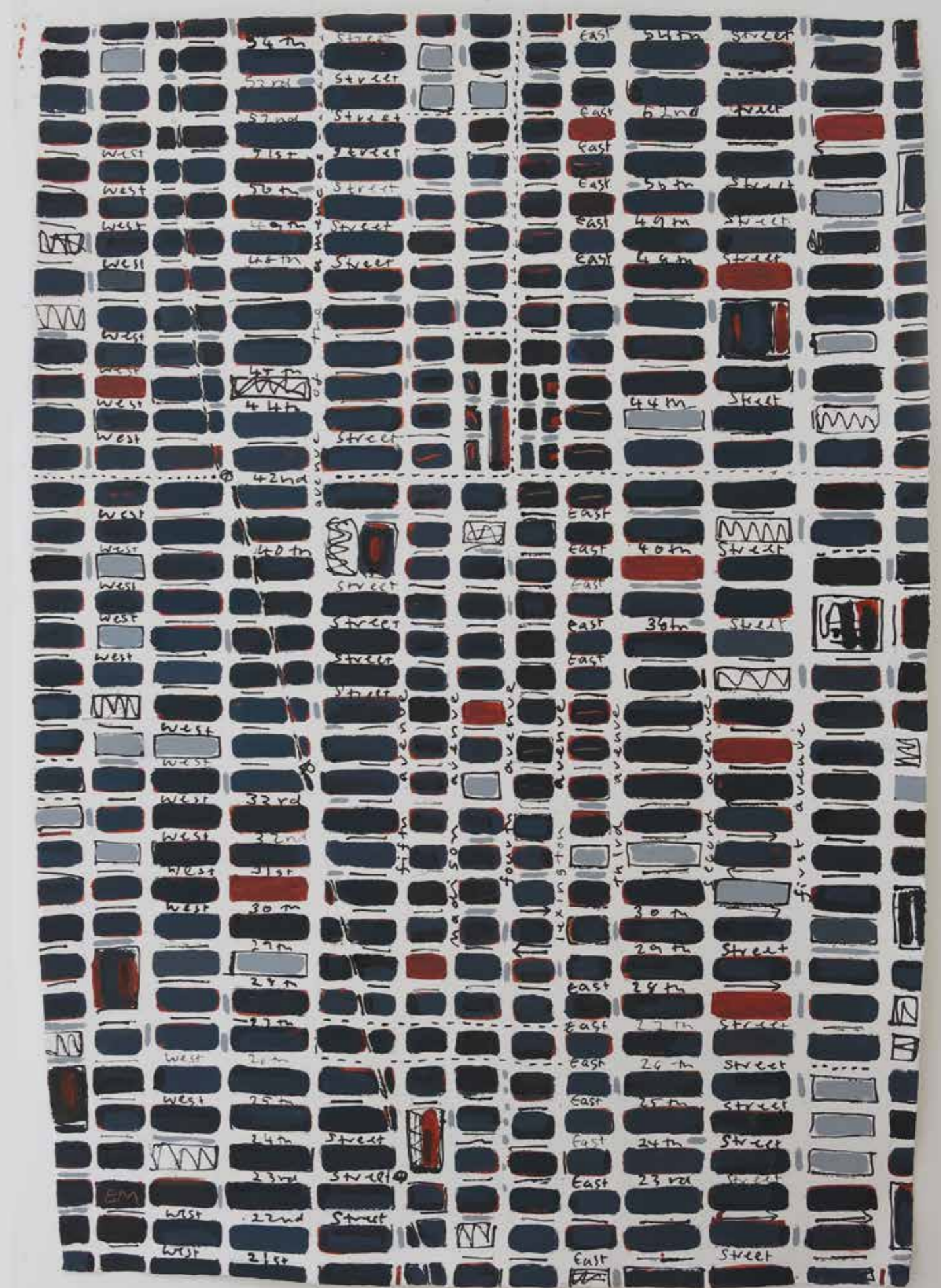


Below and opposite *Orange and Pink London* and *Blue Black Midtown*, both 2014, Barbara Macfarlane (Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery). The two paintings show the contrast between the ordered grid of Manhattan and the sinuous chaos of London.



A Steady Pace

Walking in cities can be stressful and exhausting, with traffic lights, street junctions and seething crowds to contend with. But, as **Kim Wilkie** points out, there is a clandestine network of small alleys and narrow pedestrian connections in cities such as London, Venice and even San Francisco, that can offer the walker a peaceful, rhythmical experience of city life; much is being done, too, to enhance the walking experience, improving London's riverside paths and connecting green spaces.

In many ways New York is the ultimate city, with the thrill of the architecture, the energy of the crowds and the sense of metropolitan confidence. But while the city pumps you with adrenalin, the rhythm of walking saps your strength. The grid of streets stops you at every block to wait for traffic. Unless you are in Central Park or on the High Line, you can never gear up to a steady pace. You walk to a form of Morse code - just as you get into your stride you have to halt again. Red lights repeatedly jostle for attention

– 'DON'T WALK' – and while your feet are held fast, your mind cannot wander. There is something profoundly calming about gentle, continuous motion; the rhythm of a train, the rocking of a cradle, the shuffle of a dance. Steady, rhythmic walking proves to be good for your mind as well as your body. Doctors don't just recommend it for preventing coronaries; it seems to keep dementia at bay, too. Meditative walking around cloisters and labyrinths is an intrinsic part of spiritual exercise.

As you walk at a steady pace, you enter a form of trance where problems are transferred to the back of the brain and somehow seem to have resolved themselves by the time you get home.

