

The London School of Economics and Political Science

Unfinished and unfinishable: London's skylines

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Abstract

How is the city seen from a distance? With regard to 'world cities' and their battle for recognisable city-images, this is an aesthetic, political and historiographical question. How does a particular representation of the city's past become useful for economic globalisation? This thesis analyses the relationships between history, power and profit as played out on a city's skylines. It is conceived as a politicisation of the aesthetics of skylines, which speaks to the increasing power of aesthetic arguments in developer-driven urbanisation processes.

My focus is on professional debates attending the development of the City of London's 'formal skyline' prior to the economic recession; debates between architects, historians and townscape consultants, which revolved around the visibility of the emerging high-rise cluster that is located adjacent to listed buildings and conservation areas. I show how the conservatism that is encapsulated in concerns with the visual protection of historic landmarks is being transformed into 'progressive' arguments for constructing iconic towers. This transformation results from professionals' pre-occupation with a single static viewpoint as providing a 'definitive' and easily marketable image of London, their fetishisation of St Paul's as a building that needs to be visually enhanced, and their insistence to produce a unified skyline that is rooted in a linear historical narrative of continuity and change.

In my critique of the intrinsic marriage of historical-aesthetic concerns with the prosaic pressing interests of finance capital I draw on two different traditions: the British Townscape movement and the idiosyncratic admixture of Marxism, Messianism and Modernism in the writings of Walter Benjamin. I challenge the prevalent understanding of 'the new London skyline' as a representative, aesthetically pleasing, compositional whole and argue for an understanding of skylines as unfinished and unfinishable, adversarial processes that is based on four conceptualisations: a *cinematic skyline*, which involves the notion of Surrealist montage, grounded in radical disjunction, unresolved tensions and contradictions; a *non-auratic skyline*, breaking with the conception of skylines as 'enframed paintings', foregrounding disruptive elements and providing for shock and distraction rather than contemplation; a *multidirectional skyline*, which attests manifold and marginalised histories that run counter the conventional historicist ideal conception of historical progress; an *allegorical skyline* in which meanings are multiplied and mortified and the unity and purity of the symbolic and the power of the iconic are fractured and fragmented, subject to political construction in the present.

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Abbreviations

AP.....	<i>The Arcades Project</i>
AR.....	<i>The Architectural Review</i>
Arch.....	Interviewed architect
CABE....	Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment
City....	City of London
CoL.....	Corporation of London
EH.....	English Heritage
ES.....	Environmental Statement
GLA.....	Greater London Authority
GLC.....	Greater London Council
LVMF....	<i>London View Management Framework</i>
RoEH....	Interviewed representative of English Heritage
TC.....	Interviewed townscape consultant
UDP....	Unitary Development Plan

Introduction

I. The politics of verticality

A city's physical and social structures are constantly changing. The same is true for its appearance from distance. The City of London (usually known as 'the City') is no exception. Yet for centuries a small number of tall structures – and the dome of St Paul's in particular – visually dominated views from outside its borders.¹ Located on a topographical high point within the city and standing at 111 metres, St Paul's was the tallest structure in London until the 1960s when the BT Tower, formerly known as Post Office Tower, was constructed. The City is London's historical core and has long been both a religious and a commercial centre. But it is only more recently that corporate towers within the City have started to demand its appearance at a distance, with a proliferation of office high-rises that host FIRE, i.e. the financial services, insurance and real estate industries.

The shift from a religious and historical to a corporate skyline is not an unfamiliar story. New York City, for example, underwent this shift at the end of the nineteenth century, more than one hundred years ago. Seemingly disturbed by the construction of tall structures in London in the 1960s, the American historian Lewis Mumford (1964) lamented that the city "billow[s] upwards" (121) and that it is orientating itself 'to the Skies' "under the impression that [tall buildings] are serving the cause of progress" (ibid.: 119).

The most obvious shift toward a corporate City skyline started in the 1970s, when Tower 42, formerly known as Nat-West Tower, was constructed. Standing at 183 metres, it is 72 metres taller than St Paul's and, although located approximately one kilometre away, it dwarfed the Cathedral in many distant views. This process, however, paused in its infancy, for about three decades when under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal politics and sudden deregulation of financial markets high-rise construction moved to Canary Wharf, a then derelict area in East London.² It started

¹ For a visual history of the London skyline see <http://londoninsight.wordpress.com/2013/05/31/london->

² Today, the City and Canary Wharf are the two competing financial service industry hubs in London.

again in the new millennium most noticeably with the construction of 30 St Mary Axe, widely known as the Gherkin, an iconic office tower 180 metres in height.³

A city's skyline is usually described as its outline seen against the sky.⁴ It is the 'line' that separates a city's built environment – or, better, the tallest buildings in a city – from the sky. As a graph, it is the visual presentation of buildings' competitiveness in terms of height. Reduced to an outline, a skyline is a highly abstract urban representation. Understood in a broader sense as a distant view from a low, publicly accessible viewpoint, it is also visually highly reduced. The majority of the city's built environment is hidden, alongside its social structures played out on street level. Without the appreciation of a visually rich foreground, the city in the distance appears flattened. If we agree on an understanding of the city as a representation of spatial, social and cultural aspects (Donald, 1992), what, then, can we learn about the city from this flattened image?

Emphasising the height competition between buildings in the city, this flattened image can be understood as a vertical map of power relations. This map is telling in terms of what is shown and in particular also what is left out. It is in this way that we can understand Sharon Zukin's (1991) distinction between the vertical city – cathedral, factories and skyscrapers, all representing the powerful – and the ordinary city – village chapels, shantytowns and tenements, which represent the powerless. To build tall and, in so doing, visually dominate the surrounding urban fabric requires political power and is expensive.

The vertical map is also telling in terms of how power relations shift over time. Maria Kaika and Korinna Thielen (2006) use the term 'urban shrines' to describe buildings of superior scale and in prime locations, which visually dominate their physical context for at least as long as the authority they represent remains in power. Throughout history, these built manifestations of power have shifted from state and church authority in pre-modernity, to technology and money power in the nineteenth century, to capitalism and

³ 30 St Mary Axe, also known as the Swiss Re Building or the 'Gherkin', was built from 2001 to 2003 and formally opened in 2004. Tower 42, formerly the National Westminster Tower, was built from 1971 to 1980 and formally opened in 1981.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the term see Chapter 1.

global finance in the twentieth. The new London skyline – i.e. London's skylines as conceived by professionals in the analysed planning processes – includes both ends of this chronology of urban shrines.⁵ Currently built office high-rises are private–public shrines that represent the global financial service industries. St Paul's Cathedral, on the other hand, is a pre-modern monument to the authority of the Church of England. The simultaneous visibility of those different urban shrines from places such as Waterloo Bridge near the West End makes us question in what ways and to what degree religion and financial capitalism, history and contemporary interests, and preservation concerns and investment opportunities shape London's skylines.

Understanding skylines in relation to the politics of verticality as played out in the city is an important starting point for a socio-spatial and political analysis of the notion of skylines, which is what this thesis aspires to provide. However, I suggest that a simplistic reading of a skyline as a vertical map of power relations must be avoided, most of all, because of a skyline's non-dynamic nature. Current politicians, developers and architects tend to argue that because London is a dynamic city and not a museum, its skylines are subject to change.⁶ But do skylines really reflect a city's dynamism? I suggest that skylines are not dynamic but, instead, that they are slow, delayed and cumbersome, which is why we need to highlight a more complex understanding of the politics of verticality in the city. Consider the following three dimensions: the selective quality of skylines, the slowness of architecture and the endurance of urban shrines.

⁵ 'The new London skyline' refers to the way design-related professionals conceptualised London's skylines in the planning processes relating to the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle. It needs to be distinguished from 'London's skylines' which refers to different distant appearances of London more generally.

⁶ See http://realestate.union-investment.com/downloads/difa/3c8a2dd05f3788aa9f4741bcea97c193.0.0/Places&spaces0206_klein.pdf [accessed 21 August 2013].

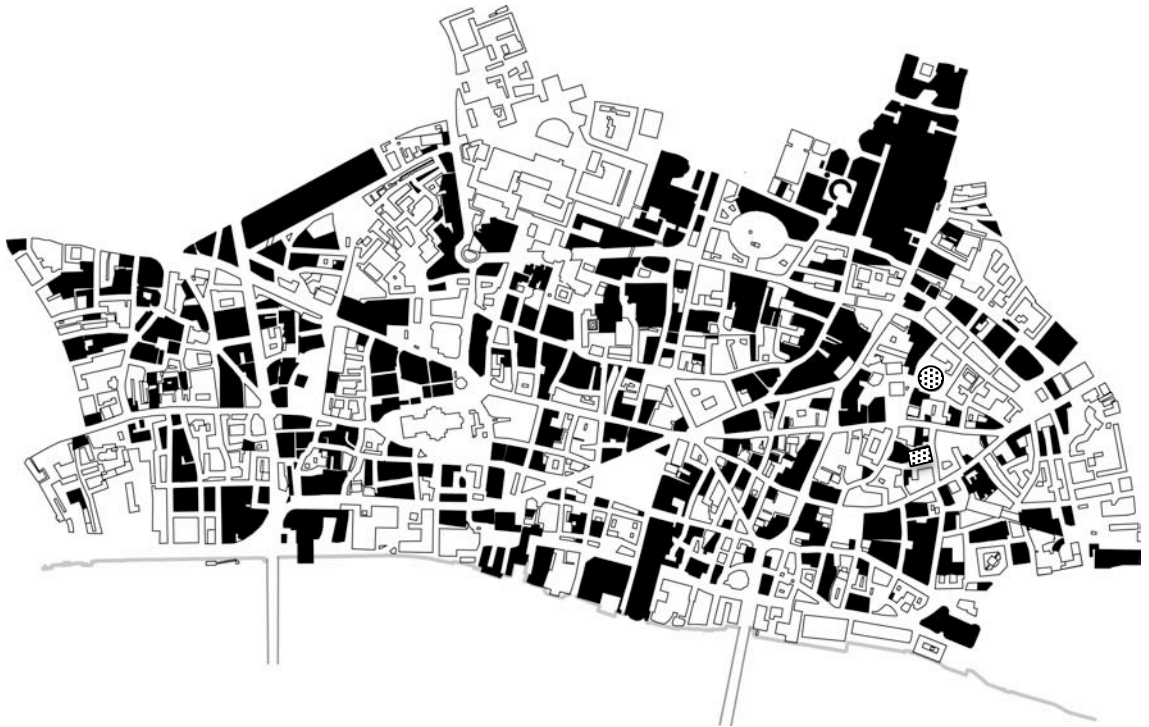


Figure 1: Developments within the City of London from mid-1980s to mid-2000s (based on architect's information) (Gassner, 2013).

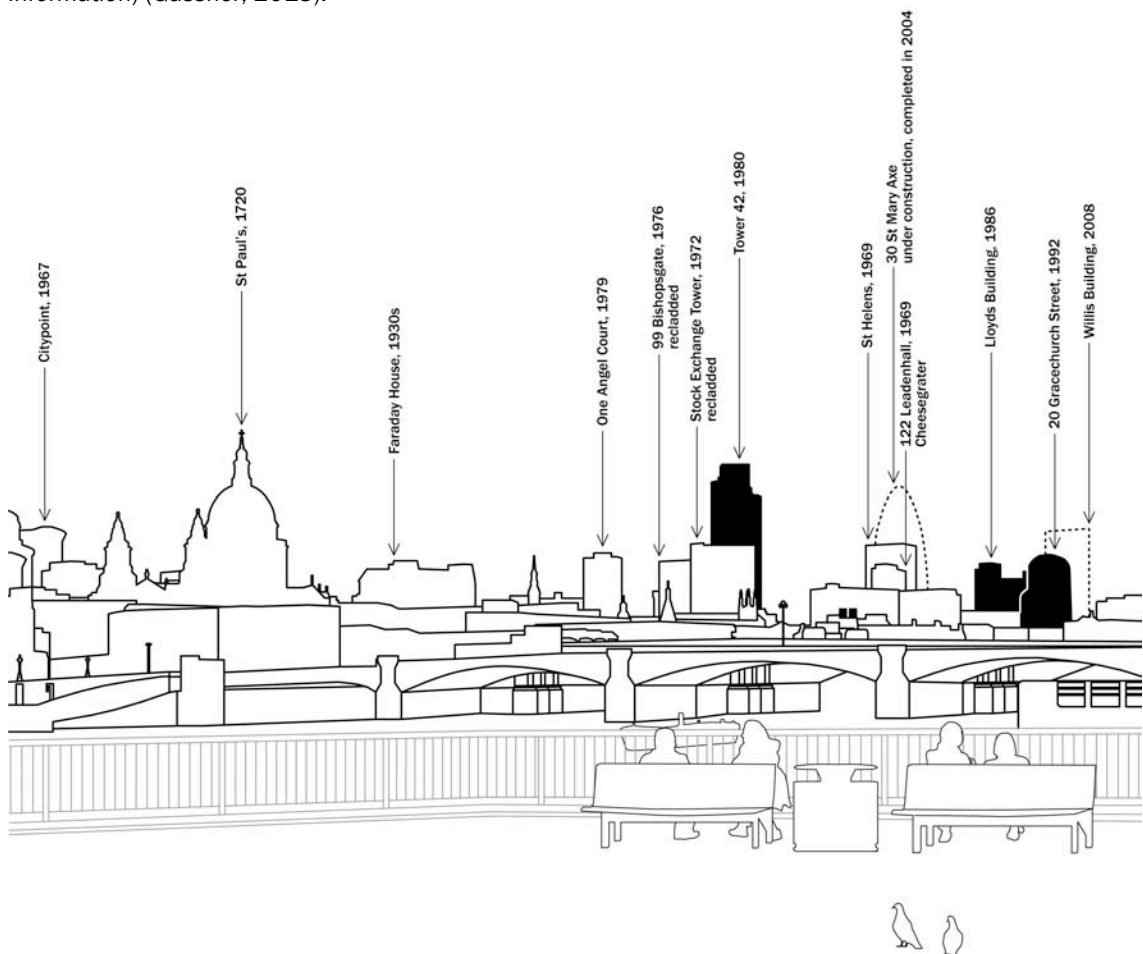


Figure 2: The City skyline as seen from the South Bank highlighting visible developments from mid-1980s to mid-2000s in black (Gassner, 2013).

In regard to the first issue, it is undoubtedly the case that the City's physical structure has changed substantially within the last twenty years. From the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s, the timespan within which high-rise construction largely moved to Canary Wharf, the City did not stand still. More than 200 developments, some of them several storeys high, can be counted in that period of time. However, only a few of these changes were noticeable from distant viewing places. The arrival of 30 St Mary Axe is probably the most prominent one. Thus, the City's skylines did not reflect the transformation that the physical structure underwent. Because a skyline is a highly abstract visual representation, it is also very selective in terms of its representation of change; fundamentally, many changes in the city fall through its cracks.

As to the slowness of architecture: office towers are investments. Even if the construction time of high-rise buildings has become shorter in recent years, it usually takes several years to go from setting up a financial budget to renting out office space. It is also difficult to predict the economy and future needs of financial service industries for representational office space. Moreover, tall buildings are not simply passive representations of the economy's behaviour but they actively affect it. Thus, skyscraper construction and real estate circles are reciprocally intertwined, as Carol Willis (1995) suggests with the saying 'form follows finance', although I want to add that finance follows form too.

Office towers both serve and often also create further demand for new office space. However, a skyline that bursts with high-rises does not necessarily mean that a city is wealthy or that the financial service industry prospers. A recent study shows that the visibility of skyscrapers may not signify economic wealth but could in fact herald an economic crash. Historically, "skyscraper construction had been characterised by bursts of sporadic, but intense activity that coincided with easy credit, rising land prices and excessive optimism, but often by the time the buildings were finished, the economy had slipped into recession" (Inman, 2012).⁷ Building tall can be a sign of a building boom, which, in turn, often means the misallocation of capital, which is why the Chrysler

⁷ Examples include: the world's first skyscraper, the Equitable Life building in New York, which was completed in 1873 and coincided with a five-year recession; the construction of New York's Chrysler and Empire State buildings, which preceded the New York crash of 1929 and Great Depression; Chicago's Willis Tower in 1974; Malaysia's Petronas Towers in 1997; Burj Khalifa in Dubai, just before Dubai had to be bailed out by its neighbour Abu Dhabi.

Building and the Empire State Building in New York, for example, need to be understood as visualisations of and contributions to the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

Now consider the endurance of urban shrines: these highly visible buildings in prime city locations often remain highly visible even after a shift of power relations. Many of them are not destroyed but, after a while, instead become preserved. They become designated as listed buildings, which means they become placed on the “Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest” by English Heritage (EH). They are therefore not erased from the public eye, but rather enshrined as heritage. Today’s visibility of St Paul’s in distant views, for example, indicates less the current power of the Church of England, I suggest, than the power of preservationist groups. Indeed, as I will suggest in the thesis, in some way it represents the power of politicians and developers who found ways to utilise preservationist concerns for their own interests.

The City of London’s skylines are highly selective, slow and delayed. These time-related aspects indicate the complexity of reading skylines. They cannot be limited to a concern with buildings’ heights. I suggest that the politics of verticality, which address the shape of London’s skylines, need to be understood in relation to the politics of distance, involving both spatial and temporal distance.

II. The politics of spatial-temporal distance

A skyline is characterised by a spatial distance between the viewer and the viewed. This spatial distance implies that a wider scope of the city is visible, which, in turn, tends to lead to the idea that a skyline conveys information about the ‘whole’ city. This is especially the case when this particular skyline is the one seen from a historically relevant viewing place; when the city is viewed from a historically important gateway to the city and/or when the view is directed towards the historical core of the city, such as the City of London. When spatial and temporal distances intersect on a skyline the notion of representatives tends to come into play.

We find an emphasis on such an intersection of spatial and temporal distance in the work of the sociologist Anselm Strauss (1976) and his account of the New York skyline from Battery Park at the south tip of Manhattan. According to Strauss, it is this particular skyline of New York that symbolises the city and makes us understand the city “as a whole” (5). This one skyline, it seems, provides us with some kind of overview of the city; an ‘overview’ from a low and publicly accessible viewpoint.

The architect Wayne Attoe (1981), in turn, argues that a skyline can be “the chief symbol for an urban collective [which] testifies that a group of people share a place and time, as well as operate in close proximity and with a good deal of interdependence” (1). Furthermore, he alleges that skylines “can also provide information about those collectives”; they can indicate “what is valued in a community; who is powerful there; what the principle business of the town is; which factors – social, political, economic – appear to have the greatest impact on life in the community” (ibid.: 29).

In a similar way, the architectural historian Robert Tavernor (2004a) suggests that a skyline can represent the city and that a particular skyline can have not only local but national and global significance and recognition, which is particularly the case for skylines of national capitals that, or so he argues, are required to represent the specifics of nationhood through their images, which include national identity, language, culture and history. Tavernor (2007) further proposes that the skylines of capitals not only represent the specifics of nationhood but that their national and global significance lies to a substantial degree in their power to attract businesses and tourists.

These accounts demonstrate a shared belief that a skyline indeed is capable of representing an ‘urban community’, a city in its entirety, or the specifics of the city. As a result of a peculiar intersection of spatial and temporal distance, it seems, skylines are thus transformed into representational city-images. But in our contemporary society without a meta-narrative, without one ideology and one religion we can agree on, the idea of representational city-images is doomed from the very start. The architectural historian Christine Boyer (1996), for example, argues strongly that in the contemporary western city meaning in representational images is eroded and totality is lost. Contemporary cityscapes, Richard Sennett (1992) reinforces, do not represent the

culture's values in religion and politics, and neither do its skylines, I want to add. In London's multi-lingual and multi-ethnic pluralistic society, for which a clear-cut dualism between permanent citizens and tourists is a poor explanatory model, there are no common values and no static whole that define representativeness. Yet, still, professional skyline debates tend to revolve around city-images and the notions of representativeness that are associated with them.



Figure 3: The most prominent buildings on the City skyline as seen from the South Bank in 2000 and expected arrivals (Gassner, 2009).

Ideas about the representativeness of London's skylines need to be understood in the context of neoliberal politics and city-branding. Academics have shown how in recent decades politicians increasingly started to court the City of London and private property developers as a way to secure social services such as affordable housing provision (McNeill, 2002a; 2002b; Harris, 2008; et al.). A business agenda has become hegemonic within urban policy-making in London, in which commercial developments are

privileged and London's global financial competitiveness is emphasised (Harris, 2008: 297). As part of a broader process of neoliberal urbanisation, which involves the construction of speculative high-rises in central London, as well as the privatisation of public spaces around developments or the purchase of buildings within conservation areas by developers as an attempt to limit possible objections in planning processes, the business agenda became particularly clear with some statements that the first democratically elected mayor of London made at the beginning of his term in office.

Ken Livingstone, a Labour politician who was the mayor and the leader of the Greater London Authority (GLA) from 2000 to 2008, announced in 2001 that "high buildings should be assessed by what they add to the skyline, rather than what they take away" (Livingstone, 2001). This was in the same year Prince Charles pronounced that new tall buildings were "overblown phallic structures" that ruined the skyline of the capital (Harris, 2008: 293). Since then, and despite the global economic recession and the change from a Labour to a Conservative leadership of the GLA, both in 2008, the construction boom in high-rises in central London has continued at an ever faster pace.

Livingstone's statement was based on the idea that London's built density should be increased within the built area. In so arguing, he referred back to the conclusions reached by the Urban Task Force (1999), an urban research group that was led by the architect Richard Rogers, which argued that cities with densely populated, compact, well-connected cores would encourage people to travel by public transport, to cycle and walk, and create more liveable places.⁸ But the report did not suggest that tall buildings are the best way of achieving these ends. Livingstone's concern with London's compactness was coupled with a concern for redefining London's city-image.⁹ In times of a globally integrated economy, he suggested, London should maintain a historical city-image and simultaneously strengthen its image as a world city by finding appropriate locations for corporate high-rises.

⁸ The Urban Task Force was an urban research group led by the well-known architect Richard Rogers, who was invited by the Deputy Prime Minister in 1998 to identify causes of urban decline and to establish a vision for cities, founded on the principles of design excellence, social wellbeing and environmental responsibility within appropriate delivery, fiscal and legal frameworks.

⁹ The prediction that was included in the *London Plan* (GLA, 2004) was an increase in employment by 636,000 from 2001 to 2016 and in population by around 810,000 in the same time period.

