This book was commissioned in response to the exhibition *Living with Buildings* curated by Emily Sargent at Wellcome Collection. The exhibition explores the pivotal role of design and urban planning in human health and examines how the structures that surround us shape our mental and physical health, in both positive and negative ways.

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Christ Church, Spitalfields. Leon Kossoff.

LIVING WITH BUILDINGS

And Walking with Ghosts

On Health and Architecture

IAIN SINCLAIR

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wellcome collection

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‘Descartes said all our ills come from a man
being unable to sit alone, quietly, in a room.’
James Sallis

‘He could walk. He walked.’
Joseph Conrad

POLICE, BY THE COUPLE, one standing back, came to the door. The first pair, interrupting our Sunday lunch, wanted witnesses to a kidnapping that might or might not have happened outside the local school. The second, late in the evening when the chain was on, were careful to check the address, the number. Unusually, they had turned out to deal with a reported intrusion. Local elections were imminent.

Nothing came of these tentative investigations. Uniforms we hadn't seen in forty years were pursuing crimes reported in another life. They were as bemused by this as we were. The original burglars had retired to Loughton and were driving minicabs. The 'kidnappers' were sold out, beaten to the floor, cuffed and dragged away.

And that's how it is with buildings and health. It might be centuries before potential detectives identify the source of the infection. Rooms, houses, flats, estates: they provide an unreadable richness of layered histories. But the instinct, however posthumous, however disorientating, remains: to balance the equation and close the case. Listen. The wronged dead are already tapping at our windows.

MOVE

Christ Church: The Sickness and the Shadow

'But most of the patients' notes are marked "Not for resus!"'

David Widgery

MUCH OF THE RUBBISH coming through my letterbox these days, now that the estate agents have flatlined, pitches funeral insurance. 'When you've lived a long life, there is no avoiding the sad reality, we have to plan for our passing on.' After more than seventy fortunate years on earth, when gravity is applied, there is always a faint, unsourced smell of charring fat. Chill anticipation of something far worse, shadows detaching themselves from once familiar buildings, asserting their independence before fading away.

I had been advised by a trusted source to inspect a set of newly installed watercolour paintings by Rebecca Hind, a reredos triptych in Christ Church, Spitalfields. On my next free afternoon, I obeyed. That was in 2010. I always intended to return, to take a more measured look. Now, invited to consider the relationship between built environments and the health of those who lived in them, the particular catch of light in my memory of the Hind paintings became critical. I needed to get back, but there were detours, other voices, other duties. Years passed. I found myself plodding towards the church door only when those

big iron gates were locked. Or television lighting rigs were being wheeled into place by crews who had started the day too early to know where they really were. Catering trucks were the only reliable geographic fact.

It is our melancholy fate, as higher animals, to carry our ills, while searching for somewhere to plant them. Better, I felt, to be outside, on the move, eyes cast down, swerving the shit, stooping painfully after useless coins, gleaning and gathering, but not gazing up at remote figures in high windows, or the mortal shiver in the crowns of London plane trees. We chew over old hurts and project a future that is already used up – while the significant other, the viral messenger, sleeping partner, parasite, alien-friend, waits to announce herself: a twinge here, a dry cough, cold hands, stiff back, toes that refuse to clench. Let the doctors keep their verdicts until we're gone.

There is liberation in shutting the door behind us and striking out. Released from the sleep chamber where subconscious warnings play and tease their dream cinema, another night survived, we are mad to pitch into weather and landscape, so that what is left of the tattered rags of our common humanity must be shared with sorry derelicts, embattled survivors in the holes and cracks of an indifferent city. Even the dying obey the instinct to crawl into some rude shelter. But they are only hiding from their own powerlessness. So we walk away, while we can, in the superstitious belief that the ugly thing will not find us out. Our unmediated journey, beginning with a first hesitant step, protects us from immediate termination of contract: not today, not now, not yet, not until this new pilgrimage, the final of final programmes, is done.

'CARCINOMA, METHADONE, DIABETES, depression, miscarriage and angina have poured down as unremittingly as the weather,' wrote David Widgery in his essay, 'The Doctor is Sick', published in *Esquire* in 1991. General practitioners

back then, still subject to the quasi-naval discipline of hospitals with eight dining rooms where different grades of staff never had to mingle, and green rooms with more desperate clients than can be registered as they wave their numbered tickets, were anathematised by tabloid journalists and bullying media moguls for threatening to speak out, or to take industrial action, against slashed budgets, rationalised refuges and rising tides of managerial bullshit. Doctors, male and female, had more to worry about than their caste titles and official designations.

