Charrette aae

# William Blake's "London" (1794) and Covid-19 London (2020): Discovering spaces for death in the city's history

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ABSTRACT

*This text is on a unique, trans-disciplinary project (Architecture, Literature, Mathematics) which weaves the voices of three academics to associate manifestations of death in William Blake's time with those prevalent in the years of lockdowns (2020-21). It explores spaces traditionally associated with death via a reading of Blake's 'London' (1794). The project, which proposes a methodology with which to access the rich palimpsest of the city, documents a collaborative practice of collective place/text reading that relies on translation as a mode of communication. It explores the visual and visionary dimensions of urban space in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.*

KEYWORDS

*Blake, London, trans-disciplinary, Covid-19, urban poetry,*

LONDON

I wander thro’ each charter’d street,
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro’ midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

*Figure 1*:
William Blake’s ‘London’ (Copy F of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, printed 1794, © Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)

> ‘Mathematical form is Eternal in the Reasoning Memory. Living Form is Eternal Existence. Grecian Mathematic Form. Gothic Living form’

William Blake, ‘On Virgil’ (c. 1820)[1]

### 1. Wandering the Streets of London (1794/2020)

In 2020 Covid-19 and the ensuing lockdowns forced us to radically adjust our relationship with our cities' public spaces as well as with death. Confined to our homes, geographically apart but virtually connected, this project sent us, the three authors, on a journey of discovery, following the poet, painter and printmaker William Blake (1757-1827) across London (the city) through 'London'[2], a poem that comments on living in London in the late eighteenth century. Our project was trans-disciplinary it brought together three academics from Architecture, Literature and Mathematics. This text is a discussion of the urban poetics of London, focusing on the representation of death in the context of two moments of the city's history: the deserted urban centres and temporary mortuaries created by Covid-19 rules (2020) and Blake's multi-media 'London' (1794) (Fig. 1).[2] This poem is both specific in its historic, social and spatial references, and yet it transcends time with its acknowledgement of political responsibility in the management of death. Both project and text on Blake and Covid weave different strands of methodologies to ponder the significance of the disruptive factor *death* in its collaborative practice of collective place/text reading.[3]

Blake's 'London' is in a collection of penetratingly outspoken poems, Songs of Experience (1794), that respond to the political turmoil in the aftermath of the French Revolution (1789), ensuing oppression in Britain and consequences of war.[4] Having identified the cruelties of social evils, such as poverty and suffering, as well as the moral and political corruption of the government and by extension the British people, Blake's tone is one of urgency. Blake wrote 'London' when Britain was at war, the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802), but we found many parallels to today – political conflicts (Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere), social injustice, environmental concerns and violent power struggles among them.

Addressing the impact of the war with France, Blake captures the process of grieving in an extended metaphor. The figurative language from stanza two, 'mind-forged manacles' (l. 5, E27),[2] culminates in the third stanza where Blake coins a metaphor, describing what he can hear and see in his encounter with London: 'And the hapless Soldiers sigh / Runs in blood down Palace walls' (ll. 11-12, E27).[2] With this Blake blames the government (as well as the Church) for their blinkered decisions; he visualises the cost of war as synaesthesia which converts sound into something tangible, but also anchors it in a specific space, the walls of Lambeth Palace, home of the Archbishop of Canterbury. During the pandemic London underwent three lockdowns (2020-2021).[5] As part of the restrictions imposed to control the pandemic, gatherings were banned, shops closed, and citizens encouraged to work from home where possible. As a result, London's city centre became deserted and notably silent, with air and road traffic noise replaced by birdsong. The daily updated graphs charting the facts about the Covid-dead and Covid-infected became the visual image of the invisible virus and the death toll, dominating public media. The graphs, which used predictive modelling to forecast future scenarios, formed

*Figure 2*:
Cross Bone Graveyard with face mask added in remembrance of a Covid-19 victim
(Sophie Ungerer, Summer 2021)

an abstract representation of the pandemic and its advance or retreat, yet were created from specific individual events and tragedies which remained hidden; the loss of human life was translated into numbers. In the UK, these graphs also dictated how we should inhabit urban public space, setting a two-metre distance between pedestrians and limits on interactions between individuals, establishing a link between Mathematics and urban realm. Buzzing city centres turned into silent streets and social spaces between people became perilous ground.

However, the information and knowledge about death, as represented in the graphs, did not and does not protect us. Death remains a deeply personal experience and writing now (2023), reflecting on our collaboration (June 2021 - May 2022), we realise that our project became the means to contemplate how we might navigate the disruptions. Turning to Blake's 'London' was a solution because our conversations about the poem provided us with the opportunity to find solace. While graphs systematise facts to present information, only living systems, like a poem where meaning is elusive, can bridge past, present and future. We eschewed the most technical aspects of poetry analysis (word patterns created by stressed or unstressed syllables) and searched instead for the physical and ephemeral spaces within the poem. We avoided, for example, its arithmetic dimension (counting words, mathematically analysing rhythms and rhyme schemes) to search for links to conceptual mathematical models. This aspect of the project not only underpinned the dialogue between us but was also the go-to reference point for the discussion. Our analysis of the poem remained descriptive and superficial but allowed and encouraged, at the same time, a change in perspective.

