory to describe thickly the complex and multivalent ways that urban form takes shape, engenders experience, creates identity, expresses ideology, and operates independently as a product of architectural knowledge’ (p. 389).
transnational Italian history in the area. The traces of Italian presence which persist in the urban environment are materially and undeniably there, but could go unnoticed as isolated examples of migrant or transnational heritage which routinely exist in almost all urban areas and provincial towns of the UK. To some degree, the historical Italian community of this part of London is now hidden in plain sight: visible, but apparently unremarkable. This scarce visibility of a community which once dominated the area is easily explained by a catalogue of factors: changing patterns of migration from Italy to the UK, changing patterns of global migration especially in the postcolonial era, new urban planning priorities, the upward economic and social mobility of city-centre areas formally characterized as ‘slums’, the ethnic diversity of London as a global city, the ways in which economic, commercial, cultural and aesthetic priorities combine to reinvent the urban identity of particular postcodes. That the Italian community in Clerkenwell seems all but gone is thus not a surprise. What is interesting, though, is to look at the traces that remain and to think about what they might mean, both to an observer connected to that past and to one who stumbles upon apparently dislocated signs of Italian-ness.

The hub of ‘Little Italy’ in Clerkenwell was historically St Peter’s Italian Church on Clerkenwell Road, inaugurated in 1863. The church remains active on this site and remains a focal point for many Italians in London (tourists included) who, even though much further dispersed across the city than in the past, still choose to worship there. The church itself, as a monument and as a community space, speaks to a wider public of the memory and the sense of common values and purposes which are understood to define the multigenerational population of Italians in London. A memorial plaque in the entrance and a larger panel in the interior, listing names, both record the sinking of the Arandora Star in 1940, the single most striking wound borne collectively by Italians who inhabited all parts of the UK during and after World War II. At the level of the everyday (and an everyday construed in continuity with the past), publications available to buy, such as a history of the Church and a calendar, both record and state the currency of established practices which bridge the religious and the cultural, depicting events such as first communion as well as Church-organized trips and pilgrimages. The calendar is a particularly eloquent artefact of temporality, its annual collection of new photographs stating the timelessness of traditional events and practices and marking the regularity of their recurrence, whilst also repopulating the images with new (often young) faces, so staking a claim to perpetuity into the future. Publications embedded entirely within the community –

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4 See [https://www.italianchurch.org.uk/home](https://www.italianchurch.org.uk/home) (all online references in this essay were last accessed on 12 February 2020).

5 The website states that St Peter’s Church represents ‘The biggest Catholic Italian Community in London’ (see n. 4).

6 The SS Arandora Star was torpedoed by a German U-boat in July 1940 whilst carrying German and Italian civilian internees, as well as prisoners of war, from the UK to Canada. Of the total death toll of 865, 446 were Italian nationals.
The peculiarities of the prominence of St Peter’s Church come to light if the material form of the building itself is considered. In the interior, the church commands significant space both vertically and horizontally, is richly decorated, and accommodates a large congregation. It makes a statement about the presence and pride of an Italian Roman Catholic community in London: this is not a makeshift place of worship adapted from an existing building in order for a migrant community to be able to sustain religious practice, but rather a bespoke building, involving the intervention of an influential Roman priest, San Vincenzo Pallotti, significant investment, high-quality design, and support from local urban planning authorities. It signals that the Italian community has a permanent and dominant place in the locality, and, celebrated as ‘Chiesa di San Pietro per tutte le nazioni’ [Church of St Peter for all nations], leads a wider global population of Roman Catholic faith. From the outside, however, the impact of the building now is different (see Figure 1). It has an imposing, neo-classical façade with twin columned archway entrances and marble steps rising directly, behind iron gates, from the pavement. However, the elevation facing Clerkenwell Road is no more than about eight metres in width, and sits squarely within the extended terrace of nineteenth-century buildings. It is clearly taller, more ornate, and more colourfully decorated than the shops, offices and flats that flank it, but above the first storey, it is brick-built and has windows which match the architecture of the surrounding, more utilitarian buildings. Architecturally and visually, then, the Church as seen from the street is certainly distinctive and majestic, and yet at the same time it slots into its immediate urban architectural context rather than imposing upon it.

St Peter’s Church until the mid-twentieth century would have its presence on Clerkenwell Road and in the network of streets making up ‘Little Italy’ complemented by a range of landmark properties, including workshops, shops and cafés, and several large tenement buildings heavily populated by Italian nationals, along with other migrant groups including those identifying as Irish. In this sense, it would topographically and spatially have been a hub: the centrepiece of a collection of buildings identifiable by names and by usage as part of the Italian community. For someone walking in this area, a series of signs of Italian habitation, commerce and culture would combine through a grammar of urban relations to signify that this area recreated Italy in a foreign context (‘Little Italy’) and that its primary reference point was the Church. In the twenty-first century, much of this evidence of Italian presence in the locality has gone, following the dispersal of the community to a wider range of localities in and around London, and the entry into the area of businesses associated with newer

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8 See the section, ‘La Storia’ of the Church’s website: https://www.italianchurch.org.uk/chiesa/la-storia.
migrant communities, particularly visible in food outlets. The refurbishment or replacement of low-cost housing with more expensive residential properties and with high-quality office and retail space has also seen Clerkenwell attract design and media companies and develop a more mobile and mixed community, in terms of social class and ethnicity.

