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Change and continuity in a central London street
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‘Rhythm must have meaning.’
Ezra Pound

Life starts early in Cheniston Gardens (CG) on weekdays. People begin to come out from the Victorian buildings at 6.00a.m., heading to the underground station where the Circle and District lines will distribute them all over London and beyond (fig. 1.1). Residents mix with other people taking CG as a shortcut towards High Street Kensington (HSK): male and female adults, no children. Many check their smartphones on the way; a few emerge from the basement flats with a dog, quite likely heading to Kensington Gardens or Holland Park. The flux of pedestrians moving out of the street reaches its peak between 8.00 and 9.30a.m.; meanwhile, in the nearby Wrights Lane (WL), a busy thoroughfare with modern residential and commercial premises leading to HSK, traffic becomes congested. By 10.00a.m. the outward rush is over, motorcycles have left their racks, and bicycles have been unlocked from the railings enclosing the lower ground floor flats. Now a different rhythm, made of short-term activities performed by residents and outsiders, takes place in CG until the late afternoon counter-wave brings people back home.

An uninterrupted flux of tourists pull creaking wheeled luggage along WL from the tube station towards the two hotels at the bottom of the street. Some stop at The Muffin Man, a tea room at the corner between CG and WL, enthusiastically recommended by TripAdvisor reviewers as a quintessential English experience: ‘very British’, ‘a quaint little shop’, ‘a microcosm of Kensington society’, ‘a cosy alternative to your usual Starbucks or Costa’ (Tripadvisor n.d.) (fig. 1.2). The tatty atmosphere
Fig. 1.1 Cheniston Gardens (encircled in red) and the surrounding area of Kensington.

Source: Ordnance Survey open data, 2017
of the tearoom, and the aroma of freshly baked muffins mixed with the smell of toasted bread and fried eggs with bacon evoke the Victorian character of the neighbourhood and enhance the British appeal of the place. Reproductions of old black-and-white photographs of the surroundings are strategically deployed on the walls to tickle the customers’ fancy and add visual awareness to their experience (fig. 1.3). Some of the pictures predate the construction of CG and show how green and airy this area was before major property speculation changed the urban layout of West London in the course of the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The evocative appeal of the old pictures adds meaning to an immersive British re-enactment performed in the ‘true’ atmosphere of the tearoom, culminating in the ritual ‘selfie’ with CG in the background, showing the regular alignment of four-storey Victorian townhouses on the sides of this peculiarly L-shaped street.

During the day, the noise of a broom reveals that Pedro, the caretaker of no. 9, is sweeping the pavement in front of his building. No. 9 is in a dreadful condition: the once creamy stock bricks of the facade are covered with a thick, blackish layer of dirt, creating a sharp contrast with the buildings nearby, whose facades have been renovated recently (fig. 1.4). Although no other house in CG shows a comparable degree of shabbiness, the overall look of the street is undeniably rather patchy. Some facades have been fully or partially coated with white or
Fig. 1.3  View of Wrights Lane from north, before 1881. The brick wall enclosed the rear gardens of houses facing High Street Kensington. The small cottage at the bottom, used as a stable or a warehouse, was later incorporated into the northern sector of the Cheniston Gardens development. © RBKC Local Studies & Archives department

Fig. 1.4  Nos 7–11 Cheniston Gardens – contrasting facades. Source: author
grey paint to conceal a long-lasting negligence; window frames, front
doors and tiled steps have different finishing and colour; quite a few
doorbells are of a poor quality (fig. 1.5), with labels carelessly scribbled,
and dozens of aerial cables are hanging loose along the facades.

On weekdays, most of the residents are away between the rush
hours. Apart from Pedro and the owner of The Muffin Man, the only
people left in CG are a few housewives and aged people, the employees of
the Armenian Embassy at no. 25, three priests in charge of the residence
of the Catholic Order of the Augustinian Recollects at no. 14, and the
doorman of an extensive apartment mansion at the bottom of the street.

All day long, delivery vans try to find their way among the rows of
cars parked on both sides of the street; they always come with two
drivers, one remaining in the unparkable vehicle, the other delivering
the parcels. The postman arrives at 2.00p.m., after any sort of junk mail

Fig. 1.5 Examples of doorbells in Cheniston Gardens. Source: author
has been dropped through the slots of the front doors. Every Tuesday and Friday, waste collection is announced by three bin-men in their high-visibility vests, who swiftly and silently take the rubbish bags out of the basements’ vaults and pile them up by the street lamps; for half an hour, the street is transformed into an open-air dump until the bin lorry comes along and voraciously swallows all the waste up. Male voices from behind a scaffold, regular hitting of hammers, persistent screeching of drills, the soft daubing of a paintbrush, indicate that renovation works are going on somewhere on the street. Near and distant sounds: tenacious noises from burglar alarms, the sudden slamming of a doorway. A siren approaches from HSK and fades down towards Cromwell Road; wheels of a pram pushed by a young mother; an old lady trudging past, carrying a heavy shopping bag. Overall, there is a quiet atmosphere in CG on weekdays, almost untouched by the incumbent rhythms of nearby WL, where traffic goes on intermittently, in tune with HSK traffic lights. High above, the sky is congested with airplanes flying in the direction of Heathrow airport. They come across the CG skyline exactly every 60 seconds, and by the end of the day more than 300,000 people have been flying over this stretch of sky. These gigantic jets do not ‘sing’ like those of the humanised London skyline of Virginia Woolf, nor do they scare people, as did the German Luftwaffe flying over London in World War 2 (WW2) (Woolf 1976:8; see also Beer 1990; Britzolakis 2011). Each new rumble overlaps the previous in a see-sawing rhythm that goes on unrelentingly from 6.00a.m. until the flight ban starts at 11.30p.m. Nevertheless, airplanes come across the sky almost unnoticed, until their sudden disappearance, just before midnight, gives way to an archaic and disorienting silence; paradoxically, it is their very absence that makes people aware of the dull, penetrating sound they have been exposed to during the day.

The Muffin Man shuts at 8.00p.m., the Thai restaurant, situated opposite to it, around 11.00p.m. Before midnight, most of the lights facing CG are being switched off one after the other. For the rest of the night CG sleeps until dawn, wrapped up by the spectral light of old-fashioned-style lamps. Such a quiet atmosphere is typical of CG nights except for Friday and Saturday, when posh cars approaching the nightclub at the bottom of WL rumble along the street looking for a parking space, and a shouting boozy population goes on messing around through the small hours.

At weekends, rhythms and routines are different. Open windows along the facades disclose the jingling and clinking of kitchenware that mingles with indistinct conversations, laughing and coughing. In a first
floor flat, a cat pointlessly seeks to open a gap in the wire mesh wrapped around and above the balcony to prevent it from jumping into the neighbouring flats. At no. 9, a woman pampers her plants on a tiny, cosy balcony, unquestionably the prettiest among the almost uninterrupted row of balconies that run along the first floors of the buildings. Two women in their fifties set the table for a Sunday lunch with guests, but no hint of what they are preparing can be guessed from any smell in the street; in the afternoons during good weather the women come out on the balcony, next to the cosy flowered one, where they sometimes treat each other to pedicure sessions.

Meanwhile in the street, car boots are being filled up and emptied, people either alone or as couples walk out of CG, others come back with shopping bags – a predominantly white milieu, with a conspicuous presence of Asians and just a few people of black heritage. Conversations are in English for the most part, to a lesser extent in some European language (particularly French, Spanish and Italian) or in different (although undistinguishable to my comprehension) Asian and Arab languages. It is a multicultural soundscape that hints directly at the wide geographical network connecting CG to the rest of the world. Apparently no music is associated to such a soundscape, although a wider composite symphony is likely to go on within the privacy of individual earphones. An exception to this lack of music is the Sunday morning liturgical tunes – the hymns attuned to the notes of an organ from the First Church of Christ Scientists on WL at 11.00a.m. and the bell from the spire of St Mary Abbots, the Anglican Parish Church on Kensington Church Street, that clangs intermittently for almost an hour from 8.45a.m. St Mary Abbots’ bells have been regulating the rhythms of the surroundings for many centuries. Ezra Pound, who lived in a flat behind the church at the beginning of the twentieth century, was literally obsessed by their regular striking, to the extent that ‘the Vicar of St Mary Abbots and his bells’ ended up in the list of ‘those to be lambasted’ in the manifesto of Vorticism, the avant-garde movement he founded in 1914, providing a genuinely peculiar and rather unorthodox interpretation of the ‘meaning’ of that ‘rhythm’ (Pound 1971:49; Wyndham Lewis 1914:21).