*Figure 3*:
What Remains? The former site of the temporary morgue facilities on Wanstead Flats, Newham, from April 2020 until August 2020
(Sophie Ungerer, Summer 2021)[7]

Cities are not only formed by layers of urban fabric, which is constructed, reinvented, removed and rebuilt by different agents and different points in time, but also created through a palimpsest of collective memories, crystallised in metaphors and symbols, as well as narratives that connect motifs of loss and death . London, as any map of the city will confirm, is scattered with cemeteries and churches but also more secular spaces of death, such as the Crossbones Garden of Remembrance for the outcast death,  turning a side street into an urban shrine and thus disrupting habitual occupation (Fig. 2). Until 1853 (i.e. including Blake's time), the site of Crossbones Graveyard in Southwark functioned as a paupers' graveyard. In 1996, the site was reclaimed as a public shrine and garden of remembrance, constantly growing and changing.

By contrast, the temporary morgues set up during the pandemic in 2020, took on a more sombre and practical appearance but have since been dismantled and rewilded. These sites of death have disappeared; except for the photographs that appeared in the media at the time, there is nothing to remember them by (Fig. 3).

Blake was a Londoner. When he created 'London', he lived in Lambeth, 13 Hercules Buildings (1791-1800) on the south bank of the Thames and not far from Lambeth Palace. To re-read as well as experience London through 'London' we would have to follow Blake on his journey through the city.

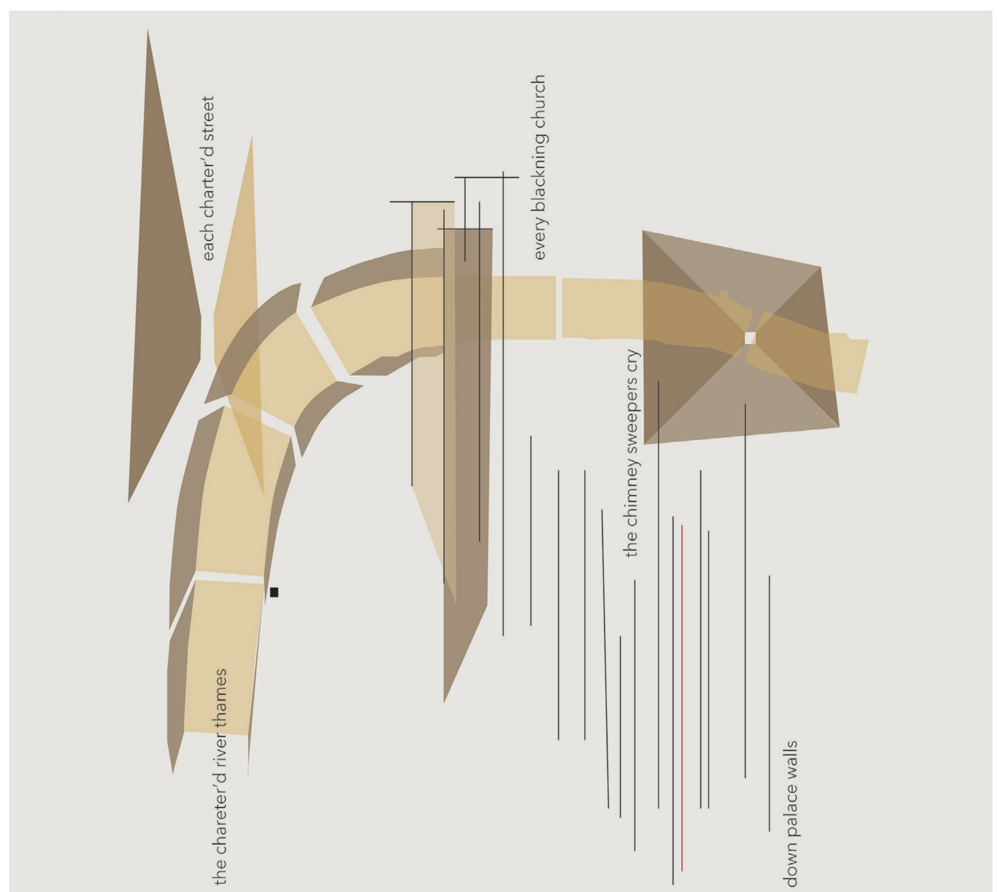



*Figure 4*: Visualising the Spaces within Blake's 'London' (Sophie Ungerer, 2022)

## 2. The Infernal Method: Etching Urban Layers

Blake's 'London' is extraordinary because as a work of literature; it combines a text with an image (Fig. 1). Reading 'London' sets in motion a spiritual process that is located in an experience, guided by a lyrical voice, that sends us, the readers/viewers, back and forth between text and image to transform the real place of London into a visionary experience in 'London'. This process, we felt, was relevant to the engagement with the physical London that was being transformed by the Covid-graphs, the visual representation of the pandemic transforming the inhabitation of tangible urban spaces.

