

In search of hope and optimism at Clapham Junction Station

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C Brueton, Untitled (from the series 'Clapham Junction'),
digital photograph, 2013

Abstract

This paper explores what kind of place, or non-place Clapham Junction Station is, and how this space is authored, with particular reference to Augé's (1995) thoughts on non-place and Massey's (2005) approach to how space is made. The relationship between people and place is a core theme and is reflected in the way the paper is structured. The critical paper 'In search of hope and optimism at Clapham Junction Station' has been presented alongside Appendix A, which is a stream of creative writing, written by myself. Appendix A is set in 'Courier New' and right orientated against the left hand setting of the critical paper.

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* Appendix B has been formatted to be viewed on screen. For a print friendly version, please contact camillabrueton@gmail.com

In search of hope and optimism at Clapham Junction Station

'Before the railway came the area was rural and specialized in growing lavender.' (Catford, 2011)

Clapham Junction is Europe's busiest interchange station (South West Trains, 2013a).¹ Over 20 million people annually use it as a conduit to their journey – a place to change trains. For more passengers than any other station, it is neither a start nor end point. It is not a destination but somewhere that facilitates their passage to somewhere else. 2000 trains pass through the station each day. Although most do at least stop, the experience for half of the passengers who use the station is one that is not connected to its vicinity; it is a blip on their journey; somewhere one hopes not to stay too long. But if we choose to linger, what kind of place is Clapham Junction, and who authors the space we recognise as such?

*I arrive at Clapham Junction during
the morning rush hour,
on a train from Streatham Hill.
Passengers alight and melt away,
leaving just the bright orange
high-vis jackets of the station staff
and me on the platform.*

*Commuters spill out of trains, coffees in hand.
I glimpse Christmas jumpers:
Rudolf and snowmen
peep out of work suits and coats.*

¹ South West Trains (SWT) are responsible for managing Clapham Junction Station.

Could Clapham Junction be a non-place, as described by Augé (1995), a symptom of supermodernity, where thousands of people act in an isolated way as they go about their solitary, daily commute?²

The station and rail network displays many characteristics of non-place. Entry is by identification: as you pass through the ticket barriers you identify yourself by blipping your registered Oystercard or ticket, having purchased this with a credit or debit card (only those who buy tickets and top up unregistered pay-as-you-go Oystercards with cash, remain unidentified).³

Non-place is a lonely place, one with the paradox that having identified yourself, you then become part of the crowd to be herded around, in the facilitation of your journey. And whilst being like the other commuters, you feel apart from them.⁴

At busy times, there can be thousands of passengers, waiting on platforms at Clapham Junction "in the process of departing" (Augé 1995 p.82).

² "Clearly the word 'non-place' designates two complimentary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces." (Augé 1995, p.94)

³ "Alone, but one of many, the user of a non-place is in contractual relations with it (or with the powers that govern it)... the ticket he had bought, the card he will have to show at the tollbooth... are all more or less clear signs of it." (Augé, 1995, p.82).

⁴ "The space of non-place creates neither singular identity, nor relations; only solitude and similitude." (Augé, 1995, p.83)

*On Platform 9, everyone stands equally
spaced, as if there's some kind of unspoken
rule.*

*What do commuters do whilst they wait for a
train?*

*The majority are looking down:
into their phones,
into a free newspaper,
into a book.*

*Are most people who are here,
actually somewhere else?*

Are these isolated passengers producing the non-place we recognise as Clapham Junction? Massey (2005, pp.118-119) sees space as being "the product of social relations" and talks about destinations and "places in between" as being created from "a bundle of trajectories". Travel for Massey, is not about crossing "space-as-a-surface", but "travelling across trajectories". Clapham Junction is all about travel and being in transit, so to consider it as a place, we must also consider the relationship between travel and space.