**An ordinary street in the ‘alpha territory’**

Altogether, the rhythms and routines observed in CG convey a sense of the ‘ordinary’ that stands at odds with the ‘extra-ordinary’ character of Kensington, known for being one of the wealthiest sectors of the city,
where property prices are among the highest in the UK. So, to what extent does this ordinary street comes to terms with the cliché of Kensington as the London elite neighbourhood par excellence? Actually, although the key role of the ‘elite’ in the London socio-economic context has been widely acknowledged (Atkinson 2015; Atkinson, Burrows and Rhodes 2016; Atkinson, Parker and Burrows 2017; Hay 2013; Savage and Williams 2008; Savage et al. 2015), until recently the analysis of this social group has been dealing at large with abstract conceptualisations and statistics rather than with the actual places where the super-rich live (Birchnell and Caletrio 2014; Capgemini 2016). Meanwhile, the spatial mapping of this sector of the population has remained ascertainable only at the level of macro areas (Atkinson et al. 2017; Beaverstock, Hubbard and Short 2004; Cunningham and Savage 2015; Hay and Muller 2011; Savage et al. 2015:281) and information about the residential distribution of the London elite still relies largely on the mainstream representations given by the media and the property market or on the descriptions of the so-called ‘alpha territories’ provided by geo-referenced consumer classification systems such as Mosaic or Acorn (Burrows and Gane 2006; Parker, Uprichard and Burrows 2007; Webber and Burrows 2016). Apart from notable exceptions (Butler and Lees 2006), only in the last few years have the academic focus on localised sectors of the ‘alpha territories’ been advocated as an urgent priority and new site-specific investigations making extensive use of ethnography been launched (Burrows and Glucksberg 2016; Glucksberg 2016; Knowles 2017; Webber and Burrows 2016). Under these circumstances, qualitative research focusing on a single street represents a new perspective to the study of the spatial dynamics of the London elite. It may uncover contingent specificities and peculiarities and at the same time provide insights for broader generalisations.

CG has much in common with other exclusive Kensington addresses, starting with the uniformity of the Victorian architectural features still preserved throughout this area of London, yet it differs from the surroundings in its slightly rundown character. If in large sectors of the borough the wave of ‘super-gentrification’ (Butler and Lees 2006) in the last 20 years has cancelled the traces of previous neglect and disrepair, CG is somehow midway through. Such a unique character makes this street a perfect case study to investigate changes and discontinuities in residential space. It provides the opportunity to look through the grain of the material world, searching for traces, absences and disappearances that reflect changes in dwelling habits and reveal the inherent tension between the longevity of the buildings and the transiency of the dwellers over time.
For the study of CG residential patterns in a diachronic perspective, two methods of investigation have been used: documentary research and ethnography. Maps, public records and demographic data (censuses, directories, electoral rolls), photographs, literary sources, local magazines and newspapers have been dug up to find relevant information dating back to the end of the nineteenth century, including surveys conducted for Charles Booth’s social map of London (Booth 1891, 1902), that provide invaluable early examples of street observation. Ethnography has been backed by a broadly phenomenological approach (Tilley 1994, 2012; Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017) that emphasises the profound significance of human perceptions, interactions and negotiations in relation to the place where people live (Back 2007; Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2016; de Certeau 1984; de Certeau, Giard and Mayol 1998; Lefebvre 1991; Massey 2005; Pink 2012, 2015; Silva and Bennett 2004). Drawing from the conceptual and methodological perspectives of flânerie (Benjamin 1979) and rhythmanalysis (Amin and Thrift 2002; Lefebvre 2014), street observation has been extensively employed to generate thick descriptions of the built environment and everyday routines in CG. This type of information has been complemented by the stories that emerged in the course of semi-structured interviews with the local residents who have been also engaged in sketching their mental maps of the CG neighbourhood and in taking pictures of its surroundings, thus adding the evidence of their bodily experiences to the verbal narratives. In the course of these conversations, it was possible to explore the manifold ways CG people deal with mobility and place-belonging within the wider scenarios of transnational connections that emerged from their stories.

Residential patterns in Cheniston Gardens

CG and its immediate surroundings along WL have been cut out from the boundaries of the Kensington conservation areas established in the 1970s and 1980s. With regard to this, the question arises: what are the reasons for such exclusion? No doubt CG’s architectural forms might not be as aesthetically appealing as in other streets of the borough. Surely, its houses are ‘squeezed-up, gardenless, very dry and bleak enough’ in their appearance (Survey of London 1986:107), yet unattractiveness alone cannot be a reason for exclusion, as other unattractive streets in the borough are nonetheless included in the conservation areas. Likewise, CG was already rundown and shabby in the 1970s and 1980s when the conservation areas were drawn, but its degree of decay
was not much different to that elsewhere in those years. A possible alternative explanation can be found in the high concentration of small flats and bedsits that has characterised the street throughout the twentieth century and to a lesser extent still continues today with the complicity of the local council. By keeping CG out of the conservation area, the council gives de facto free rein to a lucrative renting business of small dwellings, which is hitherto justified and encouraged as a strategy ‘to resist the loss of existing small, self-contained flats of one or two habitable rooms’ that are regarded as a ‘typical Kensington feature’ (RBKC 2015:212). Such a strategy reflects a double-faced building control action that on the one hand justifies and encourages the development of small units in the streets excluded from the conservation areas, and on the other hand allows the super-rich to dig underground ‘pits’ to expand the volumes (and the values) of their properties in the conservation areas – a ‘fair’ deal attempting to reconcile a chronic housing shortage with building speculation. As a result of this policy, today in CG it is much easier to obtain permission to upgrade existing bedsits into the same number of modern units than to convert them into fewer flats or, even more difficult if not impossible, to bring them back to the original Victorian layout of a single independent house, as was attempted un成功fully with no. 17.

The majority of CG bedsits have been upgraded into fancy studios with independent cooking and toilet facilities during the last 10–15 years, but still a few look, or have looked until recently, quite rundown. A survey of no. 17 CG carried out in December 2014, just before the building was sold by public auction for £4.5 million (Allsop 2014), revealed a state of disrepair below any acceptable standard: 19 rooms, including one in the basement without any window at all, with cramped shared toilets and showers arranged in the hallways under the communal staircase. Intensive multiple occupation of this building had been going on since the end of WW2, when it was converted from flats into bedsits. During the 1980s, no. 17 was an unauthorised hostel for international students, and short-term letting was carried on uninterrupted for 30 years under different owners without any substantial improvement to the building. In 2010, an application to re-convert no. 17 into a single house was rejected by the borough on the grounds of the need to ‘resist the loss of small units’. After being auctioned, the property underwent a complete refurbishment that reduced the number of rooms of just two units from 19 to 17, which are now advertised on the property market as luxury studios for short lets at £4,500 per month by a discreet company operating for a foreign owner (figs 1.6 and 1.7).
In contrast to no. 17, no. 9 has remained to date unchanged and looks as if it is ‘suspended in time’. No authorised renovation seems to have occurred since the house was built in the early 1880s. From the 1950s, after more than 50 years of occupation by members of the same family, the building started being used as a boarding house; since then, intensive occupation by people of different nationalities (mainly Irish,
Fig. 1.7  Kitchens at no. 17 before and after renovation. Source: author
Greek, Maltese and Indian) went on until the arrival in the 1980s of a ‘colony’ of Galicians, who still live there today in independent rooms with shared toilets and showers. They have low-paid jobs, mostly in the caring and service sectors. One of them, Pedro, acts as unofficial house caretaker during his time off from his job as a night watchman in Knightsbridge; he is in charge of collecting the rents on behalf of the British proprietor: ‘When you have to collect the money,’ he explains with a complicit wink, ‘you have to speak the same language.’

Some of CG bedsits are advertised as student-friendly accommodation. These are self-contained studios with bathing and cooking facilities. They are comparatively cheap for the area (from £150 to £220 per week including bills), but usually very small and the furnishing extremely basic. Monica, a 31-year-old Slovakian woman, lived in a bedsit at no. 16 CG for five years and moved away in 2015; she arrived in London as a student, and now works for an estate agent in Chiswick: ‘When I came here the building was half empty. The Arab agent told me that the new owner, an Armenian investor, had just completed the refurbishment.’ CG Middle Eastern property agents are usually very efficient in filling up bedsits; for example, a young single mother from Martinique and her teenage son were approached just on their arrival from Paris at St Pancras station by a man with a visiting card advertising lettings in CG. Behind these small entrepreneurs there are wealthy investors whose identities most of the time are shrouded in mystery, as the account of Rose, an American student on a one-year contract at no. 6, points out: ‘There is a story going around that this house was gifted a couple of years ago to an Arab guy by his multimillionaire family for his 28th birthday.’

In CG’s dwelling geography, the world of bedsits coexists with larger residential units that can be afforded only by people with substantial assets. Fred, a US citizen and CEO of an American media company, rented a luxury maisonette at no. 30 for more than two years, paying £3,350 a month. Thomas, a retired Swiss banker, occupied a sober, classical two-bedroom flat with antique paintings and a tiny balcony for 30 years. He is back in Switzerland now, and his flat was sold for £1,195 million to an international investor from Medellin (Colombia).

