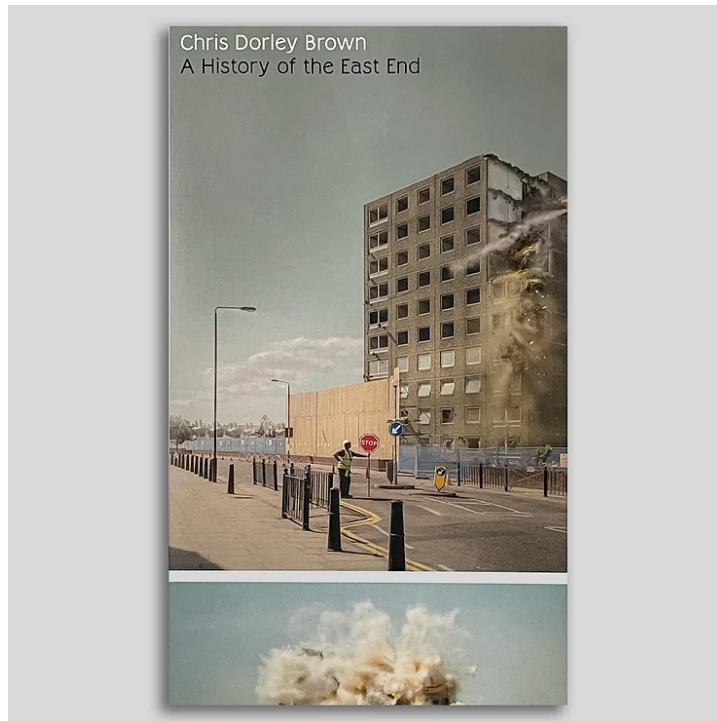


Chris Dorley Brown: A History of the East End

colin dutton

5-6 minutes

Every now and then I'm revisiting some of the photography books and other items on my shelves here. This time it's . . .



There's a lot to be said for belonging somewhere, although I'm not sure where that is in my case. I no longer live where I grew up in the north of London, in fact I no longer know anyone that lives there. Home for me is another country, and another culture. I moved to Italy over twenty years ago and I've lived in the same town here all that time but it's not really mine. When I photograph it I'm still doing so as a foreigner. That's just the way things are.

So I'm always envious when I see the work of other photographers that have dedicated themselves to photographing a particular place.. their place (and their people).. over many years. I had this feeling when I came across Chris Dorley Brown's work recently. He has been documenting the East-end of London since the early 1980s as both a photographer and filmmaker, capturing its architecture, roads, people and street corners in his unique style. Naturally I assumed Chris Dorley Brown was born and

bred in east London in the same way that I assumed Chris Killip was born and bred in the north-east of England, it being the focus of his work for so many years. Not so, however. Chris Killip was born on the Isle of Man and Chris Dorley Brown on the Isle of White. Not their place and not their people after all. What both these photographers have shared, however, is a long-term dedication to a particular social and geographical context.. over the years they have made that place 'theirs'.



Dorley Brown's most famous book, now impossible to find, is *The Corners* (Hoxton Mini-Press, 2018). I can't afford a copy of that so I was very happy when the book I'm looking at now, *A History of the East End*, was published in September this year (2024). It's an unusual, tall format made to accommodate square images when opened on a double page. It's also unusual in the fact the text, written by Dorley Brown himself, is printed on loose yellow sheets inserted between the pages. He is a wonderful writer with a natural and unpretentious voice. It sounds like he's sitting next to you in the pub, telling tales over a pint of beer, sometimes playful, sometimes profound. He has a refreshing modesty, and honesty, when talking about his work too and his own status as a photographer:

"I don't really think of myself as a professional. I do the odd advertising job to earn money, and I think I do it okay, but the phone isn't ringing off the hook with jobs because I don't put the energy into promoting myself... I keep my overheads low and can just about get away with it."

A History of the East End takes us on a journey that starts and finishes on the banks of the River Thames. We move through the Isle of Dogs and the streets of Hackney, Walthamstow, Romford, Poplar and Dagenham.. all places that I never frequented as a Londoner; mine was very much the other side of town. Dorley Brown's subjects range from high-rise council flats, demolition sites and misty-morning views across parking lots, to railway tracks, street-corner-newsagents, abandoned cars and abandoned factories. It sounds depressing but it isn't. There is life and colour here too. And a strange kind of beauty.





Our journey is also a journey through time, covering 30 years of history, demolition, building and rebuilding. And for Chris Dorley Brown, as a documentarian, the passing of time will change our reading of his work. He suggests the images should be put away and viewed later, improving with age like a fine wine.

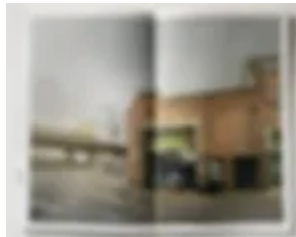
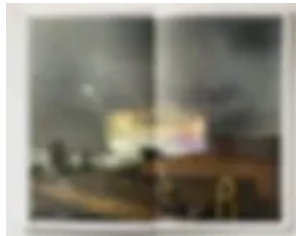
"I'm probably taking pictures for people who haven't been born yet. I don't think they're going to come into their own for maybe another 30 or 40 years."

That's an aspect of photography that I have always found fascinating and an idea that I very much share with him.

There are photographs from various projects in this book: an early commission to document council housing, some work from his 'Corners' series, interiors of a former hospital.. now a luxury apartment complex, and shots from the empty streets of the City during Covid lockdown. It's a

wonderful, meandering, theatrical series of images, a mixture of architectural and social documentary photography with a vaguely mysterious atmosphere hovering over it.

It's a great book and it makes me think I should spend more time documenting my own town here in Italy... even if it's not mine, maybe because it's not mine, as a way of making it mine.



Chris Dooley Brown, *A History of the East End*. Published by Nouveau Palais, 2024