*On Platform 14
a kid in bright yellow astro boots
(high-vis footwear)
moves restlessly on the platform,
side to side,
wide stance,
pointing at his feet (like dance moves).
The commuters around him stand stock still,*

*playing on their phones
or watching expectantly for their train.*

With 17 sprawling platforms spreading out in a fan shape, it is easy to see Clapham Junction literally as a bundle of track and trajectories connecting London with the South Coast and the South. But beyond the physical, what of the trajectories of the thousands of commuters who encounter the station everyday? Do they linger long enough to form a meaningful relationship with place and/or each other? What level of engagement is required for space/place to be made? Is catching the eye of someone on a platform enough? Is ordering the same coffee at the same time every day, a space making story, or are you just another commuter with a caffeine habit?

*"To travel between places is to move between collections of trajectories and to reinsert yourself in the ones to which you relate."
(Massey, 2005, p.130)*

I would suggest the isolated passengers of this non-place, waiting to leave Clapham Junction, are at a point of non-insertion. They are continuing along their own trajectories, and whilst their presence will alter the experience of others (who gets the last seat? Who offers theirs to the person who is less able to stand?), the etiquette of mass transit means the individual stories present on a platform weave in and out, but rarely connect.

The passengers, by their sheer volume are the primary consumers of Clapham Junction. Through their

movements, they actively author the history and space (Massey, 2005).⁵

So what about the station staff in their high-vis jackets, dispatching trains and overseeing the general activity on the station? Whilst being a smaller group, they have a more intimate relationship with the place and each other. I witness their interactions about the football last night being shouted between Platforms 14 and 13, which remind me of Massey's description of arriving at her office:

"collecting the post, picking up the threads of discussions... Picking up the threads and weaving them into a more or less coherent feeling of being 'here', 'now'." (Massey, 2005, pp.118-119)

Another defining characteristic of non-place, is how it tends to be ordered by language and a set of rules (Augé, 1995).⁶ We know we are meant to 'mind the gap' and stand behind the yellow line to keep a 'safe' distance from the edge (although there is no standard distance for this line and it varies from platform to platform).

*I watch commuters wait for a
train on Platform 10.*

They line up, on the edge of the

⁵ "Space and place emerge through active material processes... Movement, and the making of relations, take/make time." (Massey, 2005, p.118-119)

⁶ "But the real non-places of supermodernity – the ones we inhabit when we are driving down the motorway, wandering through the supermarket... have the peculiarity that they are defined partly by the words and texts they offer us: their 'instructions for use', which may be prescriptive... prohibitive... or informative." (Augé, 1995, p.77)

*yellow-hatched area
(etched with 'Mind The Gap')
separating them from the edge of the platform.*

*Clusters form where the doors of the
train will be.*

*As the train arrives,
everyone huddles forward into the yellow zone,
parting to make a small corridor
for passengers to exit.*

*The train dispatcher blows his whistle
and raises his paddle.
The train closes its doors and moves off.*

*Similar clusters of commuters
reappear on the platform,
awaiting the next train.*

Automated announcements are a constant backdrop, imparting information and instructions on how to behave. Only when something unexpected happens, does a member of staff make an announcement.

Automated announcements are also present on London buses, (the driver can press a button to ask us to "Please move down inside the bus" amongst other instructions) and at stations run by other train companies (at Thameslink stations you are informed at regular intervals how much crime has come down on the network, presumably to make you feel you are less likely to be mugged). Whilst these announcements are clear and audible, the reliance on them represents a distancing between passengers and the staff who facilitate travel.

I do wonder what Sir John Betjeman would make of this. In his 1963 BBC TV programme, "*A Branch Line railway with John Betjeman*", he introduces us to "Evercreech Junction Somerset. It was to be the Clapham Junction of the West" and asserts:

"But a station master's life, now that's something worth living." (Betjeman, 1963)

In this short film, Betjeman shares his love of train travel and distrust of roads as a transport solution in a year when Beeching published his now infamous report, which led to the closure of thousands of miles of track. (Hamer, 1987)

The pace of the film is slow, the rhythm of Betjeman's narrative echoes the pace of a steam engine: far removed from the frantic commutes of Clapham Junction today. There is a sadness throughout. Betjeman communicates the hope that railways would bring prosperity to small towns and villages. A hope not always realised.