Basement apartments provide an opportunity to stay conveniently located in the city with relatively smaller budgets, particularly if you have a pet. Emily, a divorced middle-aged lady with an interest in building history, has lived in the basement flat at no. 14 since 1994: ‘I was looking for something affordable in the area and I found this flat that was cheap because of its dreadful condition.’ She thoroughly transformed
her basement from dark and bleak into a bright cheerful burrow for herself and Rufus, her pet dog. Two houses away, Glenda, another dog owner and a lecturer in economics in her late 50s, comes to her basement flat in her red sports car only on the days she has to teach courses at the university. Her flat had been kept shabby and dark for more than 30 years until a cheerful neighbour working in the building sector renovated it to a fairly decent standard.

The shabby appearance of the street is likely to be the reason for the relatively ‘lower’ average price of CG properties (£1,359 million) compared to the average property value for W8 (£2,758 million) (Zoopla, n.d.). However, as anybody who has invested in a central London location has experienced, those who bought a property in CG two or three decades ago have seen the properties’ values at least double, if not increase three to ten times from their original price, thus becoming de facto millionaires. Maria bought her two-floor maisonette at no. 21 CG in April 1992: ‘We bought the flat with a mortgage when the previous owner, an old lady, died. I had fallen in love with it at first sight.’ Maria is a retired primary school teacher and a widow now and she lives at no. 21 CG with two of her three sons. Together with her elder son, a filmmaker, she volunteers with young adults with disabilities and refugee and immigrant families. Their flat is one of the largest in CG, more than 150 square metres split over two floors. The living room on the ground floor is screened from the street by dozens of plants placed against the large bay window that looks like an indoor greenhouse. Though unpretentious and unsophisticated, the home is cosy and atmospheric and conveys an overall sense of inclusiveness. Nothing is there by chance; furniture and accessories tell a lot about the life story of the family, the places they had previously lived in or visited, their tastes and beliefs. The miniatures and butterflies framed on the walls, the tribal mask on the side table, the ethnic sculpture on the fireplace and the poster of a Ken Loach film are fragments of personal biographies – messy, temporary and precarious, as human lives are.

The human richness of Maria’s interior contrasts strikingly with the anonymity of CG furbished homes available on the rental market. In these homes, immaculate fitted kitchens are combined with living areas where the banal becomes manifest through touches of exoticism mixed with a zest for vintage and a flavour of Britishness. A reproduction of a photograph chosen within a predictable range of subjects invariably complements these interiors, usually placed above the fireplace. Fireplaces are highly appraised and, together with bathtubs, represent the material and symbolic objectifications of the divide between flats.
and studios, no matter whether real fires are actually forbidden in central London or showers have replaced baths in the accelerated rhythms of everyday life. There are many flats of this kind in CG. They are almost identical to each other and to the vast majority of the flats on the rental market in central London. Estate agents label them as ‘fully’ or ‘newly’ ‘refurbished to a high standard’, as opposed to the properties described as ‘with a lot of character and potential’, hinting at a long-standing lack of substantial renovation.

The diversified array of accommodation available in CG, from bedsits to flats of various sizes, either newly refurbished or in disrepair, reflects the economic diversity within the social milieu of the street. In CG one can find British people like Maria who have been upgraded to be millionaires by the market living next door to rich foreign investors and to a mostly transient, less affluent multicultural population of students, professionals, skilled and unskilled workers. From this point of view, the characterisation of CG that emerges from an empirical approach to the study of its residential patterns discloses peculiarities and specificities that stand out in partial contradiction to the mainstream representation of prime central London locations as territories uniformly occupied by a fleeting and inaccessible elite of super-rich, and suggests the existence of wealth gaps in Kensington that collide with the depiction of this borough as the quintessential ‘alpha territory’ of the super-rich.

**Filling up**

Currently, the CG Victorian development accommodates a population that can be roughly estimated at 400/450 people distributed over 293 dwellings. These figures, obtained by comparing and contrasting the 2011 census data at the level of the local area (NOMIS 2017) with the results of street observations, indicate a densely occupied neighbourhood, matching the data reported by the census for the whole Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which scores the second-highest population density and the highest household density in London and the UK (ONS 2011). While the extremely high figures in terms of population and household density come as no surprise, what is indeed surprising is the comparison of such figures with the demographic data provided by the historic censuses. In 1901, when the CG compound was in full occupation, it accommodated a population of 254 residents living in 57 independent dwellings. This means that over the course of 116 years,
the number of residents has almost doubled, and those very houses that were created to accommodate a few dozen households are now parcelled up in a number of units that is five times bigger than the number foreseen in the original development. For a thorough understanding of the present residential pattern, this section will focus on the process that underpinned the transformation of the CG built environment from self-contained Victorian townhouses to boarding houses/bedsits and flats, demonstrating how such a process had already started at the beginning of the twentieth century in connection with major changes in the socio-economic milieu that are reflected in the composition and organisation of the household (fig. 1.8).

The CG Victorian development was built on a plot of approximately 7,000 square metres on the western side of WL previously occupied by a Georgian villa with a pleasure garden that was demolished (fig. 1.9). The new compound and the L-shaped street that cuts through it were given the fictional name Cheniston Gardens, passing it off as an old English version of Kensington (Loftie 1888:13–15). Thirty-nine high-rise terrace-houses were ready for occupation in 1882, together with three semi-detached artists’ studios hidden in the corner where the street bends southwards (fig. 1.10). A fancy redbrick cottage, Cheniston Lodge, was attached to the western row of townhouses three years later, and in 1895 a mansion with 12 apartments was built next to it (fig. 1.11). The houses were erected over five levels, including a lower ground floor, using as building material a creamy stock brick pointed with reddish lime mortar that is typical of many Victorian buildings. Two architectural styles merged in the layout of the facades: small windows with red terracotta friezes on the two upper floors, classical stuccoed porticos and large bay windows on the levels below, quite likely an aesthetic artifice in an attempt to minimise the visual impact caused by the lower ceiling heights of the two upper floors. The difference in style of the two lower floors was accentuated by two rows of cast iron balustrades at street level and along the first floor, where they encapsulated small balconies running on the top of the patios and bay windows of the ground floor.

Each townhouse was meant to fit the needs of one family with a few servants. Each building was subdivided into 10–14 rooms over the four floors and the basement. On the lower ground, accessible via the external staircase but also connected internally to the upper floors, there were a kitchen, a pantry, a scullery, a cellar, the servants’ toilet and two storage spaces for coal in the external patio. The ground and first floors were used as living spaces: a dining room and a library or smoking room on the
Fig. 1.8 Diagram showing the variation in occupation density of Cheniston Gardens houses from 1881 to 2015. Pale orange: single family dwellings; orange: flats; red: boarding houses, bedsits, studios. Source: author
Fig. 1.9  Map of the area before Cheniston Gardens was developed. Source: Ordnance Survey Map 1871, Sheet 74 Kensington

Fig. 1.10  Entrance to Cheniston Gardens studios nested among two rows of townhouses. Source: author
ground floor, a landing and a drawing room on the first floor. The second floor accommodated three main bedrooms and a bathroom. Four smaller bedrooms on the top floor were meant for the servants but could also accommodate children if needed. Each floor was equipped with four fireplaces.

From the early 1880s to the turn of the century, CG townhouses became the homes of the families of well-to-do civil servants, army officers and professionals (solicitors, businessmen, doctors, engineers and architects). A large majority had colonial connections either by birth or by career, including quite a few retired officers who had spent part of their life in the colonies either in the army or in the civil service. A lively artistic community congregated around the three studios, adding a touch of bohemian atmosphere to the prevalent bourgeois character of the street: some were minor artists who left little track of their activities, yet a few were among the most successful portraitists of the Victorian aristocracy. In those days, CG residents were exclusively of British origin with roots in central or southern England, where many returned to spend part of the year in their family country estates, coming back to London for the ‘season’ (from October to the end of April).

**Fig. 1.11** Cheniston Gardens, view from south. To the left Cheniston Lodge and the apartment house that were added to the row of townhouses in 1885 and 1895. Source: author
While away, some residents rented out their houses on short-term agreements; others simply left them vacant for a substantial period of time: in 1891, 14 out of 42 households registered in the census were reported as being temporarily vacant or the properties occupied just by servants. An Irish enclave was formed by a group of houses next to each other on the northern stretch of the street, a residential pattern that unveils the contradictory feelings of the elite sector of the Irish migration, whose members on the one hand tended to group together to preserve their ethnic identity, and on the other hand were keen to mix with the English upper class to mark their status and at the same time act as ambassadors of Irish cultural values within British society (Swift and Gilley 1999).