World cities, such as London, are nodes in the network of advanced business services (see Pain, 2009; Sassen, 2001). One of the important indicators of their economic performance is their global network connectivity.¹⁰ A world city needs to be well connected to other world cities. Furthermore, in order to stay competitive within the global market, it simultaneously needs to stand out, offering unique urban qualities, for which a distinctive city-image is crucial. A city's visual distinctiveness, the sociologist Martina Löw (2008) suggests, operates on two different scales at the same time. In order to have a strong imageability – which Kevin Lynch (1995) defines as the quality that gives it a “high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer” (9) – world cities tend to combine uniqueness at the global scale with uniformity at the city scale. London, however, lacks the latter.

Central London lacks the visual order and regular building heights of Paris' historical centre (the Eiffel Tower being the only exception), or the verticality of Manhattan, which give these cities an easily understandable visual identity. London is rather an agglomeration of 'villages' with different characters with a built structure in central London that includes buildings of very different sizes, heights, styles and ages. And it is exactly at this point that representations of history in London's built environment become important for capitalist urbanisation. The lack of a citywide uniformity – i.e. that London's identity is its multiple identities, as it could be argued – makes the historical built environment all the more important. Professionals suggest that it is the presence of London's past rather than visual uniformity that make its city-image unique as well as recognisable.

As a result of the simultaneous visibility of historical buildings and recently built office towers then, London is meant to be both recognisable as a unique city and a thriving world city. Design-related professionals, who operate within this particular framework of capitalist urbanisation, thus question less if, in principle, tall buildings should be built in London, but rather, how London's past should be represented through the built environment. What visual relationship between 'old' and 'new' buildings, but also

¹⁰ For a ranking of world cities according to their Global Network Connectivity in 2008 see <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/rb/rb328.html> [accessed 21 August 2013].

between sacral and secular buildings, between religion and financial capitalism, is representative, appropriate or, at the very least, acceptable?

I suggest that rather than reiterating an over-simplistic understanding of a seeming opposition between advocates and opponents of tall buildings, an analysis of the encapsulated historiographical approaches is what is needed to critically examine professional skyline debates. When we look at a skyline, we look at a city's material past. We see very old buildings, such as St Paul's, which was designed by Christopher Wren and completed in 1720, and less old ones, such as Tower 42, designed by Richard Seifert and completed in 1980. Dividing up a skyline into 'old' and 'new' buildings is, however, a crude over-simplification and, in fact, wrong. We do not see the city's present directly: its social structure, on-going activities, present debates and struggles. A skyline needs to be understood as a manifestation of politicians', planners', developers', architects' and historians' conceptions in and of the past; not one particular conception, but rather the current result of a series of negotiations and decisions in the past, and not a single, unified vision.

How is London's past represented for the city's present and future as a world city? How is time represented spatially and visually? Campkin (2013) shows that "'regeneration' [in London] has consistently been envisioned through representational strategies that seek to detach and decontextualise places from their existing histories, identities and communities" (166). Have contemporary visions of the city that are antagonistic to London's image as a world city a place in skyline debates?

Preservationist arguments are intertwined with concerns about a new image for London. At the bottom of a critical analysis of skylines as visualisations of historiographical approaches lies the still timely question about the uses and disadvantages of history for contemporary life, which Friedrich Nietzsche (1997) discussed in 1873. What is the 'useful' past, what makes an obsession with the past unhealthy, and what is the value of forgetting?¹¹ History is not given, neutral and universal but rather it is a particular representation of the past. 'How is history possible?' asked Georg Simmel in 1905, arguing for the need to "develop a critique of historical realism – of the view that the

¹¹ For a discussion see Foucault, 2009.

science of history should provide a mirror image of the past ‘as it really was’” (1971: 3). “Man, as something known, is made by nature and history; but man, as knower”, he continuous, “makes nature and history” (ibid.: 4). How professionals make the ‘urban landscape’ and history in regard to London’s skylines is what I will discuss in the context of contemporary forms of neoliberal urbanisation.

The aim of my research is to reach a better and critical understanding of the professional production of the new London skyline in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Relating the politics of verticality to the politics of spatial-temporal distance, I propose an understanding of the new London skyline as a past representation of the city’s past, present and future as a world city.

III. The professional production of the new London skyline

London’s skylines are produced progressively as the city is transformed piece by piece. The most momentous sites of professional skyline debates are the planning processes of tall buildings. Because London does not have a legally binding citywide land use plan that prescribes maximum building heights, floor-area ratios and building programmes such as Paris and Berlin, building proposals are discussed on a case-by-case basis. Analogous to case law, where the juridical decisions of certain courts can be cited as precedents, planning in London is to some extent also based on precedent cases. Although every case is assessed on its own merit, precedent cases can help an argument.

Proposed buildings are subject to the prior approval of a local planning authority, which, for the City, is the Corporation of London. Most planning processes in the City begin with pre-application discussions between the applicant’s team, which includes architects and townscape and planning consultants, and the local authority (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2003: 128). In regard to tall buildings, architects also tend to have pre-application meetings with advisory bodies such as EH and the Commission of Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE).¹² These pre-application meetings are

¹² CABE was an executive non-departmental public body of the UK government from 1999 until 2011, funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Communities and Local Government. In 2011, CABE was merged into the Design Council.

the first momentous sites at which aspects relating to a particular possible transformation of London's skylines are debated.

When the Corporation of London has received an application it begins publicity, notification and consultation procedures. It consults local communities as well as advisory bodies, such as EH and CABE. On the basis of the consultation returns, the relevance of national and local policies, previous decisions, and a site visit, the planning office makes a report to the planning committee with a recommendation on the decision to be made. These assessments of planning documents by the local authority and advisory bodies are thus the second momentous sites of skyline debates.

The decision can be an unconditional permission, permission subject to conditions, or a refusal. The applicant has the right to appeal against the decision. However, planning applications "which raise issues that are of more than local importance [...] can [also] be 'called in' for decision by the Secretary of State" (ibid.: 120) by EH and CABE, for example. These bodies have the power "to call the attention of any of our departments of state [...] to any project or development which [they consider] may appear to affect amenities of a national or public character" (ibid.: 140). When the Secretary of State calls a project in, it considers evidence and reaches its decision either by a Public Inquiry, hearing or written representation. Both the applicant and the planning authority have the right to demand a full inquiry if they wish to do so (ibid.: 138) and, in fact, several office towers in the City were subject to inquiries in the last ten years, which are "*adversarial* debates conducted through the presentation and questioning [...] of evidence" (ibid.: 128). Public inquiries are the third momentous sites of skylines debates, and probably the most momentous, because it is through cross-examinations that different perspectives on skylines become most clearly formulated and measured out.

The main difference between the world city London and the world city Paris in regard to skyline debates is that in the UK planning processes are complex negotiations between experts who communicate in their roles as experts. In France, by contrast, planning processes are mostly administrative. While in London a land use plan, as suggested by local and regional authorities (GLA, 2011; CoL, 2002a), is only one in a number of material considerations that local planning authorities must take into account

when reaching their decision (Breuillard et al., 2007: 62), in Paris a local masterplan has legal force and is opposable. This therefore implies that the London context allows for a stronger dimension of professional judgement in decisions about planning permission, which is why the consultancy sector has grown over the last decades in the UK. While traditionally the consultancy sector served solely the needs of private developers, it now increasingly also serves the needs of local authorities (ibid.). CABE and EH were important organisations that co-shaped the new London skyline in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and in regard to the representations of history on the skyline EH in particular so.

Thus, the first important dimension in London is that the professional production of skylines is case study-oriented. London's skylines are assessed case-by-case in complex negotiations between design-related experts, local authorities and, at least for buildings that are taller than 150 metres, also the Mayor of London. The other important dimension of skyline debates is that London's skylines are conceived in terms of the sum of several positioned views in the city.

As part of an Environmental Statement (ES) that the applicant's team needs to submit, tall building proposals are required to include a chapter on their visual impact on the surrounding site. In a so-called Townscape and Visual Assessment, a range of experts including a townscape consultant identifies what it regards as key views of the development in relation to other prominent buildings and historic sites of the city (Tavernor, 2004b: 48f). These key views include strategic views, which are defined in the capital's strategic plan, the *London Plan* (GLA, 2004; 2011), and the *London View Management Framework* (LVMF) (GLA, 2007; 2012), which is supplementary planning guidance to the *London Plan* that focuses on a detailed description of qualitatively and quantitatively assessed strategic views.

Strategic views are defined as views in which "significant parts of London, or significant buildings [are] visible" (GLA, 2004: 185). These views are argued to be "highly valued and [allow] for the appreciation and understanding of London as a whole, or of major elements within it" (ibid.). In other words, the professional notion of the 'strategic view' suggests that particular views are key to our understanding of the city as a whole. Of

particular importance for London's skylines as representations of the city's past are so-called protected vistas, which are distant views towards "strategically important landmark buildings" (GLA, 2012: 238) that are both qualitatively and quantitatively assessed. Currently protected views include distant views towards St Paul's Cathedral, the Palace of Westminster and the Tower of London.

I suggest that in order to critically engage with the new London skyline the historiographical approach that is encapsulated in its discursive production needs to be filtered out of London's case study-oriented and experiential planning system. Professional debates about London's skylines revolve around the assessment of visual experiences from selected viewpoints in the city. In these assessments, the primary focus lies in evaluations of the visual impact of a proposed development on the settings of selected historical buildings. Ultimately, a critical analysis needs to examine the ways in which visual experiences are conceptualised, measured and controlled, as these are the mechanisms through which a hierarchy of sight is imposed upon us.

IV. Analytical approach, aims and research questions

In what ways does the discursive production of the new London skyline ask for a more sociological and political approach? In this thesis I critically engage with questions about different visions of the city and representations of the City's skylines that were debated in the socio-political and economic environment of London in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The planning processes I engage with took place before the global economic recession that started in 2008, at a time when there was less debate about the 'uncontrollability' of financial capitalism, at least among the wider public. Skyline debates within the planning processes of specific commercial developments were characterised by an apparent reduction of skylines to their aesthetic dimensions within a 'given' political context. I am particularly interested in how professional conceptualisations of skylines both create urban visions and how some of these visions are translated into built form, impacting on our everyday visual experience and perception of the city. I suggest that a city's skylines are not simply passive representations of established landscapes of power but that they can be the subject of critical perception and a proactive political appropriation. To put it differently, I suggest

that London's skylines can be conceptualised other than in terms of an aesthetical city-image to attract global investment.

In that respect, I also want to argue that design-related professionals, such as architects and townscape consultants, and also historians and preservationists cannot simply accept what they might regard as the realities of London's neoliberal urbanisation, but rather need to use their expertise in order to develop and clearly communicate a more critical and proactive attitude. Of course, it would be easy to criticise politicians and representatives of EH, who are paid by taxpayers and work for the public, rather than for a few developers. But while I argue that skylines cannot be reduced to their aesthetic dimensions based on the argument that this is what can be negotiated within a 'given' political context, I also argue that it is exactly the aesthetic dimensions that can be the starting point for a proactive critique of politics. I suggest that in regard to London's skylines, aesthetics need to be politicised and not politics aestheticised.¹³

Employing a more sociological and political approach, I thus critically re-examine the norms and standards of professional skyline debates. This includes a critical engagement with ideas about representative city-images, a conception of the city as a whole, a critique of the hierarchy of sight that is created through formalised vision, and in particular the historiographical approach that is encapsulated in current skyline debates. I suggest that visual and spatial relations between old and new, low and high, sacral and secular, religion and financial capitalism, as historically formulated and endorsed by current design-related professionals, need to be re-evaluated.

The aim is to re-examine the notion of the new London skyline as a representational city-image. More specifically, I aim to explore the relationships between aesthetics and politics that are played out in professional skyline debates in order to better understand how representations of history, religion and financial capitalism shape current forms of neoliberal urbanisation in London. What are the social and economic power structures and historical narratives that are projected in the London skyline as it is conceived by

¹³ Here I refer to Walter Benjamin's (2006a) "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility" in which he argues that fascism relates to "an aestheticizing of political life" and that communism "replies by politicizing art" (270). I discuss the aspect of politicising aesthetics through the thesis, in particular in relation to surrealist collages.

architects, planners and heritage representatives? I analyse the historical, spatial and visual relations that define London's skylines from a perspective that does not 'fix' them in a flat and single aesthetically pleasing image, but which tries to examine them as a critical and political representation of the city that makes up the socio-spatial, lived-in environment. The view from which I look at London's skylines neither conceives of the city as a museum nor as an evolutionary process and does not aim to fix the meaning and the symbolism of a skyline. I regard it as more appropriate to emphasise the multiplicity of a city's *skylines* and to use, wherever possible, the plural.

In this thesis I focus on professional skyline debates relating to two office towers that were crucial for the definition of the Eastern high-rise cluster in the City: the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle. While the former is located at the very northern fringe, and so defines an edge condition for the cluster, the latter is in the geographical middle, and thus defines its centre. These particular roles within the visual definition of the Eastern cluster led to heavy contestations. Both developments had long and particularly expensive planning processes including, in the case of the Heron Tower, a Public Inquiry.

It is in this context of negotiations between design-related professionals in regard to the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle that I disentangle skyline-related historiographical approaches. As there is no isolated and clearly definable skyline discourse – it is always embedded in either wider urban debates or in the planning processes of particular proposed developments – the two developments are not case studies in the conventional sense. I do not analyse these developments or the planning processes of these developments, but rather examine the dimensions of skylines that underpinned the debates about these two developments, particularly the dimensions that were voiced in planning negotiations.

Given the historiographical focus and my work, I narrow my analysis further down to debates between three actors: architects, townscape consultants and representatives of EH.¹⁴ I examine these debates through an analysis of visual and textual representations

¹⁴ A townscape consultant is an expert in architectural and urban design who can demonstrate an appropriate degree of professional impartiality.

and conducted interviews. In so doing, I use the notion of discourse to address the rhetorical organisation and social production of visual, written and spoken material and highlight the relevance of intertextuality, because in order to filter out relationships between the aesthetic and political dimensions, I look for information in between different types of documents and different representational forms.¹⁵

My analysis also includes visual representations, which are drawings and diagrams that are produced by me, reflecting my professional background as an architect. These drawings are not to be read as illustrations but as visual analyses. For me, drawing is not a means of visualisation of something I know already but is itself an analytical process. In this process I aim, first, to understand the aesthetical and political logic behind design-related statements and, second, to explore visual alternatives, which in turn shed further light on the nature of the statements made. As such, my drawings carry an important role in communicating and structuring the narrative of my thesis.

My drawings are therefore an integral part of my analysis; they get to the bottom of what a pluralistic and adversarial understanding of skylines can mean visually. In so doing they are not simply representations of what a skyline looks like in relation to what it could look like, but are also an exploration of how a skyline is conceptualised and thought of. In my outline drawings I employ a technique that was heavily used in early twentieth-century debates about cityscapes. However, my drawing technique differs in the sense that it is, following a collage-like understanding of the city, deliberately visually disruptive and constructive, for example by superimposing two different image planes in order to challenge the spatial isolation and closure that characterises formalised vision. As I will explain throughout the thesis, I understand visual disruption at the same time as a political disruption and, furthermore, as a historiographical strategy.

¹⁵ For a discussion of different dimensions of intertextuality in regard to visual methodologies see Gill, 2000; Tonkiss, 1998; Rose, 2001.

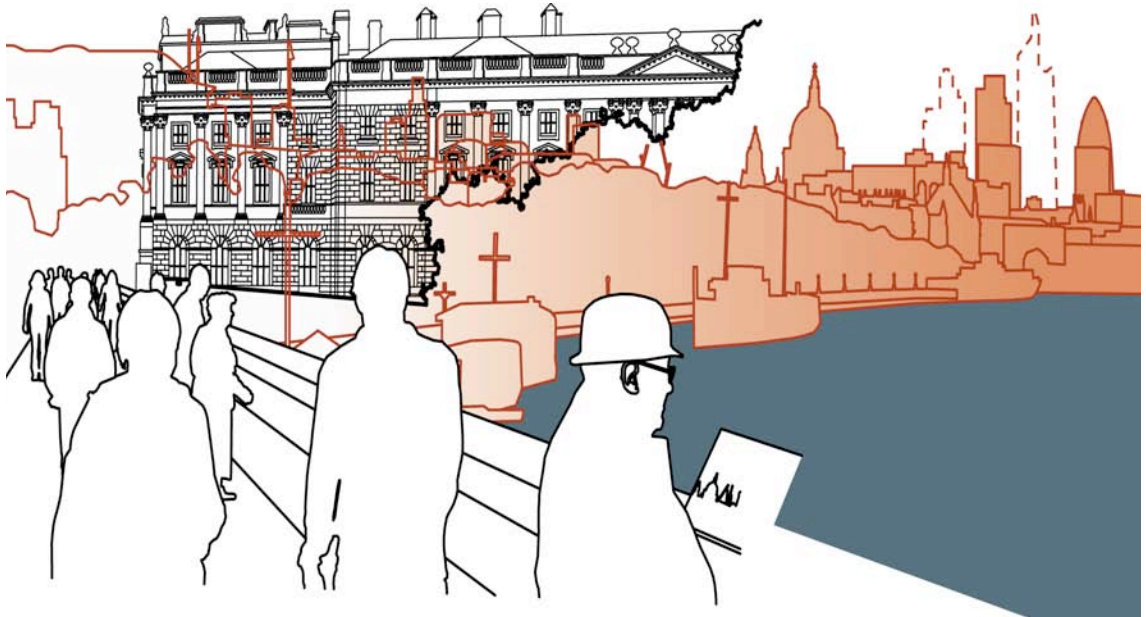


Figure 4: Superimposition of a view to Somerset House and a distant view to the City of London from the same viewpoint on Waterloo Bridge (Gassner, 2013).

In this thesis I return to Romanticism and eighteenth-century debates about picturesque landscape gardening as well as to early twentieth-century debates about cityscapes and focus on those urban design principles that have widely fallen into oblivion since the post-WW II construction in the City and the heritage framework it is subject to. Drawing on the visual principles that were developed in these historical debates, I critically examine current conceptualisations of the new London skyline and formulate an alternative conception of London's skylines as unfinished and unfinishable.

Furthermore, rather than understanding a skyline as a representative compositional whole, I argue for a collage-like and fragmentary understanding of skylines, which involves a conceptual destruction, re-evaluation and critical re-arrangement of townscape elements. In so doing, I propose three dimensions to be considered by professionals: first, to acknowledge political and not solely aestheticising aspects of spatial-temporal distance; second, to recognise multiple and contesting histories; and third, to resist a desire to fix one meaning and symbolism to the new London skyline. A skyline that is directed by these three principles, I suggest, is unfinished and unfinishable in a material as well as epistemic sense.

In sum, the research is guided by three questions. First, how are representations of London's past, present and future conceptualised in the new London skyline by design-related professionals? I will explore this question through an analysis of visual, written and spoken material produced by architects, townscape consultants and representatives of EH relating to the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle, the former of which was completed in 2011 and the latter of which, at the time of writing, is not completed.

The second question focuses on an examination of how the historiographical approach that characterises current skyline debates relates to one that is encapsulated in eighteenth-century picturesque and early twentieth-century Townscape debates. The English Townscape movement, which was developed as an editorial campaign in the monthly magazine *The Architectural Review* (AR), is a visual approach that current design-related professionals frequently refer to. They tend to do so, however, in a limited and sometimes erroneous way. Nowadays, Townscape is often reduced to a nostalgic way of looking at the city. Such an understanding neglects the progressive and political concerns that I see as part of the movement and which were most clearly mentioned in articles from the 1930s and 1940s that are generally not known among the architectural profession. I suggest that a particular reading of Townscape articles allows us to critically examine current skyline debates and to demonstrate a historiographical counterpart.

It is in particular Hubert de Cronin Hastings' (1944; 1949) ideas of cityscapes as "democratic art" and as "surrealist pictures" and Gordon Cullen's (1949) early visual examples rather than his well-known *The Concise Townscape* that I focus on. In so doing, I follow the work of a few academics who have started to excavate the early phase of the movement (Macarthur, 2007a; 2007b; Aitchison, 2008). I regard Hastings' abovementioned ideas as particularly relevant for current conceptual problems. But they are not thoroughly developed by Hastings, whose articles tend to be both highly provocative and highly obscure. I work closely with selected concepts of the German-Jewish thinker Walter Benjamin, who, roughly at the same time as Hastings wrote about English cityscapes, was thinking and writing about cityscapes too. It is almost certain that there was no intellectual exchange between the two writers. However, I suggest that

they share an influence from the avant-garde surrealist movement and the political attitude that comes with it. Several conceptual threads, such as Hastings' surrealist pictures and Benjamin's surrealist historiography, Townscape's visual principle of netting and Benjamin's emphasis on the constructive principle of history, prove to be highly productive for a critical engagement with current skyline debates.

The third research question is more speculative and asks how professionals can conceptualise a more meaningful, proactive and critical engagement with cityscapes. How can the notion of skylines be approached as a subject of critical perception and political appropriation, and not simply as a beautiful and easily marketable image? I deal with this question in a propositional way. I regard it as the red thread throughout the thesis that must not be lost from sight in the detailed presentation and discussion of empirical data, archival material and theoretical concepts.

V. Chapter outline

In Chapter 1 – The formal and informal skylines – I discuss two fundamentally different ways of how to approach a city's skylines. Current planning policies and guidelines shape a formal skyline. This skyline is not so much formal in the sense that one singular outline is dictated, although such tendencies can be identified as I discuss in a later chapter, but, most importantly, because its visual experience is formalised. The most important professional tool to this end is the protection of views towards historical landmark buildings. Such a formal skyline, I suggest, is a conservative skyline, independent of the number of new office towers that are visible, because its basic principle is that of historical continuity, which is created by means of three mechanisms: first, the selection of those historical buildings that are considered to be 'heritage assets'; second, the definition of static views towards these buildings; and third, the idea that the remaining buildings have to visually enhance them.

An informal skyline, by contrast, is one whose visual experience is its primary concern but that is not formalised. Such a conceptualisation can be found in Townscape debates in the 1940s. Based on picturesque planning principles, Townscape writers challenged all three abovementioned mechanisms. I discuss informal skylines in relation to

Hastings' understanding of cityscapes as 'democratic art' and show in what ways the related collage-like understanding of the city needs to be distinguished from urban models such as the radiant city, the garden city and the monumental city. Drawing a line between the informal and formlessness, I argue against Mumford's suggestion that informal visual planning involves a solely utilitarian laissez-faire approach. I take his description of informal planning as "cultural rag-picking" as the starting point to introduce parallels between Hastings' approach towards visual urban planning and Benjamin's work on cityscapes in order to argue that 'rag-picking' is an important notion for a critical engagement with the conservative formal skyline, because it politicises historical remnants.