"And here to the rhythm of the Somerset and Dorset Joint Railway, we can dream again that ambitious Victorian dream which caused this railway still to be running though deepest, quietest, flattest, remotest, least spoiled Somerset." (Betjeman, 1963)

Betjeman does have some optimistic words for us for the future:

"You know, I'm not just being nostalgic and sentimental and unpractical about railways. Railways are bound to be used again. They are not a thing of the past and it's heartbreaking to see them being left to rot." (Betjeman, 1963)

Betjeman was right, as railways are very much on the agenda again. With the construction of Crossrail 1, the contentious approval of HS2, and Crossrail 2 in consultation, there is certainly a renaissance in London.

The most recent arrival to Clapham Junction is The Overground service, run by Transport for London (TfL). This last stretch of London's 'outer circle railway' was opened in late 2012. And whilst the new service wasn't without contention (it knits together existing track and services into a cohesive whole causing the loss of some direct routes (Brown, 2012)), it has contributed to an 11% rise in entry and exits at Clapham Junction (Steer Davies Gleeve, 2013).

*On Platforms 1&2 we enter an
'Overground' colour scheme.
A muted Overground orange colours the
hand rails and
adorns the station staff's jacket.
She swings a small megaphone from her wrist
as she walks up and down the platform.*

As you step onto Platforms 1&2, you are greeted by the orange, blue and white Overground roundel. It's a TfL outpost, orphaned in a sea of Southern and South West Trains. Unlike the names of the other train companies, which historically link to the geographical parts of the country they serve, 'The Overground' is an abstract description of a non-geographic place. It is relative - 'Overground' as opposed to 'Underground' and suitably non-directional for a 21st century orbital railway.

*These trains can take me back to my past-
'Kentish Town West' for my secondary school
'Highbury and Islington' for my primary school
'Dalston Junction' for
the house I grew up in.*

*The Overground didn't come to
Clapham Junction then
and it wasn't called 'The Overground'.
Instead it was 'The North London Line'
Unloved, underfunded and
fairly dysfunctional,
(like my secondary school).*

*Part of me is tempted to
hop on a train to Highbury,
but I know you can "never simply 'go back'".
(Massey (2005))*

Clapham Junction does have a reputation for being a bleak place. In 2009, it received the 2nd worst station customer satisfaction rating in the UK (BBC, 2009). A report for the Department of Transport highlighted the need to modernise the 10 worst stations as they had been "left behind" and that "many were large Victorian buildings that were difficult to develop or had little commercial appeal" (BBC, 2009).

Unlike a terminus such as Waterloo or Paddington, Clapham Junction is not an impressive train shed, but a large sprawl of Victorian platforms above street level, connected by a footbridge and a

subway. There are three entrances, including the station buildings at the crest of St Johns Hill, opened in 2011, the culmination of a publically funded programme to improve access and ease crowding (SWT, 2011).

For over 50 years, the old station buildings were boarded up. A painting by Carel Weight from 1978, shows the grim, unloved face Clapham Junction projected outwards during this time.



Figure 1: Carel Weight (1908–1997), Clapham Junction, 1978, Oil paint on canvas, 708 x 908 mm held in the Tate collection

In an article for the Guardian in 2009, titled *"Yes, Clapham Junction is that bad. The sun shone, but the roof still leaks"* Zoe Williams explains

how Clapham Junction improved cosmetically in the 2000's:

"...if you were transported from the 80's to the station today, you'd think you'd died and gone to America. It might be dirty and have disabled access that, I believe, is functionally illegal, but at least you can get a cup of coffee, a paper, some cheaply made hair accessories and a birthday card. In the old days this station was like a ghost town... Sure these improvements are a bit fur-coat-no-knickers (or the railway equivalent, Costa-coffee-no-lifts)..." (Williams, 2009)

Williams (2009) lays the blame for lack of investment on railway privatisation and was surprised that more has not been done to Clapham Junction, despite the change in the area around it.⁷ This link between stations and location was echoed by the government's "rail champion":

"Stations are deeply entwined with their local community and effectively act as the gateway to both town and railway. They leave passengers with their lasting impressions of both." (BBC, 2009)

Yet what happens when half of the passengers who use a station, don't ever leave it, apart from by train? What link do these passengers have with the locality? Some do look up at the vista around them, but for most, the time spent on the platform is time spent looking down: into a mobile phone, a newspaper, a book. Looking anywhere, but here.