A substantial number of spinsters and widows ‘living on their own means’ provide clues to the existence in CG already in 1891 of small yet prosperous renting businesses. The most renowned house in this respect was that of Mrs Vernon, who ran an unofficial boarding house at no. 32. An artist involved in the Women’s suffrage movement, a lieutenant, a clerk at an insurance office, a student at the National Health Society, a retired army general and a retired engineer are just a pale reflection of the varied community she accommodated at her premises in the course of almost 40 years.

In Charles Booth’s social map of London of 1889, CG is represented in yellow, a colour employed for the ‘Upper-middle and Upper class’ (Booth 1891). Yellow areas are not uniformly widespread in Kensington, and CG stands out in the map among less affluent areas that are represented in red, confirming its character as an exclusive elite neighbourhood (fig. 1.12). However, according to the census carried out two years later, the members of the wealthy families amounted to just 74 out of the 169 people living in CG, and the rest of the population were servants. Except for a footman, a page and a valet, all the servants were women, in large majority from southern England and London, aged from 15 to 60 according to their tasks. Their overwhelming presence was crucial in shaping CG everyday rhythms as highly gendered. Husbands were away at work for most of the day, while teenaged sons were spending part of the year in college elsewhere. CG, therefore, was the absolute domain of women: housewives with their daughters, spinsters, widows and servants (fig. 1.13).

With the new century, an increase in the number of boarding houses began to undermine the stability that had characterised the CG social milieu during the previous 20 years. The shift towards a more structured renting business is hinted already in 1901 in the field notes of
Fig. 1.12  Charles Booth’s map of London poverty (1891). The CG houses are highlighted in yellow, the colour of the upper-middle and upper classes. © The British Library Board, Maps C.21.a.18 det.
Inspector King, a police officer in charge of the survey of Kensington for the new edition of Charles Booth’s social map, who observes that CG ‘looks like lodging houses’ and suggests to represent CG as ‘red to yellow’ in the map, where the red stands for ‘a hardworking sober, energetic class’ (Booth 1902:33–62). A substantial change in the CG social milieu is confirmed 10 years later by the number of official boarding houses recorded by the new census. Gradually, the typical Victorian family with servants was giving way to a different kind of household, centred on the housekeeper. A woman in most cases, she was responsible for accommodating the boarders and for their lodging. In-house servants were not necessary, since the housekeeper was also directly in charge of domestic services or hired cleaners living elsewhere. Together with her family, she usually occupied a small portion of the house either in the basement or on the ground floor. The housekeepers and the members of their families – a jobbing paperhanger, an upholsterer, a clerk in a coach-building firm, a bookbinder, a milk carrier, a carpenter and joiner,
just to mention a few – had little to share with the upper-class people who had been dominant in CG during the previous three decades. The change in the social milieu was also favoured by an increasing number of boarders. These were in the vast majority young people in their 20s: some had come to London to study at the university; many were music students or professional musicians, quite likely in connection with the nearby Royal Academy of Music; others were foreigners who had come to London to improve their English; a few young girls were aspiring actresses seeking their fortune on the London stage.

At the same time, the gradual displacement from CG of the upper-middle class was facilitated by the aspirations for change of that very elite. By the turn of the century, bearing the costs for the maintenance of a large Victorian property with live-in servants came to be considered unaffordable, and new types of dwellings appeared more suitable to a modern lifestyle, from self-contained flats to smaller detached or semi-detached houses in the new London suburbs, where people could benefit from more greenery and much cleaner air. The lack of green space became a particularly crucial issue for CG residents when it was announced that a massive development of six-storey mansions was to be built just behind the street on the last bit of green space in the surroundings of WL. The opposition of several CG householders did not succeed in stopping or changing the project of Iverna Court, which was completed in 1901. In the meantime, an increasing number of commercial premises were altering the original residential character of the street, bringing a further reason for the progressive estrangement of the upper class. At the beginning, these were essentially dressmakers’ workshops, which worked to supply the fashionable department stores – Barkers, Derry & Toms, and Pontings – that had started their fast-growing expansion on the High Street, but over the course of the years other businesses joined in: schools of dance and music, care homes, a kindergarten, private clubs with restaurants, therapists and masseurs.

During the inter-war period, the scale of conversion of the original Victorian homes into smaller units became massive in connection with the needs of a new type of dweller looking for affordable accommodation, no matter how small it was. In view of this, many houses were converted into one- to three-bedroom flats or into cheap bedsits, where any available space was turned into a place to sleep equipped with a washbasin. Renovations implied in most cases extensions to the rear of the buildings in order to fit bathrooms and toilets on all floors and to create extra space for new bedrooms. Bit by bit, internal courtyards and patios disappeared, replaced by messy brick boxes, piled up one on top of
the other without any planning criteria and with the complicity of loose building controls that followed the overarching principle that anything can happen to the interior as long as it is not visible from the outside. The massive transformation into smaller living units is likely to have been favoured by the compressed design of the buildings, which implied simple readjustments rather than reshaping; without spare spaces in excess, a bedsit could be created by just shutting a door. Likewise, inexpensive extensions for additional rooms were just as easily carried out, particularly in the central building compound, where the backyards of the townhouses are encapsulated inside four wings of facades and therefore totally concealed from view (fig. 1.14).

Again, in this new phase, a vast majority of residents were single women, now flocking to live in central London as the result of major transformations in the labour market during the first decades of the twentieth century. The first to arrive had been young girls from poorer areas of London, hired as live-in apprentices by the tailoring shops that had opened their businesses in CG. A second wave of women arrived after World War 1 (WW1), coming from all over the country to work in London as typists, receptionists, shop assistants, or employees in the civil service. Some CG boarding houses accepted exclusively women, as it was at the Perks’, which accommodated female boarders throughout its 60 years of activity at no. 30. When the Perks had moved to CG in 1911, John Perks was a clerk at the stock exchange and Elsie, his wife, a dressmaker/employer. Like all other CG tailors, Madame Elsie shut down her business by the end of the 1920s and turned her workshop into a boarding house. Elizabeth, who recently passed away, was one of the boarders in 1943. She was 22 years old, had just graduated in English from Oxford, and had found a job in London as a civil servant at the Ministry of Information in Senate House. Between air raids, she was carrying on a fair routine, working until 6.00p.m., taking typing lessons at Pitmans, and going out with friends in the West End in the evenings. She recalls her stay at the Perks’ as a substantial improvement compared to her previous accommodation in North London, where she had to climb up five floors to reach the toilet: ‘In CG my room was on the first floor, not far from the bathroom. There was a partition dividing the bed from the stove and the sink. Apart from the bed, there was no other furniture in the room, and when I had friends visiting me, we used to sit on the floor.’

Alongside boarding houses and bedsits, sectors of townhouses were converted into flats of various sizes, some occupying one single floor, others extending over two floors into large maisonettes. Better-off families, predominantly British, but also American and Australian, from
more advantaged social and economic backgrounds were living in these larger dwellings. At no. 17, a maisonette on the second and third floor was the home of the offspring of two business partners of the renowned department store Fortnum & Mason. Emma, a current resident at no. 12, recalls that the Sewells, distant relatives of her husband, lived there from the 1930s to the end of the 1950s: ‘They had created a large dance studio that occupied the whole first floor; it was still there with part of its decoration, its mirrors, an empty, magnificent open space when we moved here thirty years ago.’ That was the studio of Edna Morton Sewell, the world champion ballroom dancer known as Edna Deane, famous for being the ‘girl who danced with the Prince of Wales nine times in a row’ (New York Times 1995).

In the aftermath of WW2, London was hit by a severe housing crisis as a consequence of the shortage of new homes and of the heavy damage to the housing stock from air raids. The Kensington ‘Great Sunday Squat’ on 8 September 1946, when more than a thousand people took over empty flats in the district, lasted only two weeks but led the central government to act with new social housing measures (Burnham 2004). These measures implied that many unoccupied buildings in central London were to be turned into council houses. In CG, no. 25 was confiscated and converted into a house for destitute old ladies. A few years later, the Cheniston Court Hotel that extended over two buildings was transformed into temporary accommodation for homeless families. Even the once-praised Cheniston Lodge, which had been home to rich merchants and professionals, became a council property and, after being used as air raid precaution depot during the war, was turned into the registrars’ offices of the borough (Murphy 2010). However, differently from nearby Earls’ Court and Notting Hill, Kensington was not targeted by the post-war massive migration of people forcibly displaced from their countries or voluntarily seeking asylum. A limited effect of such a phenomenon in CG is hinted at by a few Eastern European names (Polish, Russian, Yugoslav and Armenian) listed in the electoral rolls.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the whole of Kensington was being transformed into what has been labelled the ‘land of the bedsitter’ (Miles 2010:82), a world that Muriel Spark efficaciously represented in her best-selling novel A Far Cry from Kensington (Spark 1988). Bedsits in CG were now used on a corporate scale: a prominent dealer in antiques accommodated his many American customers at no. 23, no. 18 was a staff hostel for Sainsbury’s employees, no. 38 a nursing home.