In Chapter 2 – Methodological constellations – I outline the relationships between the data and methods that are used in this research. I explain my visual methodology by analysing a walk from the South Bank to Somerset House via Waterloo Bridge and the different distant views along this walk. The visual methodology I use in this research involves a process of visual abstraction, separation and re-arrangement. I elaborate on my approach towards skyline debates, arguing that debates between architects, townscape consultants and representatives of EH provide a useful focus for an analysis of the new London skyline and the historiographical focus that is encapsulated in its professional production. I explain the role of the two case studies and introduce the different types of documents to be analysed, further highlighting the relevance of intertextuality for my research. I then move on to explaining my reading of the Townscape articles. My aim is not to give a full account of what Townscape writers had to say about London's skylines, but rather to filter out those aspects that are most productive for a critical engagement with current professional debates. I then discuss the intellectual methodology of this research and in particular my reading of Benjamin's account. Similar to my reading of early Townscape articles, I choose very few concepts, namely those that politicise the visual principles developed in the eighteenth-century picturesque and early twentieth-century Townscape debates. I argue that an analysis of the interlinking of aesthetics and politics in regard to representations of history requires the singling out and putting in relation of critical moments and the avoidance of remaining within an overall, highly abstract theory.

In Chapter 3 – The politics of representing time – I start with my concrete analysis of how the new London skyline was professionally conceptualised in the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle. I suggest that London's multiple skylines were narrowed down to very few distant views of the City from viewpoints in west London, in which St Paul's and the Eastern cluster are visible side-by-side. I explain the spatial, social and historical dimensions that underpinned this approach and suggest that the new London skyline is characterised by spatial closure and a linear and continuous representation of time. Drawing on Boyer's analysis of current practices of architecture, city planning and historic preservation, I argue that the professional production of London's skylines carries within its visual imaginations the influence of nineteenth-century procedures and representational views of city building, envisioning the new London skyline as a highly controlled node within otherwise neglected visual experiences. This node is regarded not only as representative but also as self-contained. I critically engage with the compositional wholeness that is ascribed to the new London skyline by introducing Hastings' understanding of the cityscape in terms of surrealist pictures, which I relate to Benjamin's literary montages and his surrealist and redemptive approach towards historiography. I argue that the surrealist collage with its characteristics of deconstruction, decontextualisation and destabilisation needs to be understood in relation to a constructive principle, which applies to both aesthetics and history. Such a critically perceived and politically appropriated skyline, I suggest, is one that is conceptually open to being taken apart in order to be put into critical and illuminating constellations.

In Chapter 4 – The politics of form – I focus on professional attempts to make the new London skyline quantifiable and measurable. I analyse the two most momentous abstractions that were used to this end: the visual reduction of cityscapes to skyline profiles and the measurement of sky gaps. I argue that visual separation and formal uniqueness are further attempts to fix visual relationships between different townscape elements and to create a seemingly harmonious ensemble. Focusing on the use of an animation as an official planning document in the planning process of the Heron Tower, I discuss Townscape writers' emphasis on the kinetic visual experience of the city, which involved an understanding of the 'eye as movie camera'. In my discussion of a cinematic rather than painterly understanding of skylines, I emphasise the destructive

quality of films. A cinematic skyline, I suggest, is not one in which visual impressions go hand in hand with one another, but one in which independent snapshots collide with each other.

In Chapter 5 – The non-auratic skyline – I continue with my discussion of the kinetic experience of skylines, returning to the walk from Gabriel’s Wharf to Somerset House I set out in Chapter 2. I critically engage with the prevalent idea that a ‘fine’ and representative distant view is one that is characterised by a free line of vision towards a historical landmark building and the wider city, and I argue for a political understanding of spatial and temporal distance. Referring to Benjamin’s notion of aura, I introduce an understanding of a non-auratic skyline, which does not solely revolve around the visibility and appreciability of selected landmarks. In this context I also emphasise Benjamin’s political interpretation of distraction, which I relate to a process of visual destruction and an understanding of skylines in terms of visual fragments. This conceptualisation is important because, although current professionals acknowledge the impact of the viewing place on the viewing experience, the visual foreground tends to be decoupled from the viewing place. Such an approach aims at a totality of the picture in the distance, which I argue needs to be critically assessed making use of the immediate surrounding of the viewer. I discuss the picturesque distinction between looking *into* and looking *at* the distance, and I highlight two Townscape strategies of how to relate the spatially distant to the nearby: truncation and netting. I suggest that these two visual strategies can be paralleled to two different historiographical approaches, historical reconstruction and history as construction respectively. I suggest that the latter approach helps us to not reduce spatial-temporal distance to its aestheticising quality but to draw attention to the tactile quality of a skyline, and I give a concrete example of what this tactile quality can mean in the contemporary London context.

In Chapter 6 – The multidirectional skyline – I critically engage with the notions of progress and regress as represented in the new London skyline. My discussion revolves around different professional ideas of what cityscape the City ‘needs’ in the present and the future and I highlight that while some professionals argue that the City does indeed need office towers, they are not meant to challenge the visual dominance of St Paul’s on the City’s skylines. I place this finding in a dialogue with the professional debates after

WW II, in which Townscape writers argued that after the destruction wrought by the war the City not only needed new office and retail blocks but also that a system of formalised vision should be avoided and bombed-out churches should be maintained in their ruined state. I develop a more detailed understanding of ruins, focusing on Benjamin's concept of an object's afterlife, and argue that they can be understood as critical representations of a city's past because they express their individual histories and do not sit comfortably within a linear and progressive historical narrative. My discussion then moves to contemporary ruins on the new London skyline, which are mostly programmatic ones. I show that the new London skyline conceived as a whole composition – as it was imagined in the analysed planning processes – has started to crumble away before its material completion. This premature ruination of the new London skyline is a critical moment that poses questions about how time is represented in the city. I close the chapter by drawing attention to the flipside of technological and scientific progress and the power structure that lurks behind a progressive historical narrative more generally.

In Chapter 7 – The empty skyline – I move from the realm of objects to the realm of language, analysing how meaning was concentrated in the discursive production of London's skylines. I refer back to my critical examination of the established distinction between 'heritage assets' and buildings that are visually prominent without having aesthetic and historical merits, which is so typical of the formal skyline, and analyse in more detail what different symbolisms were attached to individual buildings on the new London skyline. In my discussion I focus on the notions of symbols and icons, and I show that in planning processes St Paul's has been overloaded with multiple and sometimes contradictory symbolisms. I suggest that this can be understood in terms of a repression of symbolism by recognisability and move on to critically assess the symbolic value of buildings by introducing Benjamin's distinction between symbols and allegories. The overloading of multiple and contradictory symbolisms, I suggest, is part of a process of hollowing out meaning, which, in turn, relates to the commodification of individual buildings on the new London skyline. When visual ruination characterises the non-aesthetic skyline, and physical and programmatic ruination the multidirectional skyline, so the ruination of symbolism characterises the empty skyline.

Chapter 1: The formal and informal skylines

1.1 The newness of skylines

A city has an infinite number of different skylines. Expressions like ‘the London skyline’ or ‘the new City skyline’ suggest, as mentioned in the Introduction, that different values are attached to different distant views and that some of them are regarded as more representative of the city than others. In principle, whenever we are in or nearby a city, we are in a visual relation to a city’s skylines. Looking up or into the distance, we often see the city’s upper edge. However, we should make a distinction between the terms ‘skyline’, ‘roofline’ and ‘roofscape’. If the skyline is a silhouette of the city as seen from the distance, the roofline suggests a similar visual abstraction but from relatively short distances. Roofscape, in turn, is used to describe the visual composition of different roofs, and hence is a less abstract notion (see Moughtin et al., 1999). Still, skylines belong to a city’s inherent visual phenomena and have political, economic and aesthetic values attached to them. It is therefore surprising that there is only a very limited amount of academic literature that exists on the topic. Other than planning studies relating to high-rises and literature on urban form more generally, skylines as socio-spatial, cultural and political phenomena in their own right lack extensive scholarly analysis, and studies that focus on skylines in European cities even more so.

The lack of extensive inter-disciplinary studies of London’s skylines is also surprising because the new London skyline has been at the very centre of many political debates, especially in the first years of the twenty-first century, also attracting a great deal of media attention. With tall building schemes in the pipeline, it was not only difficult to escape London’s skylines as visual experiences in the city but also images of future scenarios of London’s skylines, which featured prominently in newspapers and in the London Evening Standard in particular. “Towers of London”, “Nickname buildings march across London’s skyline”, “Shard stands proud above City skyline”, “Standard takes a bird’s eye view of our changing skyline”, “Boris Johnson and Ken Livingstone are gripped by a phallic obsession that is destroying London’s skyline”: these are a few more recent examples of skyline-related articles in this newspaper.¹⁶ Many of these

¹⁶ “Towers of London” by Elizabeth Hopkirk and Ross Lydall appeared in the London Evening Standard on 18 July 2007; “Nickname buildings march across London’s skyline” by Kieran Long on 28 October 2010;

articles show a direct comparison between the city's distant appearances from the same viewpoint at different moments in time. These before-and-after comparisons tend to trigger preservation- and conservation-related questions. Should the existing skyline be preserved? Are changes acceptable? If so, are only changes that are cautious and do not change the overall symbolism to be tolerated? Such questions open up debates about the newness of a skyline. What is 'new' about the new London skyline? How many or what kind of changes make a skyline new? If London's distant appearance is in the process of being transformed from a historical and religious to a modern and corporate aesthetics, how many or what kind of office towers need to appear on the skyline until design-related professionals regard this as a change in kind and not degree?

These questions, however, address only one aspect of newness relating to corporate skylines. Another dimension is related to the idea that, until recently, London did not have a skyline at all.¹⁷ Is a skyline so clearly defined by capitalist interests interlinked with modern and/or post-modern aesthetics that a city without speculative corporate high-rises does not have a skyline? Are we currently witnessing the coming into being of skylines in London, or, better, is 'the London skyline' still in its infancy?

In this chapter I develop a distinction between two different professional approaches towards skylines. These are two different ways of seeing the city through its skylines. The formal skyline is a skyline wherein the visual experience is formalised. In the current London context, this is done by means of the control of static views towards strategically important landmark buildings. I argue that such a formal skyline is, by definition, a historical and conservative skyline, independent of the number of new office towers that appear. There is nothing fundamentally visually new about it as long as its professional production follows the established three steps: the singling out of certain historical buildings which are regarded as 'heritage assets', the definition of static views towards these buildings, and the idea that new buildings are meant to visually enhance them. In contrast is an informal conceptualisation, in which visual experiences are not formalised.

"Shard stands proud above City skyline" on 26 November 2010; "Standard takes a bird's eye view of our changing skyline" by Miranda Bryant on 30 September 2011; "Boris Johnson and Ken Livingstone are gripped by a phallic obsession that is destroying London's skyline" by Simon Jenkins on 29 November 2011.

¹⁷ The idea that until very recently London did not have a skyline at all is suggested in several statements in online discussions. See www.skyscrapercity.com [accessed 21 August 2013].

Such a conception can be found in early Townscape debates in the 1940s. I introduce Hastings' understanding of cityscapes as 'democratic art' and show the ways in which such an understanding of the visual city is to be distinguished from urban models such as the garden city, the radiant city and the monumental city. I contextualise my analysis of informal skylines and my reading of early Townscape articles by referring to Jane Jacobs' attack on established planning practices and Mumford's criticism of informal planning as a practice of 'cultural rag-picking'. I take Mumford's remark as a starting point to introduce parallels between Hastings' approach towards visual urban planning and Benjamin's work on cities. I argue that Benjamin's account helps us to filter out the political dimensions in Hastings' understanding of visual informality. Informal skylines are not simply utilitarian, based on the idea that capitalism is regulating itself with regard to visual order, but they can be conceptualised in relation to a critical engagement with both the conservatism of the formal skyline and the hierarchy of sight that formalised vision imposes more generally. That way, I suggest, concerns with the newness of the formal skyline give way to concerns about the topicality of skylines. I commence this chapter with the question of how to define a skyline.

Material removed for copyright reasons. See
<http://www.planning2.cityoflondon.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=IME1FTFH51000>.

Figure 5: Protected viewing corridors in central London (Design Statement, Heron Tower)

1.2 Definitions

1.2.1 Skyline

In *The Architecture of America* the historians John Ely Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown (1967) note that the term ‘skyline’ was coined in 1897. New Yorkers were intrigued by the enormous changes in the built environment since 1894 and it was at that time that the new corporate skyline impressed itself as a symbol. The increasing replacement of church steeples by commercial skyscrapers became a theme that photographers recorded, artists depicted and poets wrote about. Guessing at the exact source of Burchard and Bush-Brown’s date of origin, the architectural historian Thomas van Leeuwen (1988) suggests that the reason could have been Montgomery Schuyler’s contribution to the article “The Sky-line of New York” in the political magazine *Harper’s Weekly* in that year.¹⁸ Still, one year before that, the term had already been used as the caption of a panoramic drawing “The Skyline of New York” by Charles Graham for the *New York Journal*, and Leeuwen (1988) suggests that the word was very likely in general use before that date (84f). According to the architect Wayne Attoe (1981), the term in its most common present day meaning as a silhouette of the city came into use a decade after the invention of the term ‘skyscraper’ in Chicago in the 1850s, where it appeared for the first time in travel fiction, describing the city from a distance and from street level.

The OED defines the term ‘skyline’ in two ways: first, as the line where the earth and sky appear to meet, the horizon; also, the representation of this in painting or another art; and second, as the outline or the silhouette of a building or a number of buildings or other objects seen against the sky. Selected literary sources, such as the ones cited in the OED, let us track the term back to the 1820s. These sources suggest that the term ‘sky-line’ (with a hyphen) came into use in the UK in the first half of the nineteenth century, where it was often viewed as analogous to the horizon and referred to the natural landscape rather than the city. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, skylines were regularly placed in the context of buildings, which at that point, however, were not viewed as having the power to create a skyline but instead to ‘break’ the natural one. From the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, the term was viewed

¹⁸ *Harper’s Weekly* (A Journal of Civilization) was an American political magazine based in New York City, published by Harper & Brothers from 1857 to 1916. It featured foreign and domestic news, fiction, essays on many subjects, and humour.

most commonly as analogous to a silhouette of the city and was regularly used in the context of a changing metropolis, often in relation to orientation within a city and recognition of a city.¹⁹

Most definitions above indicate an understanding of skylines as graphic abstractions: the city is reduced to a more or less “spiky line” (Heathcote and Hammond, 2011). But does this definition hold out against current professional debates about the new London skyline? Although the term ‘skyline’ is widely used in current planning policies and guidelines, it is often not defined.²⁰ In the latest LVMF (GLA, 2012), the term is mentioned thirty-two times, and in ambiguous ways. While some quotes suggest that skyline is put on a level with roofscape, others indicate that it describes an abstraction of the city as a continuous line, the silhouette of a city, which is an invented line that is the result of the human capacity for abstraction. In other cases, the term seems to describe more generally a distant view, the background of a view or a visual feature of the background.²¹

So, in the LVMF, which is arguably one of the most important documents for professional skyline debates, a broad and visually less accurate understanding of skylines is in place. EH’s concern, by contrast, is clear:

Our concern our remit is the protection of the built environment. It’s not so much the skyline as an abstract entity, but it’s what [visual impact] any new

¹⁹ “Some boy’s daubing, I suppose... Eh! What..is this?.. Who can this be?.. Do but see the sky-line – why, this is.. an exquisite little bit” (Walter Scott in his novel *St. Ronan’s well*, from 1824).

“Seeing only the roof of that palace boldly breaking the sky-line, how serene your contemplations” (Edward Bulwer-Lytton in his chronicle *The Caxtons*, a family picture, from 1849).

“A tall and beautiful figure, rising like a delicate spire above a skyline of city chimney-pots” (George Bernhard Shaw for the *Saturday Review* in 1896).

“A traveller returning to the metropolis after some years’ absence has difficulty in recognising some of our famous streets; the sky-line is different, salients have disappeared” (George Bernhard Shaw for the *Daily Mail Year Book* in 1928).

²⁰ The most important policies include *The London Plan* (GLA, 2004; 2011) and the LVMF (GLA 2007; 2012); the City of London’s *Unitary Development Plan* (UDP) (CoL, 2002a) and *St Paul’s and Monument Views* (CoL, 2002b); the *City’s Local Development Scheme* (CoL, 2011) and *Protected Views* (CoL, 2012).

²¹ The LVMF (GLA, 2012) states that in a particular view “[m]odest roof top features that provide a more interesting skyline without obscuring significant parts of the Cathedral might be acceptable” (106), and relating to another view that “foreground development on the Victoria Embankment has a fine historic grain, varied materials and a skyline including spires and other roof top elements” (ibid.: 129). New development is described as “breach[ing] the skyline of the four towers of the White Tower” (ibid.: 101). Sometimes, the term ‘skyline’ is used more generally in terms of a distant view. At other times, it describes a ‘whole’ distant view or individual features of it.

development may have on the setting of a listed building. [...] our concern is with the preservation of listed buildings and their settings (RoEH2, 8).

Bearing in mind the crucial role of EH in planning processes, this statement shifts the focus from solely visual definitions to values that are attached to different buildings on a skyline. It also shifts an understanding of a skyline as a whole to one that is primarily concerned with the legibility of individual buildings on a skyline. One question, then, is if there is something like a *Gestalt* skyline in which the whole is more – or something different – than the sum of its parts?

Attoe (1981) highlights different dimensions of skylines, conceiving them as collective symbols and social indexes. With regard to both, his analysis oscillates between an understanding of skylines as wholes and that of individual buildings, often describing what is qualitatively dominant or the quantitative majority as representative of the whole skyline. Attoe's examination of the rituals that are attached to skylines and utilitarian skylines, that is to the role of skylines in relation to orientation within the city and recognition of a city, focuses on individual buildings on a skyline. By contrast, his discussions of iconic visual representations of skylines and in particular his discussions of the visual qualities of skylines mostly refrain from singling out individual buildings. His account hints at a more general instability of skylines. Some academics conceive them as wholes, while others focus on individual elements that make up a skyline or on visual relationships between townscape elements. I suggest that in regard to current debates, skylines need to be understood primarily as visual relationships between tall buildings and St Paul's in distant views. But what is a tall building?

1.2.2 Height

Compared to skyscrapers in New York, for example, even the very tall buildings in the City are comparably low. After all, in Europe we tend to use the term 'high-rises' and not 'skyscrapers', which emphasises the building's growth from the ground up rather than its visual confrontation with the sky. Despite recurrent attempts to compete for the tallest building internationally – the construction of the Shard of Glass near London Bridge, which is currently the tallest building within the European Union, is an example of that – in professional skyline debates height is understood as relative to its local context. The same building height means very different things in different environments.

And so, although professional conceptions of the new London skyline need to be understood in relation to the city's image as a world city within a globally operating economy, approaches towards building heights also mean that views become self-referential.

This contextual yet – in relation to views – self-referential definition of height is anchored in planning guidelines. CABE and EH (2007) argue that “it is not considered useful or necessary to define rigorously what is and what is not a tall building [...] a judgement as to whether a building can be considered tall is strongly influenced by its surrounding” (5). Similarly, the City's Unitary Development Plan (UDP) from 2002 defines tall buildings as those which “significantly exceed the height of their general surroundings” (CoL, 2002a: 146), while in the *London Plan* from 2004 tall buildings are defined as those “that are significantly taller than their surroundings and/or have impact on the skyline and are larger than the threshold size set for the referral of planning applications to the mayor” (GLA, 2004: 181). This threshold size is 150 metres and currently there are five buildings in the City, out of a total of fifteen buildings in London, which are taller than that. Up to this threshold, height is contextually defined. An understanding of building height as being contextually defined and views as being self-referential compositions is the very basis of formalised vision.

1.3 The formal skyline in current planning policies and guidelines

In discussions of the new London skyline, current academics tend to emphasise the crucial power of the mayor in planning processes (Mc Neill, 2002a; 2002b; Kufner, 2011) and the role of aesthetic arguments that have become more and more important in contemporary forms of capitalist urbanisation (Charney, 2007). I want to filter out the approach towards history that is encapsulated in the new London skyline.

Tavernor (2004a; 2004b) embeds his discussion of design quality and current tall building planning debates in a historical context.²² Assessing current skyline-related policies and guidelines he concludes:

²² Tavernor's discussion of historical visual representations of London include Claus Janz Visscher's "View of London" (1600), Wenceslaus Hollar's "Long View of London" (1647), Antonio Canaletto's "The City from

Ultimately, the art of urban design is to transcend time – to meet the needs of now and the future, but also to provide continuity with the past. To this end, the policies and guidelines that are being developed and tested now in London appear to offer an appropriate minimum of support. All that is required is a more plentiful supply of good urban designers (Tavernor, 2004b: 58).

Tavernor's account is crucial, because it hints at a fundamental characteristic of the historiographical approach that is encapsulated in the current professional production of London's skylines. When the two concerns 'to meet the needs of now and the future' and 'to provide continuity with the past' are not seen as being in tension, then a conservative approach towards skylines results. This conservative approach, I suggest, is a fundamentally formal approach. My main question is how 'continuity with the past' is conceptualised in current planning policies and guidelines?

In regard to established forms of formalised vision, continuity with the past means the highly controlled visibility of selected historical buildings. It refers, in quite a literal way, to a visual continuity from selected viewing places in the city to these singled-out buildings. Contemporary London is therefore 'cut through' with a set of sight lines and viewing corridors from "publicly accessible and well-used" viewing places to "significant buildings" (GLA, 2011: 223). The main aim of these controlled views is to ensure that future developments will not interfere with buildings "that make aesthetic, cultural or other contributions to the view and which assist the viewer's understanding and enjoyment of the view" (ibid.).

A qualitatively and quantitatively assessed view focuses on a so-called 'strategically important landmark' which is defined as a "prominent building or structure in the townscape, which has visual prominence, provides a geographical or cultural orientation point and is aesthetically attractive through visibility from a wider area or through contrast with objects or buildings close by" (GLA, 2012: 238). Crucially, such strategically important landmarks are distinguished from "prominent buildings", which are "visible in the Designated View by virtue of their size and/or location. Reference to

the Terrace of Somerset House" (1746) and John O'Connor's "The Victoria Embankment and St Paul's" (1874).

them in this SPG [Supplementary Planning Guidance] does not infer that they have notable townscape qualities or value” (ibid.)