The ways in which Italian-ness remains visible in the urban fabric of Clerkenwell are suggestive of the mechanisms by which a community sustains presence in a locality even when it has physically dispersed. In other words, they indicate how the past continues to figure in the present. What is striking about buildings recognizable somehow as ‘Italian’ now, two decades into the twenty-first century, are two elements: their concentration and their anachronism. Concentration is evident in the fact that the frontage of St Peter’s Church on Clerkenwell Road is flanked immediately to the left by the Casa Italiana San Vincenzo Pallotti (visible in Figure 1), housing the community organization related to the Church, and immediately to the left of this again, by Terroni’s Italian delicatessen and café, a business existing in this location since 1878. To the right is the central London office of ACLI. This concentration suggests that whilst the community has chosen to reside and do business elsewhere, they will still return to this place of ‘origin’ in London to worship and to access the solidarity, services, and social opportunities historically furnished by the Italian community as represented by its apparently ‘essential’ components of shared creed, cultural practices, work ethic and foodways. Within this combined frontage of around thirty metres on Clerkenwell Road, the history and insistent presence of an Italian community which would once have been actively present along the full half-kilometre stretch of the road and through its connecting streets is stamped into the built environment.

What I have identified as the anachronism of this set of remaining buildings of ‘Little Italy’ is closely related to their tight concentration within a relatively confined space, in that they present a perhaps counter-intuitively consistent presence in a road now populated by quite anonymous, dispersed buildings. In an urban setting without a coherent narrative, they present to an observer who looks closely a tight micro-narrative of a community. Denis Byrne establishes the concept of ‘heritage corridors’ to express the two-way influence of built environments associated with diasporic communities. To set the context, he points out that:

The sheer weight and groundedness of migration-associated built heritage may seem to resist our efforts to depict it in transnational terms. At face value, it appears rooted in the terrain of

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9 London’s ‘Little Italy’ in this respect mirrors those in the USA, Canada, and Australia. See Donna Gabaccia, ‘Global Geography of “Little Italy”: Italian Neighbourhoods in Comparative Perspective’, *Modern Italy*, 11.1 (2006), 9-24; also Elisabeth Becker, ‘Little of Italy? Assumed Ethnicity in a New York City Neighbourhood’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38.1 (2015), 109-124. Becker notes the comparable emptying of New York’s ‘Little Italy’ of Italian residents and workers, though their replacement with a constructed experience of Italian-ness – ‘a pseudo-Italian fantasyland’ (p. 121) – which is the object of her analysis is not a phenomenon affecting London’s ‘Little Italy’.

10 See [https://terroni.co.uk](https://terroni.co.uk).

11 ACLI, Associazioni Cristiane Lavoratori Italiani; Italian Christian Workers’ Association: [https://www.acli.it](https://www.acli.it).
distinct nation-states: buildings sink their foundations in the very soil and ‘geo-body’ (Thongchai 1994) of the nation, while in-ground archaeological traces of migration are buried in that soil. Beyond this, however, modern nation-states have strategically finessed an abiding and almost religious conflation of themselves with the material past lying within their borders, however ancient that material past, however recent the borders (Gellner 1983; Handler 1988; Silberman 1982).12

In order to challenge this single ‘ownership’ of all forms and provenances of built heritage within the nation, Byrne notes that: ‘Attention has also been given to the agency of migrants in reworking destination landscapes (Silvey and Lawson 1999, 124). The migrant is now seen as co-constituting these landscapes rather than being a mere guest in them (Hewage and Rigg 2011, 204)’.13 St Peter’s Church and surrounding buildings are usefully interpreted in this light, as elements of ‘English’ and London built heritage which emphatically assert their transnational heritage as well as their significant presence in a national architectural history, and so open up a ‘heritage corridor’.

Whilst this suggests that these buildings and the community they represent are very much in place, they appear in many ways out of time. They represent a history still embedded in this locality and yet not actively and presently belonging in it any longer; a powerful reference point for a form of sociality and relationality which is sustained in modified ways and yet no longer viable in the context of twenty-first century diasporic Italian community in London. This temporal mismatch is announced by an interesting form of anachronism in the outward presentation of the buildings themselves. The Church is, of course, a historic and unchanging piece of monumental architecture. The Casa Italiana San Vincenzo Pallotti next door has an extensive shop window on to Clerkenwell Road which displays notices for the community: an array of photo-copied sheets, posters and newspaper cuttings, in both English and Italian. Amidst the darkened glass office frontages or curated displays of design companies along the road, this homely display of improvised information and publicity looks old-fashioned, and suggests a community speaking to itself, rather than to a wider world. The sign above the shop window is strikingly ‘out of time’ too, with the colours of the tricolore [Italian flag] overlain with thick black lettering in an outdated font (see Figure 1).

