

# SUBTERRANEAN LONDON

CRACKING THE CAPITAL



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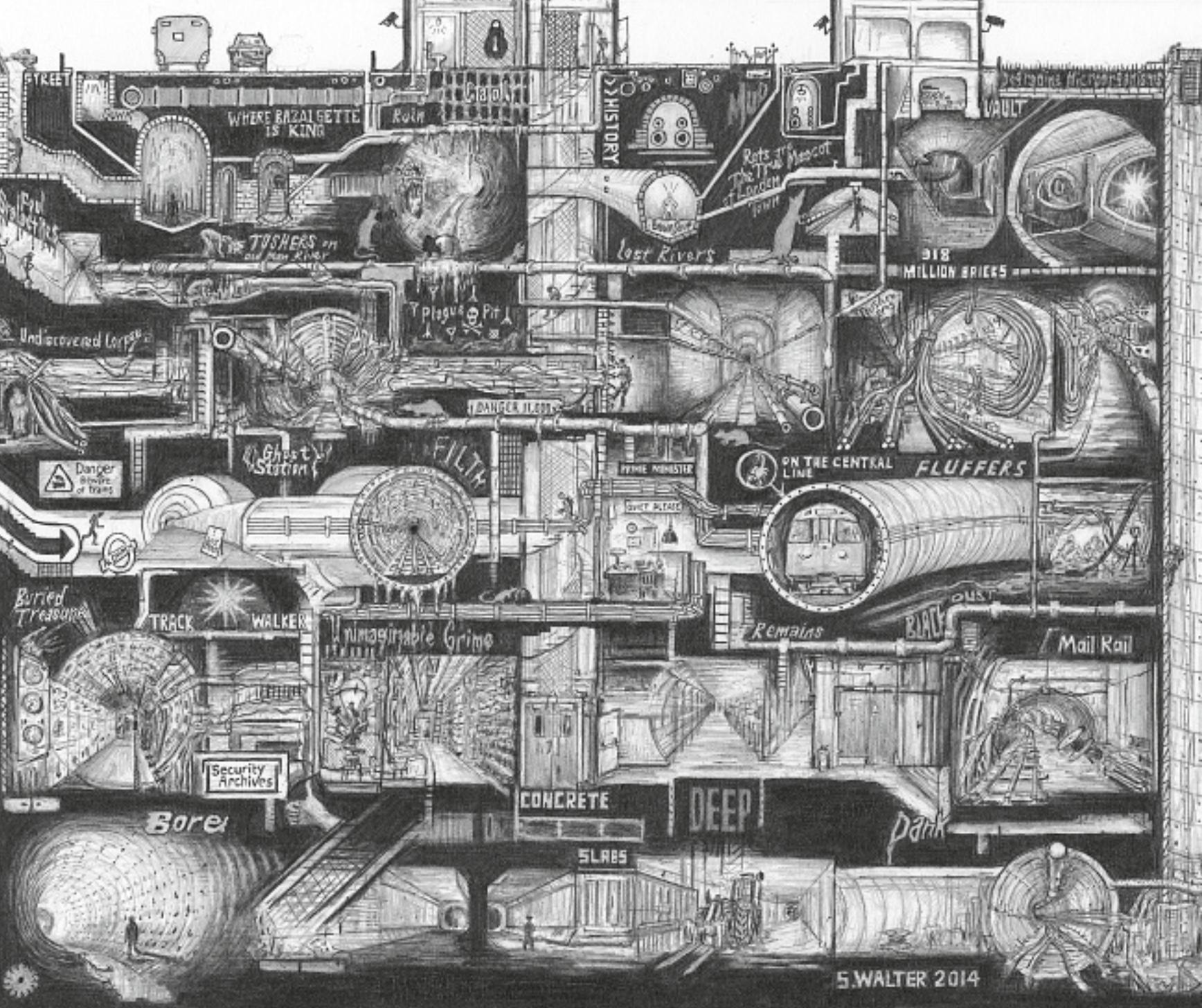
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**PRESTEL**

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*Dedicated to Matthew Power (1974–2014),  
a fellow explorer who had a way with words.*



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# FOREWORD

I like to go up and I like to go down as well. I don't have either the physical courage or the devil-may-care brio of these place hackers, but I've been wandering around London, off-piste, for many years now. As a child in the north London suburbs I used to follow the long conduit the Mutton Brook took under the North Circular Road. Leaping from one chunk of masonry to the next islet of rubbish, listening to the continuous susurrant of the traffic overhead, it was I who was transported. To be both in the city and yet outside of its established parameters is to experience a liberation from workaday concerns that are, almost always, shaped by wider economic imperatives. Our movements around the city are prescribed for us: we fit in, either willingly or unconsciously, with the great population flows as they flush through the tube system and the roadways. In our dreams we may all be anarchists, but in our actions, for the vast majority of the time, we're the most rigid of conformists.

A few years ago a young anthropologist friend who had the right key took me down a manhole in Brixton Water Lane and we walked for a mile or so through Bazalgette's sewer system to Clapham North. This was, I thought, the true chthonic underworld of London – its intense odour of comingled detergent and excrement a bizarrely appropriate crudescence of the city's superficial preoccupations: the denial of the bodily, and the reduction of its inhabitants to the status of soulless economic units. I spent at most an hour underground, but it was

long enough to be gripped by the strange architecture of the sewer system: its ironwork festooned with a dense mucilage of old toilet paper, its junctures echoic halls of coursing bath- and dish-water.