Despite the apparently chaotic street pattern, London on foot can be surprisingly soothing. It is a city of interconnecting parks, long meandering streets and a watery backbone of river. Occasional slipped discs between the vertebrae are gradually being repaired. The reconfiguration of Hyde Park Corner has joined up the central Royal Parks, from Speakers' Corner to Embankment Gardens. Small incremental links along the Thames now make it possible to walk absent-mindedly along the south bank, from Vauxhall to Shad Thames.

Bit by bit the north bank is also improving. Small sections of riverside path that planners demanded as part of consents in the 1990s – and at the time looked like isolated irrelevancies – are finally linking together to make a proper walk. The path running between the Tower of London and Temple begins to make sense at last. There is still the odd gap, such as Lower Thames Street, but the recent link under London Bridge leading to the new Hanseatic Walk shepherd you gently westwards. Even the active wharf beside Cousin Lane protects pedestrians and allows them passage beside the water. And little by little there are dedicated pedestrian bridges across the river. The Charing Cross Bridge pedestrian walks were followed by the Millennium Bridge, and now a new Nine Elms Bridge is planned.

As well as being good for individual sanity, a walkable city may also be the route back to conversation. While the French whisper confidences head to head across coffee cups, or the Americans side by side at a bar, the British bare their souls striding out, looking fixedly forward without eye contact. Thames paths, park strolls and High-Line saunters may help to get us talking, exchanging ideas and sharing thoughts rather than rushing past one



Main picture and near right On Shad Thames (detail), 2014, photograph by Garry Knight, flickr.com/photos/garryknight; Millennium Bridge, 2012, photograph by Daily Sublime, flickr.com/photos/dailysublime.



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Opposite *London Walking*, an idea to change the perceptions of walking in London, 2000, by Kim Wilkie.

LONDON WALKING  Kim Wilkie



another as if everyone else were invisible.

Much attention has been given to walking as an effective way of navigating cities, and as the best route from home to work or home to school. That is all excellent and makes cities more civilised places to live. But it misses a further dimension: walking to think and walking for sanity. Computer analysis of urban layouts tends to prioritise efficiency over sanity. In London, Oxford Street comes up as the principal pedestrian thoroughfare of the capital; the lemming route to madness. Many of us would take endless detours to avoid Oxford Street. The quality of the walking can be more important than the speed, and a lot less bruising. Small alleys and narrow pedestrian connections between buildings become part of a clandestine network – short cuts that are cool and quiet and make the city feel like a labyrinth, secret to the walker who discovers the route. The discovery is an important part of converting the city into somewhere personal and manageable; a place where you feel in control, a sense of belonging and almost ownership. The passages through the Inns of Court and St James's are lovely examples. They speak of ancient plot lines, rights of feet and burrows. Medieval cities are rich in these routes. Paris, Rome and of course Venice have a raku of fine fractures through their urban blocks that makes for wonderful walking. Even Berkeley in the San Francisco Bay Area has an alternative network of stepped alleys between the houses that lead up to the hills, avoiding the road switchbacks.

Temporary walks give a further dimension. Special road closures, such as the Mall on Sundays or the Victoria Embankment for demonstrations, flip the city from a place for cars to one for people. There is a particular thrill of taking possession of usually forbidden space. The beaches that appear in the Thames at low tide are great meditative walks that come and go with a rhythm, thankfully largely beyond the control of the metropolis.

For your mind really to be released to wander on a good urban walk, you also need a clear and obvious sense of direction, provided by beacon landmarks such as tall buildings or a river. Relatively low-rise cities with occasional tall buildings work really well for orientation. Centre Point acts like a lighthouse, guiding you through Mayfair and Soho without having to navigate the deadly rapids of Oxford Street. Once the city becomes a canyon of skyscrapers, the distant beacon can no longer be seen. Being able to improvise your way across the metropolis is key to feeling familiar and comfortable. The London tube map is a masterpiece of clarity and offers a ready

mental map of the city. It is only when you emerge from underground – like a meerkat out of its hole – that the panic starts. Compasses set into the pavement at each tube exit would be a real help; at least then you would know which way up to hold the map. The power and clarity of the tube map may, however, be responsible for encouraging people to scurry underground rather than walk. A similar map of walks may help people to form a surface mental map of the city and feel safer orientating themselves around the twisting streets; an On the Ground map – as opposed to Underground or Overground maps. The lines of the parks, the river and the principal London squares could help to give a fresh sense of the layout of the capital for pedestrians.

It is interesting how much of the South Bank path is pretty basic and how little that matters. The walkways are not always particularly elegant or beautifully garnished, but if you can saunter at a steady pace and look out over the river, the expense of the detailing is less important. The freedom of movement, without fighting traffic or having to stop and start, gives the pleasure. In some ways, the more rudimentary and straightforward the link, the better. As funds become available, they should concentrate on forging more connections ahead of gilding the finishes of existing paths. The route past Temple tube station and along to Whitehall is crying out for simple connections. The most transforming investment has probably been in the footways under the Thames bridges. Lighting, ceramic panels and materials that reassure make a big difference and keep the urine away. The New York High Line is beautifully designed and very expensively detailed. This undoubtedly brings much delight and a valuable sense of care and safety. But perhaps the greatest achievement is the ability suddenly to rise above the traffic and float across the grid with vistas out to the Hudson and up to the skyline. The effect is so impressive that people are drawn to the tiered seating that looks down – from a pigeon's perspective – on the maelstrom of traffic beneath. The ability to be close to activity and watch without fear or turbulence is magnetic.

Our democratic society has become so used to ranking things by numbers that places tend to be rated by the quantity of people that use them. Solitude is not highly esteemed. The moments when you can be alone – on a temporary beach at low tide in the river, or adrift in your head as you stroll uninterrupted by red lights – are harder to value and given less weight. Yet it is these moments of peace in the seethe of the city that keep madness at bay and make it possible to cope with the crowd.