Terroni’s delicatessen and café next door similarly creates a sense of elsewhere in time and place. A visitor or resident in London now is likely to have a very full experience of Italian cafés and restaurants, marked by carefully chosen representations of ‘authenticity’. In this context, Terroni’s stands out for its simplicity and functionality, as a place to buy and consume Italian products rather than an ‘experience’. A range of unfashionable as well as fashionable Italian products is available (tins of tuna as well as fresh olives). Lighting, décor, furniture and display of products are functional rather than ‘designed’ and customers either visit for one specific item and spend minutes in the store or spend hours there, meeting friends or alone, consuming sporadically. In other words, it’s a

13 Byrne. p. 2364.
serviceable retail space, doing what it appears it has always done, with consumer demand adapting to (and attracted to) the business as it is rather than the business adapting to meet changing demand.

None of this suggests that these three core locations of Italian community in Clerkenwell are necessarily on a path to extinction; rather, in the concentrated persistence of their presence and continued operation in this area they demonstrate that, though times have changed as have the forms of Italian community in London, there remains a demand for that reproduction of key elements of community identity established in the past. They appear ‘out of time’ in that they bespeak tradition and positive conservatism in a zone which otherwise tends to style itself in terms of change, mobility and innovation.

I referred above to the ‘narrative’ – a clearly historical narrative – that the adjacent buildings that I have discussed together assemble. Functioning metonymically to signify a large population, influential commercial, social and cultural presence, religious and moral leadership, political impact – all extended over more than a century – these buildings mean something by virtue of the clear and direct relationality between them. More isolated buildings associated with the London Italian community draw attention to how this concentration affords meaning, and that without it, it is difficult to make sense of traces of Italian-ness. An example is the Italian Hospital in Queen Square Gardens, less than a kilometre north-west of the western end of Clerkenwell Road. It was established in 1884 by an Italian businessman in London, Giovanni Ortelli, who donated two adjacent houses he owned in Queen Square to offer bespoke medical care to Italians in London (though other nationalities were not excluded), at a time when living conditions in ‘Little Italy’ were poor and medical care difficult to access for Italians in the community, for financial, linguistic and cultural reasons. The houses were demolished fifteen years later and a purpose-built hospital building erected in its place. This is an elegant, imposing building occupying one side of the square, and it fulfilled its function of providing medical care for the Italian community for a hundred years, closing in 1990. In this sense, it is a landmark building, marking Italians in London as a significant community capable of self-organizing and self-funding in order to establish public spaces and facilities both adequate to their needs and appropriate to the enhancement of the local built heritage in the destination environment: it creates a ‘heritage corridor’. Like St Peter’s Italian Church and the buildings around it, it makes a statement of

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14 The architectural style of nearby Farringdon Road contributes incidentally to this ‘narrative’ of Italian cultural heritage, thanks to C19th planning strategy: ‘early development of Farringdon Road coincided with the vogue for Venetian Gothic as a suitable style for commercial buildings, given its mercantile associations’. BHO British History Online, ‘Commercial architecture in Farringdon Road, 1860s–90s’, https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol46/pp358-384#p129.

15 See Olive Besagni, A Better Life: A History of London’s Italian Immigrant Families in Clerkenwell’s Little Italy in the 19th and 20th Centuries (London: Camden History Society and Olive Besagni, 2011), p. 15, for a story of Ortelli recognizing the need for a dedicated Italian Hospital after witnessing the difficulties experienced by an Italian worker in communicating with hospital staff. See also chapter 7, ‘Housing and Sanitary Conditions of the “Italian Quarter”’ in Sponza, Italian Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century Britain (pp. 195-230) for an account of health risks emerging in ‘Little Italy’ and the responses of the British public and institutions.
permanence on behalf of the Italian community. Whether that permanence is compromised by the closure of the Italian Hospital and the repurposing of the building is an important question. On one hand, the building was bought by Great Ormond Street Hospital, whose other buildings surround it, and so it remains fit for purpose and functional, though for an undifferentiated body of users. For its intended original users, the foundation of the Italian Hospital retains its functionality and now runs as the Italian Medical Charity, offering financial support to Italians and ‘those of Italian descent’ in order to access medical care beyond that offered by the UK National Health Service. 16 On the other hand, the Italian Medical Charity is largely invisible at a public level: it provides an important support structure, but does not make the kind of statement of civic presence that a major building in respectable Bloomsbury would have made throughout the twentieth century. The building remains, is well maintained, and still bears the name, The Italian Hospital, in elegant red lettering high up across its façade, as well as the original plaque detailing its Italian origins. These are important but easily overlooked markers of Italian history and, out of context in this immediate locality, may serve as an indecipherable sign of Italian-ness. Coincidentally, an archival narrative is also missing: the University College London (UCL) Bloomsbury Project, charting the history of buildings in the area, has a webpage dedicated to the Italian Hospital, which notes that ‘Most of its records are apparently lost’ and that the only book charting its early history is missing from the British Library. 17

