

# ANGEL ALLEY

INTRODUCTION & LETTERS



RESOLVE COLLECTIVE Freedom Press, Cardboard Citizens, Angel Allies

## #1: THE UTILITY OF OVERLAPPING EXPERIENCES

"Even in the archive, you are never removed from the shadow of the alley"

## Allyship & Alleywork

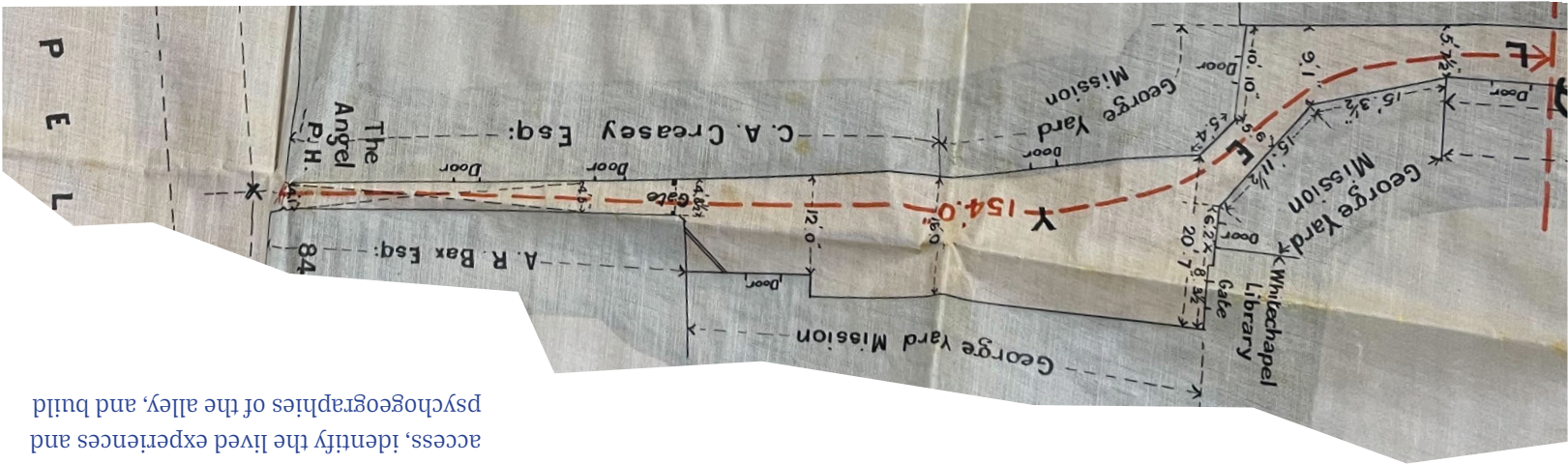
The devil is in the historical detail of Angel Alley, a dark, narrow passage in Whitechapel, East London. Named after the long-gone Angel Inn and once connecting two significant thoroughfares, Wentworth Street and Whitechapel High Street, it rose to proletarian prominence (and genteel notoriety) from a delta of Victorian backstreets that coursed through the urban grain of East London. With cartographical records dating back to at least 1676, Angel Alley has been the setting for Samuel Pepys' burning love affairs, a 17th century clothworking industry and an 18th century sugar refinery industry, 'low' lodgings for defiant Irish tenants and high-paying sex work for wayward lives, historic convenings of the Jewish radical Left, and of course the residence of the Anarchist haven, Freedom Press and Bookshop.

Our work in the Alley, between December 2021 and April 2023, intended to scale back the initial ambitions of a brief set by Whitechapel Gallery and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (LBTH), to lay the foundations for what we called 'Stage 0'. In order to do this, we worked closely with the 'Angel Allies': a unique configuration of Angel Alley stakeholders assembled by Luke Gregory-

The spectacle of Angel Alley's *longue durée* precedes its sombre, at best unassuming, appearance today. Yet, beyond first impressions, its manifold legacies of urban contestation live on. It is a theatre of competing realities; an arena for police misconduct with local vulnerable populations, opaque entanglements of land access rights, slum landlordism, institutional failure, young people's illicit leisure activities, art programming, urban planning mysteries, radical activism, and more-than-human geographies.