The locations that these explorers sought out in the course of producing these entrancing images are often dangerous to reach. The obstacles are physical, psychic and most importantly political. The contemporary city demands of us that we make obeisance to its superficial character – that we don't dig too deep. And the penalties for those who dare to enter the labyrinth can be severe. To use Debord's formulation: the Spectacle, while not confined solely to the visual, nonetheless requires a certain very restricted form of regard. To look under London is to catch the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street stepping out of her soiled underwear.

In his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1984) Debord wrote this: 'This perfect democracy fabricates its own inconceivable enemy, terrorism. It wants, actually, to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results. The history of terrorism is written by the State and it is thus instructive. The spectating populations must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else seems rather acceptable, in any case more rational and democratic.' The inaccessibility of London's netherworld is a crucial component in our being convinced that 'everything

else seems rather acceptable': the punitive class-cleansing currently being enacted in London's so-called housing policy; the cannibalisation of the built environment by the ingurgitation of speculative transnational capital flows; the elevation of grand and useless projects such as the Olympics to the status of 'sustainable' shibboleths – all this rests on a bedrock of carefully willed ignorance about what lies beneath.

In this book we are shown what we're not meant to see, and for that reason this text and its accompanying images have had to be wrested from the jaws of the state and its corporate allies by men and women who are, perforce, branded as irresponsible abettors of precisely that shadowy terrorism the Spectacle requires for its own perpetuation.

Do not be deceived: read the book – open the manhole.

**WILL SELF**  
LONDON, 2014

*Will Self is a London-based journalist and the author of nine novels. His most recent book, Umbrella, was published in April 2013.*

# INTRODUCTION

This book is an assemblage of material from 12 photographers infatuated with subterranean spaces. Over the course of five years, we infiltrated, by cover of night, underground layers of London, to capture the city's hidden depths. The tales of adventure and discovery behind those explorations are the thing of London legend, stories so lavish, so multiple, that we felt only imagery could render and relay the affective force of the experiences appropriately. What you now hold is the outcome of those efforts: the most comprehensive photographic account of subterranean London ever produced – every single photo taken without permission from anyone.

Fascination with the underground has always been fraught with fear. Recalling iconography connected to the River Styx, the Mayan Xibalba or the underworld in Dante's *Inferno*, the subterranean imaginary has long been associated with malice, disease, poverty, sin and death. People worked through these subterranean anxieties in two characteristic ways – by either fleeing from them or facing them. Londoners, in classic colonial style, chose to stand their ground, leading a 19th century secular assault on the seemingly malevolent forces of subterranea through stanch confidence in the vanquishing power of industrial technology. Citizens of this city, as a result, have always had a particularly poignant – and at times peculiar – fascination with underground spaces.

Fifteen decades have now passed since Sir Joseph Bazalgette, chief engineer of London's Metropolitan

Board of Works, broke ground on the current London sewer system, just a few years before the world's first underground railway began to be dug out between Paddington and King's Cross. It was even further back

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in time when Marc Isambard Brunel, a French-born engineer, developed the tunnelling shield to burrow under the Thames, a technology that would transform future excavations ineradicably. Victorians, in clear admiration, toured newly constructed sewers, viaducts, tunnels and pumping stations, celebrating industrial urban development with utopian goggles on. Since then, countless subterranean spaces all over the world have been excavated using similar techniques. The sub-urban material infrastructures upon which our lives above now rely – electricity, water, gas, waste and data – passed inevitably from ubiquity to inaccessibility, a process of remythologisation of the

underground. The goal of this book, in that context, is not to 'reconquer' these places or take them back from those forces that seek to keep them hidden, but to make transparent the emotional qualities of the underground that have caused such a contested, riven and complicated relationship to transpire. In short, we simply seek to add new elements to the mythological amalgam, yet another blip in a long history of subterranean happenings.

Today, if one were to take a large, hot knife and slide it through London, insert thumbs, and slowly peel it apart into two halves, it would become clear that the city exceeds its horizontal expanse in profile. Below us, hidden rivers and sewers, cable conduits, road and utility tunnels, train tubes, deep shelters and government citadels are hemmed in by disused, dysfunctional and forgotten features. Underneath this snarl, thousand-tonne tunnel-boring machines with names like 'Phyllis' and 'Sophia', Brunel's mutant offspring, are ripping through forty-metre-deep bedrock, inches at a time. While we sought to explore each of these layers in turn, we found difficulty in trying to piece together the scale of our spatial discoveries, to connect the shutter clicks outside the frame. Until we met Stephen Walter.

Stephen is an obsessive cartographer who, in 2012, was compelled to expel every memory he had of London subterranea onto a two-metre-wide piece of parchment. He then began an intensive period of research about other underground phenomena to pack into every inch

of empty space on the map that led him, inexorably, to us. We could not imagine a better partner to have on this journey into the depths of the dug world. Like us, Stephen is a rogue archaeologist, excavating the past, present and future of the most vertical city on the planet on his own terms. Each of the five sections of this book will open with a cross-section drawing from Stephen, dredged from our mutual admiration for the underground.

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The acts involved in collecting, thinking through and even publishing this collection have been equally liberating and harrowing. Painfully, there are also at least another six people whose work is notably absent. They chose not to contribute for fear of the response of authorities,