Comparing Socio-spatial Traits in Two London Neighbourhoods and explaining their outcome using Soja's Socio-spatial Dialectic.

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Introduction:

Society and Space have been in debate for centuries and different philosophers have defined them according to their own perception. Some considered society and space separate ((Harvey, 1973),(Smith, 1989)) while some Marxists have always been concerned about how one causes another but have not grasped the interplay between society and space (Lefebvre, 1974). It was Soja (1980) who introduced the concept of socio-spatial dialectic which maintains that society and space are interconnected and they keep on mutually changing each other.
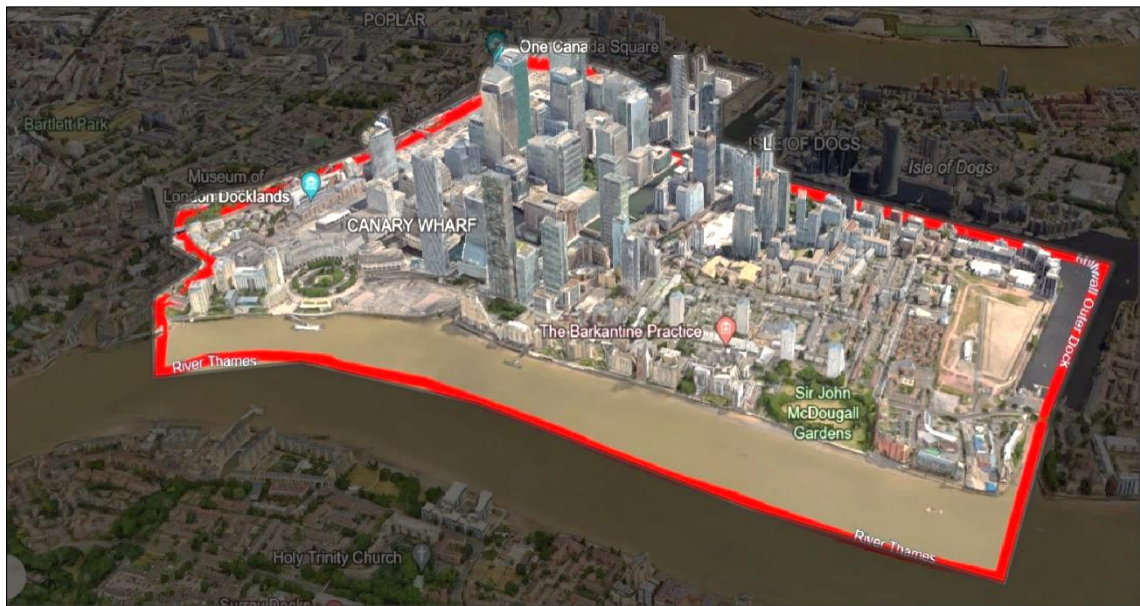
Data and Discussion:

In this study, we will compare and describe the sociospatial characteristics of two neighbourhoods in the London borough of Tower Hamlets: Whitechapel and Canary Wharf and further explore role of socio-spatial dialectic in understanding their very different outcomes.

I) Social and Spatial Factors:

a) Housing: Whitechapel features old traditional low-cost dwellings with modest low-rise commercial establishments, while Canary Wharf displays majestic skyscrapers. Thus, giving Whitechapel an old historic neighbourhood look (Fig.1) while Canary Wharf gives a more modern, prosperous, and contemporary appearance catering to its social audience (Fig.2).

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Fig.1. Building landscape of Whitechapel (Source: Google Earth, 2022).

Fig.2. Building Landscape of Canary Wharf (Source: Google Earth, 2022).

b) Population and Density: Canary Wharf and Whitechapel have fairly similar population as shown in Table 1, but the annual population change is less in Whitechapel while the population density is more. Thus, pointing towards overcrowded conditions in Whitechapel and less population moving into the neighbourhood.

Table 1. Population Statistics of Canary Wharf & Whitechapel (UK Census - ONS, 2021)

Wards	Population (rounded to 100)	Annual Population Change	Population Density
Canary Wharf	18,000	3.7%	12,754/km²
Whitechapel	18,800	2.9%	19,965/km²

c) **Ethnic Diversity:** Canary Wharf's population was characterized by its global workforce, with a substantial i.e., 60.9% number of residents born outside UK, whereas, in Whitechapel it was only 55.2%. Further, with respect to ethnic identities, Table 2. shows, the contrasting picture of the two wards.