Widgery, a Hackney-based physician and radical, an early US traveller/recorder, Beat enthusiast, contrarian, tried to keep a written record – against impossible hours worked, against carbon-dioxide commutes down roads clogged with construction traffic for the emerging Canary Wharf towers – of his experiences in Gill Street, a medical practice tucked alongside Nicholas Hawksmoor's imposing Portland stone temple, Saint Anne's. The sharp-angled church was a white battleship whose periscope tower, before recent interventions, was visible to incoming vessels on the Thames: an established London marker.

The doctor is remembered by a plaque in the garden beyond the churchyard. 'As a socialist and writer his life and work were an inspiration in the fight against injustice.' Words cut on slate honour the man who 'practised locally'. That is the key: locality. Widgery was embedded. Seen on film, he *moves*; he bristles, he engages. It appears, in television documentaries of that time, that the doctor regarded the buildings themselves as the enemy: malpractice and politic short-termism incubating rogue pathologies, tapping the sweats and fevers of migrant generations. And favouring impoverished and disenfranchised clients with the sickness of the system. The doctor, who was also a poet, made it his task to snare disease as a metaphor for the failures of the social contract.

In a photograph taken when he braved the 'forgotten' St

Vincent's House on St Saviour's Estate, the doctor's right arm is gauzed and bandaged. Walking home from the bus stop, at the end of a long and weary day, he was assaulted by four black youths. He 'left a goodish sample of epidermis on the pavement of Richmond Road'. Widgery wasn't obliged to experience the glamourised grot of *London Fields* by Martin Amis. He'd just been mugged there. He was hauled through the gutter by the strap of his medical briefcase. The twilight assailants got away with a blue convenience-store bag, a bottle of cheap plonk and a dirty shirt.

On call, the doctor's modest car is raided like a delivery van. Bicycles are barely pushed up the garden path before they're gone. Car radios, until they are left as gaping wounds in the dashboard, scream for a smarter class of wreck, a brief appearance in the recycling bins of Kingsland Waste market.

Widgery is summoned to the smoke-thick den of an extended but unlanguaged family, new arrivals from Bangladesh or Vietnam, where a young child, not yet immune to the microclimate, responds with bouts of spectacular projectile vomiting. We are ghosts talking to ghosts. The city is undone. Housing is the infirmity. Innocent carriers, risking everything in transit, are blamed.

As early as 1974, the promise of future towers justified a death certificate for overwhelmed but still functioning East London hospitals. The prognosis was poor. The managers couldn't manage anything beyond their own dissolution. Established hospital-estates, like St Clement's in Mile End Road, were a cartography of unquiet memories, pain smears, tiled corridors saturated in muffled sounds; the whisper of phantom wheels, bad news delivered in a steady voice.

'Memory of a memory of a memory,' said Lee Harwood, who spent a few grim months as a patient in the secure hospital colony, divorcing his cells from heroin, and absorbing the bitter essence of his capture by place. Here was a precise but provisional terrain in which the poet opened

himself to the pathology of the city: tender collisions were arranged in expectation of the heart fluttering, missing the next beat, or catching the latest mortality telegram delivered from between the sticky pages of a retired book in the local history library in Bancroft Road. If hospitals are constructed as industrial plants for containing, manufacturing and focusing the sickness, they are better avoided. Libraries are more subtle, fingerprints and saturated sweat are left for generations on unopened pages. Tubercular wraiths, let in from the street, huddle around austerity-era radiators coughing over friable newspapers. Obituaries are hot news. You are not dead until they tell you that you are dead. In hospitals and libraries everybody is learning how to wait. Time is sucked from sick rooms like precious oxygen. Sit too long and you will never move again.

Another damaged London wanderer, the name character of W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, experiences, after a collapse in Alderney Street, 'three weeks of mental absence' in St Clement's hospital, where he has been inserted, like a returned volume, among the sheets of a narrow bed in one of the male wards. Austerlitz processes the endless corridors, 'desolate and weirdly contented' on the palliative drugs he has been fed, peering through dirty windows at the fecund wilderness of Tower Hamlets cemetery. He is trapped within a structure – part prison, part asylum, part barracks (the keepers are prisoners too) – built to facilitate confusion. Patients arrive at the hospital gates with their undiagnosed but interesting problems as the price of entry.