Following the *London Plan* and the LVMF, then, there are two types of buildings that are highly visible on London’s skylines: strategically important landmarks and other prominent buildings seemingly ‘without value’. The LVMF includes three strategically important landmarks, and all of them are historical buildings: St Paul’s Cathedral, the Palace of Westminster and the Tower of London. Following the definition, a strategically important landmark is not a historical building. Still, all three buildings that are designated such status are historical buildings and, crucially, are also listed buildings. In current planning policies then, continuity with the past means the visibility of listed buildings to which not only historical but also aesthetic and cultural values are ascribed.

Of these three strategically important landmarks, St Paul’s is arguably the most crucial one for professional debates about the City of London’s skylines. Professional concerns about protecting views towards the cathedral go back to *St Paul’s Heights* from the 1930s, which, back then, took the form of a gentlemen’s agreement between the City Corporation, the Dean and Chapter of St Paul’s and City developers. In extended form, it became a planning protocol and anchored in the City UDP in 1989. As a policy that now must conform with the *London Plan*, its aim is to “protect and enhance important local views of the Cathedral from the South Bank, Thames bridges and certain points to the north, west and east” (CoL, 2002b: 5; GLA, 2007: A83); it has therefore resulted in the creation of a ceiling of mid-rise buildings surrounding the Cathedral, from which St Paul’s protrudes.²³

Professional concerns about view protections were usually a reaction to the construction of buildings that impinged on ‘cherished’ views towards historical buildings. A change in regard to the protection of views usually took place when the visual continuity to singled-out buildings – and with that the accompanied conservatism – was in danger. St Paul’s Heights needs to be understood in relation to the construction of Faraday House, the building that hosted the world’s first international telephone exchange, and that was tall enough to obscure St Paul’s from some views. As a reaction to the construction of

²³ See Markham, 2008.

Tower 42, in turn, MP Patrick Cormack submitted a ‘Skyline Protection Bill’ in 1977. Although it was unsuccessful in passing onto the statute book, it proved to be influential in terms of its recommendation to protect views by designation, which would be similar to the status afforded by listed buildings and conservation areas. After the abolition of the Greater London Council (GLC), the central government commissioned several studies from research centres, some of which recommended a set of fifty views to provide special protection to the Palace of Westminster and St Paul’s (Catchpole, 1987; LPAC, 1989; 1998).²⁴ In the absence of the GLC, the regional government body at the time, national government limited this approach to a set of ten views, which were protected by the *Regional Planning Guidance 3: Annex A (RPG 3A), Strategic Guidance for London Planning Authorities*, 1991.

With the advent of the tall building boom around 2000, debates about the protection of views arose again and the London Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC) recommended the protection of twenty-nine views (LPAC, 1998).²⁵ With the inauguration of a metropolitan government and the introduction of an independent mayor in 2000, protected views became part of the spatial strategy for Greater London, as set out in the *London Plan* (GLA, 2011) and the LVMF (GLA, 2012). That way London ended up with currently twenty-seven protected views and thirteen quantitatively assessed protected vistas, eight of which focus on the listed St Paul’s.

The important question for my discussion of protected views and formalised vision more generally revolves around the different values that are attached to certain buildings that are highly visible on London’s skylines. The publication *Seeing History in the View* by EH is crucial in this context, because it aims to introduce a more nuanced understanding of measuring history in qualitatively assessed views. Acknowledging that most views are not reducible to the visibility of a single historical building but rather that they are historical composites, i.e. the “cumulative result of a long process of development” (EH, 2011: 3), EH highlights the relevance of understanding the visual city in a non-static way. In so doing, it challenges one of the foundations of formalised vision: the fixing of visual

²⁴ The GLC was the top-tier local government administrative body for Greater London from 1965 to 1986.

²⁵ LPAC was a body established after the abolition of the GLC and charged with advising national government in regard to London’s regional policy.

relationships between buildings. However, despite its merits, it nevertheless supports a top-down distinction between historically valuable buildings and other buildings that are 'just' visually prominent. In this document EH does not fundamentally challenge the distinction between valuable strategically important landmarks and buildings 'without' townscape qualities and value (see GLA, 2012: 238).

EH provides a step-by-step manual for assessing the heritage significance in a view: from assessing the quality of the viewing place, to identifying heritage assets, to assessing the magnitude of the impact of heritage assets and the cumulative impact of proposals on heritage. In so doing, it quantifies history visually.²⁶ The values EH attaches to built heritage are manifold. First and foremost, historical buildings provide primary evidence about past human activity and their historical value lies in the idea that people in the past, past events and aspects of life can be *connected* through a place to the present. Moreover, the built heritage, EH argues, also has aesthetic and communal values. The latter is described as the "meanings of a place for people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory" (ibid.: 28).

It is this distinction between valued past and past that needs to be further analysed. The Government's Planning Policy Statement 5 states that its "overarching aim is that the historic environment and its heritage assets should be conserved and enjoyed for the quality of life they bring to this and future generations" (DCLG, 2010: 2).²⁷ While "[a]ll aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time" (ibid.: 14) define a city's historic environment, only "[t]hose parts of the historic environment that have significance because of their historic, archaeological, architectural or artistic interest, are called heritage assets" (ibid.: 1).

This policy suggests that heritage assets "not only provide a material record of our nation's history, but can also provide an emotional meaning for communities derived from their collective experience of a place and can symbolise wider values such as faith

²⁶ "The value of individual heritage assets in the view may be determined on the basis of their designated status, the degree to which their heritage significance can be appreciated in the view, their contribution to the view and whether this is the best (or only place) to view the asset" (EH, 2011: 19).

²⁷ PPS 5 was superseded by the National Planning Policy Framework in March 2012. The preceding Planning Policy Guidance 15 was also a commitment to preserving the historic environment and provided a full statement of government policies for the identification and protection of historic buildings, conservation areas and other elements of the historical environment.

and cultural identity” (ibid.: 14). In *The Government’s Statement on the Historic Environment for England* (DCMS, 2010), on the other hand, the notion of heritage assets is somewhat challenged:

It is easy to identify the historic environment with iconic buildings and monuments, the cathedrals and castles of tourist guidebooks. Those are rightly important to us and are of special interest to many people, but they are only a small part of the historic environment. Our history is equally reflected in the homes of ordinary people, in the street plans of historic towns and cities, in farm buildings and factories, in our public places, the landscapes we have created, and sites beneath our seas (DCMS, 2010: 5).

Note the link between heritage and the ordinary, which is a crucial connection for an informal conceptualisation of skylines. Overall, however, the formal skyline focuses on visual continuity with selected historical buildings. Several planning guidelines, then, deal with the visual role of those buildings that are not heritage assets. CABE’s (2000) *By Design*, a document that provides a set of key principles of urban design suggests that the character of a place is related to its local distinctiveness, which, in turn, is related to its history. However, “[n]ew and old buildings can coexist happily without disguising one as the other, if the design of the new is a response to urban design objectives” (19). This is the case when “new development [is integrated] into its landscape setting [in a way that] reduces its impact on nature and reinforces local distinctiveness” (ibid.: 20).

The impact of a new development should be reduced, CABE argues, because “[s]kylines are sensitive to being obscured by high buildings in front of existing buildings or having their silhouette spoiled by high buildings behind them” (ibid.). New and old can coexist if the new does not visually ‘disturb’ the old, which is the case not only when the new hides the old in a cherished view but also when the new spoils the appreciation of the old, either by being located directly behind it or too close to it in a ‘cherished’ distant view:

A building should only stand out from the background of buildings if it contributes positively to views and vistas as a landmark. Buildings which have functions of civic importance are one example (CABE, 2000: 21).

CABE argues that places should be understandable and landmarks, gateways and focal points are meant to help people find their way.²⁸ Such an understanding is related to Kevin Lynch's (1995) study of *The Image of the City* and his concern with legibility and the 'imageability' of a city. It is also related to Jane Jacobs' (1992) understanding of landmarks as orientation clues. But Jacobs argues that landmarks also need to emphasise the diversity of a city and they do so by "calling attention to the fact that they are different from their neighbors" (384). Moreover, a geographical orientation point is not necessarily a historical building. Nevertheless, CABE does suggest that these aspects may coincide, in the form of a highly visible building with civic importance reinforcing the local distinctiveness through its heritage asset.

In *The Guidance on Tall Buildings*, a document jointly published by CABE and EH (2007), it is stated that one of the assessment criteria for a tall building is its impact on "views to improve the legibility of the city and the wider townscape" (6).²⁹ On the one hand, CABE and EH argue for a contextual approach and the context of a tall building includes "natural topography, scale, height, urban grain, streetscape and built form, open spaces, rivers and waterways, important views, prospects and panoramas, and the effect on the skyline" (ibid.: 5). The effect on a skyline is part of a building's architectural quality, which also includes "its scale, form, massing, proportion and silhouette, facing materials and relationship to other structures" (ibid.). At the same time, CABE and EH argue for "the need to ensure that the proposal will preserve and enhance historic buildings, sites, landscape and skylines. Tall building proposals must address their effect on the setting of, and views to and from historic buildings, sites and landscapes" (ibid.).

Considering the introduced policies and guidelines, there is a clear tendency that new office towers are primarily meant to visually enhance historical and listed buildings that are visible on the skyline, such as St Paul's. This, then, is how continuity with the past can meet the needs of now and the future. On the formal skyline, new office towers are acceptable as long as they do not reduce the visibility and appreciability of historical buildings that are regarded as heritage assets.

²⁸ CABE (2000) acknowledges as well that "some places draw their charm from their lack of clear routes" (28).

²⁹ CABE and EH published *The Guidance on Tall Buildings* in 2003 and a revised version in 2007.

The skyline, as described in the current planning framework, is a formal skyline, because its visual experience is formalised. From designated static views, ‘valued history’ is visible. In these views, other, more recent history such as newly built office towers are meant to visually enhance valued history. In that sense, the formal skyline is, in its foundations, a historical and conservative skyline, independent of the number of new tall buildings, because its conceptualisation revolves around the visibility of historical buildings. A *new* formal skyline, then, would be one where this conceptual framework is interrupted, for example one where office towers are deliberately meant to impinge on the visibility of selected historical buildings in ‘cherished’ static views. But as long as skylines are reduced to static views, which have the main purpose of visually protecting heritage assets, a new formal skyline is choked off.

1.4 Informal skylines in early Townscape debates

If the formal skyline is defined by static views towards heritage assets then, an informal skyline is one that resists both the definition of static views and the top-down assignment of what is valued in relation to the past. In some current planning policies and guidelines, the reduction of visual experiences of the city to ‘key views’ is challenged. CABE and EH (2007), for example, emphasise that developments need to be assessed in multiple views, i.e. they “need to be considered in the round” (2). However, the conservatism that defines the formal skyline is not avoided in that way. Here I want to introduce an informal conceptualisation of skylines that is related to Townscape.

Current professionals regularly refer to the Townscape movement. They do so, however, often in limited and distorting ways. This is particularly the case because of the movement’s well-known latter period and well-known publications such as Gordon Cullen’s *The Concise Townscape* from 1961. The movement’s early phase before and at the time of WW II and concepts that were influenced by avant-garde movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism, tend to be neglected by current professionals. The term ‘townscape’ refers to “a picture or view of a town; the arrangement and overall appearance of the buildings, spaces, and other physical features of a town” (OED). The term ‘Townscape’ (with the capital T) refers to a specific approach towards

cityscapes as developed and formulated in the architectural magazine *The Architectural Review* (AR) from the 1930s onwards. Essentially, Townscape was an editorial campaign on the part of this magazine that was also referred to as “visual planning”, “picturesque planning”, “exterior furnishing” and “sharawaggi” (Aitchison, 2008: 25, 45). It was a diverse and not coherent movement; a way of seeing and conceptualising the cityscape without an abstract meta-theory (Aitchison and Macarthur, 2010).

Townscape was officially launched in the AR in 1949 with two articles: one by the owner and chief editor of the magazine Hubert de Cronin Hastings and the other by the architect Gordon Cullen. Together with the art-historian Nikolaus Pevsner, these authors were the campaign’s initiators, although almost 1,400 Townscape-related publications by around 200 different authors appeared in the AR alone between the 1930s and 1980s (Aitchison, 2008: 23). They shared the aim of developing “a concept for the study of the make-up of the urban scene” (ibid.: 164). Given the movement’s diversity of voices, I limit my discussion of informal skylines mostly to Hastings’ early Townscape articles, principally because these are the ones that speak most directly against a formalisation of visual experiences.³⁰

Overall, Townscape’s approach can be crudely summarised as a combination of traditional urban planning and the insistence of an inclusion of both historical and modern buildings. Townscape writers rejected modern urban planning.³¹ They rejected modernists’ tabula rasa approaches to existing cities, a scale of streets appropriate for vehicles and not pedestrians, oversized public spaces and parks, and visual sameness and repetitiveness. They proposed “to include both buildings with architectural merit and those without that are none the less valuable through necessity, sentiment, or simply as instances of the different tastes of the past” (ibid.: 200). To a certain degree, Townscape was an attempt to solve what the AR saw as the major problem of modernism in architecture: its unpopularity and divergence of taste between the public and the profession.

³⁰ For a detailed account on the movement see Erten, 2004; Aitchison, 2008.

³¹ Tavernor (2004a) conceptually links Townscape to Camillo Sitte’s *City Planning according to Artistic Principles* from 1889.

Reducing the movement to Cullen's *The Concise Townscape* runs the risk of a misunderstanding, namely that Townscape was historicist, anti-modernist and, in that way, related to post-modernism in architecture. Cullen's nostalgically tinged hand drawings of town scenes form a part of this misconception.³² However, in fact, Townscape writers simply advocated a "humanised modernism" (Aitchison, 2008: 165) combined with conservation concerns. The reason why I stress this point is because I want to emphasise that Townscape was simultaneously backward and forward-looking. This is important because an informal skyline, I want suggest, escapes conservatism not by negating history but instead by creating visual contrasts between old and new buildings. In parts, the inclusion of historical and modern buildings has to be understood as a "compromise" (Hastings, 1944). But partially it is also a form of "radicalisation" (ibid.: 1949) of representations of the city's past and current politics. The latter dimension is crucial for my discussion of an informal skyline. Nevertheless, it is first important to introduce a few of the key ideas of the early Townscape movement.

Townscape writers argued for a historical, cultural continuity, claiming that eighteenth-century picturesque landscape garden principles should be transferred into twentieth-century urban settings. This suggestion was based on an inherently nationalistic argument. The English picturesque garden, ran the argument, is based on a way of organising nature that reflects an "English type of temperament" and an "English liberalism" (Hastings, 1949: 358ff). While I focus on this line of argumentation in the next section, at this point I want to emphasise that a critical impulse is hidden within this conservative argument for a historical and cultural continuity of how to organise matter.

The picturesque is a form of informal planning. Picturesque gardens are not defined by the control of certain perspectives and static views and nor are they based on a hierarchical distinction between the different elements that make up views. While nowadays the term 'picturesque' tends to be used in an almost synonymous way to the term 'quaint', this is not necessarily the way picturesque writers such as the two

³² Architecture history often tells us that the contextualist urbanism of Colin Rowe, Aldo Rossi and Rob and Leon Krier, with their argument of the inability of modern architects to make urban space and the failure of the modernist project altogether (Aitchison and Macarthur, 2010: 29), followed and replaced Townscape.

landowners Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight and the landscape gardener Humphry Repton thought about it. In the eighteenth century, the term described the idea that the compositional principles that govern a painting can be filtered out to organise nature, using “the power of pictorial composition to unify disparate elements” (Macarthur, 2007a: 200). The picturesque meant “looking at the world as if it were a picture” (ibid.: 1). Based on these principles, the English garden had an irregular plan and allowed trees and plants to grow in their natural manner. Its design was based on the visual experience of the person who walked through the garden. The English garden was thus an informal garden because it did not have a particular perspective to be looked at. In that respect, it was distinguished from the French garden, which was conceptualised in a plan and in which elements were meticulously designed following an aesthetic ideal (ibid.: 3).

Rather than being defined by an overall visual principle and a particular form, the picturesque garden was concerned with the detail and the incidental and accidental aspects of nature. It did not promote an overall logic and uniformity but instead allowed for “visual accidents” (Rowe and Koetter, 1998: 34). In the eighteenth century, this implied nothing less than a re-conceptualisation of aesthetics. Price argued for the picturesque being its own, separate aesthetic category that was different from the beautiful and the sublime. The distinction between the beautiful and the sublime was drawn by Edmund Burke, who suggested that the sublime “is caused by terrible objects, by obscurity, solitude and vastness” while the beautiful “is connected with smoothness, gentle curves, polish and delicacy” (Pevsner, 1944: 47).³³ Price contended that the picturesque is a third category, a “visual delight” that is caused, for example, by “a beautiful building in an advanced state of decay” (ibid.). While I discuss a political reading of a building ‘in decay’ to a greater extent in Chapter 6, at this point I want to highlight the picturesque idea that an ordinary object – or, better, one that is undesirable – can nevertheless be a subject for admirable visual representations due to its purely visual qualities (Aitchison and Macarthur, 2010: 22).

³³ Edmund Burke (1958) developed this distinction in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* from 1757.

To a substantial degree, this idea is a form of contextual understanding of objects. Picturesque principles were meant to unify disparate elements and thus individual elements were assessed in relation to other elements nearby. To put it differently, rather than assessing the visual quality of an object, it was the visual quality of the relationships between objects that was the main concern. Transferred into the urban context, Townscape, then, was described as an “art of relationship” with the purpose being “to take all the elements that go to create the environment: buildings, trees, nature, water, traffic, advertisements and so on, and to weave them together in such a way that drama is released” (Cullen, 1995: 7f). In this vein, Hastings (1963) emphasised that “townscape is *not* town-planning, is *not* architecture, is the urban scene stock-piled with all its impedimenta, toys, trinkets, tools, services, conveniences, shelters, play-pens, people” (26). An informally conceptualised cityscape, I suggest, is inclusive, diverse and relational.

1.4.1 Cityscape as democratic art

An informal skyline is one in which the visual experience is not formalised. It is not defined by the visibility of singled-out buildings in singled-out static views but is open, in the sense that it is defined by multi-perspectivism (or rather inter-perspectivism, as I argue in Chapter 4), as well as by the idea that difference is not only allowed but required, as I discuss in Chapter 3. Such an open conceptualisation of skylines is the basis for an understanding of cityscapes as democratic art.

In his article “Exterior Furnishing or sharawadgi: the art of making urban landscape” from 1944, Hastings argues that cityscapes should be understood much like interiors, because in interiors objects that differ in size, style and age are simply mixed together.³⁴ He suggests that in our homes, the aesthetic qualities of individual items are irrelevant:

Let them be ugly, let them be incongruous. What matters alone is the unity and congruity of the pattern. A frankly vulgar little bronze poodle on an Italian marble pedestal might even hold a place of honour on the mantel-shelf, either because of its value as an accent in a picturesque whole, or – and here is a new argument – because of some equally legitimate sentimental value (Hastings, 1944: 6).³⁵

³⁴ Hastings published this article as ‘the Editor’; see Aitchison, 2008.

³⁵ For a discussion of cityscapes of ‘modern ugliness’ and Walter Rathenau’s comparison between Berlin, Paris and London in particular, see Frisby, 2001: 24ff.

So, what matters is the pattern, i.e. the visual relationship between the elements. In the city, and on an urban scale, the pattern is to be found in the visual relationships of buildings with buildings or buildings with trees (Hastings, 1944: 7). Following Price, in *The Italian Townscape* from 1961, Hastings argues that “good townscape often comes out of bad architecture. Conversely, good architecture often makes bad townscape” (Hastings, 1963: 43).³⁶

In a way, such a rejection of a clear-cut distinction between beautiful and ugly and between valuable and valueless is simply a way of promoting diversity, which is why Hastings (1949) proposes an understanding of cityscapes as “democratic art” (357). Townscape’s cityscape is democratic art because it has the ability to give “satisfaction to all tastes” (ibid.). This, in turn, is related to a particular understanding of liberty. It is a form of liberty that is not to be found in “common conclusions about life and society” but rather in the possibility to “be free to differ, be themselves” (ibid.).³⁷ For objects to “be themselves” means

... the freedom, better still, the duty to differentiate biologically [...] on the understanding that when things or people are allowed to be themselves they disclose fresh potentialities – higher powers of organization – of team-work even – so that relationships that have never been foreseen spring suddenly into being between dissimilar or even hostile objects, between tree and tree, sky and bare hill, sward and waste. Such relationships, first revealed by accident, become next the motifs of a self-conscious art, aimed at reconciling by accentuating varieties of form, and establishing, in resolving that conflict, the conditions for a democracy of buildings (Hastings, 1949: 360).

An understanding of Townscape as democratic art involves the idea that each element has the freedom and duty to be itself and to differ from other elements. As mentioned, Hastings bases his understanding of liberty on a dubious nationalistic argument, in which he distinguishes two types of temperament: between “the man who wants liberty because it will leave men free to be rational, i.e., come to common conclusions about life and society, and the man who wants liberty so that men can be free to differ, be

³⁶ Hastings published *The Italian Townscape* under the pseudonym Ivor de Wolfe.

³⁷ The distinction between these two different types of liberty and his association of the former with a French ‘type of temperament’ and the latter with an English one are highly polemical, but they show the direct influence of debates about English versus French gardens in the eighteenth century, and his interest in particularities rather than an overall design principle.

themselves, cock a snook at their fellow democrats” (ibid.: 357). For Hastings, the former is French liberalism, or what he calls “rational liberal”, which “cultivates the universal”, because it “looks to found the social structure upon the basis of the unanimity ultimately predictable to all individual minds in virtue of the ultimate identity of reason” (ibid.: 358). English liberalism, by contrast, is “radical liberal”. It cultivates the particular and “seeks the higher social organization in the differentiation of the individual from the mass” (ibid.).

While I leave the nationalism behind the argument aside (these texts were written at a time when National Socialism stirred up national mindsets not only among Nazis), I want to open up Hastings’ understanding of the cityscape as democratic art by emphasising what I regard as the two fundamental aspects relating to an informal skyline. First, an informal skyline focuses on the particular, and on visual relationships between particulars, rather than on the whole. This is what Hastings describes as “a radical idea of the meaning of parts”, which concentrates “on the urge of the parts to be themselves to make a new kind of whole” (ibid.: 361). An informal skyline is not designed or controlled as a whole but rather the whole is the outcome of well-designed visual relationships between elements, which, in turn, differ from each other because they express themselves.