While during the inter-war period, the coexistence of bedsit occupants and apartment householders had been apparently rather...
peaceful, the situation was different after the war: particularly from the 1960s, tensions among neighbours became a common affair, reflecting not only social differences but also generational conflicts. Complaints were made from the traditional households about groups of young people living together in rundown properties; sharing flats was in fact a fashionable habit among the youth counterculture gathered around the catch-all term of ‘swinging London’, which had in the nearby High Street one of its most iconic temples, the fashionable Biba shop. From the 1970s, bedsit landlords were largely people of foreign nationality, either well-off Middle Eastern investors or expatriates from Eastern European countries, as was the case with the Serbian owners of a bed and breakfast at no. 28 CG, who had started as cleaners and caretakers in the 1960s ending up in the 1980s with a financial empire in the hotel business. The aggressive approach of this new wave of speculators was the origin of complaints from many flats’ householders; the director of a well-known London museum, who was living in CG in those years, was literally obsessed by the growing number of ‘disguised hotels’ and by the intensive letting out of rooms that was transforming the residential character of the street.

The count of the people registered in the electoral rolls suggests a specific demographic trend for CG, showing constant population growth from the 1930s to at least the 1960s, in stark contrast with the census figures relating to Kensington, which are conversely characterised by a substantial population drop (GB Historical GIS 2017). During this period of time, CG residents were, in the vast majority, white British, with the addition of a few Europeans, Australians and Americans, but from the 1980s foreign migration, particularly from European countries, became significant both in CG and in the wider neighbourhood. This was the time when the Galicians came to live at no. 9. Bedsits and flats were quite rundown in those days, due to a lack of renovation for many years, and provided cheap accommodation to a multicultural population often from disadvantaged backgrounds. Emily has a vivid memory of the tenants who lived in her basement flat before she moved in: ‘There by the toilet’s door there was a hole on the floor where he [a drug dealer] used to hide the dope. He shared the flat with an Argentinian prostitute who was claiming she was doing the job part-time just when her husband was away.’ Maria remembers the ‘filthy curtains reeking of cigarettes’ she found when she moved to no. 21; ‘We stripped everything away; under the carpet we discovered a whole layer of old newspapers reporting on the Vietnam war.’ Some dwellings were available under a social housing scheme that, in a few circumstances, was in force until not long ago:
'A Scottish cleaner was still living in this house after it was renovated; the agent told me it was hard to make her vacate the room,’ explains the American art student at no. 6. In 2001, more than a dozen residents from African and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds were still renting under a social housing scheme. These types of dwellings, run down and for this very reason ‘affordable’, existed until very recently in CG, and in a few cases still exist today, alongside flats that have been renovated to the highest standards. Just a few yards away from no. 9, where the Galician enclave is squeezed in cramped bedsits, the three Cheniston Studios have been the home of well-off arty types and celebrities all the way into the new millennium, the late Robin Gibb of the Bee Gees being just the last of a long list of renowned names.

Dwelling inequalities ultimately explain the current uneven appearance of CG, yet they are scarcely visible from the outside. As on a theatre stage, the Victorian facades with their repetitive architectural patterns act as brick curtains, keeping out of sight what is going on behind the scenes. Only the long lists of numbers on the doorbells, in the majority carelessly scribbled, hint at what is concealed behind the front doors. Inequalities have been at work in CG since the first occupants settled in the street more than 130 years ago; at the very beginning it was the distinction between servants and members of the affluent Victorian families, then among bedsit tenants on short-term contracts and long-term flat occupiers, then between migrants and wealthy white British. Through the act of dwelling, the less affluent and the better off have been ceaselessly living side by side in a social milieu that, far from being the exclusive terrain of a consistently wealthy class, has been characterised over time by people with pronounced economic disparities: between the poor and the affluent, the well to do and the wealthy and, in more recent times, between the rich and the super-rich. In this perspective, the analysis of residential patterns over time transcends the minutiae of the historical reconstruction and provides a powerful lens for understanding the complexity of contemporary urban inequalities (Atkinson, Burrows and Rhodes 2016; Butler and Watt 2007; Dorling 2014; Hamnett 2003; Minton 2017; Savage et al. 2015).

The neighbourhood

The most recent comprehensive update on the CG population has been provided by the Office for National Statistics through the neighbourhood statistics area-based web service, NOMIS, where 2011 census
data have been released at the level of preset small geographical output areas (NOMIS 2017). CG data are included in an output area referring to 198 households constituting a total of 281 residents. Although this area does not match exactly the CG compound (a part of the southern stretch of the street is cut out), the data associated with it provide a fairly accurate picture of the CG neighbourhood at the time of the last national census. They show that 60 per cent of the dwellings are one-person households; two-person households represent 25 per cent, while those with more than two people 15 per cent. The picture that emerges is of a population of singles (either unmarried or separated/divorced) and couples without children. The number of women is slightly lower than that of men (47 versus 53 per cent), according to a countertrend that started with the new millennium and is now consistent all over the borough. Age records show that 65 per cent of the residents are between 25 and 44 – a fairly young adult population compared to the figures available for the borough as a whole, where the same life stage is represented by 39 per cent of the residents. Many are graduates and work in professional or managerial occupations, and their incomes are well above the national average and, although less dramatically, above the London average. In the geo-demographic segmentation of socio-economic types developed by Acorn, the vast majority fit into the category of ‘metropolitan professionals’, while the so called ‘metropolitan money’, whose homes are worth over £1 million, are under-represented as compared to other Kensington neighborhoods (http://acorn.caci.co.uk). In other words, CG is a street where the ‘ordinary rich’ prevail as opposed to the ‘super-rich’ gathered in other more exclusive areas of the borough.

The contrast with the borough figures is particularly remarkable when it comes to people’s ethnicity and country of origin. Although Kensington, and CG with it, are traditionally white areas with a white population above 70 per cent, the ratio between white British and ‘other Whites’ shows an almost reversed pattern: British and Irish represent 42 per cent of the population in Kensington and 27 per cent in CG, while the ‘other Whites’ are 29 per cent in Kensington and 50 per cent in CG. Compared to the figure for the whole city of London, where they represent only 13 per cent, the ‘other Whites’ stand out as a robust component of the Kensington population, but their presence in CG is well over the average for the borough. The same applies to the country of birth: those born in the UK/Ireland are 50 per cent in Kensington and 31 per cent in CG, while Europeans (European Union (EU) and non-EU) are 20 per cent in Kensington and 36 per cent in CG (fig. 1.15). Zooming in on the census records for the output area, there were 102 Europe-born residents
Fig. 1.15  Place of birth of Cheniston Gardens’ residents in 2011 Census. Source: author
in 2011: 17 from Spain, 12 from Italy, 10 German, 9 French and the rest from Poland, Romania, Portugal and Turkey. The availability of small accommodation in rented bedsits and studios is likely to have acted as a catalyst for a growing wave of Europeans favoured until now by free movement within the EU, to the extent that at present European-born residents represent by far the largest component of CG multicultural environment. Besides the Europeans and the British, this includes to a lesser extent people from all over the world; according to the census records, 31 different languages apart from English are actually spoken in this small area.

Altogether, the picture provided by the census adds further evidence to what the analysis of the residential patterns has so far highlighted: that is, the unique character of CG, whose population on the one hand shares features with the wider borough, but on the other hand stands out for its own distinctive traits – a younger multicultural population with a far higher number of Europeans who live in this street on either a permanent or temporary basis.

However, although statistics and geo-referenced consumer classifications are undoubtedly helpful to spot peculiarities and suggest trends, they may easily lead to stereotyped generalisations. They give detailed evidence of a multicultural environment in CG, but they do not unravel the dynamics of diversity, rootedness and mobility that underpin it. They suggest forms of transnationalism that make class distinctions meaningless, but at the same time they do not provide explanations of how people connect to the place and the meanings they attach to it, as situated ethnographic research can do.

To understand the CG neighbourhood, it is necessary to focus on the habits and values of its residents and on how these are reflected in their relationship with the street, the borough, the city and the wider world. Adopting a broad phenomenological perspective, this research on the CG social environment wittingly moves away from abstract conceptualisations about neighbourhood and their multiple relationships with the idea of community that still enlivens the sociological debate about place (see Tonkiss 2003; Watt and Smets 2014) and focuses instead on the ‘sensuous and sensory dimension of social experience and community life’ (Back 2009:14). Neighbourhoods and communities in London are fleeting, fragile and constantly reworked. Yet bonds exist (Andreotti 2014; Blokland 2003; Blokland 2017) and the notion of neighbourhood cannot be simply dismissed as irreconcilable with contemporary London, as is suggested by Daniel Miller, who refers to the ‘unprecedented coherence’ and the ‘unique configurations’ at the level of individuals and
households that are revealing of ‘an internal holism and order set against the overall diversity of London’ (Miller 2008; 2009:7–11).