[INSERT FIG3 HERE]

A different kind of story or architectural repurposing attaches to the premises of the Gazzano café and delicatessen which, like Terroni’s, was one of the long-standing suppliers of Italian food and related social space in ‘Little Italy’, established in 1911. Its shop on Farringdon Road was, at the start of the current century, bought and radically redeveloped to incorporate the original ground-floor business with also a five-storey residential development above. This was an award-winning architectural project (2005 RIBA award) by Amin Taha Architects, completed in 2004 and creating a statement building which stands out among the Victorian and more recent office buildings of Farringdon Road, with its asymmetric window pattern and distinctive steel cladding (Figure 4). The new and emphatically twenty-first century development did not erase the original delicatessen and its history, and instead, as well as maintaining the space for the business, amplified its presence by naming the renowned building Gazzano House. This offers an interesting example of the Italian cultural history of the zone being folded into the new and future-facing architectural fabric of

16 http://www.italianmedicalcharity.co.uk.
Clerkenwell, and being celebrated as part of its social and commercial heritage retaining purpose and value for the future.\textsuperscript{18}

This discussion so far has adopted the perspective of an observer external to the ‘Little Italy’ community experiencing in the present day the traces and signs of Italian presence in Clerkenwell. In order to understand this better in relation to the meaning the surrounding built environment held for its residents and visitors in the twentieth century, when the Italian community was more visible, it is helpful to look at the accounts of individuals who lived there. Olive Besagni published in 2011 and 2017 two volumes of biographical accounts, oral histories and photographs.\textsuperscript{19} These twin volumes look back at the life of ‘Little Italy’ from a position in the 2010s which acknowledges that ‘Little Italy’ is now barely visible. Besagni collects and publishes photographs, stories, and multi-sourced forms of evidence of a community developing over around 150 years, and does so from the explicit position of an insider who inhabited the area (though she records her own move out to suburban London in later life) and knew its histories intimately.

An arresting element of the accounts that Besagni gathers, whether authored by others or by herself, is the emphasis on place. People are undoubtedly important, and the materials are ordered according to individuals or families, but these people are deeply and definitively emplaced, locked into their material environment with an emphasis which suggests that it constitutes them as much as they constitute it. The inside cover of both volumes bears a map of ‘Little Italy’, and the streets which make up this triangle are then regarded in the volumes as familiar, named routinely as the essential coordinates by which to interpret the events and characters recounted. Besagni thus – and in the titles of the volumes – claims the name of the area with conviction and pride, taking ownership of what is at root an exclusionary toponym that Donna Gabaccia demonstrates to be an invention of the English-speaking host culture:

It was the efforts of natives to understand and to interpret the significance of the arrival and clustering of Italians that first generated the label Little Italy. But only in the US, at first, then the UK and somewhat later in Canada and much later still in Australia, did this occur, and only after long years of referring to emerging clusters of immigrants in very different terms.\textsuperscript{20}

As Gabaccia also points out, ‘The term piccola Italia [little Italy] was not part of Italian nationalist discourse of the early twentieth century. On the contrary, Italian nationalists of both imperialist and

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\item See \url{https://akt-uk.com/projects/gazzano%20house} for details of the project and photographs. A further sign of the importance of the Gazzano business in London is an obituary written by former food writer at the Guardian newspaper, Matthew Fort, for Joe Gazzano, who ran the business until his death in 2010: \url{https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2010/oct/25/joe-gazzano-obituary}.
\item Gabaccia, p. 19.
\end{enumerate}
liberal tendencies instead developed alternative visions of *la più grande Italia* (a larger Italy).\(^{21}\) In this vision, communities of Italians overseas are identified as *colonie* [colonies], extending Italian labour and commercial (as well as political) dominion into other nations.\(^{22}\) This term is vividly in evidence in St Peter’s Church, where the external plaque commemorating Italian soldiers lost in the First World War self-identifies the community as the ‘colonia italiana di Londra’. The formal statement of national solidarity in the face of the effects of global conflict uses the language of ‘greater Italy’, whilst Besagni, elaborating a micronarrative of community life, adopts the nomenclature of the host/home nation.

