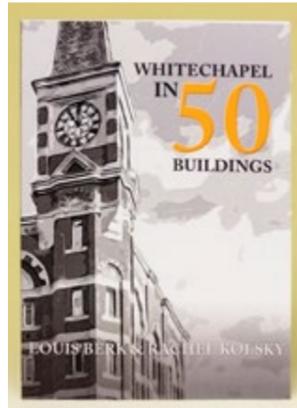


Louis Berk is a photographer with a passion for urban landscapes and for challenging perceptions of the inner-city. His photography has appeared on book covers and in publications including *The Financial Times* and *The Big Issue* and he has exhibited at the Mall Galleries and the Cotton Centre in London.

Over the past 12 years, Louis has earned a reputation as a fine art and documentary photographer, largely concentrating on the East End of London. "I generally only work in colour and I particularly aim to produce vivid captures which have impact", says Louis.

In 2008 he published *Walk to Work*, a four-year photographic study of the London districts of Spitalfields, Shoreditch and Whitechapel. This was followed, in 2010, by *School Work: One Day in the Life of an Outstanding Secondary School*, which is a pictorial investigation into the operation of a modern secondary school in Whitechapel where Louis worked for many years and, in 2012, *Amptbill: A Picture*

### 3: Louis Berk – documenting London



*Book to Remember Her By*, which is Louis' personal architectural perspective on the unusual colour-coded tower blocks at Mornington Crescent, in London.

His latest book, *Whitechapel in 50 Buildings*, was created with historian, author, and prize-winning Blue Badge Guide, Rachel Kolsky. Their collaboration came about because of what Rachel describes as a serendipitous meeting at Brady Street cemetery, in Whitechapel, while Louis was photographing for his *Walk to Work*



book and Rachel was delving into the social history of the same area of London.

"My philosophy in life", says Louis, "is that you don't have to get on a plane take photographs, shoot what is near you". While he was working on a self-published project shooting one of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in London, next door to his school, the cemetery owners introduced Louis to Amberley Publishing, with have a publications list including the 'In 50 Buildings' series and another series on 'Secret' locations. "I explained that I had already been photographing in the area and knew it well and told them about Rachel's expertise as an architectural historian", explains Louis.

The exciting consequence was that

the duo signed contracts for three books with Amberley, the second of which, *Secret Whitechapel*, will be published in November 2017.

The co-authors state that one aim for the *Whitechapel in 50 Buildings* book was to map the journey of the various immigrant communities who have lived and contributed to the area, from the Huguenot weavers in the eighteenth century, the large Jewish community of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries up to the recent growth of the Bangladeshi community, as evidenced by the changing face of Brick Lane.

The book is laid out so that the buildings are listed in chronological order by date of construction. Most of the images show exterior

architecture, and each building has at least one photograph, with a few being depicted from alternative angles, in two or three images.

Most of the photography was completed in around five months, between March and July 2016. Louis used some images that he had accumulated "pounding the streets", over the previous 13 years, although this was a limited number as he "wanted the images to be contemporary".

How the specific fifty buildings were chosen was, Louis explains, very simple. "Rachel and I just compiled two lists of buildings and when we sat down to compare them, we found that they were very similar, with only about half-a-dozen differences. The plan was then to go around and take the best possible photographs of each building."

This proved more difficult with some buildings than others – as with Spitalfields Market and the old Godfrey Philips Ltd cigarette factory. "I went back there about four times, on Sunday mornings, to get the road completely free of cars and to make sure that I got the sunlight in the right place" Louis explains. "One of the things I like about London is how surprisingly empty it can be on Sunday mornings. I mean really empty. Here is this bustling metropolis, and there is no one at all around."

Louis has found that many of his images which have received very positive feedback are often those which were shot early in the morning. One exception is an image of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, which was captured in the middle of the day. However, as Louis explains, "the traffic pattern was such that there were quite long absences between cars. I can't remember why I took it in the middle of the day, perhaps I'd been shooting an interior and walked back that way. The traffic just cleared for a moment and it was like, wow, I'm going to take that photograph."

The weather is a crucial consideration for Louis. "I'm looking at the weather all the time. My wife gets annoyed with me because I have this weather app, and



The commercial history of the area shows in its buildings – the Bell Foundry (above) closed while the book was being prepared. Below, Co-Operative magnificence.



I can tell her precisely what it's going to be like at any hour of the day", he says.

Louis feels that his choice of camera gear, for buildings photography, might surprise many

photographers. "It surprises me, too", he explains. "I had a period when I wasn't using digital cameras at all. When I was working on the East End Cemeteries project, for example, I was shooting



everything on medium format film stock, with a Hasselblad.

"However, because I also have an amateur interest in bird photography the Micro Four Thirds system appealed to me, because of the 2X sensor crop factor. Panasonic announced a 100-400mm zoom, which sounded like great birding lens, and I bought it along with a Panasonic GX8 which came with a 12-35mm f2.8 zoom lens. I took it with me to Whitechapel one day and found it just so easy to use. The controls seemed to be in the right place, the menus made sense and the image quality was pretty damn good. The lens that I use the most with the GX8 is the Olympus 17-14mm f2.8 Pro. It's beautifully built and amazingly sharp. Most of the new photographs in the book are taken with the GX8 and the Olympus lens and some with the Panasonic 12-35mm."

Louis feels that not everyone will agree with his views on equipment – his personal philosophy is that the camera is immaterial; it is the content of the image that is important. But there was a time only a few years ago when it seemed almost every photographer pointing a *serious-looking* camera at a building in London was being accosted by security officials and being told not to take photographs. Louis has had this experience, albeit only a small number of times. This may be because of campaigns such as PHNAT – *I'm a Photographer, Not a Terrorist* – and an increased level of enlightenment among security officials.

Louis is also cognisant of the 'rules' regarding photography in public places and of how to act with them in mind, to avoid



Religious buildings are landmarks – like the Synagogue of the Congregation of Jacob, and St George in the East, right

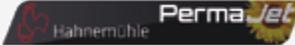




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running up against potential problems. "There is nothing to stop me from photographing buildings from the street. It's when you enter property that you can run into problems, and I never do that, to take photographs. I can always state that I was on the other side of the street, or certainly not on the property when I took the photograph. If I do need to enter property, such as for the images of church interiors, I will always seek permission and only photograph if I get it."

So, what might this experienced buildings photographer want to change about his working experience? "I have two main bugbears around photographing in London", Louis says. "One is that many of our lovely buildings can't be fully appreciated because of street parking: cars just get in the way. I could not get a good photograph of Hanbury Hall without having parked cars in front of it, which is very frustrating."

"The other issue I have is street furniture. I don't know what town planners must be thinking, sometimes. I was photographing outside The People's Palace for Secret Whitechapel and there

was a great big bus shelter right in front of an architecturally significant frieze on the wall. Didn't somebody think it might be possible to put the shelter twenty yards further away? It wouldn't make that much difference."

"I see a lot of things that are incredibly incongruous in terms of protecting the view of our architectural heritage. When I look at something architecturally significant I might suddenly realise that there is a rubbish bin, or a stop sign or a pole with parking restrictions stuck in front of it."

Louis' passion for photographing his corner of London shines through in his photographs and it is reflected in the success of his work. *Whitechapel in 50 Buildings* has been reprinted twice since its publication and sales are growing internationally. Louis Berk is, quite literally, a photographer streets ahead of his rivals.

*Whitechapel in 50 Buildings, Amberley, ISBN 978-1445661902*  
Louis Berk: <http://www.louisberk.com>  
Rachel Kolsky Go London Tours: <http://www.golondontours.com/>