Investigating the CG neighborhood should not necessarily mean searching for ties that justify its existence, or looking for its borders (Watt and Smets 2014:8). It rather means unravelling how near-dwellers coexist ‘in place’ and what meaning they ascribe to it. In CG, near-dwellers hardly know each other but they feel each other’s presence: along the street or from the windows of their flats, their proximity is marked by gazes, gestures and rarely by words; a soft concurrence of signs and non-verbal exchanges defines the style of an ‘imagined’ neighbourhood, ‘whose members will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (Anderson 2006:5, 6). From this point of view, CG provides a grounded example of the often cited ‘London conviviality’ (Gilroy 2004), where ‘indifference to difference’ is the key word to understand human relationships (Amin 2012; Valluvan 2016).

Cognitive maps

The investigation of a residential neighbourhood is challenging, because it lacks the vibrancy of human relations that, conversely, can be found in commercial streets, where social interaction is more overtly disclosed. A residential street is to a certain extent ‘sanitised’, and its sensorial lure more difficult to grasp compared, for example, to a market, where a phenomenological approach involves the whole sensorial spectrum (Rhys-Taylor 2013, 2017). In CG, smells and tastes remain behind closed doors, apart from the mixed aroma of baked muffins and fried eggs coming from The Muffin Man. In addition, the homogeneity of the Victorian architecture muffles the visual details and makes specificities not immediately ascertainable.

In such a context, the information about individual experiences and practices provided by the residents’ interviews (table 1.1) and by their pictures and sketched maps of the neighbourhood becomes crucial for the understanding of CG everyday life. Photos and maps reflect individual and differentiated topographies that help one in disclosing habits, tastes, affects, encounters and activities that form part of the everyday routine of people. Liza, a CG resident since 2000, represents her neighbourhood as a series of routinised encounters: the aged newspaper man at the kiosk by the underground station entrance, the bank clerk
Table 1.1  List of the people interviewed in Cheniston Gardens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Sector of activity</th>
<th>Type of dwelling</th>
<th>In CG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46–60</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Addis Ababa</td>
<td>education</td>
<td>maisonette</td>
<td>1992–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46–60</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Gloucestershire</td>
<td>yoga teacher and artist</td>
<td>maisonette</td>
<td>1985–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31–45</td>
<td>Slovakian</td>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>real estate</td>
<td>bedsit</td>
<td>2010–14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yussuf</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>46–60</td>
<td>Iraqi/British</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>IT development</td>
<td>flat</td>
<td>1987–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenny</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>French Caribbean</td>
<td>Martinique</td>
<td>high school student</td>
<td>bedsit (with mum)</td>
<td>2012–14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liza</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>over 60</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Hampshire</td>
<td>healthcare</td>
<td>flat</td>
<td>2000–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46–60</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>south of London</td>
<td>academic</td>
<td>basement flat</td>
<td>1984–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31–45</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>housewife</td>
<td>apartment</td>
<td>2014–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46–60</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>living on own means</td>
<td>basement flat</td>
<td>1994–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>over 60</td>
<td>Swiss</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>retired banker</td>
<td>flat</td>
<td>1990–2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18–30</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>MA student</td>
<td>bedsit</td>
<td>2014–15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Felipe</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>over 60</td>
<td>Spanish/British</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>priest</td>
<td>house</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46–60</td>
<td>American/British</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>flat</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominique</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>31–45</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>flat</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued table 1.1)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Sector of activity</th>
<th>Type of dwelling</th>
<th>In CG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>46–60</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>IT CEO</td>
<td>maisonette</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedro</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>over 60</td>
<td>Spanish/British</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>watchman/</td>
<td>flat</td>
<td>1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>housekeeper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Over 60</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>doorman</td>
<td>flat</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Over 60</td>
<td>British/Lebanese</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>owner of coffee</td>
<td>coffee shop</td>
<td>not known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>shop</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>retired</td>
<td>bedsit</td>
<td>In 1943</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
sitting behind his office window, the chocolate seller, the people at her gym in WL, and to the east, past her favourite charity shop, Waitrose where she buys her groceries. The neighbourhood topography that Emma draws traces her daily itinerary with her dog towards Kensington Gardens (fig. 1.17), less than 10 minutes to the north-east of CG. This park is mentioned also by other residents as a place for a walk, either with dog or without, or to cycle through, often coupled with Holland Park, but most often in opposition to it: Emily starts her daily routine at 8.30 a.m. by going for a walk with Rufus to Holland Park; Glenda takes her dog exclusively to Kensington Gardens; Liza goes cycling every day through Kensington Gardens, as in Holland Park cycling is forbidden. In the mental maps of many CG residents, these two extensive parks represent the eastern and western edges of neighbourhood interaction, compensating for the lack of green spaces in the immediate surroundings of CG, where the only form of greenery is provided by two slender and battered birch trees planted some 20 years ago on the inner corner of the street (fig. 1.16). Most of the residents’ on-site routine takes place on the stretch of HSK between the two parks where a vast array of fancy, posh and expensive retailers and department stores are lined up. Shopping for groceries is a selective activity and may vary according to affordability, personal attitudes, interests and moods. Marks & Spencer, the closest supermarket to the tube station, is easily reachable ‘in the days you are lazy or in hurry’ (Emily), but at Waitrose ‘the food is more fresh’ (Liza); the Americans and the Italians prefer the alleged natural and organic products of the even more expensive Whole Foods. Dominique, a young French professional in the IT sector, goes to Whole Foods just for the ‘small everyday grocery’, and for the ‘big stuff’ he shops online; a sporty type, fond of rock climbing, cycling and jogging, he is also a regular client of the retailers of outdoor and mountain equipment that are aligned on the northern side of this stretch of the High Street at a stone’s throw from each other. Five residents extend their maps of the neighbourhood to Stratford Road, a small alley to the south of CG, but their acquaintance with this location varies according to tastes and habits: Kate, a young Australian mother of two who lives in the apartment house at the end of CG, goes there for its pharmacy; Glenda because of its good pub; Emma for the tea room; Thomas for its grocery shops that create a village atmosphere; Lenny, the teenager from Martinique, because there he buys snacks and nibbles on his way to school. In the course of the interview, Maria, Dominique and Yussuf, an IT consultant living at no. 7, disclose their ‘secret places’ far from the crowd and hidden from view: for Maria, it is the roof garden of the iconic Barker’s building on the High Street; for
Fig. 1.16  Cheniston Gardens – view towards the central corner of the street with the birch trees from a top-floor flat. Source: author
Dominique, the secluded alleys behind St Mary Abbots, those very streets that Ezra Pound hated for the noisy bells; Yussuf took me behind the parish to show me his little green corner with a bench by the old churchyard.

Belonging in contemporary Cheniston Gardens

Altogether, the phenomenology of everyday routines and bodily experiences suggests that the people who live in CG sense their local environment in manifold ways. Following on from that, the idea of
neighbourhood that emerges, rather than univocal and unambiguous, takes a variety of configurations, all of them precarious and unstable, that reflect personal and contingent choices as well as different forms of social belonging. Particularly, the narratives of the rooted residents, often also homeowners, disclose a strong attachment to their CG homes: ‘I have been knowing CG for a long time; there was a special memory attached to it, as we had married here at the register office just opposite this house in 1977; we were living in Earls Court before and the landlord was very nasty with my kids and when this house came on the market I literally fell in love with it’ (Maria). ‘CG is my home. I like it for its diversity, its location and for being a little scruffy’ (Emily). And again: ‘It’s the last scruffy street in this part of Kensington, but it has a lot of character’ (Emma). ‘Scruffy’ is a recurring adjective in the descriptions of CG, and, in contrast to ‘shabby’, it entails an implicit loving indulgence for this ‘idiosyncratic’ street (Glenda). Those who have been living in CG for a long time seem to love it even more precisely because of its rundown character, like a mother who shows a particular care for a sickly child.

