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A History of the East End, Chris Dorley Brown, book review: 'Stands out from the crowd'

2-3 minutes



Photograph: Chris Dorley Brown / Nouveau Palais

Chris Dorley Brown has been documenting our streets since the 1980s; now a selection of his photos has been collected in *A History of the East End*.

This handsome book, produced by French publisher Nouveau Palais in a unique format a foot long half as wide, contains vintage-shaded images shot between 1987 and 2023.

Interspersed among them are loose pages of text with personal recollections by the author.

As Dorley Brown says, this work is an “ongoing archive of east London’s cycle of shrinkage and expansion, triumph and failure.”



Photograph: Chris Dorley Brown / Nouveau Palais

Failure is depicted in a 1986 picture of tower block demolition on Trowbridge Estate, which like its more famous cousin Holly Street, had fallen out of favour with local administrators.

Triumph is figured in the gloriously-lit magic of the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony.

In Dorley Brown’s photographic imaginary, East London extends from the statuesque City to a murky Sheerness along the Thames Estuary.

In between are Upton Park, Stratford, Bow, Stepney, Walthamstow, and most of Hackney in all its beauty and its grime.



Photograph: Chris Dorley Brown / Nouveau Palais

Textual interludes weave the images together with anecdotes and memories of particular areas.

We learn how a series of council block photos commissioned by Hackney Council Archive popped up in an exhibition years later, with no attribution to the by-then famous photographer.

And how in lockdown he ventured into areas of the Thames foreshore that are normally off-limits to capture the resurgence of nature in the temporary absence of human menace.

Each year seems to bring a new crop of East London photobooks, but this volume stands out from the crowd for both the quality of the images themselves and the care with which the publisher has assembled them.

A History of the East End by Chris Dorley Brown is published by Nouveau Palais éditions, ISBN: 9 782 957 207244, RRP €35.