

On the old businesses of the new Peckham

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Back in 1996, when I was four, my parents, my brother and I moved from East Dulwich to our new home in Peckham, an eight-minute walk from Peckham Rye station off Bellenden Road.

Today, Peckham is renowned as one of London's trendiest and most creative neighbourhoods. Stroll down its streets and you'll come across hip cocktail bars serving drinks in jam-jars, craft beer breweries and posh stores selling homemade produce. It wasn't always like this.

Peckham once had a terrible reputation in London, because of its high crime rates - most notably the high-profile murder of ten-year-old Damilola Taylor in 2000 - and old-fashioned racism. The neighbourhood has always been one

of the most multicultural areas of the city, home to a large African-Caribbean community.

Though I don't live in Peckham anymore, visiting it now makes me feel like I'm walking into a different world from the one I grew up in. Every visit seems to feature a cool cafe, restaurant or bar opening its doors to the growing flocks of new residents and visitors.

But what about the few establishments that have been in Peckham for the long haul? What do they make of their old, new home?

South Indian restaurant [Ganapati](#) opened in December 2004, 18 years ago. Owner Claire Fisher has mixed feelings about Peckham's transformation.

When Ganapati first opened, Bellenden Road was in the early stages of gentrification, with landlords pricing out new and existing local traders. Claire believes there are both positives and negatives to Peckham's transformation.

"People have a much more positive image of Peckham than when we first opened", she said. "Back then, many people associated Peckham with criminal activity, and were anxious about visiting from other parts of the city."

Still, house prices have sky-rocketed and though many new buildings have appeared, few of them are affordable. This is partly thanks to the Overground arriving in the area in 2012, which Claire highlighted as a game changer for her business. The enduring sense of community in the area is also a positive.

"The mushrooming of bars and restaurants definitely benefits all of us and we are almost all independent businesses", she said. "There is strong opposition to chains coming in. Local residents are very invested in what happens here."

She is also proud of being part of a network of local restaurants: "When we are full, we send people to our neighbours", she said. "When the weather is good people want to eat out, and we all benefit."

Another establishment that's stuck around is [Peckhamplex](#), a multi-screen independent cinema renowned for its bargain £4.99 film tickets – some of the most affordable in the capital. Fortunately, despite Peckham's growing popularity, these low prices have stuck around.

While Peckhamplex isn't the most stylish cinema, it has a comfortable old-school charm. You know exactly what you're getting with a visit.

Peckhamplex opened in 1994 and has since undergone several ownership changes, most recently in 2010. The current director, Simone Brown, welcomes “any changes that bring an increased and diverse audience.”

Previous ownership concentrated on a more mainstream offering but Simone's team have, since 2010, expanded the cinema's programme to cater to the demands of the changing audiences, showing more indie and international films.

As Peckhamplex's tickets have always been cheap and the cinema has always been popular in London, the growth of Peckham hasn't significantly impacted customer numbers. “Peckhamplex attracts not only local audiences but people from all over London”, she said.

Then there is the much-loved local Italian restaurant [Il Giardino](#), which opened in SE15 way back in 1987 – long before I was born. I remember walking past the restaurant's bright yellow façade and green shutters as a kid, and it always standing out among the grey and beige buildings.

While I have vague memories of eating in a half, or even quarter-full restaurant with my family as a child, it now seems that every candle-adorned table is taken whenever I walk past.



A place that definitely wasn't there at the time was Frank's Café, which sits on the top of a multi-storey car park behind the cinema. Its opening in 2009 could be seen as a defining moment for Peckham. Only open during the warmer months, the rooftop bar has become an integral part of the summer season in the neighbourhood.

The famous bright-pink staircase leading up to the bar, which has featured on the Instagram of every other young Londoner, was introduced in 2016. Since then, Frank's has been an incredibly popular destination for people from all over the city.

Ultimately, I still have mixed feelings about Peckham's transformation. Growing up there wasn't always easy, but watching it develop into a completely different neighbourhood sometimes felt strange.

Still, while it has got busier and busier, it is reassuring that so many of our favourite independent bars, restaurants, and other establishments are still holding on. Long may they last.