# A Sense of Place and Everyday Heritage: The Clinker Brick Walls of Suburban London

## Introduction: Place identity, materiality and everyday heritage

This paper explores the mundane, overlooked material elements of the built-environment that contribute to place-identity and heritage, by investigating the numerous clinker brick walls that add a distinction to the London suburb of Hampstead. Clinkers are bricks that were overheated during earlier kiln technologies and consequently became malformed and warped, taking various individual forms, ranging from identifiable but distorted bricks to configurations akin to igneous rocks. Initially dismissed as waste. They were revalued as aesthetic building components between 1880 and 1914 and used in the construction of numerous walls throughout the UK.

We argue that apparently mundane material elements such as clinker bricks, as well as overlooked sites, buildings and minor idiosyncrasies in the built environment need to be identified and noticed. The tendencies of heritage designations, promotional literature and tourist marketing to focus upon highly selective elements of the built environment as worthy of attention shape 'the distribution of the sensible' (Rancière, 2009). Here we discuss how we might more substantively recognise the mundane materialities as essential heritage features, for they are integral to the feel, appearance and identity of place (Mosler, 2019) and enchant everyday life and inhabitation (Back, 2015). This is of importance because these material components, vernacular styles, craft traditions and architectural eccentricities are officially unnoticed and undervalued, and are therefore susceptible to destruction or removal by redevelopment schemes. Subsequently, in replacing these distinctive features, generic forms of architecture and standardised building components of vague provenance can expedite the proliferation of clone towns (Duignan, 2024) and placelessness (Seamon and Sowers, 2008). In contrast, local building materials may offer textural and visual diversity, material evidence of local histories and geologies and sites of supply from near and far.

First, to contextualise our discussion, we detail the historical production of bricks in London and the emergence of clinker brickmaking and building in Hampstead. We then focus upon how the material and aesthetic attributes of these bricks significantly contribute to Hampstead's place-identity as a key element of ordinary heritage. After, we explore how clinkers conjure up the historical work practices and skills of local people, as well as nearby sites of manufacture and supply. Following this, we investigate how these idiosyncratic place-specific historical materials can potentially offer a stimulus to future creative design and architectural recycling practices. In conclusion, we examine how these walls are indeed being protected as integral heritage within the suburb's recent expanding heritage and conservation strategies. First, however, we outline our contention that place identity might benefit from more inclusive approaches to considering what constitutes heritage.

### *Place identity, materiality and everyday heritage*

In formal estimations of heritage value listed such as via UNESCO World Heritage designations, that privilege iconic national sites and tourist narratives, everyday, mundane materials such as clinker bricks are usually overlooked or ignored. Such

listings also tend to guide the focus of place promotion. We contend that they should more widely feature in place marketing and branding practices along with those features that have been officially deemed superlative, the 'best, oldest, most intact and most representative heritage' (Ireland et al 2024: 5) or identified as the 'special, unique, and outstanding: ruins of a glorious and distant past, sublime landscapes, buildings of immeasurable beauty and artistic appeal' (Giombini, 2020: 50). For local quotidian structures and materialities can generate affective and embodied experiences of place, including tactile, visual, olfactory and auditory sensations that contribute to 'the shared experiential domain of habitual, emplaced practices and daily activities' (Ireland et al, 2024: 6) in place.

Like the familiar sounds of birdsong, the tastes of local food, the play of light and shadows, and familiar arboreal and floral scents, the textures, colours and arrangements of building materials tend to be disregarded when depicting the qualities of place. These unheeded qualities often barely register; they are part of the unreflexive, affective and sensory experience of place that inheres in mundane, routine inhabitation and habitual movement (Edensor, 2022). More broadly, as Ireland et al (2024: 3) observe, most people encounter the past 'through seemingly 'insignificant' places, stories, objects, images, activities and routines – rather than through "grand" national narratives, structures, collections and commemorations'. As Degen et al explain (2008: 1916), everyday practices produce aesthetically inspired practices: 'touching, looking, photographing, sitting, listening, climbing', constituting a compendium of habitual experiences that rarely become the focus of conscious reflection. This quotidian 'engaged aesthetic' (Giombini, 2020) undertaken by inhabitants contributes to the formation of a 'cultural community 'co-produced by 'people together tackling the world around them with familiar manoeuvres' (Frykman and Löfgren, 1996: 10-11). An appreciation of how mundane material and architectural elements are integral to such practices and experiences can contribute to the celebration of local histories that are part of what David Atkinson (2008) calls the growing 'democratisation of memory'.