In the distance is a London skyline.

Battersea Power station,

⁷ "This is Britain's busiest rail station... in an area of London whose face has changed beyond recognition over the last 20 years... yet its defining hub has attracted no spending. In part this is an indictment of privatisation: The incentives were built on carriage of passengers, so the money went on rolling stock and track, not stations." (Williams, 2009)

*the blue gas holder in Nine Elms,
the new tower block in Vauxhall.
The Shard glimmers through the half light of
the grey morning mist.
Low-rise estates fill the space between.
I look up and see an aeroplane overhead.*

*"CFC Jose's Back
Happy Days"*

*A bit of graf on the sill of the window on the footbridge
reminds me where Clapham Junction is located:
Chelsea territory.*

But where is here? Clapham Junction is not in Clapham, it's in Battersea. It is widely accepted that the name came about because Clapham was a more prosperous area than Battersea when the station was built (Catford, 2011).

Is this dislocation important? If half of the people who use the station never enter or leave it (not to mention those who simply pass through it on a train), it is likely that many will assume they are in Clapham. Couple this with the prolific use of mobile technology, allowing individuals to "live rather oddly in an intellectual, musical or visual environment that is wholly independent of his immediate physical surrounding" (Augé, 1995, p.VIII), and you begin to build up a picture of a place full of people completely disconnected to it, both spatially and intellectually.

This dislocation expands outwards and extends to how the world is mapped and perceived, perpetuated by

emergent technologies. Google Maps only recently corrected the placement of the area marker 'Clapham' from next to Clapham Junction Station, to the area 'Clapham', allowing the station to appear "in the heart of Battersea". (Love Battersea, 2013)

Back at platform level, new canopies of glass and steel abut awkwardly with the original Victorian architecture. Bold with aspiration, they reach upwards to the sky. Light filters through the grey-green glass. A yellow-orange handrail accentuates the stairs ascending to the glass box at footbridge level; a waiting gallery and lift, key to improving access.⁸ This architecture is bordering on aggressive when compared to the decorative detail of Victorian ironwork and the gentle wooden edging of the old platform canopies. There is a shift in scale; the glass and steel constructions feel larger, not of human proportions. The new steel-only canopies scale in the opposite direction, feeling smaller and less generous. Augé speaks of how Benjamin was interested in the iron and glass architecture of Parisian passages, because "he sees these things as embodying a wish to prefigure the architecture of the next century as a dream or anticipation" (Augé, 1995, p.76). The new architecture at Clapham Junction aspires to a positive future, but one less personal.

*I move to the glass and steel box
above Platforms 15 & 16*

⁸ The Station improvement works, completed in 2011 were funded through the government's Access for All programme (SWT, 2011). "The 'Access for All programme' is part of the 'Railways for all strategy', launched in 2006 to address the issues faced by disabled passengers using railway stations in Great Britain." (Department for Transport, 2013).

*and watch a steady flow of passengers
leave Platform 14.
As they clear, the orange handrail of the stairs
becomes visible against the dark blue staircase.*

*The orange light on the train
announcement sign glows:
08.14 Epsom Downs On time*

*On the footbridge:
A sea of people
Rise and fall
Looking upwards-
Which platform?
What time?*

Our experience of Clapham Junction is informed by both architectural styles. Massey (2005) believes history is an active thing, happening now. This is a crucial part of her argument about how space is made. It can be tempting to see Clapham Junction as a "collage of the static" (Massey, 2005, p.119), especially when looking at its physical infrastructure. The Victorian architecture is as much an active part of the experience of the station today as the modern canopies. It is the conversation between them and the people beneath, here, right now which make the space we recognise.

Coffee and travel go hand in hand. At Clapham Junction these days, it seems like you cannot turn a corner without stumbling upon a coffee shop, true of most large UK stations, which often resemble shopping centres with added trains.