Keep walking, Sebald implies, one step in front of another, so that the diagnosis allocated to you, and confirmed by experts, will never break cover. Austerlitz knows nothing beyond 'the four burnt-out walls of his brain'. Abolished names and legends in the cemetery cohabit with ivy-choked angels. Stonemasons have chipped and laboured to reference marine tragedies, industrial accidents, named babes who never learned to crawl.

Dr Widgery, in the conflicted condition of writer and physician, was well placed to engage with the wet-brained alcoholics and street-performing vagrants who sometimes encroached on the Limehouse Health Centre. He was aware of the risks taken by doctors who chose to write, or writers who dabbled in medicine. He spoke of the poet William Carlos Williams, a general practitioner in Paterson, New Jersey, as an exemplar: a man who knew how to watch and wait. The doctor kept a prescription pad handy, on which to seize the moment. Williams scribbled his notes for subsequent scoring on the practice typewriter, before the day's work began: the never-ending consultations, the hesitant confessions to be unpicked, the expectant mothers. All that history to be absorbed and processed before his own stroke, insult to the brain, narrowed the horizons.

Alfred Döblin (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*), Brecht, Conan Doyle and Bulgakov were also cited. Widgery did not mention the perverse genius Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who was visited in paranoid retreat at Meudon, a south-west suburb of Paris, by Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. Burroughs, like J. G. Ballard, dabbled with medical studies, acquiring a forensic eye and a taste for formaldehyde in the morning. Surgeons, for Burroughs, were virtuosi, carving and drilling and joking, treating their victims like stooges dragged on stage by a malicious comedian. Céline, by the time the Beat poets arrived at his gate, had seen his madness, pricked by First War wounds, shrapnel in the head, seep into the bombed ruins around him; a flight to the east, Berlin and the Baltic, ending in prison and disgrace.

Barry Miles, in his biography of Ginsberg, says that Céline 'was dressed almost as a *clochard*, in three moth-eaten sweaters'. The shamed doctor was still in business but his diminishing list of patients now regarded him as a man condemned, a manifestation of the sickness of the years of German occupation. The language virus had undone him. 'There was brown mold under his fingernails.'

LONDON *CLOCHARDS* IN THE SNOW, with punched-pillow, medieval faces, warming broken-knuckled hands over pallet-board fires, feature on the cover of Markéta Luskačová's *Photographs of Spitalfields* (1991). A nocturnal gang of strategically aligned substance abusers. A tactical collective, mostly male and tribal, battling to survive in the vanishing hinterland between the City and the ghetto. Hardened men with deleted histories make it their business to self-medicate, to keep away from punitive charity and the buildings where the sickness lodges; where it has lodged since the verminous days of Jack London and *The People of the Abyss* (1903). The photographs in the early editions of London's book, many taken by the author himself, operate in a very different way to the crafted inserts in a book by W. G. Sebald. Sebald manipulates his text: it is easy to imagine him counting the words, designing a single sheet as an illuminated block. The Sebaldian image, sometimes copied and recopied, authenticates a teasing fiction. Found postcards dictate their own terms. Jack London's photographs are reportage. They confront the ambiguities of the prose and its status as confession or contrivance.

After being led into teeming, rancorous hovels, as tourist-reporter not medical practitioner, London discovers scenes that David Widgery later experienced. He recorded poverty caves loud with colours and characters seductive to writers: author as diagnostician. 'His skin an unhealthy colour, body gnarled and twisted out of all decency, contracted chest, shoulders bent prodigiously from long hours of toil, and head hanging heavily forward and out of place.' Prognosis as prophecy. Flesh as an avatar of poverty.

Whitechapel rookeries cough and retch. 'I could make out fish and meat bones, garbage, pestilential rags, old boots, broken earthenware, and all the general refuse of a sty.'

The sturdy Californian adventurer, head and shoulders above those who guide him, asks to be led back, not into

an unexplored zone of the titular abyss but into a literary fable: 'the site of the slums where lived Arthur Morrison's *Child of the Jago*'. Purpose-built tenements, for those who could afford them, after the original underclass warrens, with all the consumptions of the dispossessed, had been demolished and their occupants dispersed. The new structures around Arnold Circus boasted a clean bill of health: incomers were issued with rent books and the obligation of scrubbing the stairs. Only the fit and deloused could take up residence in buildings designed to advertise the clean skins and superior sanitation of those who could afford to rise in the world.