Second, Hastings applies his conceptualisation of a radical idea of the meaning of parts to both aesthetics and politics. He suggests that Townscape is a reflection, indeed, a picture of politics. For him, radical politics is politics that is based on difference: on pluralism, different perspectives on the city, on disagreement and not on unanimity. Such an informal skyline is one that exposes difference and contention rather than consensus, and in that respect it can be understood, to a certain degree, as a visualisation of Chantal Mouffe’s (1992; 1993) recent account of radical democracy.³⁸ Without overplaying their commonality in using the term ‘radical democracy’, the overlapping idea is nevertheless that agonism is productive. Exposing differences (of opinions, of appearances, etc.) without the aim of bringing them together in the sense of smoothing out different perspectives – that is, the avoidance of creating a “harmonious

³⁸ It has to be noted that Hastings often ends up with an argument for visual compromise, which somewhat contradicts his suggestion of a radicalization of aesthetics. Throughout the thesis I will hint at instances where this is the case.

ensemble” (Mouffe, 2007) – is, I suggest, the main principle of an informal conceptualisation of aesthetics in relation to politics.

There is another way to elaborate on the aesthetical-political dimension of a radical idea of the meaning of parts as promoted by Hastings, namely by emphasising their inverse relationship in regard to symmetry. This is a relationship we find in the work of the sociologist Georg Simmel, whose work I draw on several times throughout the thesis. Simmel distinguishes between a conceptually perfect society, which is one in which each member has a unique place in it, and an ethically perfect society, which is one in which everyone is treated the same.³⁹ Because society is “a construct of unlike parts”, Simmel (2009: 49) argues, conceptual perfection implies that each individual finds and follows her/his “calling” (ibid.) and has her/his particular place within society. Conceptual perfection, then, refers to a relative and not to an absolute equality.

Relative equality refers to a kind of political symmetry, which needs to be distinguished from an aesthetical symmetry that “gives meaning to everything from a single point” (Simmel, 1968: 73). While symmetry might be aesthetically pleasing, it is not politically satisfying, because it brings objects and people “under the yoke of the system” (Dodd, 2012: 9). According to Simmel (2004), both socialism and despotism possess “particularly strong inclinations towards symmetrical constructions of society [...] because they imply a strong centralization of society that requires the reduction of the individuality of its elements and of the irregularity of its forms and relationships to a symmetrical form” (489). Hastings’ radical idea of the meaning of parts, then, is one that is politically symmetrical and therefore is aesthetically asymmetrical. It is pluralistic, agonistic and not centralised.

This aspect elucidates a notion that is well established within urban debates: the conceptualisation of visual order as being like a work of art. Hastings’ non-centralised understanding of a cityscape as democratic art implies that he does not understand it like an artwork in the sense of a singular, unified vision and he also does not understand it as an artwork in the sense of an abstraction from urban life. Instead, it is urban life. In

³⁹ For a discussion of Simmel’s distinction between ‘*perfect society*’ and ‘*perfect society*’, see Dodd, 2012; 2013.

The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs makes this last point too. Jacobs (1992) argues that “when we deal with cities we are dealing with life at its most complex and intense”, and therefore there is a “basic esthetic limitation on what can be done with cities” (372). She contends, then, that a city cannot be a work of art:

We need art, in the arrangements of cities as well as in the other realms of life, to help explain life to us, to show us meanings, to illuminate the relationship between the life that each of us embodies and the life outside us. We need art most, perhaps, to reassure us of our own humanity. However, although art and life are interwoven, they are not the same thing (Jacobs, 1992: 372).

Jacobs’ account is crucial for my discussion because it further illuminates the historiographical approach that is encapsulated in an informal skyline. Jacobs distinguishes her vision from established city planning approaches: the garden city, the radiant city and the monumental city. Hastings also distinguishes Townscape from the garden city and the radiant city. There are, then, several conceptual overlaps between their accounts.⁴⁰

1.4.2 The monumental city, garden city and radiant city

An informal skyline is one that expresses diversity and difference. For Hastings, this involves a collage-like understanding of the city, one that is not fundamentally different from Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter’s (1978) conception in *Collage City*. Rowe and Koetter portray Townscape as “nostalgic, placatory and manipulative in its top-down popularism” (30) and clearly dissociate their vision of the city from that of the Townscape movement. But the difference between Hastings’ Townscape articles (1944; 1949) and *Civilia* (1971) is “less significant than a very simple point. [...] Townscape was conducted in imagined landscape views from terrestrial viewpoints while *Collage City* rotated the axis of view to look down on the plan from above” (Macarthur, 2007a: 220).⁴¹ In both visions the city is understood as a collage of monuments and ordinary

⁴⁰ Jacobs (1992) refers to Cullen’s and Nairn’s *Outrage and Counter Attack*. She also collaborated with both on a joint entry to *The Exploding Metropolis* (1958) with the pictorial essay “Downtown is for People”. See also Aitchison, 2008: 245. Hastings, in turn, describes Jacobs’ book as a “warm wind [coming] across the Atlantic and [...] in the shape of a book which is a must for all who believe the urban consequences of those odd bedfellows, Ebenezer Howard and le Corbusier, to be the spawn of the devil working through his chosen vessels” (Hastings in Aitchison, 2008: 246).

⁴¹ Hastings published *Civilia* under the pseudonym Ivor de Wofle.

buildings (ibid.: 223). In my discussion of the politics of representing time in Chapter 3 I focus on the representational logic of Hasting's (1949) "surrealist pictures" (361). At this point, however, I want to highlight that a collage city is to be distinguished from a monumental city, which has two main characteristics. First, it is defined by baroque boulevards or, more generally, straight vistas towards monuments and, second, it has a monumental centre.⁴² The monumental centre is "sorted out from the rest of the city, and assembled into the grandest effect thought possible, the whole [centre] being treated as a complete unit, in a separate and well-defined way" (24). An informal skyline, by contrast, is the result of the visual juxtaposition and not visual separation of different townscape elements. It brings differences together on purpose rather than tries to hold them apart.

An informal skyline is also not the skyline of a garden city. The garden city, which is an urban planning approach initiated by Sir Ebenezer Howard in 1898, is a planned city that involves self-contained communities surrounded by greenbelts with proportionate areas of residences, industry and agriculture. Aiming at an improvement of the socio-spatial shortcomings of the nineteenth-century industrial city, it was essentially an "alternative to the city" because it "wrote off the intricate, many-faceted, cultural life of the metropolis" (Jacobs, 1992: 20). With its abundance of green spaces it involves a "keen sense of the cosy life, but has little understanding of the metropolitan scene or the intricacy or social contact or even the variety of human tastes and types", Hastings (1944: 6f) argues. An informal skyline is thus not a garden city skyline because it is essentially urban. It is dense, it is diverse and plural, and it is not planned in the sense that it reflects an overall formal vision.

Finally, an informal skyline is also not one of a city as imagined by modernists like Le Corbusier. It is not the skyline of the "city of modern architecture" (see Rowe and Koetter, 1978). Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* from 1925, for example, is a vision for

Rowe and Koetter (1998) use the conceptual model of a collage to reconcile opposite approaches to urban planning: total design and randomness, objectivity and subjectivity, forward and backward looking, science fiction and cult of townscape.

⁴² Jacobs (1992) describes the monumental city in relation to the American City Beautiful movement, which begins with the great Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. The city beautiful is a system of baroque boulevards and a monumental centre that is modelled on the fair. In her critique, Jacobs focuses in particular on the idea of a cultural centre that is separated from the mundane city (24).

rebuilding central Paris with a tabula rasa approach, replacing the traditional city with sixty-story cruciform towers that are placed within an orthogonal street grid and vast park areas. Referring to the radiant city, which is the follow-up version of ideas encapsulated in the *Plan Voisin*, and which differs from its earlier model in that Le Corbusier abandoned a class-based stratification, Jacobs (1992) emphasises that Le Corbusier's attack against the garden city's "anti-city planning" (21) is one that actually comes directly out of the garden city. Introducing a high density, the radiant city is nothing more than a "vertical garden city" (ibid.: 22). Hastings (1944) agrees that the radiant city and the planned garden city have similar limitations. The first difficulty he sees in the radiant city is that it is planned and controlled on a large scale; the second that it "negates history" and therefore is in danger of "destroy[ing] more than [it] can possibly create" (7). The informal skyline is therefore not the skyline of a city of modern architecture, because it is historical and modern, diverse and plural.

For Hastings the limitations of urban visions such as the garden city and the radiant city can only be overcome by compromise, i.e. by effectively bringing different urban models together. This, then, is where I see a main difference between Hastings' and Jacobs' visions. Jacobs' (1992) discussion of urban form is essentially functionalist. For her, visual order means primarily being able "[t]o see complex systems of functional order as order, and not as chaos" (376). This is why she argues for "visual reinforcement to underscore the functional order" and to abstain from "unnecessary visual contradictions" (ibid.). In so doing, she directly draws on Lynch's (1995) concerns with legibility and imageability. A landmark, Jacobs suggests, is supposed to have the ability "to help to state explicitly and visually that a place is important which is in truth functionally important" (Jacobs, 1992: 386). It is, most of all, an orientation clue that emphasises the diversity of the city by "calling attention to the fact that they are different from their neighbours" (ibid.: 384). Hastings' discussion of urban form, on the other hand, is less functional in that particular sense. Influenced by surrealist artists, as I discuss in Chapter 3, Hastings' 'functionalism' of urban form includes the creation of shocks by means of visual contradictions. The aim is to surprise the wandering pedestrian in the city and to help her/him to see the everyday with fresh eyes.

Hastings' understanding of functionalism hints at the critical impulse I see encapsulated in an informal skyline. An informal skyline, I suggest, is not an uncontrolled skyline, but rather one that is controlled in ways that do not support or create a formalised vision of the city. It is not controlled in terms of superimposing an overall vision, and not by fixing relationships between elements, but rather by giving individual townscape elements and particular visual relationships the power to critically engage with an established vision of the city.

Given the informality of the Townscape writers' visions of the city, it is no surprise that historians like Mumford (1940), who describe the city as a "conscious work of art" (5), harshly criticise these visions. For Mumford, space and time are "artfully reorganized in cities: in boundary lines and silhouettes, in the fixing of horizontal planes and vertical peaks" (ibid.). Time is represented in the form of monuments and highly valued historical buildings, so he argues, and this requires the "literal control of an entire field of vision to incorporate visual order in cities" (Jacobs, 1992: 378). He argues that informal vision is nothing more than a "collapse of form" (Mumford, 1940: 202) and "formlessness" (ibid.: 203). The picturesque, he suggests, is a "denial of the importance of form" (ibid.), which is simply "a justification of the process of decomposition" and an overvaluation of "the wild, the irregular, the unrestricted" (ibid.).⁴³

While Mumford acknowledges that the picturesque is concerned with the dynamic quality of time, he criticises the Romantics with their affection for ruins, for focusing on "the stage of decay and death" (ibid.: 205). With its preference for the irregular and the outdated, romanticism is "anti-communal and anti-architectural" (ibid.). The visual laissez-fair attitude in the nineteenth-century industrial city, the utilitarian city which is based on the idea that "providence ruled over economic activity and ensured, as long as man did not presumptuously interfere, the maximum good through the dispersed and unregulated efforts of every individual" (ibid.: 152), displays for him solely visual chaos. It is a jumble of competing elements, which he has little patience for. The utilitarian industrial city, just as much as the city that Hastings imagines, which is based on picturesque principles, is for Mumford an "Old Curiosity shop: a junkheap of discarded

⁴³ For a discussion of 'formlessness' understood as a political task, such as in Bataille's account in the 1930s, see my discussion of the politics of representing time in Chapter 3. See also Pinder, 2005.

styles, cut off completely from the culture that had given them rational meaning” (ibid.: 201). The informal townscape approach is therefore dismissed as “cultural rag-picking” (ibid.).

1.4.3 *Completing history*

An informal conceptualisation of skylines that draws on Hastings’ socio-spatial and political understanding of Townscape needs to take Mumford’s criticism seriously. What is the political difference between ‘informal’ and ‘formlessness’?⁴⁴ Hastings’ strength lies in his attempt to relate the visual to the political and the social. His shortcomings, as Aitchison (2008) argues, lie in his at times obscure writing style and the multiple cross-references, which he does not develop in depth. His texts, I suggest, are polemical and include plenty of food for thought; however, they only become effective when they are read in relation to more in-depth and coherent aesthetical-political arguments.

An informal conceptualisation of skylines can be utilised for a critical engagement with skyline-related forms of capitalist urbanisation. However, in order to strengthen this critical impulse, Hastings’ account needs to be both supported and challenged. I relate it to the one of the German-Jewish thinker Walter Benjamin, in whose cityscapes outsiders such as rag-pickers, prostitutes and beggars are important elements. Benjamin characterised Siegfried Kracauer as rag-picker “who redeems the scraps, the refuse of modernity from oblivion” as David Frisby (1985: 186) emphasises in relation to his suggestion that rag-picking can be understood as a “central typification of Benjamin’s own procedure too” (ibid.: 195).⁴⁵

An important reference point for both Benjamin and Hastings is what Benjamin (1998) describes as a “‘panoramic’ [...] conception of history [that was] prevalent in the seventeenth century” (92) and which was determined by “a collection of everything memorable” (ibid.). In both of their works we find elements of such a Romantic conception of history, but while Hastings largely simply carries over this conception into the twentieth century, Benjamin develops a very specific historical materialist approach

⁴⁴ For a distinction between an “informal composition” and “laissez faire” see Pevsner’s (1955: 178) chapter on “Picturesque England” in *The Englishness of English Art*.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of Benjamin’s work and life, see Brodersen, 1996.

that is influenced by Judaic theology. For Benjamin, history is unredeemed; it is in a “lack of closure” (Löwy, 2005: 31).

One of the aspects that influenced Benjamin’s approach to historiography was the Kabbalah concept of the breaking of the vessels, which states that as part of the process of creation, God’s light was contained in ten vessels which shattered on their way to earth. Rebuilding the vessels is a precondition for redemption and the task of the historical materialist, then, is the process of making something whole again that is fragmented.⁴⁶ The process of ‘completing’ history is a prime motivation for Benjamin’s political reading of history. Throughout the thesis I discuss different concepts that are related to such a process of completion such as the task of the critic that Benjamin relates to a process of mortification of the artwork for the sake of truth and the evocation of ‘moments’ of completion (famously expressed in his concept of the dialectical image). Crucially, Benjamin suggests that redemption applies not only to the future but also the past and this is why his approach to history is so relevant for a critical analysis of skyline debates that focus, on the one hand, on preservation and conservation concerns and, on the other, on a ‘new’ future-oriented image. At this point – and in order to clarify the intellectual relationship between Hastings and Benjamin in more detail – I want to introduce three methodological parallels between Benjamin’s and Hastings’ work on cities that are important for a critical informal conceptualisation of skylines.

First, both focus on representations of particulars and argue against an overall abstract theory. Hastings (1949) describes Townscape as the sum of “individual judgements out of which a modern aesthetic grows” (362). Moreover, he suggests that Townscape is not a visual theory, which can be easily applied to different urban situations; it is a collection of examples, developed and communicated by means of particular visual cases and in so-called ‘casebooks’. In these casebooks we find no attempt at a coherent theory of the city but an encapsulation of a particular attitude towards the city. The visual cases that are presented have to speak for themselves, and architects and planners are urged to understand each situation in its own, unique way. For Benjamin, in turn, the task of the writer, the critic and the materialist historian is not to establish an overall abstract theory, but to show through selecting and arranging, juxtaposing particulars, and in that

⁴⁶ See www.kabbalah5.com [accessed 25 September 2013].

way, to enable the particular to speak for itself. This impetus is probably most clearly communicated in his uncompleted study of nineteenth-century Paris – the *Arcades Project* (AP) – in which he aims at a presentation that “will be devoid of all theory. In this fashion I hope to allow the ‘creatural’ to speak for itself” (Benjamin in Gilloch, 2002: 93). Importantly then, Benjamin’s (2002) aim is not to “say anything [but] [m]erely to show” ([N1a,8]: 460).

A second parallel is their interest in the everyday, seemingly banal and trivial features of the city. In understanding the city, Benjamin passes by well-known landmarks and monuments; trivial features are more telling for him, as can be seen, for example, in his ‘thought images’ [*Denkbilder*], which are sketches of cities that he visited in the 1920s, as well as in his reminiscences of his childhood in Berlin and his study of nineteenth-century Paris. Apparently trivial features and the mute, the marginal and the oppressed are similarly important to him, because by making use of the rags and the refuse (see Benjamin, 2002 [N1a,8]: 460) he is able to develop a counter-history, an understanding of the past that is not the one that is encapsulated in, or better communicated through, the city’s monuments and museums. For Benjamin, such official, well-recognised and celebrated objects present a deceptive vision of the past and present, a false consciousness engendered by a bourgeois ideology (see Gilloch, 1996: 11f). It is the mundane as well as the outdated, the obsolete and the ridiculous that are made to tell their own stories, and these are stories that do not sit comfortably within a universal and progressive historical narrative. Hastings’ focus on the everyday, on the other hand, tends to be less political. But he also advises caution in understanding cityscapes through official landmarks, as the visual cases he includes in his articles suggest.

Third, both argue against an overarching, coherent view of the city and suggest that the city cannot be represented in a selected, stable perspective. For Townscape, this means, most of all, that the visual city is not to be reduced to static views but rather needs to be conceived as the visual experience of the wandering pedestrian. Townscape authors such as Cullen (1949) play with notions such as ‘the eye as a movie camera’, and also Benjamin (2005c) suggests in “Berlin Chronicle” that “only the cinema commands optical approaches to the essence of the city” (599). Benjamin’s statement is related to his suggestion that the hallmark of modern experience in the city is ‘shock’, which, in

turn, engenders forgetfulness, as I elaborate in more detail in chapters 3 and 4. In the modern metropolis, which is commodified and fragmented, historical consciousness – which Benjamin regards as a kind of precondition for political changes in the present – cannot be raised by means of a static and singular perspective. The representational form itself needs to be fragmented and discontinuous.

Both Hastings and Benjamin develop (and draw on) fragmented and discontinuous conceptualisations so as to understand and show the modern city.⁴⁷ Many of the visual collages that Hastings includes in his publications, most notably in *Civilia* (1971), do not aim to portray a particular urban view accurately. They rather highlight a particular way of seeing the city, one in which difference is exposed and not visually centralised. The townscape elements that are included differ greatly from each other. Buildings that are not next to each other in a monumental city, in a garden city or a radiant city are juxtaposed and confront each other. These collages are multi-perspectival. Each element is seen in its own perspective, and no single perspective or viewpoint satisfies them all at the same time. In a related way, many of Benjamin's texts, and the AP (2002), "One Way Street" (2004d) and "Berlin Chronicle" (2005c) maybe particularly so, are literary montages. These texts often consist of citations that have – by the very nature qua citations – been torn out of their context and are reassembled in radical and illuminating constellations. Such a form of decontextualisation, as I show in chapters 3 and 4, draws on the work of surrealists and on the montage principle of films. In a related fashion, Hastings (1949) draws parallels between urban views and 'surrealist pictures'.

I discuss these three overriding parallels between Hastings' and Benjamin's approaches to the city – focus on the particular, recognition of the everyday, the mute and the marginal, and resistance against a coherent, stable perspective on the city – in greater length throughout this thesis. To a certain degree, they are summarised in Benjamin's methodological consideration of the AP:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags,

⁴⁷ For a discussion of theories of modernity in the work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin, with a detailed discussion of the notion of fragments, see Frisby, 1985.

the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them (Benjamin, 2002 [N1a,8]: 460).

An informal conceptualisation that is related to the above-mentioned aspects differs from the formal skyline, as encapsulated in current planning policies and guidelines, in its fundamental approach towards history. The formal skyline is able to both “meet the needs of now and the future” as well as “to provide continuity with the past”, as Tavernor (2004b: 58) suggests. For an informal skyline the needs of now and the future and continuity with the past are in tension. Historical continuity, as I discuss in chapters 3 and 4, needs to be disrupted exactly because of the needs of now and the future, which are not the uncritical support of new forms of capitalist urbanisation in London but rather the raising of awareness about the ways London’s past is represented in the present and future image as a world city. Such a disruption implies a critical constellation of old and new buildings and not a tabula rasa approach. In Nietzsche’s conception, it is the critical aspect of history of the present that is emphasised. “We need history, certainly, but we need it for reasons different from those for which the idler in the garden of knowledge needs it”, Nietzsche (1997: 59) writes and Benjamin (2006c: 394) quotes. And this, I suggest, is the attitude of a critical, political informal skyline.

1.5 The topicality of skylines

The formal and an informal skyline are two fundamentally different approaches towards representing the city visually. The formal skyline is one that offers a visual experience that is formalised. In current planning policies and guidelines, this is done by means of three mechanisms: first, the singling out of valued past, which are historical and listed buildings; second, the selection of viewpoints in the city, from which static views towards these buildings are defined; and third, the idea that other prominent buildings have to visually enhance these heritage assets. The formal skyline, as anchored in current planning policies and guidelines, is historical and conservative. It is historical because its conceptual definition revolves around historical buildings and it is conservative because these historical buildings are well-established monuments. A formal skyline that is ‘new’ would be one in which recently constructed buildings hide monuments in so-called key views.

An informal skyline, on the other hand, offers a visual experience that is not formalised and controlled in static and hierarchical ways. It is an approach towards skylines in which the multiplicity of visual experiences is acknowledged. For Townscape authors in the 1940s, such an approach implied the rejection of an “orthodox and formal system of fixed view-points” (AR, 1946: 148) and the promotion of difference and diversity with individual townscape elements being allowed to be themselves.

The idea that history is encapsulated in the ‘high points’ of the past, which is the basis for formalised vision and the formal skyline, shows parallels to Nietzsche’s conception of monumental history. For him, monumental history is history that seeks to emulate the past. He distinguishes it from antiquarian history that seeks to preserve the past in an undifferentiated way, and from critical history that seeks to liberate the present from the past. However, while Nietzsche’s monumental history can be seen as being related to the formal skyline, he argues against an unhealthy obsession with the past that disables action in the present, which is why he advocates a combination of a search for useful past and precedents (encapsulated in monuments, for example), and a process of forgetting of anything that hinders action in the present. It is this dimension of history *for* the present that I regard as important, which is why I make a distinction between a formless and informal skyline.