For our project, drawing became a tool to translate the physical places described within the poem into visible spaces (Fig. 4). The urban elements in the poem combine spatial characteristics with social and political events, e.g. the 'charter'd streets'[2] as an urban interior enclosed by houses and social norms, or the palace wall as a symbol of war or death, as well as manifestation of the Church's secular power.

The title of them poem, 'London', refers to a text and an illumination and is an example of Blake's innovative printing technique which required that he drew the design in an acid-resistant substance onto a copper plate and wrote

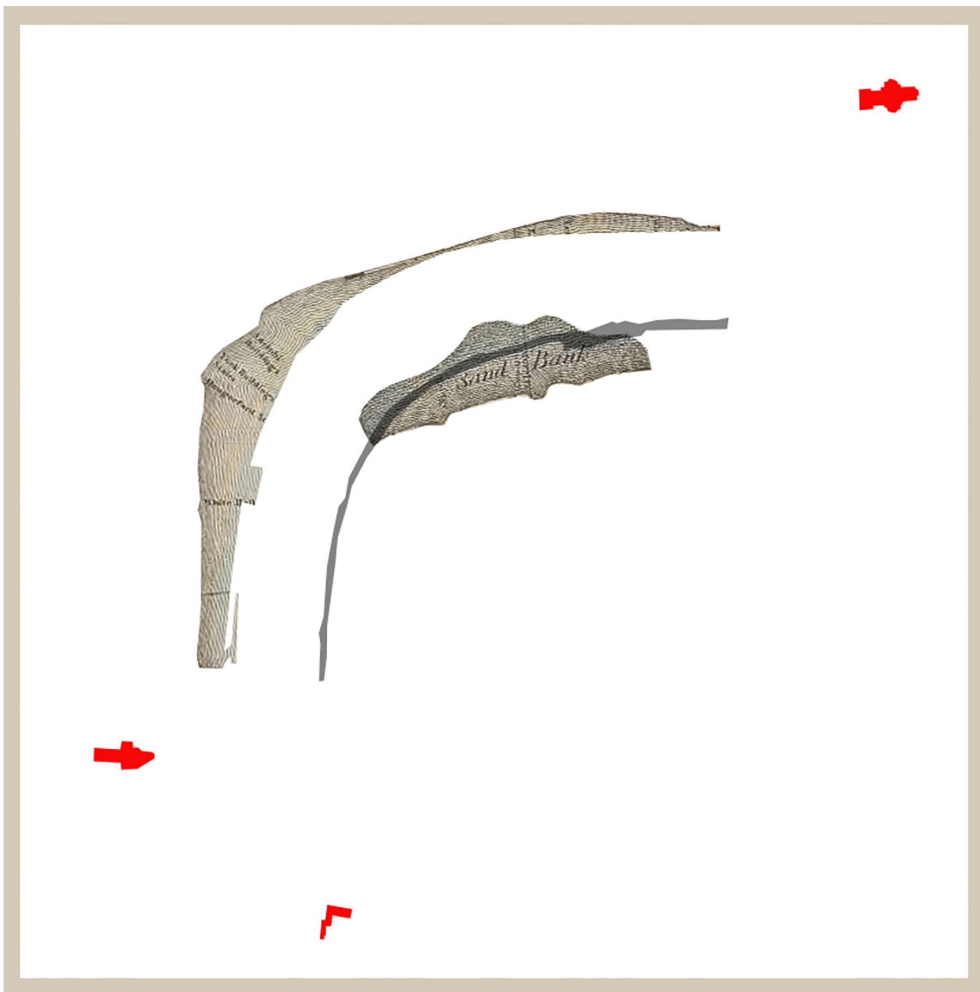


*Figure 5*:
Layers of London: collage created from overlaying maps from 1795 and 2020
(Sophie Ungerer, 2022)

his poetry backwards, before submerging it into an acid bath (aqua fortis and nitric acid). The acid would bite into the copper and eat away at the uncovered spaces, leaving those covered standing up in relief. For the combination of text and image to be successful, Blake had to carefully plan and visualise in his mind what the plate would look like and how it would appear on the page. In another work, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790), he seems to reflect on his creative process, saying that he is 'printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid'(E39). In comparison with a (normal) sheet of paper, Blake says that he constructs the copper plate as a boundary or surface which needed to be broached in order to expose what is normally hidden. This implies that, for Blake, meaning is revealed gradually and as a result of the material qualities of the medium. For our purposes this means that we should consider 'London' not as a polished or edited version of London's history, as we have come to understand it, but as a much rawer and perhaps more truthful representation of death and suffering in London. Blake's printing technique was expensive and did, therefore, only reach a small audience of friends and collectors. However, it allowed him to avoid self-censorship in an age where many were accused of treason, if they were to address the consequences of war openly.

For us, the etching process became a catalyst to explore literal and metaphorical connections between the two historic versions of London. Layering the map of Blake's London with London in 2020, the three key buildings referred to in the poem (St. Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and Lambeth Palace) remain fixed points, highlighted in red (Fig. 5). Though their dominance in the city has become less with the emergence of taller buildings, they remain present, stitching together the city's history across time. What has changed is the Thames, which, although already described by Blake as charter'd, (regulated), is now confined though the Victoria embankment. In the layering of maps and reference points a fault line is revealed, a liminal space of a now-disappeared sandbank, still present as a fluctuating tidal beach of the Thames along the Southbank.