If these are tangible examples of what has been described as ‘elective belonging’ that reflect the intentionality of a residential choice (Savage 2010; Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2005; Watt and Smets 2014), positive forms of attachment to CG are manifested also by the transient population: ‘This is one of the best places to live in London, it is a safe area, but my accommodation was so tiny, the supermarkets so expensive, and also the neighbours so noisy [...]. I moved with my sister to Ealing Broadway, it is more liveable there, and now I am pregnant, I could not live here with a child, but I keep coming here, I like the surroundings, there is Holland Park, The Muffin Man and so many cute little streets to walk around’ (Monica, in a bedsit, two years in CG). But in general, the attitude of the transient residents is more detached, if not negative: ‘I moved to CG from east London because I liked this residential area, particularly its quiet position, close to the parks and to the South Kensington museums, but I do not know anybody here’ (Dominique). For Fred, an American CEO, CG is ‘just a place to live, with a convenient location by the tube station, close to grocery shops and to London cultural centres, but the area is too snobbish and people are not all friendly’. In 2016, Fred finally left his luxury maisonette in CG and moved to Notting Hill: ‘I prefer Notting Hill to Kensington, it has a more diverse economic and racial mix. Anyway, I stop two or three times a month at Whole Foods in Kensington on my way home, then hop on the bus from there to Notting Hill, and I can still run on weekends in Kensington Gardens.’
The number of years necessary to become a ‘rooted’ resident varies from one situation to another, but, ultimately, a proactive attitude is helpful in speeding up the process. This is what happened with Alice, who was already a soundly rooted resident two years after her arrival at no. 10 CG in 2006. American by birth, but prompted by a genuine interest in British heritage, she decided to launch a CG residents’ association in order to foster joint actions on communal goals: ‘The residents’ feedback went beyond my expectations and I realised that the wish to bring CG back to a decent standard was a shared aspiration.’ ‘The association’ echoes Thomas, the Swiss banker, ‘could do a lot to help improving the character of the street, for example we could persuade bedsits owners to instruct their tenants to dispose of their rubbish in the set collection days.’ But in spite of the good start, the association has been inactive since 2011.

Although a few CG residents declare to have good relationships with some of the people living in the street, and stories of communal solidarity are provided to support evidence of proactive neighbourhood relationships, the logic of collective action is absolutely temporary and volatile. Relations among ‘near dwellers’ are not revolving around the dynamics of negotiation among tied social groups – outsiders versus insiders or between those ‘on the move’ and the rooted residents – neither can we observe the polarisation between newcomers and an established white British community being forced ‘by necessity’ to move out from its elective location that has been observed elsewhere in the affluent west London neighbourhoods (Glucksberg 2015, 2016:250; Minton 2017:7–9).

Within the debate about communities and neighbourhoods in urban contexts, we find multiple explanations of the lack of cohesiveness and the concurrent increase in anonymity and alienation in what seems to become more and more a society of strangers (Amin 2012; Tonkiss 2003). Whatever specific explanation is put forward, there is an almost general consensus to consider the looseness of social and cultural bonds as a typical condition of post-modernity and a consequence of the flows of globalisation and of accelerated mobility (Bauman 2000; Elliott and Urry 2010; Giddens 1990; Urry 2007). Particularly, David Harvey (1989, 2001:124) has articulated the concept of ‘time–space compression’ to deal with the uncertainty of being in a place as a constituent element of post-modernity. Yet, in the specific case of CG, things seem to work slightly differently. As we have seen in the previous section, the wealthy British elite started moving out of CG ‘by choice’ at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the transformation of the neighbourhood was
accelerated by the concurrent increase in boarding houses and bedsits that favoured different social configurations. Apart from a few stable residents, a relentless turnover of people had already started in CG in the inter-war period, and since then the pace of change in residential patterns has been and keeps being too fast to allow any stable form of aggregation among people. In other words, by analysing the residential trends over time, we can argue that in CG ‘space–time compression’ was having an impact on the social life of the neighbourhood long before post-modernity, suggesting that a detailed analysis of household mobility over time might shed new light on social trends that are considered integral to the contemporary society.

In CG, the idea of community endures in idealised narratives of past events but does not apply to the present: ‘When we moved here [1992] there was a different atmosphere, people sitting outside on the doorsteps, chatting and laughing, I do not know, perhaps it was because it was a very hot summer that year, everybody seemed to know each other’ (Maria). Proactive behaviour recurs in the form of a shared neighbourhood mythology, as in the story of the night when a hardened group of neighbours convinced the car-clamping truck man not to remove the car of a disabled resident who had left CG before the temporary parking ban had been implemented, or of the voluntary care offered on various occasions to an old lady living in a top floor flat. In practice, on the rare occasions when soft and volatile forms of neighbourhood relations occur, these take the shape of hybrid and contingent configurations rather than enduring alliances, and they might involve tastes and sensibilities or intersect issues of gender, age and ethnicity. For example, female residents share a recurrent narrative in which three male rooted ‘personalities’ emerge: Anthony, the owner of The Muffin Man, Pedro, the Galician caretaker, and Rob, the doorman of the apartment house, whom they describe as the watchdogs of the street. The crucial role of these three people as unofficial guardians of CG is confirmed also by male residents either verbally or by their drawings of the neighbourhood, but what makes women’s descriptions unique is the charisma embedded with the paternal authority they bestow on these three male figures, a charisma that is reminiscent of pristine logics of self-sustaining patriarchal communities. On the other hand, looking at the three CG guardians from another angle, the fact that they are from three different ethnic backgrounds – a Spanish Galician (Pedro), a Lebanese (Anthony) and a white British (Rob) – is paradigmatic not only of the transnational urbanity of contemporary London, but also of how the often-cited ‘multicultural drift’ (Hall 2000) is today a taken-for-granted scenario in this
west London street. Multiculturalism started unfolding as an incremental process from the 1980s in CG and it is today an uncontroversial reality. Of course, in the case of CG, as in the rest of central London, the smoothness of the process has been facilitated by the economic prosperity of the residents and by the character of their ‘migration’, driven, in the vast majority, by ‘lifestyle’ aspirations (Benson 2009, 2014; Benson and Osbaldiston 2014) rather than by necessity.

However, even if multicultural relations are easy and smooth, different cultural sensibilities occasionally emerge, particularly in connection with building maintenance. When asking the residents what was the thing they disliked most about CG, quite frequently the answer was one of their fellow tenants; when investigating the reasons, distressing stories emerged including trials, tribunal notifications, prying and harassment in relation to the properties. Such harsh conflicts are likely to be generated by different sets of values and meanings that are ascribed to the idea of ‘conservation’. For the conservationists, the material properties of the ancient buildings and the skills implied in their construction are enshrined as sacred: ‘the bricks themselves […] are treated as art objects and proof of authenticity’ (Samuel 1994:119–20). Conservationists in CG invest the Victorian creamy stock brick with almost human qualities: they describe it as tactile, textured and grainy, individual, quirky, warm. They refer to it as to a human body that needs to breathe and that matures and improves with the passage of years. Such an extremely sectarian attitude hardly reconciles with the practical strategies of those who think of refurbishment exclusively in terms of modernisation and simplification and propose to coat the brick surface of the building with grey paint to make it look clean for longer, or to substitute the original window frames with plastic ones so they will not deteriorate. Moreover, when the material practices of renovation are called into question, the Europeans in general, but particularly the Italians, seem to have a totally different approach from British residents. For the British, the imperative is the external look – and for this reason they do the least possible work, ultimately cheap and scruffy, provided the bad quality of the finishes is appropriately concealed. At the other end of the spectrum, the Italians are driven by a deep-seated *habitus* for durable works of the best possible standard: ‘That bloody Italian and his works, he broke through my ceiling and now he wants to get rid of my water tank on the roof; he is absolutely arrogant, I want to report him for bullying […]’. Liza’s belligerent words are echoed by Maria’s more composed opinion about the couple who recently bought the top-floor flat in the same house where she lives: ‘They are Swiss you know, their posh architect wants us [the
Mobility and the ‘other place’

CG is the place where people have their homes, but it is a fact that in contemporary society the time people spend at home, and the relations revolving around it, take just a limited proportion of their lives. Sociality is increasingly ‘deterritorialised’ both at the level of individual desires and aspirations and of the embodied practices of the everyday (Appadurai 1990). The way people connect to a place is unavoidably entangled with the way they connect with the ‘outside’, whether real or virtual. In such accentuated dynamics of deterritorialisation, mobility plays a crucial role (Urry 2000, 2007).

‘Convenience’ is invariably the answer I was given by CG residents when I asked why they chose to live here: the convenience of a well-connected underground line at a stone’s throw from their homes that frees them from the use of the car even when they own one: ‘I take the car only when I need to go outside the Circle line or to shop for heavy stuff at Tesco on the Cromwell Road’ (Emily). Living by the underground station increases the quality of their lives and pays them back in terms of ‘discretionary’ control over time and ultimately in an individual sense of freedom (Wajcman 2015:65). Using the underground, they move around London leading to their workplaces (mostly eastwards to the City or to the western media and technology hubs), but during their leisure time they are doggedly local, just rotating around the two parks or other venues situated in Kensington and its immediate surroundings, more rarely along the river by Southwark, the Tate Modern and the Borough Market. On weekends of good weather, they may jog long distances or cycle further westwards along the Thames towards Richmond, but they do not seem at all keen to go east beyond the City, providing evidence that the traditional distinction between west and east London is not just a residual legacy of the past, but is still working as a social and cultural divide, although with different patterns and under different social conditions than in the past.