Certain unheralded elements of place have been identified by other writers. Mosler (2019) mentions city walls, Giombini (2020) refers to parks, train stations, cafés and marketplaces, while Ireland et al (2024) identify local barber shops. An extensive assortment of objects of overlooked heritage features in Clifford and King's volume *England in Particular* (2006), subtitled, *A Celebration of the Commonplace, the Local, the Vernacular and the Distinctive*. Entries include landmark trees, beach huts, old cinemas, cobbles, signposts, sites of former industry, terraced houses, air raid shelters, police boxes, manhole covers, slates and milestones.

**London brickmaking and the production of clinker bricks**

Since ancient times, materially, bricks are still constituted from sand, clay, water and diverse additives and baked at around 1000 degrees. From the 16$^{th}$ century in the UK, brick gradually replaced stone in popularity. Then a largely mobile practice, brickmaking employed thousands of people, with impermanent kilns or clamps - themselves built of bricks - erected close to sources of clay. Temporary pits were dug by itinerant workers, and 'weathered London clay was blended with street sweepings of grit and cinder' (Hounsell, 2022: 12), shaped manually, dried and burnt in clamps. Later the advent of the pug mill allowed the more even mixing of bricks,

mechanical cutting devices expedited moulding, and more efficient kiln technologies manufactured bricks in greater numbers, while the development of canal and rail networks expedited transportation. The transformation of brickmaking from handicraft to mechanised industry facilitated huge urban, industrial and infrastructural expansion, advancing the building of docks, viaducts, embankments, bridges, factories, warehouses and housing. Moreover, as Helen Long states (1993: 78), ‘perhaps more than any other material, brick sums up the look of the late-Victorian and Edwardian speculatively built suburban house’. Then, most housing projects were undertaken by small firms whereas contemporaneously, a centralised industry constructs vast housing estates. Similarly, bricks were manufactured by numerous small suppliers. In 1900 there were around individually run 3500 brickyards in the UK (Hounsell, 2022), whereas presently, five companies control over 90 percent of the market (Cannell, 2023), although some specialist brickmakers deploy traditional methods, primarily for the restoration of historic buildings. Currently, around two billion bricks are manufactured in the UK, with brick production shifting away from local manufacture.

While most bricks formerly served a structural function, their use is now usually limited to external cladding attached to a supporting structure, most commonly concrete blocks, a factor contributing to the demise of bricklaying skills. Despite this change in use, bricks continue to be freighted with enduring symbolic associations of solidity, homeliness and historical continuity. As Felicity Cannell (2023: 67) argues, ‘brick is so embedded in our understanding of residential house building in England that, despite a growing variety of alternative materials, there appear to be few other ways to build’.

Clinker bricks are found across London, mostly in garden walls that line roads in former brickfield areas such as Ealing, Harrow, Muswell Hill and Tottenham (see Harries, 2022 for further London locations). Clinker bricks were created within a clamp, or ‘a kiln without walls’, that was made by stacking bricks into a tower with flues at the bottom to allow an upward through draft (Hounsell, 2022: 27). Clamps could incorporate as many as 100,000 bricks and the stacking or ‘setting’ of bricks was organised to ensure that they were evenly fired (Campbell and Pryce, 2003). Despite the skill of the setters, the design of the clamp meant that bricks located in the hottest part of the clamp, near the fuel sources, could become fused, ‘melted and run together in masses’ (Dobson, 1850, Part 2: 34-35).

Bricks were classified according to their texture, form, shape or colour, or whether they were primarily suitable for structural or as facing materials. Clinkers were originally placed at the bottom of classificatory schemes and were cheap, traded for use in rock gardens (Crofts, 1908) or to bolster foundations. This was not always welcomed. An architecture journal, *The Builder*, from 1847, states that these ‘irregular masses of bricks’ are ‘often used for cheapness’ sake, especially in the lower parts of buildings, and… materially lessen the strength of the walls’ (Watt, 1990: 48). Nevertheless, they subsequently came to be treasured by many early modern architects, builders and householders who sought decorative walls and façades. Critically, clinker bricks were not designed; they accidentally originated from a production process that became obsolescent; by the late 19th century, more efficient Hoffman kilns achieved greater uniformity and eliminated waste.