### 3. The Routes of Streets and Rivers – Blake, the Flâneur (1794/2020)

When Blake conceived 'London' (1794), it took several rewrites, edits as well as substantial changes and crossing-outs, for the poem to assume its final form. In 'London', the speaker (Blake) appears to wander aimlessly through the city; he observes and identifies instances of social injustice alongside the general suffering caused by the French Revolutionary Wars abroad as well as political oppression and the clampdown against radical ideas at home:

> I wander thro' each charter'd street,
>
> Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.

And mark in every face I meet

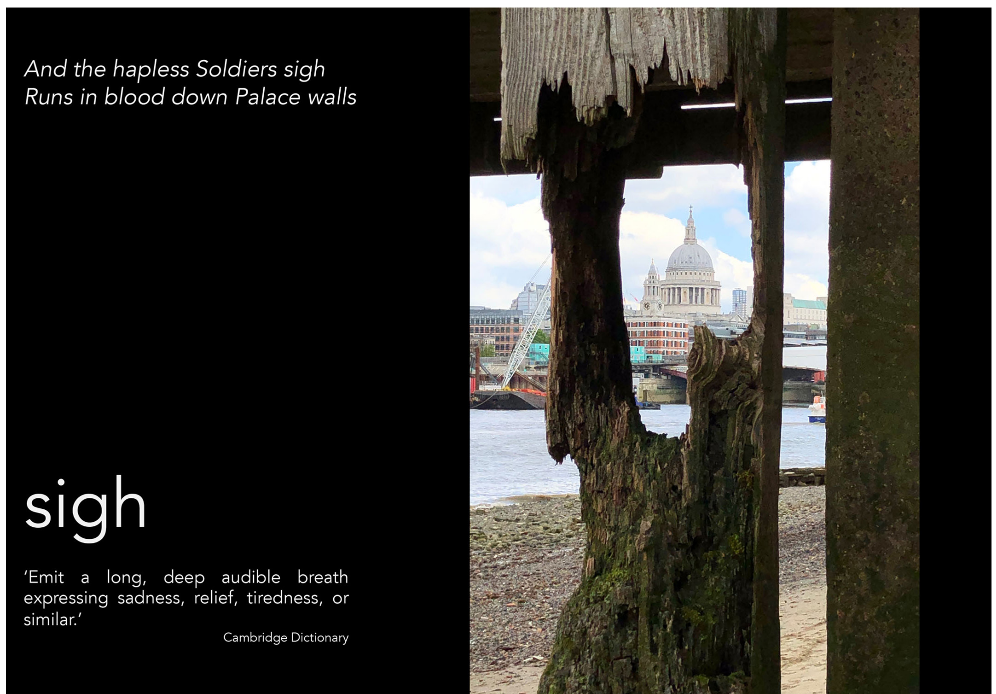
Marks of weakness, marks of woe. (ll. 1-4, E26)[2]

In the opening stanza, the visual language evokes a grid of intersecting streets not just as a means for traffic or circulation but also an urban interior, of chartered (in the sense of framed or restricted) inhabited spaces. To borrow from Walter Benjamin, Blake's speaker is a flâneur observing and documenting urban life: he 'is as much at home among house facades as a citizen is within his four walls.' What remains unanswered in the poem is whether the chartered streets offer order or enclose and restrict the city dwellers.
In our conversations the notion of the developing city or metropolis served as a lens with which to explore Blake's poetic observations: London is transforming in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and the streets of London bear witness to the growth in population, infrastructure and building developments. The words 'wander' and 'flow'[2] in lines 1 and 2 suggest walking aimlessly along and through streets, which create a grid, and determine direction once Blake has added a qualifying adjective: chartered. The word, which is a legal term, evokes commerce and the exclusive status of organisations that have rights – via a charter – to trade and traffic goods and are typically located in the City of London. The river Thames, in this context, is rendered as tamed or straightened. In the poem the word 'charter'd'[2] draws attention to the Thames as a waterway, as opposed to a meandering river, that allowed for the shipping and shifting of goods and channelled commercial exchanges in manufacture and international trade ever more efficiently. Thinking back to the notion of the developing city, this process of channelling or regulation is ongoing. In the context of Covid London's streets were charter'd through government guidance on distance between passers-by and the ceasing of every-day trade in those streets. It is the spaces between buildings which are emphasised as central to the way we inhabit urban spaces, and Blake's poem maybe contains an invitation to reclaim the public realm, encouraging the understanding of the city as a social construct that we need not only be aware of but also engage with.

Blake uses the word 'mark'[2] to mean see and he repeats this word, emphasising that we should not only see but notice what there is to see. Each face of each Londoner, to put this differently, bears physical manifestations of pain. Those looking need to interpret it correctly; 'charter'd'[2], moreover, metonymically links this idea with the 'mind forg'd manacles'[2] in the second stanza. All is unnatural and inescapable because this mechanism is perceived as determining all human interaction by the speaker. In Andrew Lincoln's words:

> 'The recognition that all channels of communication are "charter'd" might be reassuring to those who believe in the benefits of law and trade. But to this speaker the city appears blighted by the institutions and beliefs that supposedly hold it together.'

