

Trader Tales at Deptford Lounge

Written by Anita Strasser and published on [StreetSigns](#), April 2024



Detail of Trader Tales exhibition at Deptford Lounge, showing Anita Strasser's images. Photo: Anita Strasser.

I was recently invited to exhibit and talk about my Deptford work in [Deptford Lounge](#), the local library. Some of the library staff, who also have an arts background, had just made a film about Deptford market called [Trader Tales](#) and wanted to show it together with my Deptford photographs. They also invited other artists to respond to an open call to showcase their Deptford-inspired work. The idea behind making and screening the film and having an exhibition in the library was, on one hand, to record, share and celebrate the stories of local traders and, on the other hand, to build stronger connections between the library and local residents. Although the library building itself is very visible and located only a few metres off the High Street, many people still do not know that this building, which is adjacent to a school, houses a library everyone can access.

In line with the film, I chose to exhibit my project on Deptford shopkeepers made between 2009 and 2011. This was a photography and storytelling project I made just after I had moved to Deptford in 2009. I wanted to meet people in my new neighbourhood and learn about the area. And what better way for a photographer and storyteller to do that than to go out and speak to people directly. I spent about 18 months walking up and down the High Street most afternoons, introducing myself and the project, collecting stories, opinions and memories, taking photographs, returning with photographs and collecting more stories while also reading published texts to follow up on some stories/historical information I'd heard. At the end, I put all the work into a little book called [Deptford High Street](#) (2011) (now out of print but [viewable online](#)) and the work has been published in magazines and exhibited in local spaces: St Nick's Church, The Greenwich Gallery, MMX Gallery and Deptford Lounge in 2014 and now again in 2024. Each time I returned to the shops, informing people where their images were to be shown, inviting them to the shows and giving them copies of magazine pages and spare prints. The whole purpose of the project was to form lasting relationships with people and place, and returning regularly with this information and exhibiting the work locally contributed to that. By revisiting, I also found that some photographs have taken on a life of their own, seeing them enlarged, framed and hung in various shops, potentially triggering conversations between other people in my absence.



At Manze's Pie & Mash Shop (left) and Peter & Joan's (shop) (right) in 2010. Photos: Anita Strasser.

Regarding the recent exhibition in Deptford Lounge, shopkeepers told me that many people came in to tell them their photo was on display at the library. Mounting the photos double-sided so that the images faced both ways – into the library and out of the library windows – also meant people didn't even have to go into the library to see the images, making the images accessible to more people. During the exhibition it was wonderful to watch people recognising traders in the images, sharing their own stories and memories of them, their shops and the High Street and reminiscing about the time period in which the images were taken, particularly since a lot of shops have closed since then.



Exhibition images facing outwards. Photos: Anita Strasser

Giving a talk as part of the exhibition made me think more about the connection between this project and my more recent research project called [Deptford is Changing](#) (Strasser, 2020). This

project focused largely on stories of gentrification-induced displacement, including the spatial and emotional displacement of local residents, communities and shopkeepers through contemporary forms of urban regeneration. Thus, it engaged with the two major themes of the first project: community and the impending changes from regeneration. Many people had highlighted the ‘close-knit community’ character of Deptford while fearing that regeneration underpinned by profit-driven property development would have detrimental effects on local communities, including shopkeepers. Although it is all too easy to romanticise ‘community’ and disparage ‘regeneration’, my research did provide plenty of evidence that Deptford is home to many community groups offering spaces of belonging, social solidarity and validation, and that the current form of state-led urban restructuring does have detrimental effects on many such groups including shopkeepers. I started looking at how many of the shops I photographed between 2009 and 2011 have disappeared. It turned out to be more than half. Although the reasons include retirement, health or other personal issues, outdated wares or lack of profit, they also involve increased and unaffordable rents triggered by the processes of regeneration/gentrification. Often it is a combination of these factors.

In my talk at the library, I told the story of Deptford Motor Parts which had to shut its doors around the time of the London Olympics after 38 years on the High Street. Selling old-fashioned motor parts in times of a technically advancing automobile industry, the shop had been able to tick along due to a lower rent. However, when the rent suddenly doubled, the shop was forced to shut its doors. I also told the story of [Goddard’s Pie & Mash shop shutting down in 2019 after 128 years in Deptford](#) (Strasser, 2020, pp.112-115). Located on council premises with a lower rent, they were also able to tick along with fewer customers than in the past. But when the building was in desperate need of repair, Goddard’s was unable to pay for this and so the licence wasn’t renewed. The [last day of trading](#) (Strasser, 2020, pp.115-117) was an event to remember, with many people travelling in from all sorts of areas to have their beloved Goddard’s pie and mash one last time. Pie & Mash shops have slowly been closing in London, [moving out to other areas such as Essex](#) or winding down completely. George from [Manze’s Pie & Mash on Deptford High Street has also announced its closure](#) in March 2025 as he is due to retire. Thankfully the building and its interior are now [Grade II listed](#) so something will remain of this iconic place.



