

## *AKC Essay Competition - Coversheet*

- Complete all sections of this form and ensure it is the first page of the document you submit (either copy and paste this page into the front of your work, or begin your work on subsequent pages of this form).
- **DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME ON YOUR WORK.**
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Student ID number (e.g. 1712345) <b>NOT your K number</b>	
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Degree Programme (where applicable)	English BA
Department (where applicable)	Arts and Humanities
AKC Year (1, 2 or 3):	3

Essay question number:	1
Essay Title:	Beigel Bake: The cyclical ecology of London and its inhabitants.
Deadline:	<b>23:59, Sunday 26 April 2020</b>
Date Submitted:	26/04/2020
Word Count (max 1500 words):	1496

**DECLARATION BY STUDENT**

By submitting this essay, I declare the following:

This assignment is entirely my own work. Quotations from secondary literature are indicated by the use of inverted commas around ALL such quotations AND by reference in the text or notes to the author concerned.

ALL primary and secondary literature used in this piece of work is indicated in the bibliography placed at the end, and dependence upon ANY source used is indicated at the appropriate point in the text.

I confirm that no sources have been used other than those stated.

**I understand what is meant by plagiarism, including self-plagiarism.**

**I understand that plagiarism is a serious academic offence that will result in disciplinary action being taken and may result in my withdrawal from the AKC programme.**

**I understand that essays which do not include references and a bibliography will not be read.**

**My word count is accurately stated above and I understand that essays which are more than 10% over the word limit may not be considered by the AKC Steering Committee.**

The *Inside London* AKC series situated itself in the nexus of relationships between London's architecture and its population. Brick Lane's infamous Beigel Bake offers us a newly reciprocal model of discourse. The 24hr Jewish bakery, owned and managed by brothers Asher and Sammy Cohen, has become a minor cultural landmark in East London since its establishment in 1974. This is a site which revives the city's landscape in the idiom of ecology; a dialogue between space and lived experience, shared cultures, and unlikely encounters. This essay will argue that Beigel Bake would make a wonderful tenth building for the AKC series because it symbolises that although the city has been inscribed with layers of human meaning, in turn London's architecture *produces* meaning, outlining a model of symbiosis between the city and its people.

In the lecture on *Building an Inclusive Whitechapel*, we saw how buildings become palimpsestic devices to register and preserve the history of community into the urban landscape. Similarly, Beigel Bake today can be understood through the narrative of transit which constitutes its roots. Maria Balinska details how "For many East European Jews, Britain was meant to be a staging post on the way to America, but thousands of them decided not to embark for the second leg of the journey. Most of these refugees settled in the 'sordid and shifty poverty' of London's East End".<sup>1</sup> The dispersing motion of diaspora staked itself in the volatility of Britain's capital. Even within this historical narrative of flux, there existed a tension between pride in one's roots, and assimilation to the new. Balinska notes how "From the early twentieth century, Jewish community leaders in Britain had been intent on passing on 'Anglo values' to the newly arrived Yiddish speakers from Eastern Europe, in 'ironing out', as the Jewish Chronicle put it, 'the ghetto bend'".<sup>2</sup> Yet, Beigel Bake not only stakes itself in Polish-Jewish cuisine, but insists upon the original spelling of the word. Although set up in the 70s, this bakery represents a tradition of cultural pride which stretches back through history, symbolically claiming their 'ghetto bend' in the circular bagel.

Today, it produces approximately 7000 bagels each day, all made in-house, which should give one an indication of the sheer amount of customers served daily (if the line of people usually waiting outside to be served doesn't do so already). Indeed, *The Jewish Chronicle* describes how "Walking around Brick Lane today, one catches little more than shadows of what was once the epicentre of Anglo-Jewry: a faded menorah grafted on a wall, a decaying mezuzah in a doorpost, and the bagel shops at the top of the road, last outpost of a swift-moving Yiddish empire".<sup>3</sup> Instead, Brick Lane today is filled with painfully cool clothing stores, vegan cafes, and night clubs. So, how has a traditional bakery "selling the same product" for so many years in an admittedly "stripped-back environment" survived the

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Balinska, *The Bagel: The Surprising History of a Modest Bread*, (Connecticut, Yale University Press, 2008), p.187.

<sup>2</sup> Balinska, p. 187.

<sup>3</sup> Josh Glancy, 'Lost in Brick Lane's hipster shadows', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 15 January 2015 < <https://www.thejc.com/lifestyle/features/lost-in-brick-lane-s-hipster-shadows-1.64626> > [accessed 10 April 2020].

wave of gentrification which has put many such places out of business in the East End?<sup>4</sup> Something has to be said for the hipster fetishization of authenticity, which in many ways has secured Beigel Bake's future with subsequent generations. Moreover, Neil Smith described gentrification as the "reinvestment of capital at the urban centre, which is designed to produce space for a more affluent class of people than currently occupies that space".<sup>5</sup> Yet in Beigel Bake's incorporation of competitive price points and quick-high quality food alongside its cult status and social-media-worthy iconic shopfront, it counts among its customers both the people who previously dominated Brick Lane, and this 'more affluent class of people'.