At Clapham Junction, major coffee brands feature alongside independents and chains you only see at train stations. The experience of these coffee shops, with overt branding, clean lines and mochaccinos, are a world away from the station tearoom featured in the film *Brief Encounter* (1945).

*The 'Pumpkin' coffee shop on Platform 5
invites me to
'Come in for a coffee'.
The orange light looks warm and appealing.*

Here, the station tearoom is site of a chance meeting between suburban housewife Laura Jesson and doctor Alec Harvey, leading to an affair. It is the location of the couple's first and last meeting, and is described by Laura as: "the most ordinary place in the whole world". Warm, personable, but not without tension, it has character and characters. It is definitely a 'place' as opposed to a 'non-place'.

The train station itself is a refuge from ordinary life, ("I must go home now" says Laura, whilst in the station), but also a place of decisions and departures - his train leaves from one platform, hers from another. In the dark and dangerous tunnel that connects them, there is a wrenching apart and an illicit kiss. On Alec's final departure, which they both know is their separation; Laura rushes from the tearoom onto the platform, but resists her urge to throw herself underneath the express train.

Train stations do have a darker side. Clapham Junction was the site of a major rail disaster in 1988. Suicide unfortunately is on the increase in

the UK (Samaritans, 2013). This is something taken seriously by South West Trains, and their attempts to deal responsibly and reduce risks for all is reported on in their customer newsletters, under the heading of "Managing Disruption" (SWT, 2013b).

Due to high volumes of people, major stations are also targets for terrorist activity. Augé suggests that there may be another reason why terrorists are attracted to attacking the non-places of "Airports, aircrafts, big stores and railway stations" (Augé, 1995, p.90), one that is caught up with the fabric of non-place:

"...in a more or less confused way, those pursuing new socilaizations and localizations can see non-places only as a negation of their ideal. The non-place is the opposite of Utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society." (Augé, 1995, p.90)

This is all starting to sound a little bleak.

However, non-places do not have to be altogether negative, they are simply a symptom of our time, that encourage us to behave in particular ways.⁹

Non-places also rarely exist in pure form:

"In the concrete reality of today's world, places and spaces, places and non places intertwine and tangle together." (Augé, 1995, p.86)

The Victorian appetite for railways, their privatisation, South West Trains, Access for All transport policy and TfL's plans for London have all shaped the physical space of the station as we encounter it today. Its future is likely to be

⁹ "...some experience of non-place... is today an essential component of all social existence." (Augé, 1995, p.97)

influenced by Crossrail 2. On the surface, Clapham Junction can seem isolating, with tens of thousands of people each day performing an amplified display of 'being in transit'. However if you step outside of a travelling itinerary for long enough, you can begin to see glimpses of the stories attached to the trajectories of the passengers who pass through the place and its non-places, and ultimately author them. A sign on Platform 10 proudly declares Clapham Junction to be: "Britain' busiest railway station". It seems more important, that passengers understand their part in this and its place making potential, than their actual location in South West London.

*Platform 5 fills up as the 08:45 to Teddington
is not expected till 08:51*

*White dog (chilly paws)
Bobble hat
Red and white polka dots
Coffee and a Kindle*

*A family:
a man carrying a buggy,
a woman with a baby strapped to her chest.
Smiling as they climb the stairs
and make their train.*

*A gaggle of young teenage kids make their way to
Platform 13, wheeling their wheely suitcases.*

*A man with a Brompton,
wearing a high-vis orange jacket.
A union jack made from reflective strips*

adorns his back.

I look up and realise I'm sitting
directly in line with a CCTV camera.

I wonder if I'm being watched?

"Mind the gap between the train and the platform edge"

A train with a moustache pulls into Platform 4
(no really, it had one - did South West Trains do Movember?).

The colour palette of commuters:

Mostly grey,
navy blue and black
with the occasional smattering of bright red,
turquoise and green.

The 08:45 arrives.

It's 08:52

Platform 5 empties a bit.

Bright orange trainers,
dark blue jeans,
muted red tweed jacket
(makes me smile).