*Figure 6a, b & c*:
Along the tidal zone - finding fragments of 'London' in London (Sophie Ungerer, 2022)



Thinking about London in 2020, the Covid-rules were imposed by the government with the intention to keep us safe, yet they constrained what many felt concerned their personal rights. The justification was that it was impossible to ascertain if people had Covid, because many of the infected didn't show any symptoms while tests were deemed unreliable and masks as insufficient. Blake's careful manoeuvring of the visual and visionary, which concentrates on his encounter with hidden poverty and silent but conspicuous suffering, finds its counterpart in the second stanza. This stanza focuses on sound. Rather than acknowledge the busy sounds of a bustling city, Blake foregrounds the often drowned-out cries for help. The situation Blake describes in 'London' against the historical backdrop of war is one of despair and repression. What he sees and asks us to notice are the consequences of inequality and fraught power dynamics within the city that lead directly to poverty and exploitation:

> In every cry of every Man,
>
> In every Infants cry of fear,
>
> In every voice: in every ban,
>
> The mind-forg'd manacles I hear (ll. 5-8, E27)[2]

Many, old and young, are crying; every single person lacks the words to articulate their individual dilemmas. What we are asked to hear is a soundscape that is experienced through a mostly regular iambic rhythm and that, like the rhymes ('hear' and 'fear'2), establishes new connections. The impetus is to listen but there are no messages or words of social protest in this stanza, just a crescendo of a collective cry of fear.

Similarly, London in the times of Covid fell silent, with planes grounded, cars limited and people remaining inside their homes. Yet, death was not silent, and, as in Blake's 'London', our lives and news were filled with the sounds of individual sorrow and grief. The 'cry'[2] (instant, sharp and resonating) represents the sudden shock and confusion, when death shattered our routines while fragmenting our urban lives. The 'sigh'[2] (echoing, drawn out, whispered), echoed our sense of despair as Covid numbers rose and lockdown isolated us and as the silent fear of imminent loss, bearing the mark of Covid, became omni-present. Wandering along the liminal space of the tidal beach, we collected pictorial translations of all three sounds/experiences, to create a visual palette that would represent our response: jagged jawbones, glimpses through driftwood, tidal watermarks silently recording time (Fig. 6). The graphs represented the death toll but failed to capture individual stories since they tended to be subsumed and were made to disappear in the data. This perception of death resonated for us with Blake's response to attitudes towards death in the late eighteenth century. Death, disembodied and

transformed from sound into 'blood running down palace walls',[2] was deemed a necessity or rather a necessary sacrifice in the battle against the pandemic that the government claimed would be won. But are there ever winners in something that is fought like a war?

### 4. Thresholds – behind the Door and Metaphor

In the scene of the illumination (Fig. 1) Blake places an old man. To his left is a boy. The sun is setting and light and shadow are at play in the design. The stone wall, to the right of the central figure, takes up half of the space; it has an irregular pattern, created through broken stones or stones of different sizes. The age gap and the shadows cast by the figures hark back to the death theme but also reconnect with the theme of vision, introduced in the first stanza. In fact, the many contrasts in the composition anticipate the complex imagery of stanzas three and four where Blake's social protest intensifies. It is in stanza three that the key death-metaphor comes into focus:

> 'How the Chimney-sweepers cry
>
> Every blackning Church appalls,
>
> And the hapless Soldiers sigh
>
> Runs in blood down Palace walls (ll. 9-12, E27)[2]

In the poem, the walls, which enclose a seat of power (Lambeth Palace), are stained with blood and thus turned into a chronicle of war. Similarly, in the times of Covid, in March 2021, the walls of the Embankment along the Thames stretching between Lambeth Palace and Westminster Palace were stained with red hearts as a chronicle of the pandemic deaths. The memorial was created by volunteers (Covid-19 Bereaved Families and Led by Donkeys) and initiated without official permission; it was an act of spatial agency preserving the memory of the individual deaths and personal tragedies within the palimpsest of London rather than allowing them to become part of official statistics and historic write-ups of the pandemic. As the original hearts fade to pink the volunteers repaint them bright red (Fig. 7), thus guaranteeing a dynamic place of memory and urban history in the public realm. According to a plaque nearby, the volunteers in charge of this memorial's up-keep will remove any kind of graffiti so that the memorial can stay intact.