Local brickworks probably produced most of the clinker bricks used to build the garden walls that proliferate across Hampstead. Indeed, the plentiful, silt rich Claygate Beds of the area have long offered an excellent blend of materials for brickmaking, especially across Hampstead Heath, where until the end of the 19th century, hand dug clay was left exposed so rain could flush out the gypsum that might cause cracking. The clay was then mixed with chalk and ash, moulded into bricks and fired in situ. From the 1860s, the voraciously acquisitive Lord of the Manor, Thomas Maryon Wilson, leased an extensive brickfield on the East Heath beneath the scenic Viaduct. This is now filled by a large pond. Much of the heathland to the east was also pocked with clay pits and small brickworks, before parts of the Heath were transferred into public ownership. Another kiln was located on Branch Hill and features in a recently discovered 1821-22 sketch by John Constable (Brown, 2013), and a sizeable brickyard was sited at the northwest end of Frognal Road in West Hampstead.

The demise of local brick production, including clinkers, was impelled by the desires of suburban inhabitants to live far from the smell, smoke, dust and noise of quarries, brickyards and claypits; consequently, brickyards and kilns were demolished or infilled. For instance, in 1885, Mr Ellt, a brickmaker in Fleet Road, was ordered to cease production because of the smell and noise that emanated from his brickyard (Hounsell, 2022). These local bricks had been used in the construction of 70% of Hampstead's buildings, erected between 1870 and 1916 as the suburb expanded.

**Methods**

The primary method deployed in this study is walking. Walking has been undertaken solitarily or with others by psychogeographers, feminists, ecologists and artists to satisfy diverse objectives, for instance, to reinscribe boundaries, claim space, identify and transgress spatial exclusions, undertake dérives and mark out different sites in which inequalities and power is manifest. Walking as method has been mobilised across rural landscapes, urban transects and long-distance paths. In this project, we adopt walking as an appropriate practice through which to notice elements in the built environment that are usually disregarded, notably by mobilising the practice of ‘attentive observation’, identified by Gandy (2025: 1387) as ‘a mode of perception that involves stopping, looking, and searching, often accompanied by tactile or olfactory interaction’ that can ‘unsettle the habitual experience of familiar place’. Through walking, we can cultivate a multisensory attunement towards the ‘uneven and interwoven histories’ of place while also ‘paying attention to colour shape and form’ (Mason et al., 2023: 2).

One author, a Hampstead resident, spent hours walking around the suburb in 2020 during the lockdowns imposed as cases of COVID-19 surged, and came to notice the prevalence of clinker brick walls. Following this serendipitous process, walking had already helped to stoke awareness of the presence of clinker brick walls and their potential as a subject for research. Subsequently, we sought to systematically investigate their presence and variety by devising a schedule through which we walked together and separately along all streets in Hampstead. As Mason et al. (2023: 2) point out, walking offers a means through which to engage with ‘place and local knowledge and terrain’ in more intense and intimate ways. On our walks, we adopted an embodied engagement, cultivating an attentive disposition that focused

on ‘the particularities of the textures, forms and materials that combine and make up the urban landscapes in which we participate’ (Hunter, 2017, 30). In specifically focusing on clinker brick walls, walking allowed scrutiny and a heightened attunement to their distinctive qualities, affordances and divergencies (Brigstocke and Noorani, 2016) of the clinkers and the walls out of which they are composed the various attributes. We tactilely explored surfaces and examined their diverse constituencies, forms, textures and colours. We subsequently identified areas with the greatest distribution of clinker walls: a 300-yard clinker wall that borders the south side of West Heath Lane, numerous clinker wall panels in the Redington-Frognal area and along roads in West Hampstead, Highgate and Belsize Village. We also registered the diversity of architectural form, wall size and state of repair, while promoting reflexive analysis by photographing each clinker brick wall that we encountered. The enduring presence of these numerous, varied, mostly intact walls aligned with the rich historical legacy of brickmaking in the suburb that they evidenced confirmed our presumption that Hampstead was an excellent location in which to carry out our research.