Within Besagni’s map of the area, specific buildings are routinely cited, relying upon either the informed reader’s established knowledge of the area or the uninformed reader’s incipient understanding of what these buildings mean. A long account of the Terroni family (original owners of the delicatessen) describes the partial dispersal of Italian families from Clerkenwell following the internment of Italian adult males as enemy aliens once Italy entered the Second World War in 1940, and also the severe bombing of Clerkenwell. Looking then at the early 1950s, the same account reinstates the importance of the area according to the community’s attachment to specific buildings:

> Many of the former residents who had moved into the surrounding areas constantly returned to the Hill to meet in the Coach and Horses. [...] There was also plenty going on at St Peter’s Church, where the Children of Mary and various other groups still met. The large tenements: Victoria Dwellings, Cavendish Mansions, Farringdon Buildings, Griffen Mansions and Corporation Buildings, were still inhabited by a mixture of Italians, Irish and Cockneys. Many of the younger married couples, second and third generation Italians, and Irish, lived on the Bourne Estate, a massive council block with a large entrance in Clerkenwell Road and bordering Leather Lane. On Sunday mornings after Mass old friends would go for a chat in Terroni’s, which would be packed with ex-residents of the Hill all buying their wine, pastas, salamis, olives, Italian hams, cheeses etc.\(^{23}\)

This short and practical description speaks volumes about changes in the social and geographical constitution of the community whilst also underscoring its recourse to the same social and spatial coordinates: the key dwellings, the Church, and Terroni’s. The mention of ‘Italians, Irish and Cockneys’ notes the mixed cultural make-up of the community, and generational shift is indicated by the move from the ‘tenements’ of the nineteenth century to the ‘massive council block’ of the mid-twentieth century. However, the naming of these key places of residence serves as a reminder that this diaspora within a diaspora – the now less concentrated ‘Little Italy’ community – still defines itself in terms of long-familiar buildings known as ‘belonging’ in large part to the Italian community. The accounts in Besagni’s two volumes almost all refer principally to place and date to establish the

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\(^{21}\) Gabaccia, p. 17.


family or individual whose history is to be offered. Place is often initially place of departure in Italy, defined as a village or locality, followed swiftly by a specific address in Clerkenwell, usually one of the buildings listed above. Place, in this sense, locks the individual or family to an identity in ‘Little Italy’ and to belonging within that community.

The passage quoted above draws attention to the porosity of a community sometimes characterized as homogeneously Italian in Clerkenwell in the early-mid twentieth century. Irish migrants and their families made up a significant proportion of the population in this period, with shared commitment to labour and shared Roman Catholic faith providing the cultural context for the shared living spaces in the same buildings that Besagni lists above. Her first volume, Changing Lives, in fact includes an account from an Irish man born and raised in Clerkenwell, who also attended St Peter’s Italian School from 1928 to 1937. Besagni notes that this man, A.W. Kibble, ‘preferred to be called Victor because it felt Italian’.24 His memoir begins, as do those that Besagni authors, with an address – 39 Bowling Green Lane – and a description of the building he inhabited there, ‘a two-up, two-down drab brick dwelling with a communal lavatory and wash house out in the back yard’.25 His account, sent to the Backhill newspaper in 1988, some fifty years after leaving the area, picks out home, school, Italian friends, and the Finsbury mortuary built amongst residential buildings on the edge of Clerkenwell as the coordinates of his memory of that place and time.26 Albeit filtered through memory, this child’s-eye view of place offers a striking perception of the everyday as a child inhabiting this relatively small urban area. Photographs of Clerkenwell by celebrated photographer of London, Colin O’Brien, bring to life an analogous perspective reproducing a child’s-eye view, since he began taking these photographs as a child himself. O’Brien has something in common with ‘Victor’ Kibble, being of Irish descent and born and raised in Clerkenwell with Italian neighbours and friends, albeit a generation later. His photographs of the area in the 1950s-1960s, many sold to newspapers, give a powerful sense of a shared transnational and transcultural place populated by Italian, Irish and Jewish migrants and refugees whose presence bespeaks the trauma not only of displacement but also of persecution. The photographs do not search for or sentimentalize these histories, but rather, as snapshots of the everyday, accompanied in a neighbourly and familiar way by individual names, communicate a fragile domesticity built on the hope for ‘a better life’ that Besagni foregrounds.27