*Figure 7*: The National Covid Memorial wall along the river Thames, stretching from opposite Westminster Palace to Lambeth Palace (Sophie Ungerer, 2023)

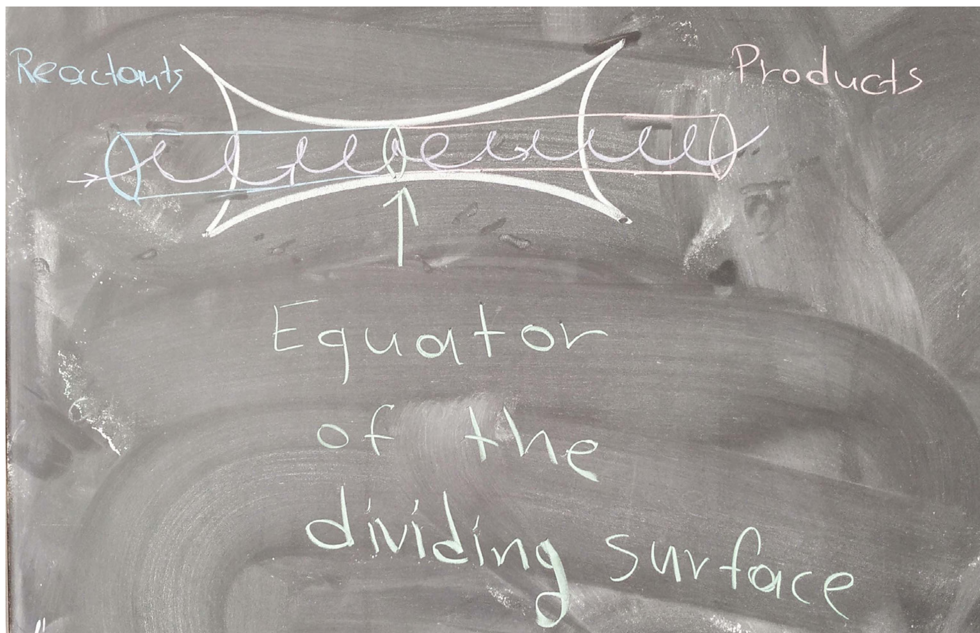



*Figure 8*:
Sketch of mathematical model describing *dividing surfaces* (Makrina Agaoglou, 2022)

Back on the plate and in the illuminated poem (Fig. 1), another closer look at Blake's wall reveals a hidden space: the room behind the door. What if the figures weren't walking past but towards the enormous door? What is curious about the rendering of buildings in 'London' is that Blake chose to make them so deliberately unspecific. The same could be said about figures. The old man, according to Jean H. Hagstrum, is 'heading for his grave', located behind the door to his left. The door, here, is a portal to the afterlife. Andrew Lincoln elaborates on what the closed door in Blake's design might signify:

> The closed door may indicate the general lack of pity in this environment. But [...] the design provides an image of [...] protective care that the poem itself makes no mention of. [...] the child here seems engaged – in an act of pity. [...] the child is the guardian of the adult.[14]

The door, which we can trace through all versions of the plate, is an evocative symbol. In any case, this door is shut and the figures will never arrive at their destination; they are suspended in time and through Blake's illuminated printing.

*Figure 9*:
Threshold spaces in the illuminations, showing the closed door and the revealed churches.

Left: Extract from William Blake's 'London' (Copy F of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, printed 1794, © Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)

Right: Extract from William Blake's 'Jerusalem', Plate 84, "Highgates heights & Hampstead..." (from *Jerusalem: The Emanation of The Giant Albion*, Copy E, printed c. 1821, © Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)

In our conversations, however, the threshold or door – a spatial device to divide and connect public death tolls and private grief, as well as the street and the domestic home in the design – came to serve as a metaphor for our perception of death and a changed state of being (afterlife). We then did a thought experiment; we agreed to interpret the threshold as a change of products and explored what this might entail. Applying and translating a literary metaphor to Mathematics, we realised that it captured what is called dividing surfaces, a concept widely used in several mathematical models; it describes the threshold between reactants and products. To explain this further: dividing surfaces, according to chemical reaction dynamics, suppose to divide two areas, i.e. the area of the reactants and the area of the products. The experiment starts and the chemical reaction begins, changing the qualities of the product. Once a trajectory of a point (on the graph) belongs to the area of the dividing surface, its fate is sealed; we know a priori that it will cross the dividing surface and the reaction will happen. There is no escape and no return to its previous state. The reactant will become a product. This meant that we had started our journey with the Covid graphs and their visual representation of the pandemic (death) and arrived at yet another abstract mathematical model linking and mapping a general development as created

*Figure 10*: Following Blake's footsteps and searching for his point of view in today's London - St Pauls highlighted in red to the left, Westminster Abbey to the right (Sophie Ungerer, 2022)

*Figure 11*:
Sketch for a speculative 'London' space on the tidal Thames beach (Sophie Ungerer, 2022)

from individual reactions and chemical processes. The model explained the change of a product beyond recognition and thus, metaphorically speaking, the cause of the death of one and reason of birth of another.

Returning to and applying this to Literature, there was more to be found in the images; Blake produced his illuminated books in editions, i.e. as different copies, subject to different printing sessions. Each copy looks different. But Blake also returned to passages or images to edit or develop them further and in other works. He reworked, for example, the illumination of 'London' in the context of his later, long epic poem Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion (1804-c.1820) where we meet a visual echo of the design of 'London' on plate 84 (Fig. 15).