Table 2. Ethnic Population of Canary Wharf & Whitechapel (UK Census - ONS, 2021)

Wards	Ethnic Identity	Ward Percentage	Borough Percentage	Comparison Ward Vs Borough
Canary Wharf	White	41.6%	39.4%	MORE
	Asian, Asian British, or Asian Welsh	41.9%	44.4%	LESS
Whitechapel	White	34.7%	39.4%	LESS
	Asian, Asian British, or Asian Welsh	51.3%	44.4%	MORE

d) **Religious Beliefs:** As illustrated in Table 3, most people in Canary Wharf have no religious beliefs while as in Whitechapel the majority are Muslims, primarily because of the immigrant Bangladeshi workforce who came to Whitechapel after 1970s for employment opportunities thereby shaping the social fabric of the area.

Table 3. Religious Affiliations of Canary Wharf & Whitechapel (UK Census - ONS, 2021)

Wards	Ethnic Identity	Percentage	Ward Rank
Canary Wharf	No Religion	30.0%	I
	Christians	27.2%	II
	Muslims	26.2%	III
	Others	16.6%	IV
Whitechapel	Muslims	43.0%	I
	No Religion	26.3%	II
	Christians	18.2%	III
	Others	12.5%	IV

e) **Household Types:** Whitechapel has a lower proportion of single adult households, which account for 34.4% of households, in contrast to Canary Wharf's 41.6%. Thus points towards the single working-class individuals who make up the majority workforce of Canary Wharf and indirectly influence its social structure (*UK Census - ONS*, 2021).

f) **Distance Travelled to work:** Whitechapel reported 34.1% of residents travel less than 10 kms to work as compared to only 24.8% in Canary Wharf, while the borough average being 33.2%. Also, for people who work from home Canary Wharf stood at 63.7% while Whitechapel stood at 52.1% while borough average was 50.3% (*UK Census - ONS*, 2021).
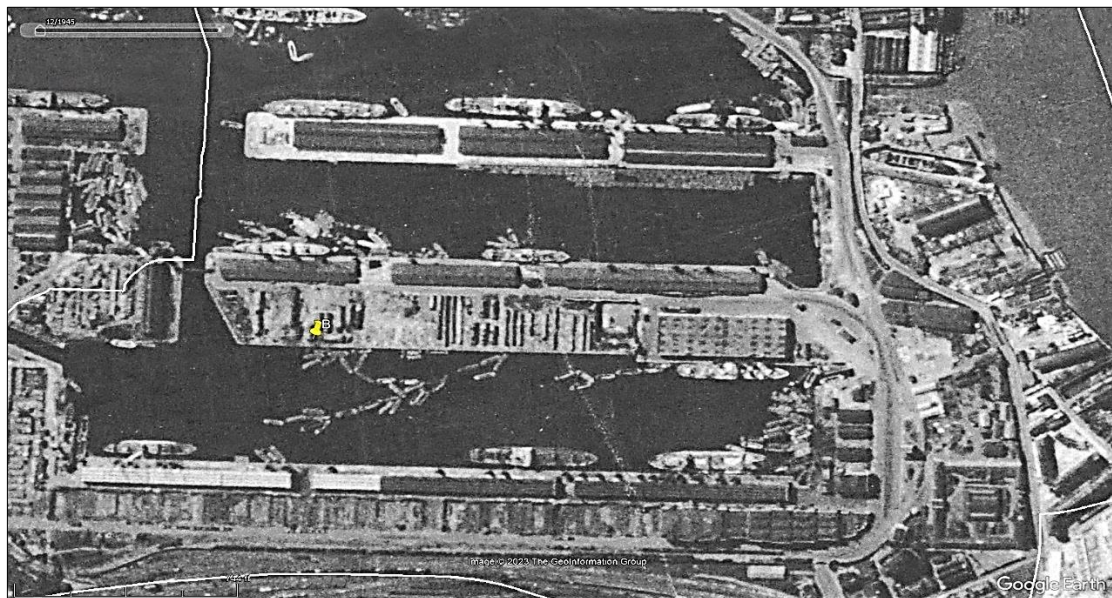
g) Employment Status: The total economically active residents of Canary Wharf stood at 75.2% while it was 66.3% in Whitechapel. Thus, pointing towards the thriving local economy and low unemployment in Canary Wharf (*UK Census - ONS*, 2021).

h) Household Income: As per the latest records, the median household income in Canary Wharf was £40,757 and in Whitechapel it was £33,936. So, a huge amount of economic disparity between two relatively adjacent wards of the same borough. ('Household Income Borough', 2019).