24 Becker notes the ‘instrumental employment of ethnicity in presenting identity’ (p. 110). That Kibble deploys an anglicized version of a presumed Italian name in order to ‘[feel] Italian’ is indicative of the cultural and identitarian transactions underlying community cohesion in a mixed neighbourhood constructed as dominantly Italian.
25 Besagni, Changing Lives, p. 27.
26 Backhill was established in the early 1970s as the newspaper of the ‘Little Italy’ community, now existing as a web journal, Backhill online, http://www.backhillonline.com. The title refers to Back Hill, a central street within ‘Little Italy’.
Putting O’Brien’s photographs into the context of social research and social history in Britain from the 1940s to the 1960s helps to elucidate their mechanisms of making meaning – and making place – as well as to expose the ways in which they speak to the construction of transcultural experience and belonging in Besagni’s volumes. Joe Moran has explored the imaginary of street life in early post-war Britain that emerged from the combined work of sociologists, photographers and architects to create ‘a homegrown anthropology’. Moran refers particularly to the work of photographers, Nigel Henderson and Roger Mayne, in the context of a more widespread commitment of middle-class social researchers to engage, through close and extended proximity, with the experience of the urban street. Their work, Moran notes, ‘combined social concern with a certain aesthetic attraction to working-class street life’; ‘Mayne admired the “unfettered physicality” of children playing outdoors and the “decaying splendour” of the streets themselves’. Work of this kind, albeit compromised by the experiential distance between subject and object of observation that Moran spotlights, informed post-war social research and urban policy in substantive ways – ways which are echoed in Besagni’s comments above on changes to the housing stock and gradual suburbanization. It also sheds light on O’Brien’s photographic practice in London and in Clerkenwell in particular: he is doing much the same, and attracted in similar ways by the aesthetics of everyday life, but he does so from a position of absolute embeddedness, as someone for whom this environment is home.

As well as bringing to light the layered histories of transnational belonging in Clerkenwell in this period through people, O’Brien’s photos give a strong sense of place for place’s sake. Living in a flat on the top storey of Victoria Dwellings (one of the Clerkenwell residential developments mentioned frequently by Besagni), his photographs articulate a child’s curiosity at quite simply looking at the world through the window, and from a striking vertical vantage point. In contrast with the gaze of the post-war photographers discussed by Moran, these early photographs have a child’s eye behind the lens. A thought-provoking series of his photographs records the traffic at the busy junction below his home, and particularly the car accidents. Wet tarmac, overhead power cables, advertising hoardings and overturned or damaged vehicles say nothing particular about Italian or transnational communities in this area but serve emphatically to contextualize what other narratives of those communities tell, and to attach that knowledge to urban space. Whereas the vast collection of photographs that appears in Besagni’s volumes of course emphasises Italian-ness – family groups,

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31 O’Brien, pp. 36-38 (1960), p. 41 (early 1960s), pp. 42-44 (1962). The caption to the latter poignantly notes, ‘I read later that a child died in this accident’ (p. 44), prompting the viewer to look back at the scene and identify a child lying on the pavement surrounded by adult passers-by and a nurse.
costumes, religious events and ceremonies, buildings marked as ‘Italian’ – O’Brien’s photos remind the reader/viewer that all of this activity takes place within a tight configuration of urban space in which other lives and other cultural histories are intersecting and ‘changing’, to cite Besagni’s title.\textsuperscript{32}

The speed, urgency, distraction, and possibly aggression denoted by the accident photos suggest the friction of new forms of relationality in this already, historically, relational urban space. This is not to suggest that Besagni’s and other accounts of ‘Little Italy’ deny the tensions and violence that emerge within the Italian community and with others: she records fights, gang rivalries and interventions by the police, as well as the direct and indirect impact of the violence of war.\textsuperscript{33} O’Brien’s photos complement this, however, by exposing the more heterogeneous relationality of London in the decades after the war. Furthermore, their snapshot quality – bespeaking ‘street photography’s interest in the unexpected social encounter, the fleeting instant, the captured moment’ –\textsuperscript{34} as well as the specific subject of traffic collisions, underline the notion of accident: things simply happen which challenge the routines, practices and continuities by which any one diasporic community may seek to establish security and stability in the neighbourhood to which it stakes a claim. ‘Little Italy’ is, ultimately, ‘little’ in its concentration: easily dislodged by changing forms of urban interaction.

O’Brien’s observational photographic records of moments in the life of this part of London serve as a useful prompt to re-view visual, topographical and written accounts of Italians in Clerkenwell less through the celebratory frame that histories of little Italy inevitably set, and with more attention to trauma. As noted above, Besagni’s volumes refer to intra-community tensions, but using a discourse which codes these events according to stereotypes of young masculinity, and particularly ‘Latin’ masculinity. Similarly, references to wartime deaths owed to action in the military field, bombings in Clerkenwell, or to the fundamental trauma of the sinking of the Arandora Star, deploy a discourse of familial and community tragedy which contains the pain of these losses within a mutually recognized cultural process. In drawing attention to what goes wrong and causes pain in everyday life, O’Brien’s photographs inform a different reading of Besagni’s anecdotal community history, and one which speaks of struggle. The celebratory narrative of the migrant who leaves home with nothing and, through hard work and perseverance, makes good in a challenging destination environment, is thus tinted with a darker emphasis on the difficulty of sustaining endurance, particularly within a culture of mutual responsibility for the collective ‘success’ of family and community as evaluated within both destination and departure cultures. The trauma of migration for Italians in London in the post-war period is perhaps reopened by the trauma of war and of rejection (as enemy aliens) within the destination culture. Viewed from this perspective, the dogged resistance


\textsuperscript{34} Moran, p. 172.
of the ‘Little Italy’ community and the concentration of its key buildings on Clerkenwell Road articulate resilience. Recalling Gabaccia’s core argument and my comments above on the term, *colonia*, this resilience seems at once a response to the mission for Italians to be proudly present and influential in overseas locations (‘greater Italy’) and an expression of the burden of surviving under the oppressive forces of the politics and economics of both departure and destination cultures (‘Little Italy’). ‘Little Italy’, in this light, looks to be doubly colonized.