In Jerusalem the design has been reversed and the rigid wall behind the central figure has been taken away to reveal two church buildings. Morton D. Paley, who associates the design on plate 84 with 'London', writes:

> This design illustrates [lines] 1-11 [of Jerusalem]. The boy is leading the old man (much like in Blake's design for "London," reversed) "throu the Streets | Of Babylon." Babylon is a city very like London, for its churches resemble Blake's icons of Gothic Westminster Abbey and domed St. Paul's.

These two churches function as powerful symbols for Blake and their individual symbolism interplays in the urban realm of his time. The baroque St Pauls symbolises religious power, and the Gothic Westminster Abbey (or maybe even Southwark Cathedral, depending on where Blake stood when he was looking at the river) represents creative power. Whilst the significance of the buildings might have changed, the tug of war between the different powers within the modern city remains. For us it was time to return to the physical London and find our place where Blake once might have stood.

## 5. Anchoring 'London' in London: Reading and Applying Blake

Our collective reading of 'London' turned into a detective hunt in London. Where might Blake have stood to view the two churches? What remains of the physical form of the city and what has been eroded and altered?

We arrived at a transient tidal zone between the Embankment, the edge of the chartered Thames, and the flowing river on the Southbank (Fig. 10). A metaphorical and physical site that resonated strongly with our interpretation of the role of Blake's process in the production of the plate: A place of constant flux, yet connected to the historic fabric of the city, which has existed since before the poem's inception. This location offered us a perspective similar to Blake's, the flâneur, poet, artist, printmaker and reader of cities, because – like Blake – we needed some distance from the city and Covid.

Blake's 'London' became a tool for re-reading the modern city in relation to the representations of death in London. Could this process of translation be continued to create spaces to capture our reading of London? The sketch (Fig. 11) shows a speculative proposal for a London space, hovering over the tidal beach. The elongated structure echoes the form of the mathematical reaction model, contemplating death (and grief) as a journey/reaction process through the threshold of the dividing surface.

The structure consists of a sequence of three spaces to wander through, each responding to different notions of death in Blake's poetic reading of London, and which we felt remained relevant for London in 2020 (Fig. 6). On the left, the fragmented, shattered cry (as in ll. 5, 6 and 9, stanzas two and three)[2] offers a precarious route through suspended fragments which at times mirror and distort the familiar views of the city. The central darker, denser section, represents the sigh (originating from ll. 11, stanza three).[2] Formed of driftwood, each shaped by its individual journey, it is an intimate, sound-absorbing space. And finally, linking back to the embankment, the clearer and regular stretch of relief as the crisis and direct confrontation with death is passing. Yet the marks (as in ll. 3 and 4, stanza one),[2] which are slowly etched horizontally into the envelope by each visitor as a memory, remain and merge with the panorama of London.

## 6. Processes of Translation in Collaborative Reading: Spaces, Graphs, Texts (2023)

What our collaborative practice and its transdisciplinary positions revealed about London and its history in relation to death resonates with Hans-Georg Gadamer's horizon of expectation, 'the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point', a concept which helps to describe the process of understanding past events from inside the present. Gadamer explains that transposition is the hermeneutical requirement with which the gap between past and present can be bridged: 'If we fail to transpose ourselves into the historical horizon from which the traditionary text speaks, we will misunderstand the significance of what it has to say to us' to insist that 'the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past'.[17] Understanding, for Gadamer more generally, is shaped through interaction, which can be explained as a model of communication where nothing is ever certain. The meaning-making process remains fluid just like a conversation where interpretation depends on the bias of the reader/

viewer, as in our case and our collaborative practice of reading/viewing/drawing in response to Blake, 'London' and London:

> Historical tradition can be understood only as something always in the process of being defined by the course of events. [...] it is the course of events that brings out new aspects of meaning in historical material. By being re-actualized in understanding, texts are drawn into a genuine course of events in exactly the same way as are events themselves. (p. 381)[17]

The actualising of a text or image taking place during the reading/viewing experience, as suggested by Gadamer, is the guarantee for the relationship between the past and the present. For our collective place/text reading this meant that we had to find links to our disciplines (Architecture, Mathematics and Literature) and translate our individual responses and our disciplines' idiosyncrasies to understand as well as be understood. This was at times challenging (and even frustrating) but opened up new avenues of thinking and opportunities for cross-fertilisation. Architecture emerged as a mediator, both reflecting the experiential aspect of the poetry though its relation to inhabitation and the more abstract structures of mathematical thought and concepts. The mathematician on the team, in fact, compared the process of our collaboration to 'reverse modelling', analysing the present (London/Covid) to understand the past ('London'). Steven Holl, too, suggests in his notion of anchoring that 'architecture and site should have an experiential connection, a metaphysical link, a poetic link'. In the process of translation and collaborative space reading, the city itself becomes a network of such links, weaving together different histories and inhabitations, buildings and memories, death and space.

## 6. What Remains (2023)?

In 2023, almost two years on from the turbulent (though frozen) times of Covid-19, many of the predictions about the death of our cities (rather than deaths in our cities) have not materialised. Urban life has gone back to old routines; inner-London footfall is surpassing its pre-Covid levels, at least based on the amount of take-away sandwiches consumed. Speaking to Dezeen in October 2020, Norman Foster predicted that, rather than changing our cities forever, the pandemic would be an 'accelerator of change' speeding up already prevalent trends (such as flexible working and focus on greener cities) – similar to other crises in the past. We are yet to see what remains and what will change in the urban life of London.

