

**Creating '48 Hours on Clapham High Street'**  
*An interview with Jim Grover, the photographer*

***How did this project come about?***

I love the challenge of photo-essays - - trying to tell a story that interests others through a series of images. So I am always on the look out for potential subjects, however mundane they may seem on the surface.

Clapham High Street has been on my doorstep for almost 30 years and felt like a suitably challenging subject, so I decided to see what I could make of it. I had no pre-conceived ideas. I just decided to explore it and its characters with my camera - - and see where it took me.

***Your project is full of self-imposed constraints. Why?***

From the outset I applied some deliberate constraints...partly to differentiate some of the themes of the story, partly as a personal challenge, and partly in an attempt to add more interest.

Thus as a local resident I knew that there was a booming weekend night life (the High Street is packed from around 11-3 in the early morning), especially on the North side of the street. So I decided that I would only photograph that side of the street at night, between 5 in the evening and 5 in the morning, and that I would only use black and white images. In contrast, I would only photograph the South side between 5 in the morning and 5 in the evening, and that I would only use colour images.

For me there is an element of 'one street but several different worlds' and I was keen to find ways to amplify this.

Working with these constraints proved to be both helpful and frustrating. On the one hand I found that limiting myself to a single side of the street, depending on the time of day, forced me to look even harder for images and stories, un-distracted by what was going on on the other side of the street. But at times it was also frustrating as opportunities unfolded on the other side of the street which was 'out of bounds' to me!

Black and white also felt right for some of the portraits. Thus the portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Singh Soor and Maurice Dorfman in their respective shops, who have been trading on the high street for over 40 years (an incredible achievement), need to be in black and white in my view.

***You also limited yourself to 48 hours...why was that?***

When I initially conceived this photo-essay, I was going to shoot it in one 24-hour stint.

But I decided against that as I felt that too much was going to rely on 'chance happenings' and on a strip of land, a suburban high street, that is hardly filled with easy visual opportunities. I also wanted to spend time to get to know the high street and, in particular, its characters and to hear their stories.

So instead I decided to work within the constraints of 48 hours of shooting time, although I spent many pleasurable days and nights on the street. There was no formula to how I spent my time: on some days I would spend most of the time just chatting to people who work on the High Street or just 'watching the world go by' and experiencing its ebbs and flows and daily rhythms, and maybe not taking a single image. At other times (for example during the week-end nights) I might shoot continuously for 2-3 hours.

### ***To what extent is this 'street photography'?***

This is not 'street photography' in the traditional sense.

Of course many of the images are taken on the street...but my goal has been to create a set of images that, together, say something about the street and those who use and work on it, as opposed to attempt to create a set of individually captivating images that capture that elusive 'decisive moment'.

And hence me spending time with the people who use and work on the high street, learning what it is like for them, and hearing their stories and memories.

This photo-essay has certainly forced me to listen hard, look hard and to search out what might otherwise be 'unseen'.

### ***What has been the response from those that you have photographed?***

There are those that inevitably remain strangers to me, photographed in a brief and un-staged moment on the street. These people either tolerated me, didn't really notice me (even though I always make myself visible as a photographer, typically using 28mm or 35mm lenses), or stopped for a short friendly chat. Only one person confronted me: a young woman went away clearly unhappy after my explanation of what I was doing and explaining my rights; she returned a few minutes later asking me to delete her image. It was clearly very important to her, for reasons that only she knows, so I happily obliged (even if I am left intrigued).

In a handful of cases I asked individuals on the street to pose for me (pleading 'Don't smile!') as I found them interesting subjects. Most obliged and, in these cases, I'd offer to send them their images and/or gave them a 'Clapham High Street' Oyster Card holder that I had had made up as a 'giveaway' for such moments.

And then there have been people who I have got to know and whom I have wanted to create contextual portraits of. These are clearly collaborative (even if still brief) ventures and they have been generously willing to participate.

***What's the reason for all of the additional research and analysis you have compiled?***

Firstly, for me to get a better understanding of the high street. Secondly, in an attempt to add 'colour' and depth to the overall story (I learned from my last photo-essay exhibition, [www.ofthingsnotseen.com](http://www.ofthingsnotseen.com), that visitors loved the analysis and detail I included). And thirdly, I wanted to find a way to have the voices of those on the high street be a part of the story and exhibition.

The 'fact base' had to be created by me. Thus Boxing Day(!) found me walking the street, cataloguing every outlet on the High Street and even measuring the length of its frontage. The employee numbers required me to ask the manager of each of the 123 outlets for their employee count (I was pleasantly surprised by how freely they shared this with me). And the 3 word descriptions of the High Street by users and workers came about by me asking over 100 people to fill in a small card (I ended up with 120 response cards, and have used 48 of the quotes in the exhibition).

It was a lot of additional work...but, in my view, worth the effort. It may also say something about me: in my previous career, as a strategy director, analysis was a big part of my life.

***How hard has it been to edit a final set of images?***

Very hard! It's such a challenge, in my experience, creating a set of coherent images that fit together and, in total, tell an overall story. And in some ways having both colour and black and white images to integrate has made it even harder.

Katy Barron, who curated my previous photo-essay and exhibition, was invaluable in bringing an expert and independent eye to the process and being brutally candid around images that were either weak or just didn't fit the story. I know that I am not a good editor of my own work; I definitely need someone to help and challenge me.

We've ended up with an exhibition set of 48 images, 24 in colour and 24 in Black and White

***So looking back, how has the experience been?***

On the one hand, 'damn tough' (and I now understand why some photographers spend years on these sorts of projects). Not much happens for a lot of the time on Clapham High Street and it's relatively sparsely populated for many of the daytime hours.

But it's also been a huge pleasure. I have had some wonderful conversations; one shop owner has been on the high street for 58 years, my entire lifetime, with so many memories. I have discovered so many new things about 'my home patch'...and I have experienced the frenetic week-end night-life at 4am in the morning, quite an experience for someone of my age!

### ***Finally...what next?***

This is my second photo-essay. I've discovered that I really enjoy this form of photography and with the subject matter being, broadly, 'social documentary'.

The project has sparked several potential ideas for future projects but, for the moment, I am focused on getting this exhibition staged, and everything that that involves (my 'to do' list seems to have a life of its own!).