The discourse of resilience which threads through both Besagni’s and O’Brien’s accounts of Clerkenwell in the post-war decades does not envisage an indefinite endurance of the ‘London Life’ that they each, differently, narrate. The title of Besagni’s second volume, *Changing Lives*, gives a hint of impermanence and of the inevitability of the community that her books define adapting to new conditions. In collecting and publishing in twin volumes the visual, written and spoken evidence of a community developing over around 150 years, as author/editor she memorializes that community and its physical spaces, and acknowledges that its time has passed: she offers ‘a snapshot, and a somewhat idealized one, of a very specific moment in the history of Italian migration and settlement’. 35 This element is underlined by the fact that the second volume appeared posthumously, one year after Besagni’s death at the age of ninety-one, with the effect that the volume becomes a memorial to her as well as to the community as she knew it. Her ‘Afterword’ to the *Changing Lives* volume reads:

This year, 2015, my husband Bruno and I will both be celebrating our 90th birthdays. It is my belief that Bruno, the oldest son of the Besagni family, is one of the few remaining Italians who were born and grew up ‘down the Hill’. We now have three children, Anita, Tony and Nicolette, seven grandsons and a granddaughter, Leah, who recently presented us with our first great-grandchild, a girl, Gaby. Time to conclude my story. Ciao! 36

The author’s closing comment points to continuity into a future that will be shaped by others, whilst at the same time confirming an ending to one particular way of life. Her husband, she suggests, is one of the last surviving traces of the community that her books have chronicled. The values that have been celebrated in those accounts are re-stated by her own emphasis on intergenerational continuity, but the question of whether those values are shared and perpetuated by those she names is one left emphatically open.

O’Brien’s photographs, when viewed in the retrospective collection making up the *London Life* volume, have a similarly strong autobiographical frame, dating from 1948 (O’Brien was born in 1940) to 2014, and, as noted above, a large proportion taken during his childhood and teenage years. 37 Whilst the subjects and scenes photographed connote past-ness, they tend to communicate present-ness and vitality through O’Brien’s photo-journalistic practice of capturing a moment. Interestingly,

35 Gabaccia, p. 12.
36 Besagni, *Changing Lives*, p. 64.
as in Besagni’s volumes, it is the act of curating and collecting these images for publication that installs the ‘sense of an ending’ to the narrative that they offer.\textsuperscript{38} Captions added by O’Brien, and longer verbal contextualizations, stress finality. For example, a photograph taken in 1952 of a cinema in Skinner Street, Clerkenwell, is accompanied by the comment, ‘Long since demolished, the Rio Cinema was where we used to go as kids and watch films over and over again until we got bored’.\textsuperscript{39}

The erasure of the buildings which defined childhood and community experience figures again, in a still more personal way, in a photograph titled, ‘Clerkenwell Road, Seventies’, which shows the demolition of Victoria Dwellings, one of the key built coordinates of the history of Little Italy.\textsuperscript{40}

Community and individual are placed in direct correspondence in the caption, which notes that: ‘After more than a century of use by hundreds of families, Victoria Dwellings was demolished and we moved into a flat on the twenty-third floor of the newly-built Michael Cliffe House in Skinner Street on the other side of Clerkenwell’. High-rise building, ‘newly-built’, and located on ‘the other side’ are signals of definitive change. Moving to other areas of London in more recent photographs, the emphasis in captions is often again on ending: a shoe repair shop ‘closed recently’ (p. 253), ‘The shop closed on October 2\textsuperscript{nd} 2010, shortly after I took this photograph’ (p. 261), smokers in a pub on ‘the final day of legal smoking in public places’ (p. 248). A late photo returns to what was ‘Little Italy’, with the comment that: ‘When Clerkenwell Fire Station closed on January 8\textsuperscript{th} 2014, after one hundred and forty-two years of service, I photographed the firefighters on their last day at Britain’s oldest operating fire station’ (p. 281). As in Besagni’s books, O’Brien’s collection speaks of an impetus to record and memorialize a form of ‘London Life’ that appears to be passing, whilst nevertheless documenting its very live-ness.

