

# CHANGING PLACES

THE HOUSE MILL, LONDON  
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TEXT BY STEVEN BODE



Interior picture of The House Mill

The House Mill is the largest surviving tidal mill in the world. Set on an (artificial) island in the River Lea, not far from where it reaches the Thames, its water wheels and accompanying system of interconnected pulleys, gears and grindstones were built to take advantage of the eight-hour surges of water flooding upriver to this part of East London. Although the current building dates from 1776, there have been mills of some description on this site since the time of the Domesday Book, each one harnessing the combined action of natural, elemental forces and human ingenuity to process grain into flour.

When people brought their grist to the mill, it would be ground and graded, sifted and sorted in many different permutations. The various grain bins on the upper floors of the House Mill are testimony to that fact, as well as being symbols (and actual, material remnants) of the wearing, winnowing effects of time, in a building that has itself been through the wringer of history – ravaged by fire in its early years; severely bomb damaged in the Second World War.

The grain bins also provide a resonant backdrop to the video, *STONWORK*, by Omar Chowdhury that unfolds nearby. Over the course of a grindingly repetitive thirty minutes, we watch a team of manual labourers in

Bangladesh, men and women, young and old, with tiny children in attendance, who sift and sort through a mass of rocks and stones, then carry them, bursting basket load after bursting basket load, to another part of the site before the stones are broken down, equally grindingly and repetitively, into smaller chippings. It is work that breaks people down: reducing them to units in an assembly line-cum-chain gang; depleting them of energy, and of dignity. It is not a sight that you see in Great Britain any more (or not so nakedly or starkly) although you would have done at the time of the construction of the House Mill in the eighteenth century, when the template of the mechanised production line that drove industrial expansion was becoming consolidated, and where human beings became increasingly thought of as cogs in a machine.



*STONWORK*, Omar Chowdhury

*STONWORK* reminds us how much of the heavy lifting that prepares the ground for first-world models of industrial production has migrated (or been exported) to other parts of the globe, while also highlighting how several of the wheels that fed the motors that powered Britain's earlier industrial transformations have ground to a halt (to be replaced, so we are told, by other, more immaterial forms of wealth creation). The foundations of industrial dominance may be built on stone, but nothing is set in stone. Change is the only

constant. The House Mill is silent now, its hush only punctuated by the footfalls of tourists and other visitors. The clangs and cries and groans and exhortations of Chowdhury's *STONEWORK* hover in the air like ghosts, echoes of the hubbub of activity that once took place here. Interestingly, as the rocks and stones are further pulverised, first by hand and then by machine, the fine-grade chippings that result start to resemble a silo of grain. Material resources are carefully, painstakingly refined, while, out of shot, it is human beings who are destined for the scrapheap.



*Dust to Dust*, Imran Channa, installed at The House Mill  
Photo: Catarina Rodrigues



Above: *STONEWORK*, Omar Chowdhury, installed at The House Mill  
Below: *Dust to Dust*, Imran Channa, installed at The House Mill  
Photo: Catarina Rodrigues



Downstairs, near the entrance, is Imran Channa's newly commissioned installation, *Dust to Dust*. Channa confronts the viewer with a number of jars of dust, accumulated over a series of visits to former mercantile buildings that have been newly converted into heritage spaces as well as museums and galleries with links to Britain's industrial/imperial past, and especially its trade with India. In the context of this particular building, it is tempting to remark how he is sorting the chaff from the wheat, and finding significance in what has been discarded, or gone neglected, or unnoticed. Dust is its own silent marker of the passing of time; the often invisible counterpart to the ground-down aggregate in Chowdhury's *STONEWORK*. And dust lingers in the air, long after the solid objects that it was part of have

disintegrated. There is an echo of this too in Channa's semi-erased drawing of the 'Crystal Palace', the spectacular showpiece of the Great Exhibition of 1851, and one of the pinnacles of Britain's Victorian industrial heyday. Also hovering in the air is a self-penned soundtrack, recited by an actor, chronicling the places and the people Channa encountered on his travels. The language of the story, with its deliberately florid descriptions, and its tendency towards self-importance and exaggeration, also feels like a hangover from an earlier era: a privileged romance from the time of Britain's industrial, imperial might; mills and boon, indeed.

Not every old industrial building goes to architecture heaven and becomes a heritage site. Far from it. Some lie in disrepair, or in abeyance. Others have simply disappeared; demolished or left to decay into ruins. Of those still standing, many have had their facades restored, and their interiors totally transformed, as the vogue for warehouse living expands and as previously down-at-heel industrial zones become gentrified. In Desire Machine Collective's video *Residue*, a former power station in Guwahati in Northern India has not yet crumbled into dust, but has certainly gone to rust. Filmed in an advanced state of dereliction, the power plant, a potent symbol of man's aspirations for dominion over nature, has yielded to plant power, as the natural world comes back to claim it in a tangle of creepers, branches and vines.



*Residue*, Desire Machine Collective





*The Distance From Here*, Bani Abidi, installed at The House Mill. Photo: Anna Arca



*The Distance From Here*, Bani Abidi



*Locus, Temple*, Omar Chowdhury

Towards the top of the House Mill, in one of the usually inaccessible second-floor spaces, is Bani Abidi's video *The Distance from Here*. The struggle to gain access to see the projection (you have to clamber through a tiny gap in the wall), again adds extra context to the content, which highlights the restrictive formal channels, and associated obstacles, people have to go through to enter a foreign country. To people on the outside, it can seem easier to pass through the eye of a needle than to get through border controls in an airport, especially one that might eventually connect them to one of the advanced, first-world democracies. People wait patiently in line; their application forms checked with the mechanical indifference accorded to items on a conveyor belt. Waiting to travel to their named destination, which may or may not be their

promised land, they too are sifted and sorted, and finally processed. If there was a promised land for people to aspire to, it may not be too far removed from the underlying principles of the utopian micro-community in Omar Chowdhury's second video, *Locus, Temple*. Although set in a Buddhist enclave in Dhaka in Bangladesh, the ways in which work, leisure, and material and spiritual sustenance are each given equal weight is redolent of those rare examples of co-operative factories and model villages that came about in enlightened moments in the industrial era in Britain, in which the various needs of workers were considered and, at least partially, addressed. There is still a very long way to go, all over the world, before an adequate work/life balance is struck. But in the same way that time changes places it can also change attitudes.

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