Derived from Hastings’ (1949) notion of the radical idea of the meaning of parts, I argue that an informal skyline is one that exposes difference without harmonisation and that exposes histories without summing them up in a singular historical narrative. An informal skyline juxtaposes difference, old and new buildings, sacral and secular buildings. It is not planned as a whole but it accretes. Hence, I follow Pevsner’s (1955) distinction between “liberty in the sense of an informal composition” and “liberty in the sense of *laissez-faire*” (178) and also argue against Mumford’s (1940) suggestion that informal planning can be reduced to a “collapse of form” (202) and “formlessness” (ibid.: 203). A political informal rather than an aesthetically formless skyline, I suggest drawing on Hastings’ and Benjamin’s account, is one that focuses on particular instances and not on a grand visual theory. It is one that is interested in the everyday, the seemingly banal and trivial features of the city. The outdated, the obsolete and the ridiculous are included and allowed to tell their own stories, especially because they do

not fit comfortably into a universal historical narrative. Such a political informal skyline cannot be classified within an old– new or a nostalgic–progressive dualism. Rather, it brings old and new into illuminating constellations.

Chapter 2: Methodological constellations

2.1 Overall research design

The question of how to draw out the critical and political dimensions of corporate skylines, which are themselves part of and contribute to today's forms of capitalist urbanisation in London, is crucial. The definition of skylines as city-images with the primary purpose of attracting global investment is part of a process that includes the construction of office towers just as much as the privatisation of the public spaces that surround these towers in the city. Being part of these contemporary forms of neoliberal urbanisation, skylines, then, can only disrupt from within, similar to counter-currents of modernism like surrealism, which formed a critique from within modernism (see Pinder, 2005: 123). But how to analyse 'critical skylines', i.e. relationships between criticism and architectural design in regard to skylines (see Rendell et al., 2007)?

My focus lies in the analysis of skyline debates relating to the planning processes of two developments in the City – the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle – and the question of how the city's past is represented in the new London skyline. In order to critically engage with current conceptualisations, I compare the established historiographical approach to one that is linked to early Townscape debates, enriched and critically discussed in light of Benjamin's account of a redemptive historiography.

In my discussion of formal and informal skylines in Chapter 1, I suggested that the counterpart to a conservative formal skyline is not a 'new' informal skyline, but a critical and political informal one. In order to actualise an informal skyline's critical potential, I suggest, it is necessary to take it out of the old–new or nostalgic–progressive dualisms and emphasise its topicality. Although Townscape writers introduced important concepts in regard to informal planning, and Hastings did elaborate on the aesthetical and political dimensions of cityscapes, these texts are limited. In order to make them relevant for today's problems relating to city planning, Townscape needs to be released not only from its nationalism but also with an eye to stopping 'visual nostalgia' gaining the upper hand. To some degree, the informalised vision that is typical of the Townscape writers' approach towards cityscapes needs to be decontextualised.

In this thesis I relate current planning debates to early twentieth-century Townscape debates and to critical theory. Rather than claiming to give a comprehensive account of any of these three groups, I am interested in ‘critical constellations’ that can be arranged by means of drawing on diverse groups of literature and empirical material. In a similar way, I deal with different representational forms: images, texts and interview material. What I am left with is a patchwork of components, which need to be assembled into constellations that help us to, first, understand the notion of skylines in contemporary London in a more critical way and, second, to re-arrange concepts in order to speculate about their critical potential.

In this chapter I discuss the methods that I employ. I start with the visual methodology I am using, which involves a three-part process of visual abstraction, separation and re-arrangement. I elaborate on this visual methodology by means of introducing my own visual experience of the City of London’s skylines along a walk from Gabriel’s Wharf to Somerset House. I then discuss my approach towards the professional production of the new London skyline, focusing on the different representational forms I put in relation with each other, as well as explaining the relevance of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle for my research. I move on to a discussion of my analysis of Townscape articles and selected concepts from Benjamin’s oeuvre, and argue that an analysis of the way aesthetics and politics are interlinked in regard to a city’s skylines requires the singling out and putting in relation of critical moments and the avoidance of remaining with an overall, highly abstract theory.

2.2 Visual methodology

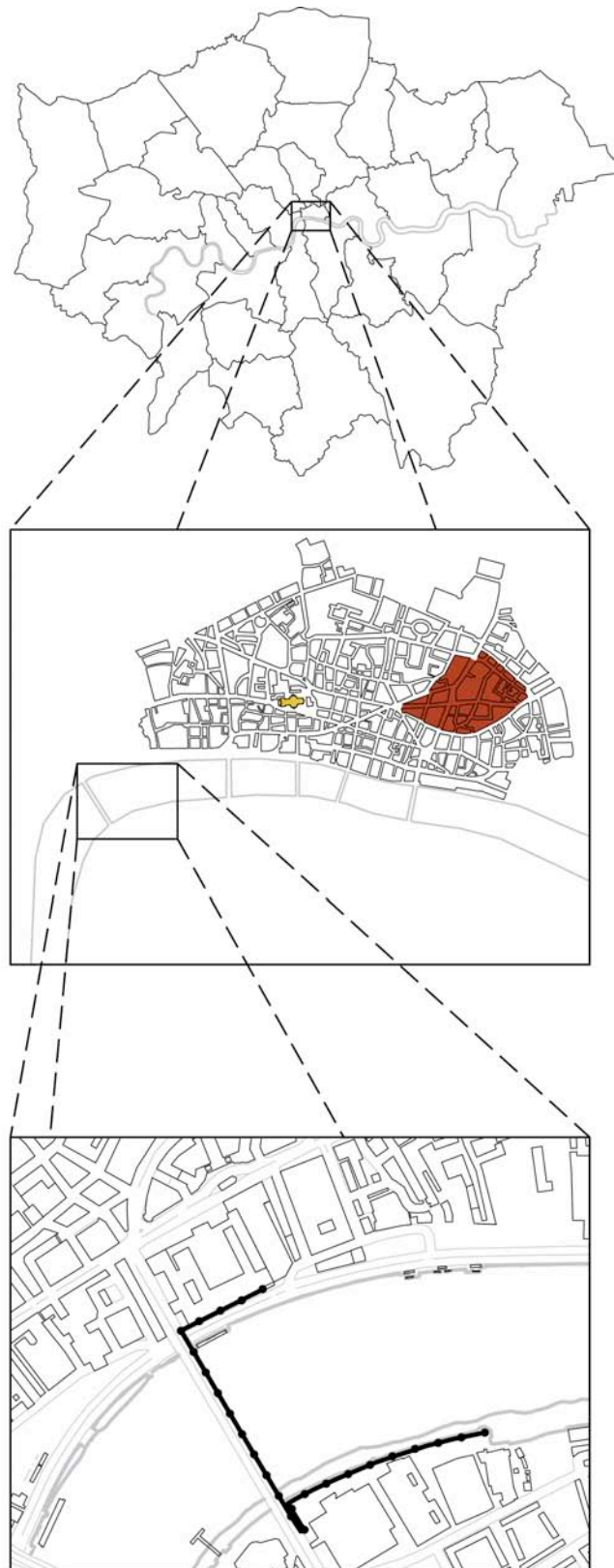


Figure 6: The visual relationship between the walk (bottom), the City of London with St Paul's Cathedral and the Eastern cluster highlighted (middle), and Greater London (top) (Gassner, 2009).

It is a pleasant day in London, a pleasant day for a stroll.

South Bank, close to Gabriel's Wharf. Breaking out from the main walkway is a viewing balcony that offers a free line of vision to the City of London. To take a view: this seems to be the single purpose of this space, judging by the reduced street furniture, the few benches and handrails to lean on. I am part of a diverse group of people here. Many tourists, I assume. Many of them sitting on the benches, holding up digital cameras. Just like them, I have nothing else to do but to stare into the distance, beyond the boats on the River Thames, the Embankment, Blackfriars Bridge, concentrating, seeking out famous buildings. I see the City, recognise St Paul's Cathedral, the Gherkin, Tower 42, several other office towers whose name or exact location I don't know, the top of a building that looks like a castle to me, tower cranes that indicate the construction work currently going on in the City. I hear the names and nicknames of buildings that can be seen and those that cannot yet be seen. Gherkin, Pinnacle, St. Paul's, the Cheese grater. The City in the distance seems both self-sufficient and inapproachable.

I step back out onto the main path and walk in the direction of Waterloo Bridge. The City-fragments; it is not in full view anymore but partially hidden by lines of mature plane trees and historical sturgeon lampposts with globe lanterns. Many things happen on the main walkway, more than just an attentive concentration on the distant view of the City. Some people pace up and down, or climb up on the benches to get a clearer view. A few runners are passing by, while others sit in the grass, absorbed in their books, phones or iPads, or deep in conversation. Street entertainers dressed up as pirates and astronauts vie for their audience's attention, juggling, pulling coins out of small children's ears. All along, the City in the distance adds to the visual character of the place, much like the street furniture or the grey blocks of the National Theatre. As a public space it is not solely dedicated to the view across the river, but in its overall experience the City acts as a visual cross-reference. Further along, the space grows dense with people and second-hand book stalls. I meander and browse, knowing that to my right there are still views across to the City; for now, however, they have become invisible behind the trees.

A double-flight staircase takes me up to the south end of Waterloo Bridge. A central artery of London, heavily used by pedestrians, cyclists, cars and buses, noisy and hot, the bridge is not so much a space to linger but a space to traverse. I see the City in the distance again. Others too. Milling around the viewing plaques that are mounted on the balustrades one- and two-thirds down the bridge, we compare what we see with its representation, buildings of the city, their names and dates. I learn that the building that looked like a castle to me is Faraday House, built in the 1930s to host the world's first international telephone exchange. The distant view from the south end of Waterloo Bridge and the one from the viewing balcony close to Gabriel's Wharf are very similar. Now I am at a higher point and more distant from the City though. Moving along the bridge, the view changes; the City's office towers appear to be much closer now to St Paul's and Canary Wharf has moved into sight on the right, in the far distance. The City in the distance seems to be shifting.

At the north end of the bridge, I turn right to access Somerset House River Terrace via a sloping bridge. The terrace is set at a high level above the Embankment and the river; there is a café, open only during the summer months. I stop. Otherwise a dead-end, the terrace gives access to Somerset House, but few people seem to use the space as a passage; many hang out, sitting on the chairs and the balustrade, reading, having lunch, chatting. But behind the people there is an installation advertising an exhibition; above are the crowns of the trees. In a neat line, one next to each other, I see the top parts of the tallest buildings in the City: the tip of the Gherkin, Tower 42, the cranes, the dome of St. Paul's. The City is hidden almost entirely, not so much fragmented but reduced to a few small visual clues.

Along this walk from Gabriel's Wharf to Somerset House River Terrace, four categories of views towards the City are to be identified. These are four different ways of how the City can be conceived from outside its borders: first, as a flat image; second, as momentarily absent; third, as visually fragmented; and fourth, as represented by a sequence of a few individual buildings.

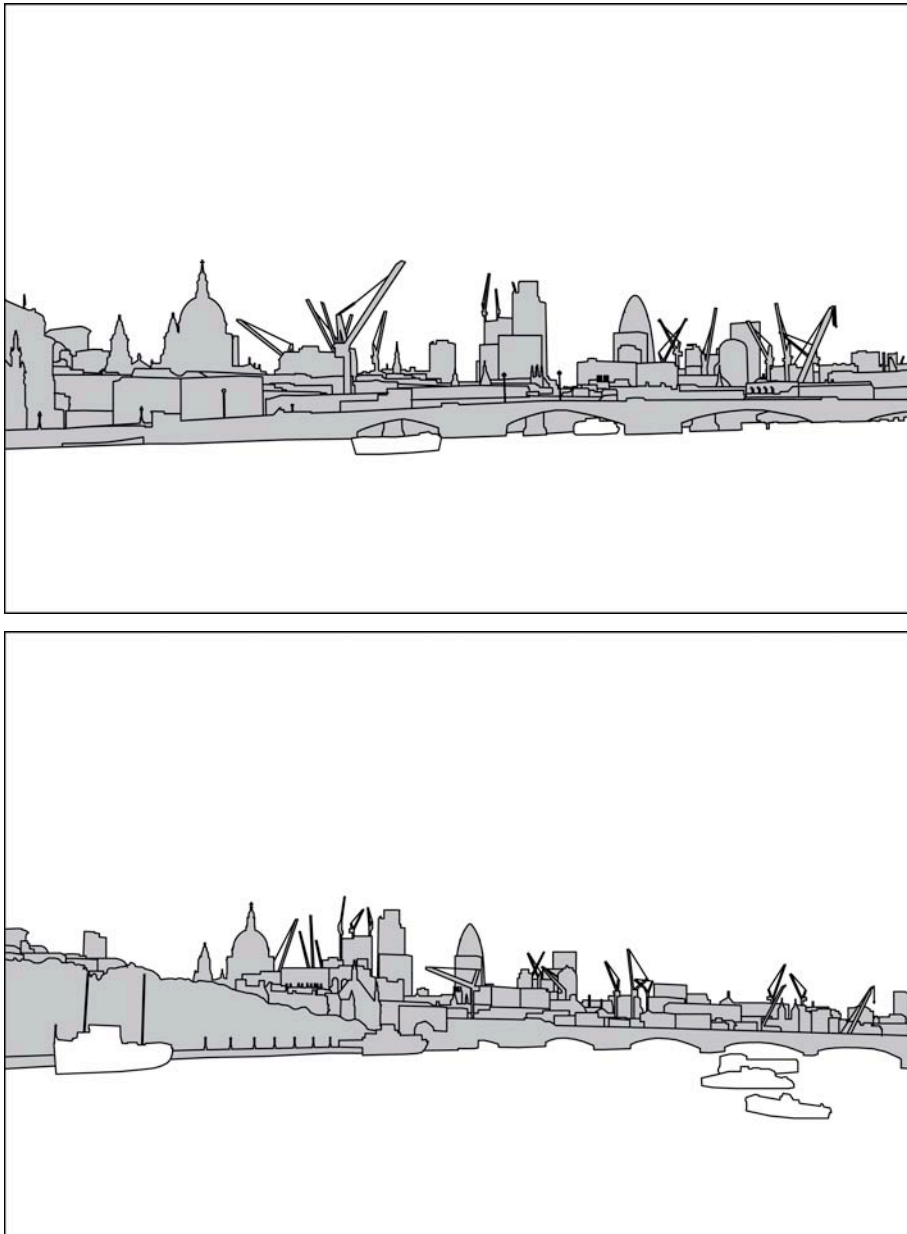


Figure 7: View category 1 (Gassner, 2009).

In the first category of views, for example on the viewing balcony or on Waterloo Bridge, the public space itself has little visual quality in its own right; it primarily serves as the staging of the view of the City. As a result of the spatial distance and the reduced foreground, the City is flattened to an elevation and as such is easily reproducible.



Figure 8: View category 2 (Gassner, 2009).

The second category of views is an inverse of the first, determined by the nearby rather than the distant. This includes viewpoints close to the north and south end of Waterloo Bridge, from which the view of the City is entirely hidden behind plane trees. In this visual experience the viewer knows of the City in the distance but cannot see it.



Figure 9: View category 3 (Gassner, 2009).

In the third category of views, elements of the nearby and the City in the distance are visually interlocked, as experienced on the main walkway on the South Bank. These views are complex and unstable, continually changing according to the respective visually rich nearby. The City is often unrecognised or not taken notice of.

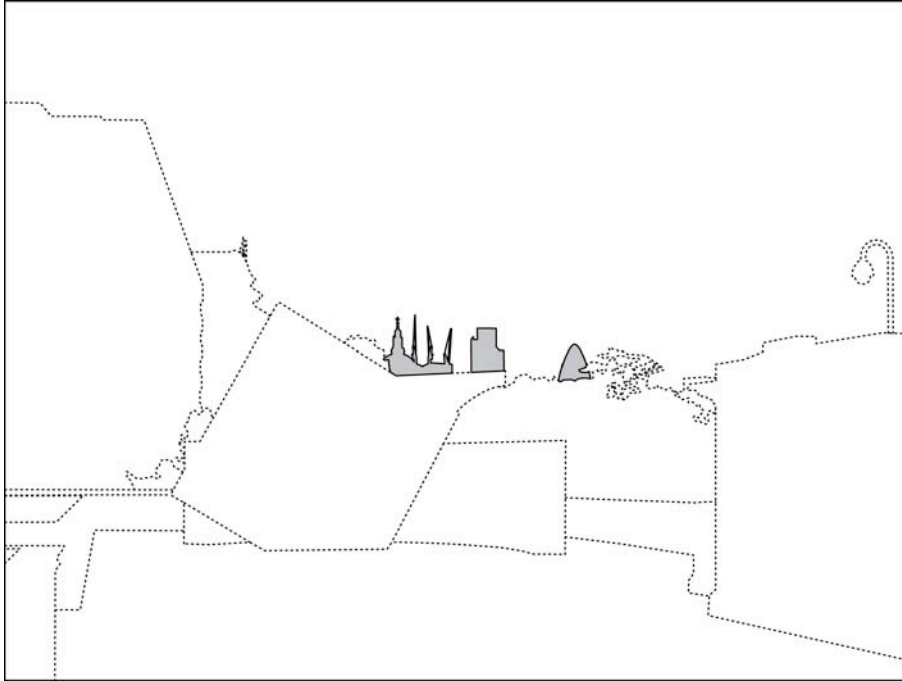


Figure 10: View category 4 (Gassner, 2009).

The fourth category comprises views where the dense visual quality of the nearby reduces the City in the distance to the top parts of its tallest buildings, as for example in views from Somerset House River Terrace. The City is represented through a linear arrangement of a few visual clues rather than through a cohesive composition of the built environment.

I suggest that this distinction between four different ways of seeing the City from outside its borders is important because each of these visual abstractions can be instrumentalised differently for economic purposes. For example, in my discussion of the non-auratic skyline in Chapter 5, I discuss the role of an interrupted line of vision between the viewing place and the City in the distance from an aesthetic and political rather than

solely aesthetic standpoint. I suggest that the uninterrupted views towards the wider city need to be understood in relation to attempts to fix visual relationships between historical buildings and office high-rises in order to create an easily marketable city-image.

The critical potential of each of these visual abstractions can be further explored by employing a montage strategy in order to test alternative visions of the city. Such a montage strategy is widely used amongst design-related professionals, and indeed has been for quite some time. In order to show before-and-after comparisons, the eighteenth-century picturesque landscape gardener Humphry Repton, for example, used a related technique in his *Red Books* (Daniels, 1999). His before-and-after comparisons aimed primarily to show a potential client the work he was intending to do. In that respect, their main purpose was to persuade rather than to open up critical questions.

In the current London context, before-and-after visualisations are an important basis for skyline debates too. These visualisations, or so it is argued, persuade through accuracy – and visual accuracy has certainly become a main concern for planning authorities. The LVMF (GLA, 2012) includes a section on “Accurate Visual Representations” (243ff), in which the relevance of geographically precisely defined viewpoints and lens lengths are highlighted, in order to accurately get hold of the human visual perception of the environment. This is, in fact, a fairly new development, due to widely available advanced computer technologies. In the planning process of Canary Wharf in the 1980s, and still in the first phase of the planning process of the Heron Tower at the beginning of the twenty first century, it was difficult to produce accurate visual representations of architectural proposals, especially in urban environments.⁴⁸ Today, built environments of whole cities are available as three-dimensional computer models, in which further models of architectural proposals can be implanted. These 3D models can be rendered from designated viewpoints in very advanced ways, showing colours and textures under different weather conditions and at different times of the day and year. Furthermore, not only static images can be produced but increasingly also animations.

⁴⁸ Canary Wharf is, besides the City of London, the second financial service industry hub in London.

In current skyline debates, arguments are supported by means of accurate visual representations; they persuade by objectifying individual visual experiences. Reviewing Linfert's *Architektur-Zeichnungen* [Architectural Drawings], Benjamin (2005d) describes architectural drawings as *non-representational* and distinguishes them from a manner of representing buildings using purely painterly means. For him, an important characteristic of an architectural drawing is that "it does not take a pictorial detour" (670). And because certain 'errors' survived through the late eighteenth century (despite all progress in naturalism), Benjamin suggests, Linfert takes it to be "a peculiar imaginary world [*Vorstellungswelt*] of architecture, which is markedly different from that of painters" (ibid.: 670). Even if some of these 'errors' can be eradicated through the use of computer technologies, however, visual inaccuracy and pictorial detours have their place within today's production of speculative office high-rises.

In principle, two types of images that are produced in the processes of designing an office tower need to be distinguished from each other: planning images and marketing images. Planning images are images that are produced by accredited visualisation companies, not by the architects themselves but based on the architects' drawings and using computer models produced by the architects. These planning images are accurately controlled in terms of the selection of the viewpoint, viewing height, viewing direction, viewing angle, etc. They are verified images with the aim of representing a building in its context as accurately as possible. It is these that townscape consultants describe and assess in ESs and which a local authority's consultants use as the basis for their judgements of a scheme's impact on existing skylines.

Marketing images, by contrast, follow logics based on market research. Commercial high-rises are usually still under construction when the developer is on the lookout for possible tenants. One of the most important things for a developer to be able to come up with a viable financial plan is to make sure that a certain percentage of office space will be rented out for sure. The developer needs to secure a pre-let agreement and thus tenants must be found before the tower has been completed. This is a very important and very tricky business, as I show in my discussion of contemporary ruins on the new London skyline in Chapter 6. Marketing images aim to 'sell' the building and office

spaces to potential clients. In these images, ‘errors’ are not uncommon. These deliberate errors, for example, can simply involve the production of visualisations that show the building under very preferable light conditions, for example on one of the very rare very sunny days in London, on which materials look all shiny and direct sunlight cuts through a deep working space. Furthermore, these errors can also include strategies to make the rentable working space more generous and spacious (for example, by increasing the floor-to-ceiling height in the computer model or by using certain perspective angles) and to make the building look taller and more elegant. In the end, although these images are not official planning documents, they find their way into planning debates, for example when they are included in Design Statements.

In addition to more or less accurate photorealistic representations are more abstract visual representations, including diagrams and, most importantly for this research, outline drawings. These diagrammatic representations are crucial because they indicate how professionals measure and assess the impact of a proposed development on the setting of a listed building, and how the city is visually abstracted more generally. In my discussion of the politics of form in Chapter 4, for example, I show how outline drawings are used to reduce the visual city in the distance to concerns with skyline profiles and sky gaps.