Besagni’s and O’Brien’s books, though presented differently and populated by different kinds of material, all offer biographies of a built environment and of the communities which inhabit it. Besagni’s focus on ‘Little Italy’ as a community reproducing a ‘homeland’ with sharply characterized practices and values does not exclude the presence in Clerkenwell of other, largely migrant, populations, and particularly those of Irish heritage. O’Brien’s collection complements this by, through his own heritage in part, stressing the shared agency of the Irish community in particular in constituting the urban reality of Clerkenwell in the twentieth century. His early photographs feature the annual procession to the Church in honour of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (early 1950s) and his friends of Italian descent (‘Raymond Scallione and Joe Bacuzzi, outside the premises of Pastorelli and Rapkin Ltd in Hatton Garden, 1948’).\textsuperscript{41} As a photographer, O’Brien’s very literal point of view on

\textsuperscript{38} See Frank Kermode, \textit{The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967). Kermode famously argues that human beings need to identify a structure to their life in order for it to have meaning, and hence strive to establish a narrative of beginning, middle and (constructed) ending in order to allay discomfort at not knowing how their own story will end.

\textsuperscript{39} O’Brien, p. 105.

\textsuperscript{40} O’Brien, p. 151.

\textsuperscript{41} O’Brien, pp. 6-7 and p. 53.
what is known as ‘Little Italy’ brings to attention a heterogeneous community, noted also by Besagni above as ‘a mixture of Italians, Irish and Cockneys’. Besagni’s formulation is interesting in drawing together diasporic populations with indigenous Londoners, but also in highlighting social class: these are not affluent, middle-class British nationals but a subnational community defined, like Italians and Irish in Clerkenwell, by urban location, class and accent. O’Brien’s photographs do similar work in making visible the overlayered quality of urban communities in the twentieth century and beyond, in which intersections of ethnicity, culture, faith, economic and social circumstances and, crucially, everyday experience may connect different populations within a shared space. These intersections may be systematic (shared religious practice and space) or coincidental (encounters in shared space, accidents).

Returning to the present-day experience, on the street, of Clerkenwell, this overlayered quality is immediately evident. Thinking about it specifically in terms of the biography of an Italian community and an Italian ‘place’ in London, the built environment of Clerkenwell indicates, firstly, the co-presence of times in terms of the traces in the present of the ‘Little Italy’ of the past, and, as discussed above, these are substantive traces articulated through architectural statements and visible community practices which take place in the present whilst also referring to enduring traditions surviving from the past. The co-presence of global spaces is indicated also by the layered and diverse use of commercial buildings in particular: businesses presenting as Italian (such as Terroni’s) remain, Gazzano’s delicatessen was enfolded into a new building celebrating the historical name of Gazzano but in a radically new-looking architectural form created by the practice of an architect, Amin Taha, born in East Berlin of Iraqi and Sudanese parents, living since childhood in the UK, and now dwelling in Clerkenwell. A clear marker of changing axes of transnational connection over time is that the street sign at the Clerkenwell Road end of Back Hill, the street perhaps most regarded as the icon of the ‘Little Italy’ community, sits directly above the frontage of Ngon Ngon, a Vietnamese food and drink outlet. Lastly, the co-presence not only of diverse ethnicities but of diverse social groups comes to the surface of the built environment in terms of the mix of old retail businesses, new and expensively styled professional and commercial locations, and routine, mid-range service providers, such as a gym or printing outlet. Amin Taha lives in the neighbourhood in a controversial building designed by himself, metres away from the significantly refurbished but original Cavendish Mansions, formerly identified as ‘tenements’ and inhabited by Italian and Irish migrants.

This social inclusivity is in many ways nothing like that which emerges from Besagni’s or O’Brien’s narratives of literally shared living space, where inclusion is a factor of necessity rather than of choice, and is underpinned by a sense of mutual endeavour towards ‘a better life’. Clerkenwell now, in common with comparable redeveloped urban spaces, is an environment in which some users

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42 Besagni, A Better Life, p. 110.
43 Dominic Lutyens, ‘Amin Taha: London’s Most Controversial Architect’, in Financial Times, 10 January 2019 [https://www.ft.com/content/a0d0ea3e-1033-11e9-b2f2-f4c566a4fc5f](https://www.ft.com/content/a0d0ea3e-1033-11e9-b2f2-f4c566a4fc5f).
of its spaces and services will be resident and many not, and where some residents may have chosen to make this area their base whilst others are there through accident of opportunity, cost, or convenience. The buildings and practices of present-day ‘Little Italy’ bespeak a form of heterotopic relationality making both elective and accidental connections between languages, cultures and places across the globe. Present – in both spatial and temporal terms – within that matrix are traces of a specifically but inclusively Italian habitation. This is not only a passive residence, however, but also an active participation in and contribution to constructing the lived environment, structural and social, of the area. Whilst Italian communities in and around London now relate and communicate probably more along digital than material ‘corridors’, to borrow Byrne’s formula, these newer forms of relationality and of transnational self-expression can be traced back to the substantive and extended place-making activity which the material biography of ‘Little Italy’ continues to tell, discreetly.44