In order to investigate wider views about clinker bricks from knowledgeable sources, and to assess the validity of our assumptions and early findings accrued through walking, we joined a Facebook Group, UK Bricks and Brickworks Past (n.d.), to solicit opinions from members about their utility, material qualities and aesthetic value, and to obtain a wider sense about their geographical distribution. Of the many responses, several were from bricklayers, and following further correspondence, we arranged to interview two in person, which proved valuable. We also interviewed a contemporary brick specialist, Lex, employed at London-based multinational company ARUP. Lex was familiar with clinker bricks and offered his own experiences of working with them in wall-building (see below). Finally, in carrying specific local historical research, we drew on recent conservation reports in which there was explicit recognition of the heritage value of Hampstead’s clinker bricks. We now turn to consider their aesthetic qualities.

**The material attributes and irregular aesthetics of clinker brick walls**

Clinker bricks are dense, tough and durable, and most remain intact: they are less friable than most other bricks, although the mortar surrounding them is often less enduring. Their individual material constituency and form vary wildly. Some are recognisable as bricks but variously distorted. In walls, these malformed units are commonly grouped with similarly twisted bricks; others have been fused together in packs of three or four. However, some clinker walls are also composed with pieces that do not resemble bricks but rocks produced by non-human forces, evoking a pleasing ‘resemblance to material effects that occur in nature’ (Karana et al, 2015: 24). Created through intensities of uncontrolled heat and pressure, they resemble the lithic products of volcanic processes and are sometimes referred to as ‘lava bricks’. These bricks vary in size and texture, with the effects of extreme heat evident in bubbling patterns or shiny areas of melted, glassy sheen. Some clinkers are smooth in texture, others are rough, deeply pitted, fissured, encrusted, jagged or bulbous.

The textural and formal qualities of clinker bricks are supplemented by their varied colours, creating a ‘a medley of affective and sensual impressions’ (Young, 2006:

173). Depending upon the kind of clay and different mixes of sand, clay, lime and ash, colours also vary according to the levels of heat and oxygen within kilns. Some elements are monotone in appearance, uniformly grey or brown, but others are kaleidoscopic. Clinkers strikingly contrast with the more uniform colour palette of standardised brick walls.

Most significantly, the idiosyncrasy and diversity of the clinkers are accentuated in the extremely varied ways in which they are arranged within an ensemble (see figures 1a-1c). These wall mosaics of different sizes, textures, colours and shapes follow the predilections of bricklayers, builders and architects. Sometimes, panels are wholly composed of identifiable bricks, in other cases, rocky forms predominate. More commonly, they are combined in variegated mosaics.

*Figure 1a: Clinker brick wall, West Heath Road*
*Figure 1b: Clinker brick wall, Frognal Lane*
*Figure 1c: Clinker brick wall, Lymington Road (photographs by authors)*

These diverse tortuous, multihued forms bestow the walls into which they are inserted with a potent aesthetic charge that contrasts with the smoother, more standardised materialities that reign across most urban spaces. In late Victorian and Edwardian times, notably, within the Arts and Crafts Movement, they became popular amongst builders and architects. In the decades before their use, architectural tensions arose between advocates of functional simplicity, smoothness, symmetry, and the classical virtues of proportion, and champions of picturesque aesthetics who foregrounded asymmetry, irregularity, variation and roughness. Subsequently, for the Arts and Crafts architects, builders and designers who created many of Hampstead's suburban houses, clinker bricks were eagerly deployed to resist the increasingly uniform components mass produced by advanced technologies. They disdained these homogeneous units for their mooted lack of character, instead, favouring the pastoral and rustic qualities that were rapidly being superseded. Such contentions supported a return to artisanship and a humane, safe working environment in which workers could develop craftsmanship and skill.

These passionate architectural approaches foregrounded the virtues of material imperfection, impermanence, discontinuity and fragmentation, epitomised in the irregularity and asymmetry of clinker bricks and walls. Such qualities remain favoured by those who promote less standardised architectural styles. For instance, Yuriko Saito (2017: 2-3) argues that the widespread deployment of serially produced, precisely manufactured objects 'limits the range of sensuous qualities for appreciation' reducing pleasurable appreciation of a 'complex, irregular, and asymmetrical shape, the interplay of interior and exterior spaces, and rough surfaces'. Similarly, contemporary bricklayer, Phil, declares, 'I like to see other materials included in walls, anything that breaks up the unrelenting uniformity of the brickwork!' (correspondence via Facebook).