Jones and Siobhan Forshaw of Whitechapel Gallery to support the longstanding stewards of the alley, Freedom Press, and help coordinate a collaborative, care-centred response to a rise in tensions in the alley in 2021. Freedom Press, alongside Cardboard Citizens, the UK's only homeless people's professional theatre company, played a central role in the Angel Allies, and the group also included organisations such as the homelessness charity Providence Row, the social centre House of Annetta, and a variety of empathetic individuals and practitioners.

This was alleywork, not artwork. And as such, steered by input from the Allies and the sensitivities of the environment, we constructed a project without final outputs or public visibility. Instead, we sought to recover missing gaps in the recent history of the alley, produce tangible interventions for the alley's most vulnerable users, facilitate difficult stakeholder conversations around land ownership and access, identify the lived experiences and psychogeographies of the alley, and build



The slow recovery of the alley's obscured recent history and a nurtured, working solidarity with Freedom Press and the Angel Allies became the project's residue; sometimes solidifying as 'Know Your Rights' murals in the alley (see Pamphlet #4: Know Your Rights) or maps locating collective memory and emotion (see Pamphlet #3: "A Chaos and A Harmony") but at other times dissolving into correspondence (see Pamphlet #1: The Utility of Overlapping Experiences) and archive diving (see Pamphlet #2: "An Important Piece of the Jigsaw"). As partial accumulations of this sediment, these four pamphlets elucidate a series of chosen relationships, histories, and present conditions in Angel Alley. Together, we hope that these documents make the case for God in the detail of allyship and alleywork, evidencing the futility of further permanent artistic intervention and physical improvements - a 'Stage 1' in Angel Alley - without antecedent and enduring systemic change.

strategies between Whitechapel Gallery and Freedom Press - all done, befittingly, from the shadows. This approach attempted to recognise and negotiate a historic power inequity between Whitechapel Gallery and Freedom Press, a landscape of varying vulnerabilities, and intersecting layers of top-down and bottom-up governance in the alley. It prioritised working methods such as workshops, interviews, 'emotional mapping', 'deep hangouts', information dissemination, archival research, and fugitive planning.

### Pamphlet Names:

1. ANGEL ALLEY Introduction & Letters  
#1: The Utility of Overlapping Experiences
2. ANGEL ALLEY Contemporary Planning History  
#2: "An Important Piece of the Jigsaw"
3. ANGEL ALLEY Emotional Mapping  
#3: "A Chaos and a Harmony"
4. ANGEL ALLEY Know Your Rights  
#4: "Suspicion-less Searches"

RESOLVE

Whitechapel Gallery



This work is indebted to the time, energy and expertise of the following stakeholders and contributors:

Whitechapel Gallery staff  
Freedom Press  
Cardboard Citizens  
Angel Allies  
Providence Row

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# Letters of Correspondence

These letters of correspondence capture the RESOLVE team's reflections in the early stages of alleywork. They take the form of a dialogue between the gallery and an imagined external party hired to investigate the current context of the alley. Taking cues from the written exchanges we frequently found in the Whitechapel Gallery archives, the formal tone of the letters is overlaid with introspective annotations, sketches and questions that reveal how hesitation and caution guided, and sometimes inhibited, our early decision-making processes.

Whitechapel Gallery  
77-82 Whitechapel High Street  
London  
E1 7QX

Dear WG,

It was after talking with my colleagues that I saw the error of my ways. In isolating Angel Alley in our minds we have missed it. The alleyway, like all alleyways, does not exist separate from its connected roads, highways, thoroughways and buildings that stitch it into the existing urban fabric. To truly understand the story, the alley must be understood as that.

The gallery staff helped us understand this. On Monday 20th June we sat around tables and mapped, constructing images of the area that reveal the overlaps and contradictions, and perhaps we found very little, but they showed a lot. I hope that our journey continues to capture the imaginations of people who, like the alley, are woven into this urban narrative.

Yours Sincerely,

I wonder if looking is the right approach. What is there? We are trying to frame our response in today's experience.

Jan from a really interesting article on the history of the alley.

TOYNBEE HALL

Constructing the maps from scratch for the first time raised interesting challenges of scope and focus. "This used to be our entrance!!"

WHITECHAPEL LIB.

SIRENS

Posh flats

STUDENT UNITE

PRET

CLANG!