The trajectories that drive residents out of CG occasionally intersect wider diasporic landscapes: ‘Every weekend I go to Elephant and Castle
where we have one of the branches of our Chaplaincy’ says Father Felipe of the Augustinian Recollects; his mission and his social encounters are there, beyond the river, among one of the largest Latin American communities in London; for him, CG is just a place to live and to host a few Latin American Catholic students; the only other people he knows in the street, besides those staying at the residence, are the Galicians, because ‘they are catholic and speak the same language’. The Galicians, in turn, have connections with the northern fringes of Portobello Road: ‘When we arrived,’ Pedro remembers, ‘many of us already lived there; we have the Spanish School in Portobello road [the Instituto Vicente Cañada Blanch], it is not far from here, just one stop on the underground.’ While Father José and the Galicians need to go out from Kensington to connect with other expats, by contrast, the Armenians, who are concentrated in the London boroughs of Ealing, Hounslow, Brent and Haringey, every year at the middle of July flock to Iverna Court, the large garden square that was built just behind CG, for the Armenian Street Festival. In the CG surroundings there are no traces of an Armenian community – not a single Armenian apparently lives in CG – yet the Armenians converge here from all over London to pay tribute to the ethnic, political and religious legitimation of their contested nation, symbolically embodied by the presence in this area of two centres of power and resistance: the church of St Sarkis, whose construction was financed in 1923 by Calouste Gulbenkian, a British Armenian who had amassed a huge fortune in the petroleum business, and the Armenian Embassy, which opened at no. 25 CG in 1961, despite the resistance of the UK government, thanks to the passionate efforts of an Armenian dentist living in CG in those years (Amit Talai, 1989; George 2009).

CG residents’ mobility follows inwards and outwards trajectories that expand concentrically throughout Kensington, across London and beyond towards the rest of the world, mingling with the entangled network of disembodied connections enabled by digital information and communications technologies (Castells 1996). Material and virtual mobility are crucial to facilitate social relations and to connect to places afar. The existence of a meaningful ‘other place’ is a feature shared by many residents in CG, a place that acts as a counter-landscape as it stands out in dialectical opposition to the place of abode and at the same time complements it. The ‘other place’, either near or distant, wide or enclosed, is where people actually spend or have spent part of their life or they plan, look for or just dream about returning to sooner or later. In the experiences of the transnational residents, the ‘other place’ reconnects to the ‘ethnoscapes’ (Appadurai 1996) where global and local processes
interact. Through its juxtaposition to ‘the place of abode’, the ‘other place’ generates different forms of place attachment within the wide scenario of what has been described as ‘cosmopolitan belonging’ (Amit and Gardiner Barber 2015; Andreotti, Le Gales and Moreno-Fuentes 2015; Jones and Jackson 2014).

A first type of ‘other place’ is that of the transient transnational residents, the young cosmopolitan professionals who live their life ‘on the move’, or the international students who stay in CG for a short period of time. For them, ‘the other place’ is a special place in their homelands to which they are linked by strong familial and social bonds. They have a life suspended between two places, their temporary London address and a home in their country of origin; their emotions are connected to both place of origin and place of arrival (Andreotti, Le Gales and Moreno-Fuentes 2013), and their identification with two places can produce emotional complexities (Schiller and Caglar 2011). Their contacts with the ‘other place’ are on a daily or weekly basis and involve regular connections via social media and travels. When they meet with other expats in London, they mix with the multicultural population of the city, but when they receive visits from their relatives, they invariably wish them to experience the ‘true’ British atmosphere of The Muffin Man. Sometimes, transiency may turn into a rooted habit, as for Thomas and his wife, who went back to their ‘other place’ after 30 years spent in CG: ‘We moved to Lugano mid March [2016]. We had spent over 20 years here before coming to London and we have still some friends. Life here is just the opposite than London. It is provincial, quiet, lovely weather. Obviously we miss London but we often visit our son and four grandchildren who live in Camden.’

Of a totally different type is the ‘other place’ of the long-established migrants – the Galicians, the Iraqis, the Lebanese – who came to London more than 30 years ago and are now fully rooted British citizens. For these people, the bond with the country of origin transcends the physical, political and cultural forms of that very land and becomes part of an individual mythology which is usually shared with other expats living in London and the UK: ‘Galicia is a beautiful green land, very different from the rest of Spain, there is good wine and food’ (Pedro). Their attachment to their homeland is usually quite loose, particularly when they belong to a nation currently afflicted by political and social instability: ‘There are quite a few Iraqis in Kensington, the owner of the Thai restaurant is Iraqi too, but we prefer not to think of what is going on in our country, we live here now’ (Yussuf). But in extraordinary circumstances, roots can be temporarily revived: Emily, who describes herself as a white British...
Kensington resident, suddenly rediscovered her Christian Lebanese origins on the occasion of the 7/7 terrorist attack: ‘I talked a lot with Anthony [the owner of The Muffin Man]; he is Lebanese and Christian. We cried together. I lived in Beirut as a child; I am half Jewish and half Lebanese, but Christian like him.’

The ‘other place’ in CG exists also at a different level, based on the contrast between the urban and the rural: Emma’s ‘other place’ is her cottage on Exmoor, where she also has her artist’s studio; for Glenda, it is her mother’s house in the south, where she cultivates her passion for horse riding; for Emily it is her retreat on the Isle of Wight; for Alice, her cottage in Sussex, where she can express her love for gardening.

The recurrent characterisation of this otherness is ‘nature’ in its phenomenological dimension of a place where the body can live, move and breathe differently than in the city, where the only available green spaces near CG are represented by two very urban parks. The opposition of urban and rural, particularly between London and the English countryside, has a long history (Matless 1998), and conceptually it can be argued that these rural retreats are the modern version of the country estate of the Victorian family – a place where individual rhythms and routines are reinvented with the complicity of a different landscape.

**Conclusion**

Fine-grain ethnography combined with documental research has revealed that CG is not wholly consistent with the cliché of social exclusiveness that broadly applies to the Kensington district and more generally to the wider western area of central London, suggesting the existence of wealth gaps behind the Victorian facades that are unexpected in the quintessential ‘alpha territory’ of the super-rich. By exploring narratives and notions of belonging in contemporary CG, this chapter suggests that social distinctions in contemporary Kensington seem connected with forms of cosmopolitan belonging rather than with hierarchies based on class and wealth.

By extending the analysis of the residential patterns over time, this chapter has argued that the cultural and social distinctions that are at work today in CG are grounded into the process of conversion of the Victorian family houses into smaller independent units that started at the beginning of the twentieth century when two contrasting dwelling styles – one based on larger flats, and the other on bedsits with single occupants – began to attract to this street people of different
socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Overall, the research on CG shows how ‘local’ examples can be used to explore broader questions in connection with the spatial distribution of the elites in contemporary London, suggesting that the history of places plays a crucial role in steering their residential patterns.

Since observation of the street started in 2013 and residents’ interviews were carried out in 2014, many things have changed in CG: a few facades have been cleaned, others repainted; the Galician townhouse is still there, but even more dilapidated; the lady with the nice balcony left and took her plants with her, and the cat on the first floor balcony has also gone; Glenda retired; Thomas returned to Switzerland; other interviewees left their CG homes. The result of the 2016 referendum that has ratified the exit of the UK from the EU is likely to impact heavily on the geography of CG and of the whole of Kensington, and new residential configurations are likely to occur before 2020. One year later, the devastating Grenfell Tower fire, which left more than 70 people dead and hundreds homeless, has dramatically pointed at the striking juxtaposition within the same neighbourhood between outright winners and vulnerable losers in the battlefield of social and housing inequality. Turbulence can be forecast in the ‘alpha territory’, and once more the new will add to the old in a dialectic continuum where the present is just ‘the latest episode of the ever-same’ (Benjamin 1974:673; Savage 2000:40).

**Methodological note**

The archival research on CG has been based on extensive use of the household data collected for the 1891, 1901 and 1911 censuses, and on the street directories and electoral rolls available from the Local Studies collection of the Kensington and Chelsea Library. Interviews with CG residents were carried out in the summer 2014 and involved informal talks with 19 people, who also provided sketches and pictures of the neighbourhood. Ten are female and nine male; their age range, nationality, sectors of activity, type of house and length of stay in CG are given in table 1.1. Although I (the author) have obtained informed consent to publish the results of the interviews, names have been changed. All the photographs of CG except otherwise specified have been taken by me.
References


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