WITH HIS CAMERA AND NOTEBOOK, Jack London circles Hawksmoor's Christ Church. He does not look up at the portico, the threatening mass of columns, ledges and alcoves. The Mayan dagger of the steeple. He does not step beyond the defensive railings. He stays outside. A photograph from distance, in which men are sprawled, sick or drunk, against the unforgiving hull of blackened stone, and women are upright, still in the game, perky in straw hats against the railings, has a helpful caption: 'In the Shadow of Christ's Church, I Saw.' That apostrophe is a curling finger of blame. A signalled sarcasm. Church without deity. The formidable conceit of this established structure, London suggests, reveals nothing more than an alembic in which to cook the physical ills of the district, to cull the unworthy, the unbelievers. The non-conformists. Christ Church excludes those who have most need of its grudging benevolence.

'Where the shadow falls, all that is mine,' Hawksmoor seems to say. London's lost ones – those of the city and of the American writer with the same (adopted) name – settle, men and women together, on a circlet of bench around a plane tree in the barren rug of park to the south of the church. The park is a waiting room for sanctioned

'In the Shadow of Christ's Church, I Saw.' Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*.

'A chill raw wind was blowing, and three creatures huddled there sleeping or trying to sleep.' Jack London.

outpatients, hawking, scratching, but staying in the honest, filthy London air, lungs shredded and cuttlefish black.

Inside Christ Church, down in the crypt, is an oozing mire of Spitalfields corpses, pressing on each other, mulched with rotten wood, foul cerements and linen rags: sad vanities as comforters for a theoretical afterlife. Failed charms against oblivion. London's outsiders know and fear closing doors, unwelcoming interiors: they stay outside.

'The shadow of Christ's Church falls across Spitalfields Garden,' Jack London wrote, 'and in the shadow of Christ's Church, at three o'clock in the afternoon, I saw a sight I never wish to see again … Grass only grows here, and it is surrounded by sharp-spiked iron fencing, as are all the parks of London Town, so that homeless men and women may not come in at night and sleep upon it.'

The American, this squalor tourist, enters Itchy Park like a house surgeon making his brisk ward rounds. 'On the benches on either side was arrayed a mass of miserable and distorted humanity … It was a welter of rags and filth, of all manner of loathsome skin diseases, open sores, bruises, grossness, indecency, leering monstrosities, and bestial faces.'

There was no healing sleep in the short, interrupted night. The morning shadow of Hawksmoor's stone steeple-tree was the call to movement, expulsion from the garden. The sick ones doze. They share their dreams, whatever moments of oblivion they can manage. *But it is always safer to be outside.* The crypt, in time, will be decanted and scoured, bodies arranged across the floor of the empty church – before the vaulting space can be heritaged, curated, tasked with generating an income stream. Before its malignancy can be exposed in conspiracy comics and blockbuster films. The London sickness, the rough sleepers intuit, is a privilege of architecture: it lodges in churches and hospitals and schools. It lodges in the palaces and mansions and railway suburbs from which they are excluded.

It is 'by the portico of Christ's Church, where the stone

'View in Spitalfields.' Jack London.

pillars rise towards the sky', and where 'whole rows' of men are trying and failing to sleep, that Jack London delivers his verdict. 'A lung of London … nay, an abscess, a great putrescent sore.' The visitor to the lower depths can now burn his borrowed clothes. His photographs, faces blurring when the subject turns away, are grounded. They begin with people on the street; with tenements, charity shelters and churches as backdrop, evidence for a polemic.

In the accepted 'view' of Spitalfields – a corner of the market as seen from the portico of Christ Church – the seething mass of humanity is frozen: lamp-post lounger, pavement squatter, carter, predestined strider, hands-in-pockets philosopher. And all of them quite oblivious to the General Gordon Temperance Hotel. And to the new building that will replace it. And to the building that will replace the replacement. And to the compulsive façadism of the twenty-first century, where boasted legacy is a curtain of quotations, behind which yet more empty apartments can be assembled for the online property catalogue. And fines paid to cover a shortfall in affordable housing.