Preface

This book arises as a result of the general frustration I have found with a great deal of the literature on urban studies. For many years, I have been teaching a course to undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Anthropology Department at UCL, entitled ‘Social Construction of Landscapes’. Part of this course considers the urban as a landscape and the manner in which an anthropological understanding of the urban can be developed through a broadly phenomenological understanding of place and space. The coursework assessment for students involves them undertaking a small research project in which they attempt to write a ‘thick description’ of a particular place, observe and analyse the manner in which it is used by people in their everyday lives, and interview individuals about what this place means to them, why they go there or inhabit it, their likes, dislikes and preferences. UCL’s location in the heart of London, and the fact that the vast majority of the students are resident in London, has meant that many of them over the years have consistently chosen to study particular aspects of London’s urban landscape. Examples, in no particular order, include the Regent’s Canal, Kew Gardens, Chelsea Football Club, Golders Green, Columbia Road flower market, Portobello Road, Hyde Park Corner, following in the footsteps of Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway walking the streets, St Pancras railway station, the London Eye, the Millennium Bridge and the Tate Modern, a Soviet-built battle tank on Mandela Way, Bermondsey, Highgate Cemetery, Brick Lane, shopping in Selfridges, skateboarding on the South Bank, Canary Wharf, London Zoo, Notting Hill Carnival and following the course of the London Marathon. The extraordinary variety and diversity of the places to study is immediately apparent from the list, and students were spoilt for choice.

Nevertheless, I was always faced with two challenging questions and lacked satisfactory answers. The first question concerned examples of high-quality phenomenological writing about place and landscape: where were the ‘thick’ evocative anthropological descriptions to be found
and how were they written? The ones that came to mind were to be found in ethnographic work conducted in very different landscapes and social worlds. In relation to London, they seemed to be a bit ‘off message’ in this respect. The second related question concerned what anthropological books or articles there were discussing particular places in London that might provide inspiration for a substantive study of the relationship between material culture and the practices of everyday life in the city. Again I struggled to think of examples. Those that I could think of were not written by anthropologists, but by social historians or human geographers or sociologists. But none of these were particularly concerned with discussing the materiality of these places from a phenomenological perspective in relation to everyday life. The places were usually discussed simply in terms of providing a rather generalised setting or backdrop for a discussion of people’s lives. In this sense, place hardly seemed to matter. All the stress was on social and political relations, social class, ethnicity and multiculture. There was little sense in these writings of a dialectic between the built environment and the people inhabiting it, the sensuous agency of places as material things, in relation to the people who moved through or inhabited them. The places, in this respect, were all strangely dematerialised, their material specificity neglected and overlooked.

So this book aims to at least partially, and in an exploratory way, fill these two gaps in the literature: a) the paucity of thick ethnographic descriptions of places in London, and b) discussion of the material significance of the places forming London’s urban landscape in relation to everyday life. Filling them amounts to ‘another way of telling’ about the city, the subtitle to this book. It aims to provide an original perspective from the standpoint of anthropological studies of material culture. The subtitle, of course, alludes to John Berger and Jean Mohr’s discussions of the power of visual imagery to tell another kind of story in their book *Another Way of Telling: A Possible Theory of Photography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995). The lack of visual imagery in most academic writing about cities is quite striking. This book, by contrast, contains many images in the various accounts of place. They both help to tell the narratives of place and are part of the attempt made to materialise the social construction of place.

All the contributors to this book have, at some stage in their academic biographies, studied for the Master’s Degree in Material and Visual Culture at UCL (which I coordinate), or have participated in or taught on it, and/or my Social Construction of Landscape course. So there is a shared communality of perspectives and interest between
the contributors in the manner in which they write about place from the particular theoretical and conceptual perspective of the anthropology of material and visual culture.

Each chapter discusses and analyses a particular place in the city. The places discussed in the book were chosen to represent as wide a range of different places as was possible in the scope of a short book. Both the residential and public spheres are considered. The individual discussions range from streets to housing estates to markets and parks, from living on a houseboat to the rhythms of a taxi rank, to the material politics of graffiti and street art.

The particular research methodologies employed in these studies of place, and the manner in which the research was actually undertaken in the individual studies, are discussed at the end of each chapter in the form of methodological notes.