However, the architectural organisation of clinker bricks in walls typically combines both irregularity and regularity. For most designs contain the clinkers within panels bordered by a regular frame composed from smooth, uniform bricks, thereby expressing a contrast between material shapes, colours and textures. Here, Saito (2017: 8) points to the potency of irregularity when it is combined with more orderly

material arrangements. In such compositions, she argues that neither the faultless nor the flawed should predominate but should be complementary. These irregular / regular arrangements significantly contribute to the distinctive aesthetics of Hampstead's built environment; they are part of a larger ensemble of material and architectural diversity. For Arts and Crafts buildings are characteristically assembled from diverse materials, including carved woodwork, wrought iron, ceramic tiles, terracotta, stucco, brick and stone in varied, eclectic combinations. The ornamental function of brick itself included an array of polychromatic geometric designs, zigzag and herringbone patterns, lozenges, voussoir arches, lintels and decorative cornering (Cannell, 2023), and clinker bricks are often an essential element in this medley.

*2a: Belsize Park Garages; 2b Belsize Court Garages, detail of facade (photographs by authors)*

The deployment of diverse building components and the enclosure of material irregularity within a uniform border is superbly exemplified in the unique Belsize Park Garages, built in 1880 as stables / coach houses by developer William Willett and Son (Figure 2a and 2b). Willett was renowned as a prominent advocate of introducing summertime hours but architecturally, the term 'Willett-built' signified high quality, and according to *The Times* newspaper, 'it applies, broadly speaking, to a type of residence which is distinguished by individuality of design, both inside and out'. This is evident at the Belsize Park property where the complex façade contains variously arranged, extremely well laid clinker panels, bordered by red brick and Staffordshire blue bricks. The containment of the dark, volcanic clinkers within geometrically formal red brickwork frames emphasizes their qualities. These brick arrangements are supplemented with white-painted timber framing and rough, pebbledash-style panels on the upper storey.

We consider that the contemporary overemphasis on functionality and smoothness in the built environment can erase multi-sensorial encounters, affective responses and emotional provocations (Karana et al., 2015). By contrast, the attributes of irregularity and its combination with orderliness, the diverse colour, material constituency, form and composition of Hampstead's clinker bricks and walls combine with other Arts and Crafts architectural expressions to undergird a distinctive sense of place. As material entities encountered in quotidian life, we argue that they are significant objects of the *everyday* heritage of place (Giombini, 2020).

## Links with histories: sites of supply, situated architectural approaches and artisanal skills

By focusing on Hampstead's clinker bricks, we now exemplify how material elements are integral to a place's identity – and thus to its heritage – because they constitute evidence of its past connections to sites of local and distant supply, local craft traditions, modes of transport, building technologies and the workers who created and constructed the buildings out of which they are made.

Any investigation into their material constitution, reveals that places are continuously reconstituted by an incessant supply of matter imported from near and far (Edensor,

2020). Until a hundred years ago, most building material was sourced from local quarries, claypits and woods. Certain places remain deeply associated with their material fabric. Aberdeen's moniker, the 'Granite City', resonates with its grey, locally supplied building stone, while Bath is uniformly clad in yellow oolitic limestone sourced from near to the city (Edensor, 2022). By contrast, most contemporary built environments are ever more materially variegated; stone, steel, glass, concrete, wood, plastic and bricks are drawn from diverse sites of supply at ever-greater spatial scales following advances in information, transport and extraction technologies. This produces an 'epistemic distance' (Carolan, 2007) resulting from the obscurity of the origins of commodities of all kinds. By contrast, places in which a large proportion of buildings are wrought out of locally sourced materials, such as Hampstead, express situated craft traditions, natural histories, geologies and landscapes that testify to its local environment and historical connections.

First, clinker brick walls conjure up the local sites of extraction and the brickworks that created them. The pond below the Hampstead Heath Viaduct is all that remains of this lost geography of extraction and brick manufacture, with other local quarries and industrial sites leaving no traces on what has subsequently become extensive heathland and residential space. Second, the enduring presence of the bricks summons up 19th and early 20th century scenes of their transport: Dobson (1850: 35) describes them as being 'sold by the cart-load', promoting visions of carts and horses clattering along Hampstead's suburban streets. Third, the clinkers are a testament to the skilful toil of the manufacturers and the bricklayers employed to produce, assemble and construct them, who lifted and laid bricks into place, slapped on mortar with trowels and checked vertical and horizontal alignments. As Trevor Marchand (2010: s2) discusses, the development of such skilled practice and knowledge does not emerge in a vacuum but from 'a context that includes 'artefacts, tools-to-hand, and raw materials; space, place, and architecture; paths and boundaries; timeframes and temporal rhythms; light, darkness, and weather'. The conditions of the workers who strenuously toiled with fierce heat and heavy burdens as they worked at permanent brickworks or besides the swiftly assembled temporary clamps are remembered by the contorted forms of the bricks. These workers belonged to a community of practitioners who shared 'values, ethos and social persona, and the learning of related professional competencies' (Marchand, 2012: 261). Similarly, local bricklayers developed sensuous knowledge and ever-evolving skills, intimately acting '*with* materials and *with* tools whose inherent qualities 'respond' to the work' (ibid: 264). Through repetitive tactile sensing, they developed an autonomous, improvisational ability to flexibly respond to the brick's diverse qualities, a 'know how' or tacit knowledge that included a skilled vision (Grasseni, 2004) mobilised to assess the qualities of the material to be worked with, its textures, plasticity and amenability to proposed designs.