Deptford Motor Parts with business owner Balbir in 2009. Photos: Anita Strasser.

However, it isn’t just specialist or long-standing shops that are closing. Also newer businesses run by young entrepreneurs (e.g. bars and restaurants), often perceived as complicit in gentrification and displacement, are subject to the forces of displacement triggered by current forms of urban change. Businesses in the railway arches at Deptford Market Yard (DMY) – a space locally seen by many as the

driver of gentrification in Deptford – [have also come and gone since DMY opened in 2016](#). Attracted by the initially “affordable” rents, entrepreneurs set up shop in the hope of establishing a customer base. While some shut their doors again soon after due to not getting the expected footfall, some developed into thriving businesses. [However, a 30% rent increase in 2022, alongside increased service charges, high inflation rates and energy prices, also forced some of these businesses to rethink their future at DMY](#). Another example is businesses in other railway arches in Deptford and across London now owned by US private equity firm Blackstone and property investor Telereal Trillium. [Some tenants are facing rent increases of more than 100%, forcing many to close](#). On top of that, a few Deptford tenants have told me that with a backlog of rent reviews, some of the rent increases are backdated, lumping businesses with bills they simply cannot afford. So whilst some of these businesses might have unwittingly contributed to gentrifying Deptford, they are now being priced out themselves.

Another reason why thriving businesses might have to shut shop is estate regeneration, where whole council estates including homes and shop premises are demolished to make way for new, mostly private and thus more expensive developments. An example of a council estate facing demolition is the [Achilles Street Area in New Cross with 85 homes and a number of shops on New Cross Parade](#). I worked extensively with these shopkeepers (and residents), telling of their experiences of impending displacement and living with an uncertain future (Strasser, 2020, pp. 215-229). I told of [Marco, a young man running a launderette](#) who doesn't expect to have the capital to set up again after redevelopment, and of [Teyfik, a father of four daughters](#) who had hoped to send them to university but now lives in limbo, unable to make plans. In the current regime of urban restructuring it seems almost impossible for small business owners to build a secure future no matter how hard one works. As one owner of a local thriving café has recently told me: “I wish I could just have 6 months without problems, just to give me a break from constant worry.”



Marco with a customer at the Launderette on New Cross Parade in 2019. Photo: Anita Strasser.

Bearing all this in mind, it seems more important than ever to bring into visibility and celebrate the traders who are trying to survive in this difficult climate. So I ended my talk by sharing some stories of shops which have managed to stay afloat through their inventiveness, community help and changes in product demand. I told the story of Alec and Kev from The Waiting Room, a café which has survived for the past 13 years despite lack of funds, problems with their old premises and landlord and many other obstacles, and because of Alec and Kev's inventiveness, connection to and help from local residents and the help of their new landlord. Their story is one of struggle and hardship but also of creativity, community and belonging. It is worth reading [the full story](#) to understand just how precarious their existence is.

I spoke of [Muhammad from Roots Fruit & Veg](#) and Halal Butchers who had a meeting with the landlord about the rent on the day I photographed him in 2019, making him feel uncertain about the future of Roots Fruit & Veg. In 2010 he had also told me that Halal Butcher's wasn't going well, lacking the number of customers it had in the 1990s. Muhammad has sadly passed away recently so I don't know the details, but both shops seem to be currently thriving with Halal Butcher's having diversified its product range and attracting more customers again, even forming a regular queue outside. A haberdashery/household shop on the High Street has managed to survive by branching out into selling wares online, keeping afloat during the COVID-19 pandemic. And although business could be better, with wool coming back into fashion they are now experiencing greater footfall again so that they are slowly reducing their online sales. And finally, I spoke of a DIY shop which was going to close its doors at the end of 2023, slowly selling off its stock and winding down its business. However, through some weird and wonderful circumstances and changes in product demand, the shop has remained open and been restocked to full capacity.



Muhammad in Roots Fruit & Veg in 2019, under a photograph I took of his relatives in the same shop in 2010. Photo: Anita Strasser.

In the end, I also shared some entertaining market stories people had told me ([some of which can be read online](#)). It was important to end the talk on a positive, light and hopeful note. So much of what we hear and experience is worrying and anxiety-inducing. We then also asked the audience to share their own stories and memories of the High Street and market. Although stories can be nostalgic and embellished, narrating the stable past is often a comforting activity in times of constant change, uncertainty and crisis. That's why I really liked the whole *Trader Tales* project: it tried to celebrate something positive amidst continual struggles, using art, creativity and a local community space to bring people together and engage in a shared dialogue.

References:

Strasser, A. (2011) Deptford High Street. London: self-published. Available also online: [Deptford High Street \(yumpu.com\)](#).

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