II) Understanding the Outcomes with the help of Socio-spatial Dialectic:

Canary Wharf has gone through a roller coaster of transitions. It transitioned from Marshlands in 1600s to Ports in 1700s and later to Docks in 1800s. The area was full of dockers, thieves, pirates, ships, etc for over a century. During its colourful history of docks, it was full of people and a community of its own, however, after the docks started closing in the 1970s, all businesses relocated or closed shops & it destroyed the community. So, the change in space changed the society. But, with the support of the government and policies backing its development, it became an attractive location for businesses. Fig.3. shows satellite picture of same area of Canary Wharf from 1945 (A) and 2022 (B), Source: Google Earth.
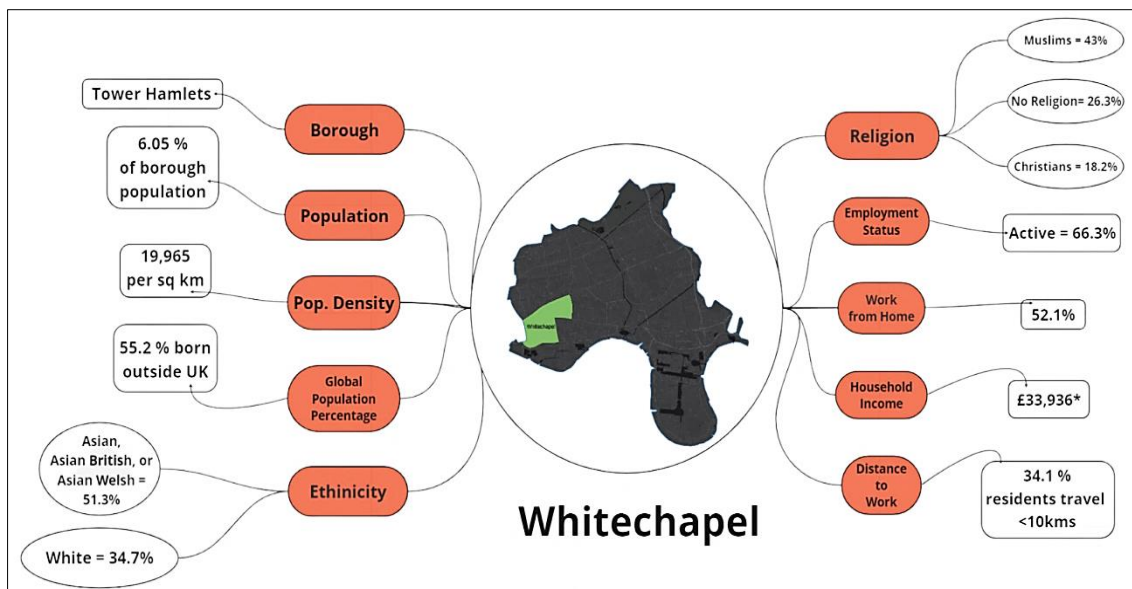

(A)

(B)

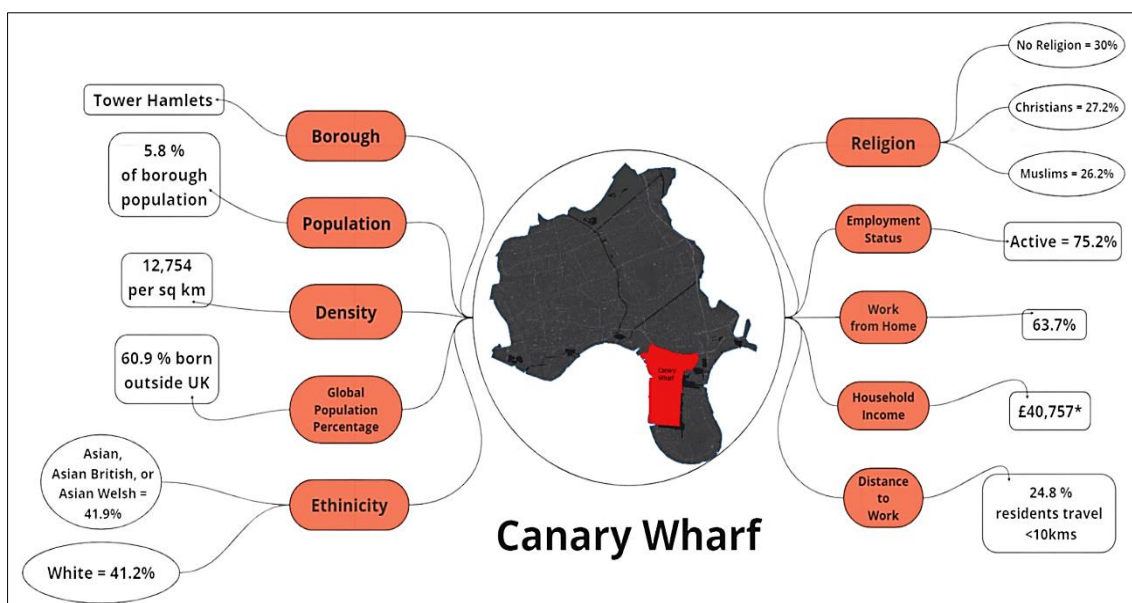**Fig.3.** Canary Wharf (A) As Docks in 1945 (B) As Business District in 2022.