I regard ‘visual inaccuracy’ as crucial for drawing out the critical potential of skylines in order to challenge currently hegemonic ways of seeing the city. Many of my drawings follow a three-step process of visual abstraction, separation and re-arrangement. The four categories of understanding the City in the distance along my walk from Gabriel’s Wharf to Somerset House are derived from, first, visually abstracting the city to the outlines of buildings and, second, separating the City in the distance from the visual impact of the near. If these drawings, then, are the base for re-arranging outlines of buildings or introducing different fore- or middle grounds, then this is an attempt to visualise alternatives related to the established ways of seeing the city. Moreover, it is also an attempt to destabilise formalised vision. This, then, is a surrealist montage principle, as I address in my discussion of the politics of representing time in Chapter 3, which aims to bring together pieces “that the reigning conceptual structures habitually held apart” (Cohen, 1998: 259).

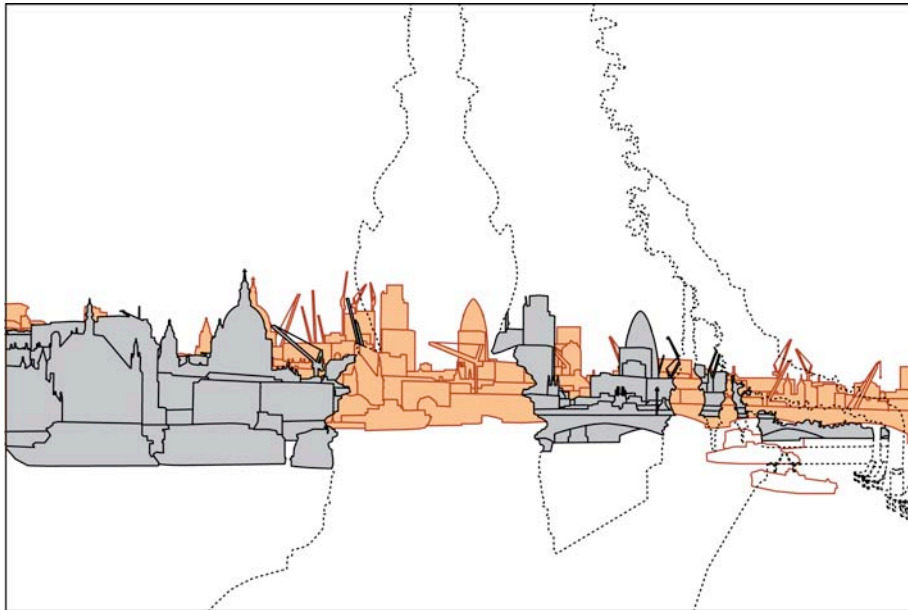


Figure 11: View categories 1 and 3 superimposed (Gassner, 2013).

The strategy of analysing distant views towards the City along a walk from Gabriel's Wharf to Somerset House is vital because, in so doing, I step inside and outside of formalised vision. Along my walk, I cross the borders of visual cones that cut through the city in order to formalise vision. I enter and leave professionally acknowledged viewing places and strive to introduce a subjective and visually inaccurate reading of the city.⁴⁹

2.3 The discursive production of the new London skyline

I use the methodology of visual abstraction, separation and re-arrangement in order to destabilise formalised vision. More specifically, I use it to critically examine the historiographical approach that was encapsulated in the skyline debates relating to two office developments in the City: the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle. The choice of the developments is the result of two aspects. First, the two developments redefined the Eastern cluster and its visual relationship with St Paul's Cathedral. Second, both

⁴⁹ For a discussion of subjectivity in the City, how individuals engage with urban spaces at the levels of perception, memory and agency see Tonkiss, 2005: 113-130.

planning processes, and in particular the Heron Tower one, were long, complex and highly contested; as a result of the sheer quantity of planning documents and reports, they thus allow for an in-depth analysis of skyline debates.

2.3.1 The Eastern high-rise cluster in the City

Both the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle are part of the current conception of the Eastern high-rise cluster in the City. The notion of clustering tall buildings became most influential in planning debates in London from the 1970s onwards, as a reaction against the singular visual presence of Tower 42 in ‘cherished’ distant views (see Tavernor, 2004b). Already in the 1960s, the Royal Fine Arts Commission (RFAC), which was the forerunner of CABE, criticised the poor and inappropriate siting of tall buildings in London and suggested that “exceptionally high buildings look better in the form of towers rather than slabs and a carefully arranged cluster of towers may be preferable to a number of isolated ones” (Catchpole, 1987: 14; see also Tavernor, 2004b: 52).⁵⁰

The Eastern cluster is the current manifestation of this suggestion. Its location is roughly described in the City of London UDP (CoL, 2002a) as a triangular area bordered by Houndsditch, Fenchurch Street and Old Broad Street, as an area that is “sensitive to high buildings” (167). It is one of the two areas in the City where high-rises can be built without creating any conflict with viewing corridors, wider setting consultation areas, background consultation areas, St Paul’s Heights control areas and conservation areas (CoL, 2002b: 167). The superimposition of these professional tools to measure heritage result in “two main concentrations of high buildings in the City: a group of high buildings in the east clustered around the building known as Tower 42 [...] and a smaller scale grouping in the north central area focused upon 125 London Wall. Elsewhere in the City the scale of development is considerably lower” (ibid. 145).

⁵⁰ In “Tall Buildings in London”, A Royal Fine Art Commission Discussion Paper, it is also highlighted that “the large number of tall buildings now generally regarded as being of poor quality which were constructed particularly from the 1960s to early 1980s have highlighted the fact that buildings do not provide commercial and other benefits simply by virtue of being tall” (RFAC, 1998, par. 16).

Material removed for copyright reasons. See <http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/services/environment-and-planning/planning/planning-policy/local-development-framework/Documents/city-unitary-development-plan-chapter-9-appendices.pdf>.

Figure 12: Map that shows how protected views and conservation areas limit possible locations for very tall buildings mostly to two areas in the City: the North Central Area, where the Barbican is located, and the Eastern cluster (City of London, UDP).

What was described as the cluster around Tower 42 in the City of London UDP from 2002 is the Eastern cluster; the north central area is the area where the Barbican residential towers are located. However, these are not geographically precise definitions, which is what EH criticises. They leave the possibility open for a redefinition of the cluster's precise boundaries – which could be exploited to include more and more office towers. Indeed, this is exactly what has happened in recent years. “Then [the Corporation of London] redefined the cluster essentially when the Heron tower came along”, a representative of EH recalled, “and at this stage they knew that the site that is now the site of the Pinnacle was going to be redeveloped and Difa, the German property company, owned the site at that time. And it's in their best interest to build a very tall building on that site. So, with Heron Tower and with Difa the City of London sort of redefined the shape of the cluster” (RoEH2, 41).

In principle, EH agrees that clustering tall buildings is to be preferred to tall buildings being scattered throughout the cityscape. “One of the reasons we accepted the Gherkin”, a representative recalled, “was that it was always promoted that would be the centre of the Eastern cluster. Since then, a whole series of other proposals came forward which means that [the Gherkin] is far from being [the] centre” (RoEH1, 11); and “with respect to the Heron Tower, there was actually a lot of debate if it is even within the Eastern cluster” (RoEH1, 15). At the time of writing, the centre of the Eastern cluster is the Pinnacle, and the Heron Tower is at its northern fringe, inside the cluster. It is important to acknowledge that, first, these two developments redefined the cluster’s location and extent and, second, that the professionals have agreed that the clustering of office towers is a sensible strategy to introduce additional office towers in central London. In my discussion of the politics of form, I discuss in detail what such an agreement means in regard to how London’s past is represented in the new skyline. At this point, however, I just want to highlight that EH is not simply against the construction of office towers in London. In the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle, it showed itself as keen to emphasise that they are not opposed to the idea of tall buildings per se, but that there should be a clear definition where exactly they are allowed:

EH is not opposed to the principle of high buildings in London. It does not advocate that London should be preserved as a museum piece. It recognises that London as a world city and the City of London as its financial centre must respond and adapt to changing requirements. However, EH is insistent that high buildings should only be permitted in locations where the historic environment is not damaged and where such structures would not harm the unique qualities so important to London’s role as a world city (EH, 2002).

This is an important quote, because the very possibility of a danger of ‘damage’ to the historic environment by means of inappropriate visual relationships calls into question the very foundations of how London’s past is read and told. My treatment of the questions of just what these ‘inappropriate’ visual relationships are is to be found in Chapter 4, and different definitions of ‘historic environment’ in Chapter 7, but what EH essentially asks for is a citywide land use plan that has legal force, similar to Paris for example. To put it differently, EH asks for a reduction in the weight given to

professional judgements in decisions about planning permissions and for a mostly administrative planning process:

Despite of all the words that have been written about this and the policies that are emerged even under the current mayor of administration [Boris Johnson], they still lack this clarity and certainty. It's still talked about the generalities of certain locations, the opportunity areas. So, I may be naïve but our view here has always been that why can't one identify certain locations where tall buildings are appropriate and what their impact are. And that's a plan-lead approach. We are not saying they [office towers] shouldn't be there, we're just saying they should be considered in the context of London as a whole. Because London as a whole is one of the world's great historic cities (RoEH1, 19).⁵¹

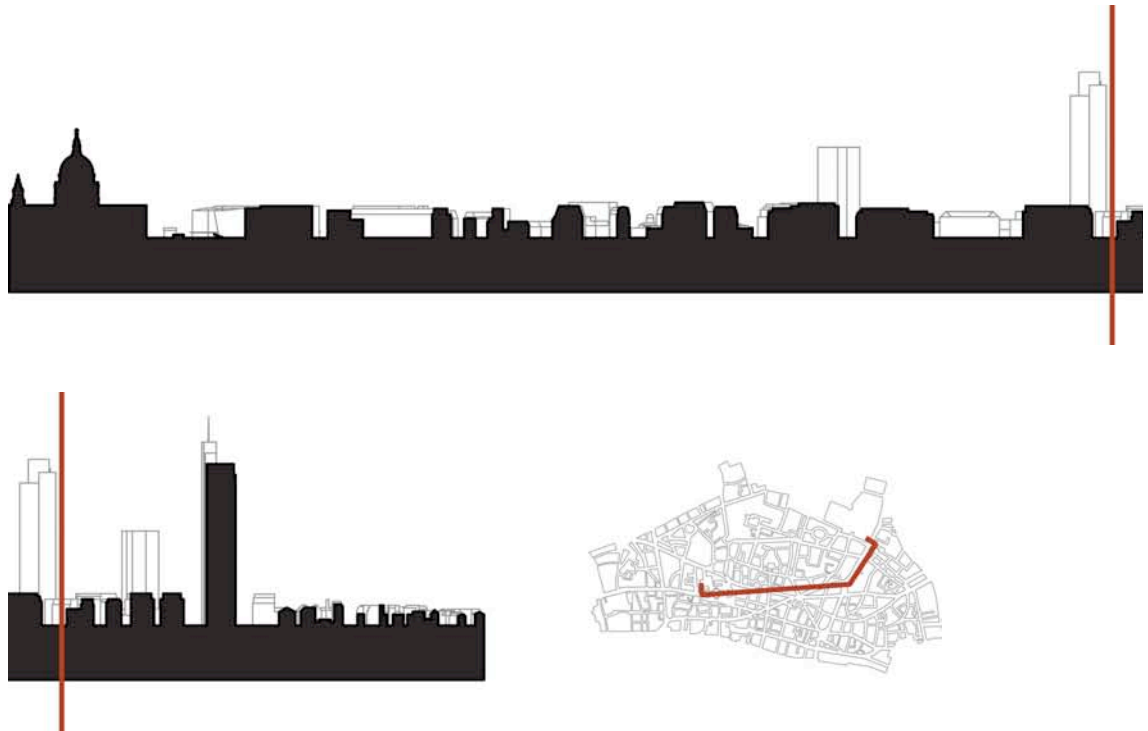


Figure 13: Urban section through the City from St Paul's to Bishopsgate and through the Heron Tower showing the impact of St Paul's Heights, the different grain sizes in the City as well as the medieval street pattern (Gassner, 2013).

⁵¹ In *The London Plan*, 'Opportunity Areas' are defined as areas "for accommodating large scale development to provide substantial numbers of new employment and housing, each typically more than 5,000 jobs and/or 2,500 homes, with a mixed and intensive use of land and assisted by good public transport accessibility" (GLA, 2011: 305).

The question that arises fundamentally revolves around the issue of how to represent one of the world's great historic cities. And more specifically, how should individual historical buildings like St Paul's be represented on the skyline? The Corporation of London's rhetoric is that while they "won't let anything through St Paul's Heights ceiling [they] must be allowing a freedom in the eastern part of the City to develop high buildings if the City of London itself is to remain a dynamic, mercantile, commercial, financial centre" (RoEH1, 49). This quote suggests a certain trade-off between EH and the Corporation. St Paul's immediate surrounding is carefully protected as long as present needs are fulfilled in the eastern part of the City.

It is the very definition of the role of office towers in the cityscape that is the issue here. What is the role of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle in the cityscape as seen from nearby and from afar? Current skyline debates focus on the visual relationship between the Eastern cluster and St Paul's in selected views; the visual relationship between a sacral building and a group of secular and corporate towers. This might suggest that what we have here is a clear-cut separation between these two building types. However, in terms of professional skyline debates this is not the case.

In the 1950s, the RFAC argued that "it is only acceptable to have high-rise buildings where they serve in a funny sort of way the same function as churches. The function being not to draw people to worship, of course, but the function being to denote a focus of urban design, a major junction, a major focus in the urban scene" (TC1, 9). This consideration produced policies, according to which high-rises should only be allowed "where they signify focal points, and they should always be in groups" (ibid.). I suggest that this is an important aspect, because it marks the beginning of a seeming 'confusion' between churches and office towers, which ends up in a deceiving image of the new London skyline – one that has far-reaching consequences for the way central London is currently developed.

2.3.2 The Heron Tower and the Pinnacle

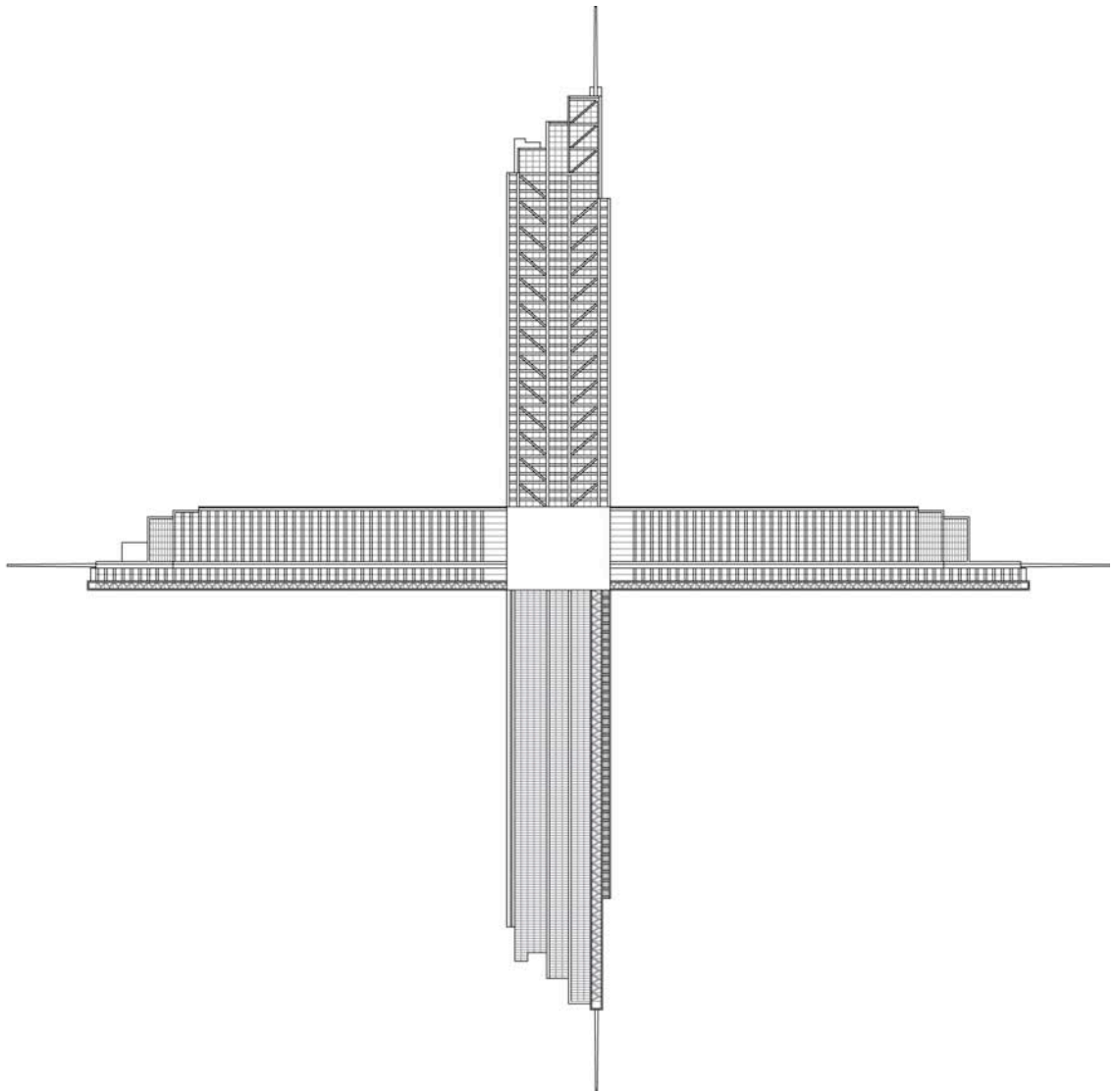


Figure 14: Elevations of the Heron Tower based on architects' drawings (Gassner, 2010).

The Heron Tower is owned by Heron International, which is a UK based property development company, and designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates. As mentioned earlier, the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle both had long and highly contested planning processes. The planning process of the Heron Tower was complex and lasted almost five and a half years. In June 2000, the first detailed planning application was submitted. In January 2001, the planning committee granted conditional planning permission and at the beginning of February the decision was ratified by the Corporation Court from Common Council. In late February, due to EH's interventions the scheme was

requested by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. What followed was a Public Inquiry that lasted until July 2002. At the end of June, the Secretary of State issued a decision letter following his Inspector's Report granting planning permission. In September 2005 a detailed planning application for a slightly revised scheme was submitted. Changes included slightly larger floor plates, four extra floors and a change to the top of the building. In April 2006 this revised scheme for the Heron Tower was granted planning permission. Within these five and a half years, the most momentous time for skyline debates was the Public Inquiry, which – according to an architect I interviewed – cost around GBP 10 million (Arch 1, 61).

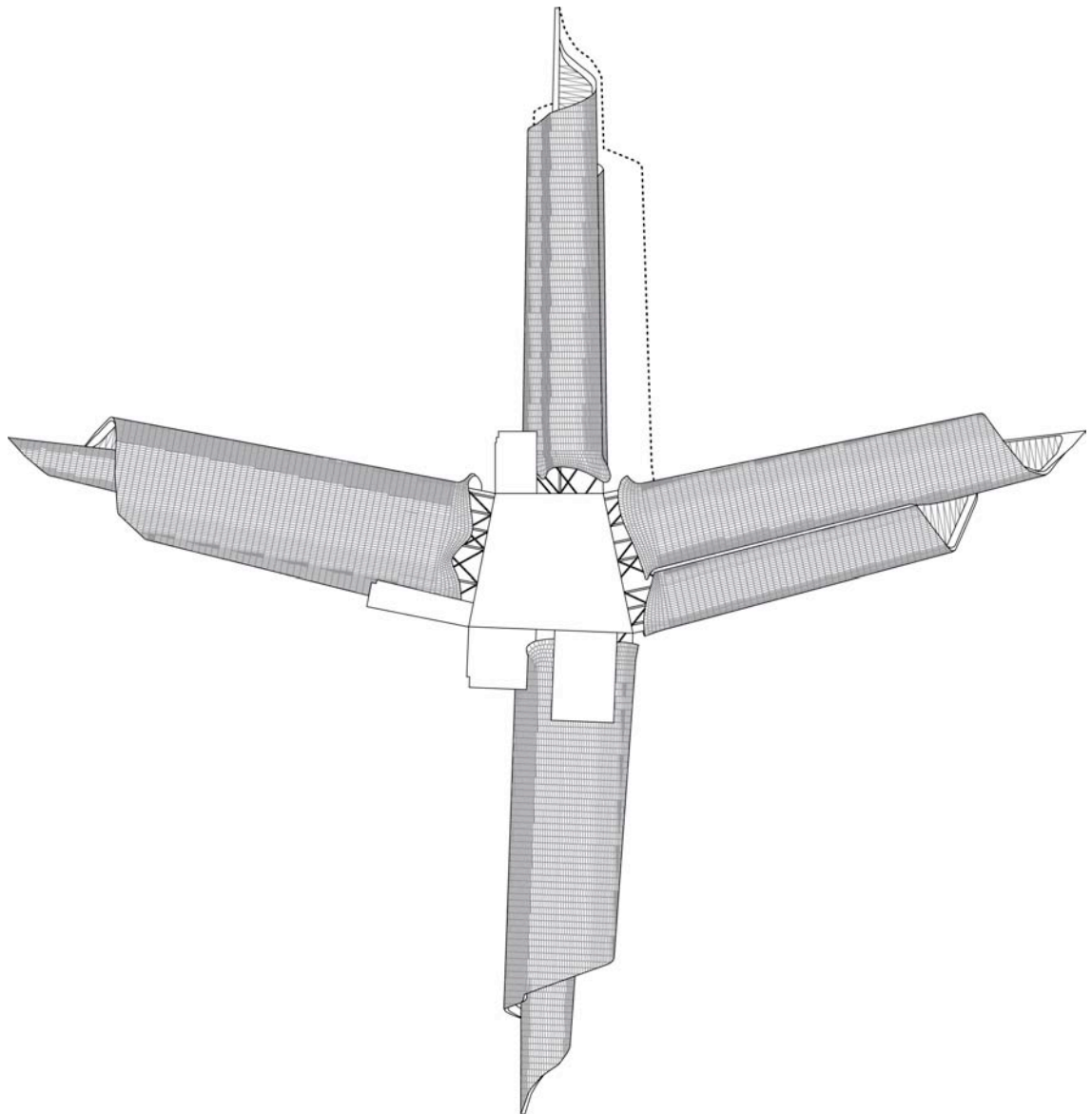


Figure 15: Elevations of the Pinnacle based on architects' drawings (Gassner, 2010).