However, this broad appeal has implications beyond its mere survival. Beigel Bake doesn't just straddle the market in an abstract sense, but recuperates the disparate London population into 'Londoners'. Balinska describes Beigel Bake in terms of the people who frequent it, noting that it is "among the few vestiges of the area's Jewish past, and [has] become something of an institution, frequented by night-shift workers, bleary-eyed clubbers and movie stars". The bakery is both a dynamic monument to Jewish culture and a site of collision between social groups who wouldn't normally interact with one another. While Beigel Bake is a material and static piece of architecture, by studying its customers we shift to an understanding of this site as one comprised of people rather than just existing around them. Understandings of London during the Modern period were underwritten by the figure of the flaneur, the (usually male) drifting urban stroller who observed the city as spectacle while maintaining a comfortable distance. Brick Lane's bakery forbids us to conceive of the subject in London as a neutral observer; they are always already both producing and a product of their environment. As such, we should understand this building is at once active and passive. It is a portal which transports one to the Jewish roots of the East End, when streets signs were in Yiddish and vintage clothes stores were Kosher butchers and restaurants. At the same time, it is a constant facilitator of new encounters; taxi-drivers bump into celebrities, suited city-workers mingle with tourists, Brick Lane's older Jewish population meet the newer Bangladeshi community.

Bearing in mind these dual narratives of history and encounter, Balinska refers us back to "the well-established East End ritual of buying a bagel from the basket of a pedlar after attending synagogue".<sup>6</sup> Beigel Bake was conveniently situated on the same road as a synagogue, which is now Brick Lane Mosque, mentioned in AKC's second Spring lecture. Updating this tableau of traditional Jewish East London, perhaps one might now buy a bagel after attending the Mosque. In reading Brick Lane through the lens of tradition in which Beigel Bake is entrenched, the landscape becomes present to us as more than a cultural collage. This building becomes the condition of possibility for active cultural interaction and

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Goldberg, 'How the humble Beigel became the great leveller', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 12 November 2015 < <https://www.thejc.com/culture/features/how-the-humble-beigel-became-the-great-leveller-1.62417> > [accessed 11 April 2020].

<sup>5</sup> Neil Smith, "Gentrification," in *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, ed. R. J. Johnson, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt, and Michael Watt (London: Blackwell, 2000), p. 294.

<sup>6</sup> Balinska, p. 187

production, projecting a vision of the urban space in which buildings retexture the space that they inhabit into new patterns of human relationality.

So, more than simply existing as a microcosm of the city's people, Beigel Bake posits a model by which to understand the agency of the urban environment in and of itself. Buildings can make their mark upon people in the same way that generations of Londoners have made their mark on the city. Photographer Jonathan Goldberg addressed Beigel Bake's capacity as a 'great leveller', stating that "no place better shows off the rich diversity of life in the metropolis today...All are served equally". He depicts how the bakery performs as a common denominator, an ephemeral socio-economic readjustment. In the 'stripped back' space of the bakery, one's social status too is 'stripped back' and life is re-orientated along a democratic axis. However briefly, this bakery organises Londoners horizontally by highlighting their shared characteristics as customers.

Beigel Bake thus gives us something more than Jewish cuisine and photos for Instagram. Tarquin Hall's *Salaam Brick Lane* describes a café with the slogan "Come Hungry, Leave Edgy"<sup>7</sup>. While this immediately connotes a pretention associated with the East London hipsters, it essentially describes a food industry predicated upon the selling of something *more*, be it culture, coolness, experience. The silent promise of places like Beigel Bake is that the bilateral transaction resonates beyond the exchange of money for food. This becomes a more profound exchange between subject and space, human and building, population and city. Just as the circular beigel holds significance within Jewish tradition for its rich symbolism of life cycles, it is also the image of cyclical mutualism between London and Londoners which we can extrapolate from Beigel Bake.

However, in reality the beauty of studying Beigel Bake as part of this AKC series would be precisely its ordinariness. The Jewish bakery is a prototype for new ways of thinking the city, yet London is filled with other sites just like it, an architectural shorthand for new encounter and cultural exchange. Now, rather than attempting to assume the position of the flaneur and perpetuate the expectation of privilege in which it is saturated, we experience an intimacy with the urban space. This is a city which we produce, but which produces us in turn. In swapping a shallow unilateral model of the urban space, the circular 'Beigel' model emphasises our intrinsic responsibility, agency, and relationality as people, subjects, and communities within the City of London.

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<sup>7</sup> Tarquin Hall, *Salaam Brick Lane: A Year in the New East End* (London, John Murray, 2005).

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