These bricklayers were expected to artfully produce stability and harmonious arrangements by combining bricks of different forms and sizes and applying proportionate rendering; their individual dispositions, aesthetic preferences and skills are evident in the diverse mosaics they forged. Contemporary bricklayers with whom we have corresponded pay tribute to the vanished skill that was required to construct such walls with one, Davey, asserting that 'As a brickie, I would dread having to lay them' (Facebook correspondence). Will, in trying to rebuild a clinker wall explained, 'we try not to make a pattern. We don't pick one up and go "oh, that one will look

good there", we just grab one and put it in. If you try and make it look nice it all ends up looking a bit dodgy' (Interview, 6/5/2021). A tactile engagement with the clinkers can conjure up these absent bricklayers, with whom we may temporarily become peculiarly intimate because of what John Harries (2017: 115) calls our shared 'bodily experience of dwelling in the world'. Through touching materials, he argues, we can rediscover a sensuous 'appreciation of the lived experience of long-ago peoples'.

While most bricks that clad British buildings continue to be manufactured in the UK, they are rarely supplied to a specific local market, reinforcing the 'epistemic distance' referred to above (Carolan, 2007). In former times, the local or regional geological landscape dictated the geographies of English brick buildings, for they could be identified through distinctive textures, shapes and colours. Clinker bricks connect the fabric of Hampstead to nearby sources, local geology and geography, historic artisanal expertise and transport technologies. These aspects of the everyday, mundane heritage of place are usually overlooked, although they can undergird a potent sense of belonging in time and space.

## Living heritage: reinvigorating skills and creative design in place

An enhanced awareness of the historical connections between clinker bricks and their sources, those who worked on them and their local provenance raises certain questions. How might once prominent local skills and forms of knowledge rekindle or inspire contemporary artisanship? How might outmoded aesthetic architectural styles and attributes be revalued?. How might we restore local, more sustainable approaches to the supply and use of materials. By learning from these local historical condiotns, how might we encourage the emergence of a *living heritage* that links past, present and future?

While the lost community of skilful practitioners are appreciated by contemporary bricklayers, recent making cultures are offering alternatives to mass manufacturing and consequent deskilling. As Carr and Gibson (2016: 299) point out, a 'renaissance in small-scale making' has emerged wherein 're-connections are being forged with themes such as quality, providence, craft, ethics, tacit design knowledge, haptic skill and the value of physical labour'. This growing embrace of the hand-made, the idiosyncratic and the non-standardised resonates with the aesthetic qualities of clinker bricks and suggests that new forms of distinctive labour and production could produce components to re-enchant material environments in old and new ways, reinforcing local distinctiveness. Accordingly, the acquisition and application of skills formerly deployed to create older architectural designs can be conceived as a practical, contemporary expression of heritage and place-making. Moreover, the Arts and Crafts emphasis on the use of miscellaneous material components might also inspire future innovation in local architecture and design. In this sense, skills, aesthetics and materials deployed in historic place-specific architectures could be reinvigorated to inspire the creation of new and traditional designs that through establish continuities, would contribute to a living heritage (Poulios, 2014)

Besides raising possibilities for the development of older building skills, the use of clinker bricks also exemplifies how the reuse of material at first labelled as waste but then revalued as esteemed constituents of Victorian and Edwardian architecture

might be deployed as part of more sustainable approaches to building. Clinkers epitomise the Victorian trend of ‘loop-closing’ or converting by-products into items of use. For example, coal gas residues were used for street lighting and eventually adopted in homes. Coal tar was utilised as a protective coating for wooden ships, as creosote for railway sleepers, and as an animal disinfectant. The industrial uses of gas water extended from pharmaceuticals and dyes to printing and fertilisers (Desrochers, 2009).