Spotty blue scarf,
orange rucksack straps,
red wellies (Hunter I think).

Yellow edging on the stairs.

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Appendix B

Clapham Junction
Series of digital photographs

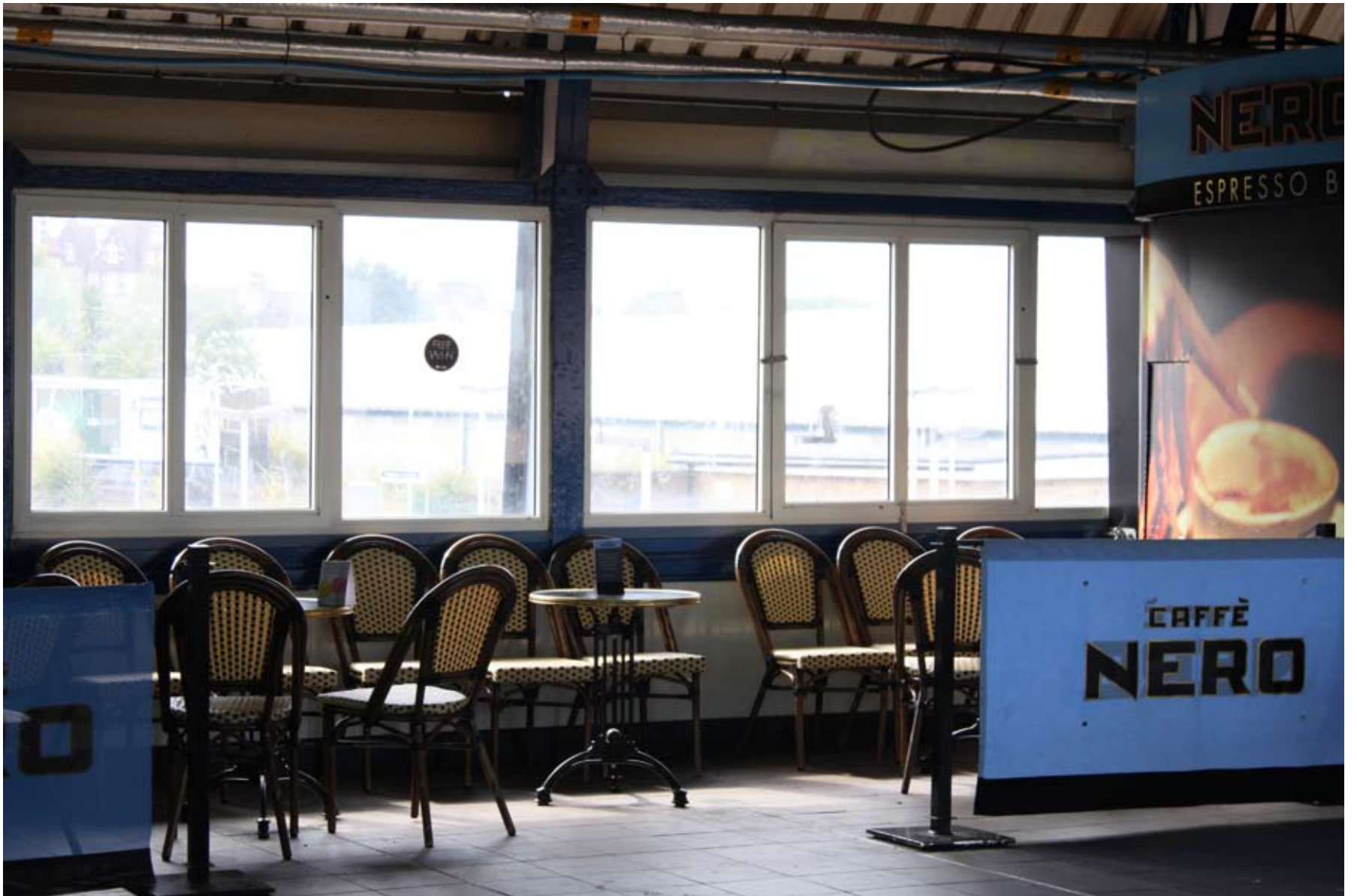
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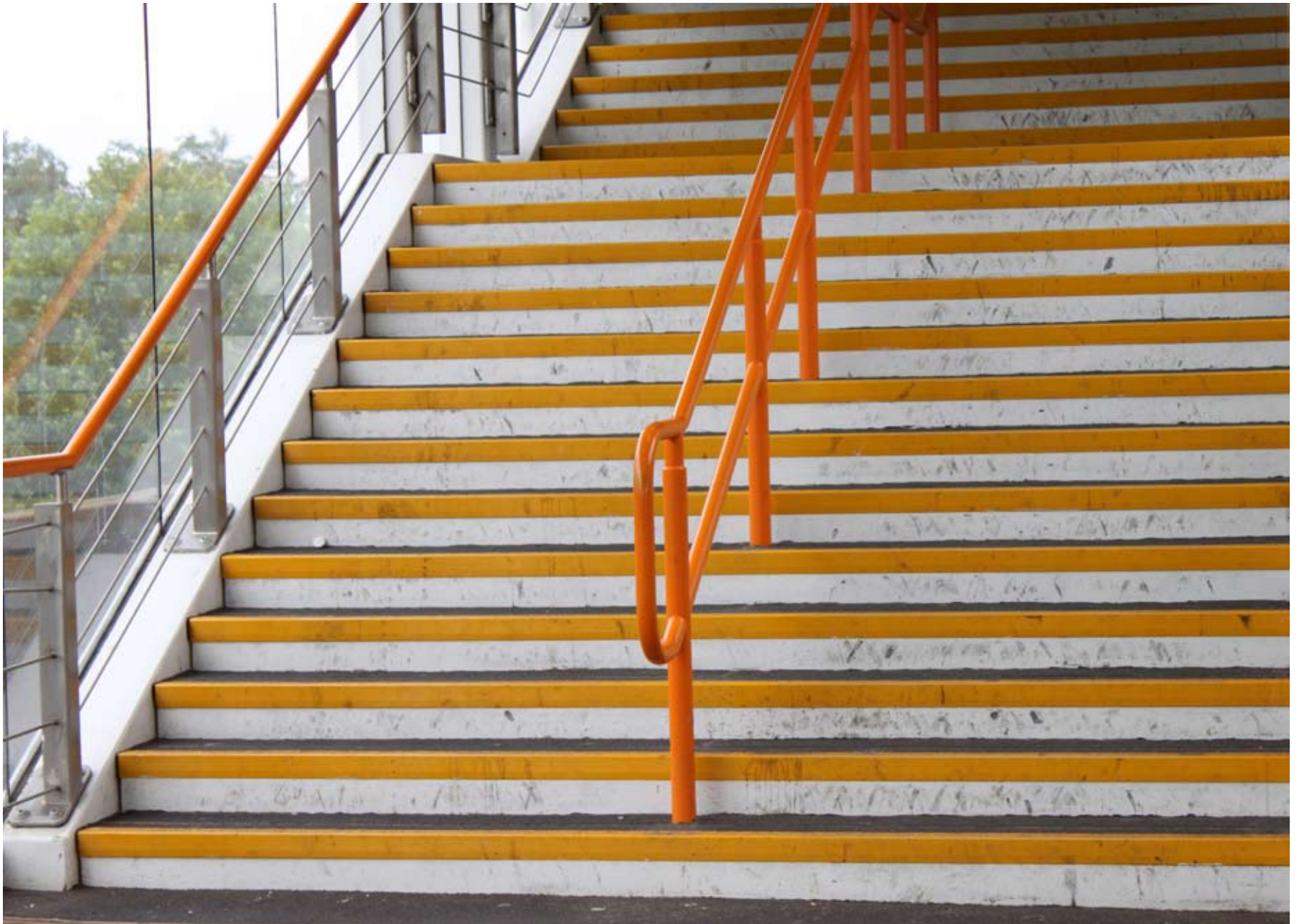


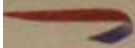










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