

It is late autumn (not the best time to be cultivating positive thoughts about regeneration and renewal). Already I notice Sophie talking about the onset of winter, giving into that dejected phraseology of the season: “winter’s starting now, isn’t it?” and ‘I’m not as young as I was”. Her brooding seems to have intensified.

She has ventured out of late – visiting the Centre for Policy on Ageing on Ironmonger Row weekdays from 10 until 4. Though I suspect this is only the beginning of a hibernation of sorts: a retreat into academic brooding over “the problem of ageing”. I join her most mornings at the centre. She has enlisted my help (as her research runner) to do some “preliminary work” prior to the borough-wide fieldwork that will be the main focus of our investigations. In the reference room we consult the latest census statistics on population growth for the London Borough of Newham and are startled to find the bulging-out of its population at the line of mid-20 year olds (the generation rising up to working age). “It is the age of productivity!” Sophie exclaims. There is a sourness in her voice. The bulge is much larger than either of us had thought.

We try to tease out the spatial implications of a borough that is growing more youthful by the day. Wondering whether the shape of a place will always respond to the demographics of its population.

Is regeneration merely the spatial rearrangement of the borough according to the rising logic of youth?

I tell Sophie what I’ve already begun to notice recently: that cemeteries around the borough are closing down, or else being sold off – for private management. Or is it redevelopment? I tell her about the monk I met on Balaam Street last week who told me there aren’t enough people dying in the borough to make good economics out of death... which is why the cemeteries are closing down. Apparently.

“Is this how regeneration is measured?” Sophie asks. “As a declining value of freshly filled burial plots?” Here is the denial of death and a distancing from those who appear to be closer to death. “Which is the whole problem with ageing”, she says, “this proximity to death.”

We pull out a box of promotional pamphlets from the local studies section of the reference room - sifting through brochures selling bright and bold regeneration schemes, scrutinising images of glossy coloured hoardings built up around what we imagine to be soon-to-be-demolished flats (things deemed “past their prime”).

Sophie Handler, *The Fluid Pavement and Other Stories on Growing Old*, (2006), housebound mobile library service, Newham. Extract from Chapter 1, Degeneration.