The reassessment of the utility of clinker bricks illustrates Ostuzzi et al’s (2011: 4) claim that unexpected errors in production can inspire the development of ‘hybrid entities’ of varied colours, forms and textures. These evaluations foreground an acceptance of that which is neither standardised nor perfect. Indeed, Ayala-Garcia and Rognoli (2017: S376) consider that an aesthetics of imperfection has been reborn in contemporary times, for example, in the positive re-evaluation of ‘faded, eroded, oxidised, scratched’ forms. They further discuss the rise of a new class of things composed of ‘DIY materials’, new forms of matter derived from vegetal, animal and mineral waste that can be technologically transformed and transmit novel aesthetic qualities.

In contemporary times, such sustainable approaches are being more widely adopted. Brick dust waste, blast furnace slag, copper slag, fly ash generated from thermal power plants, and mud produced from aluminium production are being used as substitutes for lime in cement production to ameliorate the construction industry’s carbon footprint. Other materials typically designated as waste such as recycled plastic, glass and demolition waste are gradually becoming used as constituents of bricks, concrete and aggregate in the development of a more circular economy. There is clearly great potential for many undervalued materials to become practically useful and aesthetically esteemed.

The transition of clinker bricks from waste to useful building component is valued by Will, a bricklayer who contrasts this reuse with contemporary bricklaying practices:

> They never used to waste anything. Now, if I’m building a brick wall and I pick up a brick and it has a corner chipped off, I just sling the brick down and it goes in the skip. Years ago, they were put to one side, and they would use all the broken bricks and the damaged bricks and out of shape bricks. They would use them in the walls’ (Interview 6/5/2021).

Despite the evident potentialities for future developments that the clinker bricks suggest, it can be challenging to counter tenacious aesthetic orthodoxies that regard such irregular forms as valueless. This is exemplified by the experience of a professional brick specialist, Lex. 20 years ago, he recalls working with a company that manufactured bricks by using historical kiln technologies that produced a significant quantity of unwanted clinkers; they were designated as waste. Some of these, he explains, were collected in an ‘amusing “rogues gallery” of misshapen bricks in the factory office’. Lex describes how ‘I incorporated some of them into a wall I designed and had built, with the aim of inspiring architects to think more creatively about using brick’. This experimental wall contained other diverse bricks (see figures 3a and 3b). However, when he showed the wall to his boss, Lex was dismayed to find that,

> He went crazy when he saw it, because his role was to ensure the factories *didn't* make clinkers! I felt they had huge value, for all the right reasons, but what might have been the early 2000s clinker resurgence died there and then across the board room table!

Lex's experiment, nipped in the bud, discloses that an appetite amongst many builders and bricklayers remains for the construction of more diverse, interesting and aesthetically complex brick structures, and the revaluing of that which has been regarded as a wasteful by-product.

*3a: Clinker bricks, Lex's wall; 3b: The whole wall (photograph courtesy Alexis Harrison)*

**Conclusion: Growing recognition of clinker brick walls as an integral element in Hampstead's heritage: repair and conservation**

To conclude, we explore how the qualities of clinker brick walls are currently gaining recognition as a valued element in Hampstead's material heritage of place through their ongoing repair and maintenance, and their inclusion in conservation assessments and strategies.

Practices of repair and maintenance are invariably entangled with social, political and economic judgements wherein diverse groups and individuals assert what is architecturally worthy of conservation (Yarrow, 2019). Enduring recognition that clinker brick walls are an integral element in Hampstead's heritage and place identity is evident in how many residents have sought to restore and maintain their presence. In many places, mortar has replaced crumbling rendering. For instance, along Lymington Road in West Hampstead, most of the clinker walls that border the first 30 houses have been repaired or maintained over time. Some have retained a harmonious appearance, some have been inexpertly restored with slathering quantities of rendering, while others are colonised by moss and plants. Through both skilled and improvisational maintenance for well over a hundred years, the conservation has been undertaken by individual householders who have demonstrated their shared esteem for clinker walls through everyday, situated practices of upkeep and repair.