The top banks and financial institutions shifted to Canary Wharf from Central London thus giving a huge boost. With the new look of Canary Wharf and presence of high-quality residential properties that offer breathtaking views of the river Thames, high-quality schools, and amenities reinforced the social allure of Canary Wharf.

Whitechapel, on the other hand, has been rather interesting area both in terms of its architecture of low-cost housing, overcrowded apartments, cheap rents, narrow alleys, and lack of green spaces. It has always been an option of housing for immigrants for centuries be it the Irish, the Jews, or the Bangladeshi immigrants. Also, in this context, there has always been prejudice between the different ethnic groups and it has seen its share of violence which led to the stigmatization of the area. Further, the bad housing conditions, unemployment, and racist crimes have affected the community as a whole and thus have resulted in limited economic opportunities for its people thus leading to the spatial concentration of poverty. As, evident from the socio-spatial comparison between Whitechapel & Canary Wharf in the earlier discussions and as represented in Fig.4. and Fig.5.
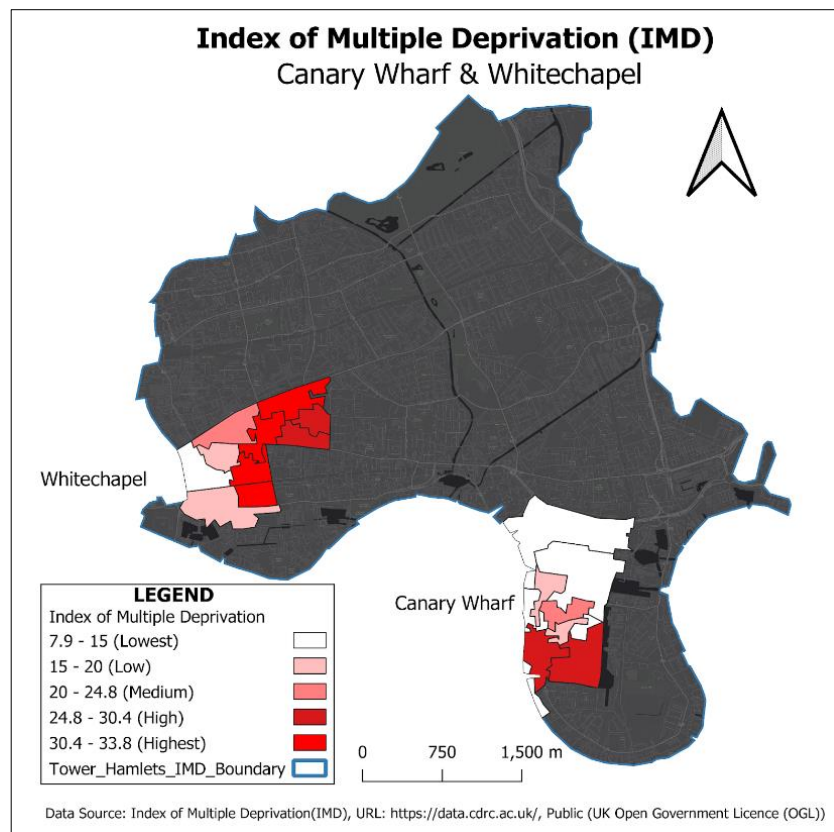
Fig.4. Different socio-spatial factors of ward Whitechapel.

Fig.5. Different socio-spatial factors of ward Canary Wharf.

Further, with the use of Multiple Deprivation Index we can also compare the effects of socio-spatial factors on these neighbourhoods. Fig.6. shows, Canary Wharf exhibits relatively lower values of Multiple Deprivation Index as compared to Whitechapel (*English IMD 2019 - Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) | CDRC Data*, 2020). So, this reaffirms our faith in the socio-spatial dialectic i.e., in Canary Wharf after the docks closed in the 1970s, the space shattered the society & when the space was again changed in the 1980-90's it reinvigorated the society as well.

Fig.6. Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) for Canary Wharf and Whitechapel

Now, contrary to Canary Wharf, in case of Whitechapel, the socio-spatial dialectic creates a cycle of disadvantage and social challenges spill over into spatial issues which indirectly lead to concentration of poor social conditions. Thus, further suggesting that, the social structures and spatial structures are highly interconnected and mutually shaping each other; playing an important role in the prosperity or the downgrade of the neighbourhood.

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