Reading Blake's multimodal poem and considering his creative process as part of a collaborative process of translation took us on a journey which enabled us to explore London's urban history as a rich palimpsest of memory, inhabitation and urban fabric, as well as representations of death in London. The different time settings (1794, 2020, 2023) brought the relationship to Blake to the fore and across the intervening time. Looking at 'London' through

the lens of the developing city or metropolis allowed us to pause and reflect. What remains is the recognition that death, as represented in the graphs, is an abstract concept but also personal in that (following Gadamer's actualising) it concerns us all as individuals. Engaging with London across time and through Blake's 'London' uncovered the complex weaving of the histories of death and narratives of grief that normally remain intangible and invisible.
It taught us that we need to rethink how we appreciate and make sense of urban history.

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1 William Blake, 'On Virgil', in The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, newly revised edition, ed. by David V. Erdman and Harold Bloom (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland: Double Day Anchor Books, 1988), p. 270.

2 William Blake, 'London', in The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, newly revised edition, ed. by David V. Erdman and Harold Bloom (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland: Double Day Anchor Books, 1988), pp. 26-27.

3 Outputs of the project include a symposium (https://www.icmat.es/congresos/2021/PDM-NST/index.php) and a video-interview with the collaborators (https://vimeo.com/730950210/fa1232c5d1). It was also discussed in an article published in *La Razon* (5 May 2022): https://www.larazon.es/ciencia/20220505/aqysq6v6gvd7nk4ezpnj6baj2y.html [accessed 11 June 2023].

4 William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly revised edition, ed. by David V. Erdman and Harold Bloom (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland: Double Day Anchor Books, 1988), pp. 7-32. For online access see https://erdman.blakearchive.org/ [accessed 13 August 2023].

5 The 'Timeline of UK government coronavirus lockdowns and measures, March 2020 to December 2021' but together by the Institute of Government provides a detailed breakdown of the Covid-UK events and ensuing regulations. (https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-12/timeline-coronavirus-lockdown-december-2021.pdf [accessed 13 August 2023]).

6 For more information on the history and contemporary role of Cross Bones Graveyard visit: http://crossbones.org.uk.

7 The temporary morgue on Wanstead Flats in Manor Park, East London was built in April 2020 to provide, in the words of the local council "a holding point before a respectful and dignified cremation or burial can take place" due to cemeteries being unable to cope with increasing numbers of dead. The facility was demolished in August 2020 and replaced with a wildflower habitat (https://www.newham.gov.uk/news/article/338/update-about-coronavirus-covid-19-temporary-mortuary-facilities-to-be-built-on-land-owned-by-the-city-of-london-corporation-on-wanstead-flats-in-manor-park-from-mayor-rokhsana-fiaz-31-march-2020 [accessed 13 August 2023]).

8 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly revised edition, ed. by David V. Erdman and Harold Bloom (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland: Double Day Anchor Books, 1988), pp. 33-45. For online access see https://erdman.blakearchive.org/ [accessed 27 March 2023].

9 The intermediary stages can be traced in Blake's Notebook and Michael Phillips discusses how Blake allows the poem to crystalize the social and political situation of London. Michael Philips, *William Blake: The Creation of the Songs; from Manuscript to Illuminated Printing* (London: British Library, 2000), pp. 55-57.

10 Walter Benjamin, ed.: Michael Jennings, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Baudelaire*, (Harvard University Press 2006), p. 68.

11 William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, ed. by Andrew Lincoln, vol. 2 (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1998), p. 193.

12 To examine the different versions of the plate, please visit *The Blake Archive* where the different copies have been digitized: https://www.blakearchive.org/copy/songsie.b?descId=songsie.b.illbk.36 [accessed 18 July 2023].

13 The memorial wall was created by 1,500 volunteers starting on 29th March 2021 over the course of ten days, without official permission. It was organised as a collaboration between the Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice and Led By Donkeys. You can walk a digital version of the wall here: https://nationalcovidmemorialwall.org [accessed 13 August 2023].

14 Jean H. Hagstrum, *William Blake, Poet and Painter: An Introduction to the Illuminated Verse* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 84.

15 For Blake's printing technique, see Phillips's demonstration, as recorded on the website of the British Library (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/videos/william-blake-printing-process).

16 William Blake, *Jerusalem*, ed. by Morton D. Paley, vol. 1 (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1998), p. 273.

17 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, rev. second edition (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), p. 313-81.

18 Steven Holl, *Anchoring* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), p. 9.

19 The Pret Index is a proxy London foot-traffic measurement based on transactions at the sandwich chain across the city. You can view the interactive graph here: https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/covid-has-changed-london-for-the-better/ [accessed 13 August 2023].

20 Tom Ravenscroft, ' "Is Covid-19 going to change our cities? The answer is no," says Norman Foster', *Dezeen*, 13th October 2020, https://www.dezeen.com/2020/10/13/coronavirus-covid-19-norman-foster-cities/ [accessed 11 June 2023].