Though we were unaware of this when we started this research project, more formal, institutional procedures to identify clinker walls as worthy of conservation and value them as heritage are emerging. For instance, in the *Redington-Frognal Heritage and Character Assessment* (AECOM, 2015) clinker walls are distinguished as an essential element of the streetscape. These streets were laid out from 1870 and subsequently lined by high quality, idiosyncratic Arts and Crafts and Queen Anne style homes, replete with rich ornamentation, with 44 buildings listed. The report (2015: 30) charts 'an important period in the development of Hampstead and modern suburbia' with its rich architectural diversity, including the numerous clinker brick walls, referred to as 'lava stone walls'. These are highlighted in three photographs in an appendix of architectural features that are identified as worthy of conservation. This growing awareness of their heritage value is illustrated in a newspaper report that discusses pop star Dua Lipa's plans to refurbish her home in the area. The

Redington-Frognal Neighbourhood Forum ‘warned against the rebuilding, or any potential harm, to boundary walls constructed from lava bricks (also known as clinker bricks), which it insists are "a very important feature of the Redington-Frognal Conservation Area"’ (Reaidi, 2023).

This heritage evaluation is reinforced in another ongoing enquiry. While the owners of a house in the Redington-Frognal area have used clinker bricks to rebuild most sections of a boundary wall, one part has been infilled with stones that are uniform in shape and colour. A Retrospective Planning Application to retain this following an earlier order was refused by Camden in June 2024 (Camden Planning Officer Delegated Report, 2022) and their report recommends enforcement of ‘the requirement that the wall be rebuilt along the lines of the existing design… and in accord with earlier planning decisions’. It is further pointed out that the new wall is significantly different to the original design’ and is a vastly inferior wall both from an aesthetic and historical perspective’. In the ‘failure to correctly reinstate the heritage wall’ it is claimed that ‘the developer has created significant harm to the character of this section of the Redington-Frognal Conservation Area’. They are supported by the Heath and Hampstead Society who point out the inappropriate colouring and proportions of the panels and insist that ‘Hampstead’s clinker walls are decorative features of a number of local roads’. The report details Camden Local Plan specifications for ‘Design and Heritage’ that ‘preserves or enhances the historic environment and heritage assets’. Accordingly, the report concludes with the recommendation that there is ‘replacement or reused materials that include and match the brickwork, clinker panel and pier with its coping stone’ and that this be ‘erected in precise accordance with the details approved to match that existing wall prior to unauthorised works taking place’.

Prosperous Hampstead possesses an assiduously protected historic built environment. However, until recently clinker brick walls have been disregarded in assessments about what constitutes its heritage and place identity. We have argued that although mundane, everyday features like these walls are typically unnoticed, they play a vital role in contributing to the sensory and affective attributes of place. First, the virtues of irregularity, individuality in form, roughness, colour and arrangement distinguish these components and the walls out of which they are fabricated from smoother elements of the built environment, enriching and diversifying the materiality of place. Second, they testify to local geologies and historic connections with sites of supply, manufacturing processes, former workers, labour practices and skills, architectural and design preferences, and lost geographies and obscure histories of place. Third, they offer a stimulus to creativity, revived artisanal skill and aesthetics that could prompt use of more diverse building materials, including that identified as waste. In this sense, they have to potential to contribute to the living heritage of place. Gratifyingly, we have found that recently, the clinker walls have been drawn into local heritage and conservation strategies and plans, revealing a situated recognition of their importance to place identity.

It is difficult in the present political climate to successfully campaign for the retention of features like clinker brick walls. Planning enquiries and appeals can take years to reach a decision, and the policies currently under consideration by the British Government to expedite development schemes while bypassing objections is concerning. Perhaps most difficult is to change perspectives. As we have seen with

the response of Lex's boss to his innovative wall, it is hard to overcome the conventions imparted by what Rancière (2009) calls the distribution of the sensible – that which has already been officially valued and snares attention. Besides the iconic sites listed by grand heritage bodies, a range of eccentric architectural relics, styles of ornamentation, strange materialities, peculiar hybrid assemblages and inexplicable traces could be more consistently celebrated by place makers and marketers and brought to the attention of inhabitants, conservationists, investors and tourists as distinctive, idiosyncratic but integral elements of place. Despite these impediments to change, such revaluing processes are emerging to challenge conservation and heritage orthodoxies. A multitude of overlooked, mundane materials and architectural features await future investigation so that they can be reappraised as integral elements of place identity and heritage.

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