Whitechapel Gallery  
77-82 Whitechapel High Street  
London  
E1 7QX

Dear WG,

I can appreciate that with the volume of information held at the Whitechapel Gallery Archive our request could seem quite specific but you handled it with great efficiency which allowed for a fruitful visit on Friday afternoon. The information provided gave helpful context to the recent meanderings in the fate of Angel Alley, and whilst perhaps more questions were raised than answers, we have come to expect confusion with each step. It seems whenever we talk about change, the gallery comes up?

or we add this?

These documents are interesting as a time stamp but there is still narrative missing, such as, of an avoided.

It is evident that the fate of alleyway and the Gallery are interconnected, especially with regard to development, with each seismic shift in the physical extension of the building, comes a conversation about the alleyway and its impedance or opportunity. The late 1970s is of particular interest here with the fervent conversation regarding gallery (9H) It seems the discourse around the gallery then was not dissimilar to that of today, words such as "unsafe" are tabled with a desire for something more "inviting" and "pleasant". It is from the recurrence of such language that I started to speculate on the haunting question of the gate. After a while it seems it was no gallery?

You can keep lifting but what are we looking for? It seemed as if the question might be wrong.

Short archive visits necessitate jumping, often abruptly, to the next most appealing basket of information presented to you. Few were more eye-catching than the documentation for Tom Hirschhorn's Bridge from Freedom to Whitechapel. His chaotic disruption of the physical and social boundaries in the enclave of 82-84 Whitechapel High Street both sparked my imagination and evoked my trepidation around the impact of creative intervention. everyone wants to know, 'what are you guys going to do?'

Even in the archive you are never removed from the shadow of the alley cast in people's minds, it was helpful to see the genuine interest and concern many of the gallery staff showed for the project and the passion in which this project has instilled. If nothing else, a moment that spotlights this would be desirable.

I hope to visit you again soon, perhaps with a new perspective and fresh eyes.

Yours Sincerely,

Whitechapel Gallery  
77-82 Whitechapel High Street  
London  
E1 7QX

Dear WG, Whitechapel Gallery

It is my first time writing to you on this matter, or indeed any matter, so please excuse me if my tone strays from the expected path. We took our first visit to Angel Alley today, accompanied by the gallery team and a few other interested parties, to whom which we hope to collaborate with further in the future. It's a special case, what other London alleyway attracts this much care? Before we stepped into the alley we spoke, we shared, we strategised, and then ventured in like the neighbourhood watch, each careful not to weigh each other down with our concerns.

Perhaps I'm being flippant but the burning question of what to do certainly looms in the horizon of each intervention. The alleyway clearly has its challenges and anyone with experience will be sure to make those heard, as well they should. The challenge for us is to sift through the layers of narrative, entangled in planning bureaucracy and local development in order to find a position. Or at least that is what we assume to be a tautologous first step. On first reflection, the alleyway feels the seasons, as it does time, it is watched, it is unsafe (for some), it is safe (for others), and it is entrenched in the contemporary and historic imaginary of the area.

Now I am rambling, let me set out where we'd like to begin. An anthropological method we've sited previously is Geertz's 'deep hanging out' and we'd like to test a similar method to build our presence in the area. At the same time we'll submerge ourselves in the wider structures that govern the alley, for this may present us with some early, more tangible wins that can help steer our journey. The existing interested parties are crucial and we'd be sure to utilise their support as much as possible.

I hope to continue our correspondence with less divergence in the future.

Yours Sincerely,

The physical alterations on the site were our first hurdle. No gate seems to have caused an obvious problem but it is unclear who sanctioned and built it? Then there are all of the landowners and tenants... To the land registry?

Archive

→ Plans for development of gallery 9H  
→ Hirschhorn's Bridge

Will need more time next time

planning new buildings extensions

It's not a thinking was done in relation to the bridge who built it? When what is decided?

Hirschhorn's work was interesting because it got people talking. The freedom team remembered it or loved talking about it. Good + bad. It was the entrance. Then they were told not to go.



Artists' Freedom

Relish? Art Interventions?

How can we continue these involvement?

become apparent how difficult this task would be

There was human pos in there

N4 Book Review 1998

Angel Alley is currently a way to involve these. Can we take it further? How can we ensure those who want to collaborate can do so meaningfully purposefully?