The Economic Development Corporation of Saudi Arabia and its development manager Arab Investments is part-funding the construction of the Pinnacle in return for a 90% stake in the structure. Like the Heron Tower, the building was designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates. The planning process of the Pinnacle was shorter and less expensive. Still, it lasted for about two and a half years and overlapped with Heron's planning process for almost a year. In June 2005, a detailed planning application was submitted and ten months later in April 2006 planning permission was granted. In December 2006 a second detailed planning application for a slightly revised scheme was submitted. Changes included three additional floors but no change in the total height of the building due to reduced floor-to-ceiling heights. Hence, the changes had little impact on the building's appearances in distant views. In November 2007, planning permission for the revised scheme was granted.

In the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle, some of the same experts were involved. As mentioned, both projects were designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates (KPF), which is a globally operating practice with its headquarters in New York City and offices in London, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Furthermore, the same planning consultants, DP9, one townscape consultant, The Professor Robert Tavernor Consultancy Ltd., and some representatives of EH were involved in both planning processes.

In a study relating to the US in the 1980s, Robert Gutman (1988) suggested that the landscape of architectural practices was changing. While the number of total projects in which architects were involved had decreased, the size and complexity of these projects was increasing. These bigger and more complex buildings, of which tall office buildings are a prime example, require a very particular expertise. It is in this context that Gutman differentiated between three types of architectural firms: first, 'strong idea firms', which tend to be practice-centred businesses; second, 'strong service firms', which tend to be business-centred practices; and third, 'strong delivery firms', i.e. commercial firms that rarely win awards but build a great deal.

KPF might be classified as one of the large 'strong service firms', similar to Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), for example. Despite Leslie Sklair's (2005) suggestion that

“[m]ost iconic buildings in the global era [...] have not been built by the biggest firms but by a relatively small number of ‘strong idea firms’” (488), KPF’s expertise in both the construction of tall buildings and planning processes in the City of London was highly relevant for their nomination as designers. Planning processes for developments in the City are very complex, which is why developers tend to work with architects who are experienced in working with equally specialised planning consultants.

A particularity relating to the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle that needs to be mentioned is that in autumn 2009, when I started to conduct interviews, five directors at KPF London resigned and founded the new practice PLP Architecture. All five had important roles in the designs and the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle in their capacities of partners in charge of design and management. During negotiations between KPF, PLP and the developer, it became clear that I would have to conduct interviews with architects now working for PLP, as it was them who were most involved. But until the future involvement of the two practices in the construction phases were clarified, the architects were not willing to give interviews.

In principle, planning documents are accessible. The planning officer’s report, along with the committee agenda and minutes and consultation returns, are public documents (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2003, p. 128) and the Corporation of London makes planning applications available on the City of London website.⁵² If one has knowledge of the planning reference number, one can download several planning documents including images and drawings (in low resolution). However, it is sometimes only the latest planning documents that are available online, which is particularly problematic because both the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle had long planning histories with more than one detailed planning application each.

The Corporation of London also provides a public enquires office at the Guildhall.⁵³ I have used these services and I have also been given access to the archive of The Professor Robert Tavernor Consultancy Ltd., which was vital for an in-depth

⁵² http://www.planning.cityoflondon.gov.uk/tdc/DcApplication/application_searchform.aspx [accessed 26 February 2010].

⁵³ http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/Corporation/LGNL_Services/Environment_and_planning/Planning/Planning+Applications.htm [accessed 26 February 2010].

understanding of the planning documents and reports by different parties who were involved in the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle.

A great number of different experts are involved in such complex planning processes. Included in the developer's team are the architects, consultants that advise the architects (such as structural engineers, mechanical and electrical service engineers, transport engineers, etc.), and – in the planning phase – planning consultants and townscape consultants. On the other side are local authorities and various consultants including EH and CABE (now the Design Council).

In this research, I focus primarily on skyline debates between architects, townscape consultants and representatives of EH. This focus is meant to allow an analytical depth and simultaneously cover enough ground. Given the historiographical focus in this research, I limit this analysis to debates between architects and townscape consultants on the one hand and representatives of EH on the other. While clearly there is a tendency that in regard to skyline debates history-related aspects need to be understood in relation to a tension between the developer's team and EH, it is important to abstain from superficial generalisations.

“English Heritage exists to make sure the best of the past is kept to enrich our lives today and in the future”, it says on its website.⁵⁴ Thus, the overall agenda of EH is clear. It involves “the protection of the built environment”, and in regard to London's skylines, the assessment of the visual impact that “any new development may have on the setting of a listed building” (RoEH2, 8). In the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle, representatives of EH spoke with one voice. Despite the overall agenda, however, EH is not an entirely homogeneous group. In interviews with different representatives, differences between particular view assessments (what is visually acceptable?), and different, more optimistic or more pessimistic outlooks regarding future developments in the City came to the fore. Most importantly, on the quiet, different representatives showed more or less sympathy for developers and their agendas. But these differences should not hide the fact that EH's overall agenda and its approach towards assessing the impact of a proposed development is codified and

⁵⁴ See www.english-heritage.org.uk [accessed 20 August 2013].

documented in the planning guidelines I introduced in Chapter 1 (see EH, 2011; CABE and EH: 2007; CABE 2000; et al.).

Three different types of planning documents are most crucial for my analysis: Design Statements, ESs and reports, including proofs of evidence of architects, townscape consultants and representatives of EH. Part of the planning documents an applicant is required to provide to the local authority takes the form of a Design Statement, produced by the architects, which gives an overall explanation of the proposed schemes, as well as planning drawings (plans, sections and elevations, usually at the scale 1: 100). This document is important because it summarises the architect's design approach most clearly.

Planning applications for developments that are likely to have a significant impact on the environment are additionally required to be accompanied by an ES. An ES includes a chapter that is concerned "with the visual impact of the proposal on and around the site" (Tavernor, 2004b: 48f). Such a chapter is usually titled "Townscape and Visual Assessment", and it summarises the townscape consultant's approach towards views – and, in this context, skylines – and her/his assessment of individual views clearly. The view selection for the document is made "in consultation with a range of experts, including a Townscape Consultant" (ibid.: 50). Moreover, it is the role of the townscape consultant, who is an expert in architectural and urban design and who can demonstrate an appropriate degree of professional impartiality, "to offer a professional opinion on each of the views being assessed, in order to assist a determination as to whether the development is likely to have a positive, negative or neutral impact on its setting" (ibid.). In addition to Design Statements and ESs, several lengthy reports, and the Proof of Evidence by architects, townscape consultants and representatives of EH that were brought forward in the Public Inquiry of the Heron Tower are crucial for a better understanding of the different positions regarding London's skylines.

The textual and visual analyses of these documents were accompanied by interviews I conducted with architects, townscape consultants and representatives of EH. I only conducted interviews with individuals who were directly involved in the two planning processes, and whose documents I had studied beforehand. My aim was to keep the

number of texts analysed manageable in order to allow a richness of detail (see Tonkiss, 1998). This means that several experts, who were highly influential in planning processes, are underrepresented in my analysis, such as the Corporation of London and developers, for example. However, I suggest that the historiographical focus of my analysis allows a limitation to the arguments that were put forward by architects, townscape consultants and representatives of EH, because these experts usually cover the range of approaches to historiography that are to be found in planning processes.

The ten in-depth semi-structured interviews, based on topic guides and held in experts' offices, each between one and two hours long, and several informal discussions, in particular with townscape consultants, did not result in completely 'new' concepts being revealed. Experts usually referred to planning documents they had produced and I had made myself familiar with before the interview. However, these face-to-face meetings did reveal a much more complex, nuanced and, in fact, interrelated picture, which does not justify a clear-cut opposition between opponents and advocates of tall buildings in central London at all.

2.4 Intellectual methodology

It is less a clear-cut distinction between advocates and opponents of office towers that is characteristic of the discursive production of London's skylines, than different ideas about how best to represent London's past for the present and future as a world city. In my discussion of formal and informal skylines in Chapter 1, I argued that these different ideas need to be understood in the context of today's established formalised vision as prescribed in current planning policies and guidelines. I argue that in order to critically examine the historiographical differences in its foundations, architects', townscapes' and historians' arguments need to be contrasted with a critical, informal conceptualisation of skylines.

An informal conception of skylines can be found in the Townscape movement; most of all, in its early phase and in Hastings' texts in particular, which is why I focus on selected texts that can be attributed to him (despite his use of different pseudonyms). It might be argued that Townscape is currently undergoing a 'revival' amongst professionals. Partly

as a result of recent PhD research (Erten, 2004; Aitchison, 2008), and the work of John Macarthur (2007a; 2007b) on the picturesque and on the Townscape movement, attention has been drawn to conceptual aspects of the Townscape-related articles in the AR in the 1930s and 1940s and the influence avant-garde movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism had on Townscape writers.

On the other hand, my emphasis is on the historiographical approach that is encapsulated in early Townscape articles, which, I suggest, is less limited to a nostalgic view of the city than the view evinced in some of the later Townscape-related texts. In that respect, I agree with Aitchison (2008) that “the earlier nascent Townscape appears to attend to conceptual problems that are closer to our interests and situation today” (198) than better-known texts such as Cullen’s *The Concise Townscape*. Hence, rather than dealing with easily available primary and secondary Townscape-related literature, I closely work with selected Townscape articles that were published in the AR in the 1930s and 1940s.

All issues of the AR since its founding in 1896 are available at the British Library. I focus on articles that were published before and including the official launch of the movement in 1949. These articles include Hastings’ two seminal texts “Exterior Furnishing or sharawadgi: the art of making urban landscape” (January 1944) and “Townscape” (December 1949) and Pevsner’s “Price on Picturesque Planning” (February 1944), for example. Moreover, I also include articles that show the AR’s plan for construction in the City of London after WW II (June 1945; November 1946), as well as obscure and provocative articles, such as Paul Nash’s “Swanage or Seaside Surrealism” (March 1936) and John Betjeman’s “The Seeing Eye or How to Like Everything” (November 1939). Hastings’ aesthetical-political understanding of cityscapes, which is encapsulated in his understanding of cityscapes as democratic art, surrealist pictures and visual education, can be understood in more detail through his *The Alternative Society*, published in 1980 but conceived from the 1940s onwards, and the unpublished manuscript “The Unnatural History of Man”. I work with the unpublished manuscript through the interpretation of Erten (2004).

This selective approach to the early Townscape movement is paralleled by my approach towards critical theory and the work of Walter Benjamin. Rather than aiming to give a full account of Benjamin's writing on cities and cityscapes, I choose only selected concepts that I regard as most productive for a critical engagement with both current formalised vision and an informal conceptualisation as proposed by Townscape.

The immanent critique of capitalist society that figures associated with the Frankfurt School such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Benjamin voiced involved a critique of commodification, the state and the law, for instance, "through family structures, cultural forms and social-psychological dynamics" (Brenner, 2009: 199).⁵⁵ Among these thinkers, it is, most of all, Benjamin, who devoted much attention to urban questions (ibid.); not only in the well-known AP but also in his 'thought images' of different cities that he visited in the 1920s, in his reminiscence of his childhood in Berlin, and in his analysis of Baudelaire's poetry.

My focus cuts across different texts, selecting those theoretical concepts that I find most inspiring and productive for the drawing out of the critical impulse of skylines. These concepts revolve around Benjamin's redemptive approach towards historiography, his understanding of montage as a visual and historiographical principle, and his reading of the revolutionary and political energy of ruins as well as the afterlife of objects. Among several texts that are crucial for my discussion, the most important ones are: "On the Concept of History", Convolutes N and J of the AP, "Central Park", "Surrealism", *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, "The Task of the Translator" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility".

As I show throughout the thesis, my discussion of Benjamin revolves around the idea that an understanding of a skyline in terms of a well-ordered and whole composition needs to be critically engaged with. I adopt a process that involves deconstruction and re-arrangement, which is why the notion of 'ruination' is pivotal for my research. In choosing this focus, I neglect several theoretical concepts that might be interesting for a discussion of skylines. It is probably most noticeable that I have not included a detailed

⁵⁵ For a discussion of critical theory in relation to urbanism as well as its relationship to 'assemblage urbanism', see McFarlane (2011a; 2011b); Brenner, Madden and Wachsmuth (2011); and Tonkiss (2011).

discussion of Benjamin's account of the flâneur in this thesis, especially given Townscape writers' emphasis on the kinetic visual experience of the city. Benjamin's account of the flâneur is complex and it would require an in-depth analysis and discussion, which would go beyond the scope of this thesis.⁵⁶

I work with a range of different texts, filtering out aspects that are productive for a discussion of the new London skyline, rather than working with a text 'as a whole'. For me, Benjamin's concepts are tools for thinking and a constant reminder not to fall into an uncritical understanding of skylines and their aestheticising aspects. Since the publication of the *Selected Writings* (Volumes 1–4) from 2004 to 2006, Benjamin has become a main intellectual figure in the Anglo-American academic world, being much-cited by architects and urbanists (see Elliott, 2011; Hartoonian, 2010; Macarthur, 2007a; et al.). In some of these accounts, the focus clearly lies in the aim of making Benjamin relevant for contemporary questions. There is, however, a tendency among architects and urbanists to refer to some of Benjamin's best-known concepts, such as the 'aura' and the 'dialectical image' without acknowledging the broader context these concepts are part of.

I do not want to argue, as it is sometimes done, that such a decontextualisation is necessarily in line with Benjamin's own account of decontextualisation. I suggest instead that a process of decontextualisation needs to be based on an in-depth understanding and knowledge of the context a concept is wrested from, which is why I try to be diligent in contextualising and documenting where individual concepts come from. The main purpose of this precision is to introduce a more subtle *and* highly topical understanding of some of Benjamin's concepts in regard to urban design and urban planning questions.

2.5 Particular instances

This research focuses on an analysis of the professional production of the new London skyline. In order to critically engage with professional skyline debates, to draw out the consequences of professional conceptualisations on the way we see London, its past,

⁵⁶ For an in-depth analysis of Benjamin's concept of the flâneur and cityscapes see Frisby, 2001: 28-45. See also Frisby, 1985.

present and future, and to engage with these conceptualisations in a critical, proactive and propositional way, I create constellation of quotes, images and personal visual experiences. I argue that when professional statements, individual observations and theoretical concepts are put in relation with each other, we can understand hegemonic ideas in a more critical way. In my constellations elements are taken out of their conventional context. They are decontextualised. Things do not always add up. And this, I suggest, is one of the main qualities of my constellations.

In principle, I work with three different temporalities: current professional skyline conceptualisations or, better, skyline debates regarding the City of London's skylines in the pre-recession years of the twenty-first century; early twentieth-century Townscape debates; and late eighteenth-century picturesque concepts. It is common among design-related professionals to think about these three temporalities in a linear fashion. Picturesque garden principles influenced Townscape ideas, which, in turn, influence the way professionals think about today's London's skylines. The problematic with such a neat narrative is that it undervalues exactly those concepts that I regard as most important for contemporary conceptual problems. In my constellation of the picturesque, Townscape and current debates, I do not seek to establish a continuous narrative but rather select those concepts and visual strategies that I regard as most productive for a critical engagement with professional ideas about the new, modern and corporate skyline. The selection of concepts, then, always starts with a present concern. This present concern involves the visual reduction of the viewing place, as I discuss in Chapter 5, or the overloading of individual buildings with multiple symbolisms, as I analyse in Chapter 7.

My constellations also relate concrete visual problems to theoretical concepts. While this is a common approach among academics, I do not solely want to enrich my empirical analysis with theory or, even worse, to 'decorate' my empirical analysis with theory. Rather, I suggest that a concrete empirical case needs to be understood in its own right, just like a theoretical concept. I put them in relation with each other, and while it should be always clear why exactly I discuss a particular visual example at length or why I draw close attention to a particular concept, my approach requires, in parts, some patience on the side of the reader. My aim is not a closed piece of text that allows only a single

interpretation but, instead, I am seeking to open up a debate about the concrete and the theoretical. Of course, I hope that my interpretation is clear; but I equally hope that after having introduced a theoretical concept at length, the reader is encouraged to read against my interpretation. In short, I hope to create a dialogue with the reader. To put it differently, the aim of this thesis is for it to be ‘finished’ by the reader. In that respect, I suggest the thesis itself is unfinished and unfinishable by the author.

My constellations juxtapose descriptive accounts with analyses. They also juxtapose different representational forms: text citations with image citations. While some aspects can be best understood through text, others can only be accessed through visual representations. I want to reiterate that my visual analyses are not meant to be illustrations of the text, although to some degree they take on this function too. However, their main purpose is it to be analytical, interpretative and also propositional. The visual representations in this thesis have to be understood in their own right, just like the text.

Each chapter can be thought of in terms of a fragment: it stands for itself and in relation to other chapters. The sequence of the chapters does not necessarily follow a strict linear logic. But this does not mean that this thesis is simply a random collection of several academic papers. There is an order to the chapters, although not a linear one. Each chapter builds up to the next chapter. There is a red thread through the thesis and several cross references are meant to show the interconnectedness of the different aspects I deal with. After all, it is in between the different conceptual viewpoints that I choose in different chapters to look at the notion of skylines that I hope a better, critical and topical understanding will emerge.

Chapter 3: The politics of representing time

3.1 Out of sight, out of mind

In what ways does the City of London in the twenty-first century have picturesque visual qualities as promoted by eighteenth-century landscape gardeners and theorists, and are these visual qualities legible from outside its borders? On Bishopsgate, between Primrose Street and Leadenhall Street, several office high-rises including the Heron Tower, 99 Bishopsgate and Tower 42 loosely line the street. Others, such as the Pinnacle and Heron Plaza are likely to join them soon. Office towers, which are still an exception in wider London – currently a total of not more than forty-five buildings in London are above 100 metres high, 14 of which are located in the City – feature prominently in the square mile. Yet, and this is crucial, these towers are currently juxtaposed, and some might argue in visual tension with old and small buildings and also with churches, which, given today's surrounding built environment, have to be described as 'low' buildings. One of these churches is St Botolph's without Bishopsgate. Located opposite the Heron Tower on Bishopsgate, its scale was indeed a reference point for the design of the office building. The scale of the church's base relates to the scale of the lobby of the high-rise and the attached shopping arcade, i.e. the church's bell tower reaches only up to the ninth floor of the new 46-floor building.

"When you go to the Swiss Re tower [30 St Mary Axe]", a representative of EH suggested, "it's great [...] and then you turn and look at the medieval church of St Helen's Bishopsgate right next to it. There is nowhere in the world you can see that kind of juxtaposition. A thirteenth-century, another fourteenth-, fifteenth-century church on the other side, beneath this vast building that goes blooming upwards, which is [...] of extraordinary qualities in many ways, that dynamic contrast is something quite exceptional, quite extraordinary, can't be found anywhere else in the world. Nowhere else in the world you find that" (RoEH2, 45). Such dynamic contrasts, which, as I show in this chapter, Hastings conceptualised in terms of 'surrealist encounters', are, in turn, related to plot sizes, plot geometries and the street pattern in the City. Plots in the City tend to be relatively small and irregularly shaped. Streets in the City tend to be narrow and crooked. These qualities work against the uniformity of the built environment. An architect suggested that "one of the reasons the City still feels characterful and it retains

its urban quality is that the plot boundaries are remarkably sticky. They tend not to change. Therefore, you see buildings, whether they are high buildings or low buildings, dealing with the complexity of the medieval street grid” (Arch1, 5).⁵⁷

After the Great Fire of 1666, which destroyed a vast area within the City, Wren and others drew up new, rational masterplans for the City, all of which were based on a *tabula rasa* approach. The schemes envisaged the rational order of the Roman grid and the ceremonial order provided by axes connecting public spaces (Baron, 1997; Richardson, 2001; et al.). However, none of these masterplans was realised and the City remained a medieval warren. Joseph Rykwert (2000) argues that this was to a substantial degree due to “citizens’ ferocious attachment to their property rights” (49). Still today, streets in the City allow only short viewing distances from within the dense built fabric and therefore tall buildings are also less visible. Their quality as orientation clues and landmarks, as described by Lynch (1995) and Jacobs (1992), for example, is reduced. At the same time, it might be argued that orientation clues are all the more important in a physical structure that not only allows short-distant views but is also defined by a continuous change of direction. It is not easy to grasp the City beyond the immediate context and to get an overall understanding of it as a single entity from within.

But legibility and way-finding are not necessarily picturesque concerns. On several occasions, Pevsner quotes the following passage from the eighteenth-century English painter Sir Joshua Reynolds’ “Thirteenth discourse” of 1786:

The forms and turnings of the streets of London and other old towns are produced by accident, without any original plan or design, but they are not always the less pleasing for the walker on that account. On the contrary, if the City had been built on the regular plan of Sir Christopher Wren, the effect might have been, as we know it is in some new part of the town, rather unpleasing. The uniformity

⁵⁷ A related early account on St Paul’s can be found in Baron (1997b): “The external appearance of St Paul’s Cathedral is well known from engravings and, sadly, one can gain a better impression of the building as a whole from these than one can in reality. In the vicinity there is no point from which one can view it advantageously for, although after St Peter’s in Rome it is the largest church in Europe, it stands too closely surrounded by a graveyard, houses and many narrow streets” (Schopenhauer in Baron, 1997b: 178).

might have produced weariness and slight degree of disgust (Reynolds cited in Aitchison, 2008: 82).⁵⁸

Reynolds' statement is related to affects the built environment might arouse in us. At the same time, picturesque qualities also refer to the way the City is understood, i.e. to an epistemological space. If the City is experienced *and* conceptualised as the juxtaposition of difference within a 'medieval city', then this opens up questions regarding the City's representativeness.

The juxtaposition between old and new buildings is not always favoured amongst the wider public. It is not rare to hear that new office towers should be as far away from the historic centres of the cities as possible.⁵⁹ New towers, or so the argument goes, should be spatially and visually separated from 'substantial history'. The new – if absolutely necessary – should be located out of sight and not disturb the representation of a valued past. Such a normative statement refers to a distinction between a city's front and rear façade. Mumford (1940) describes such a distinction as a typically pre-modern approach to urban planning, a purely visual conception of the city plan that distinguishes between front and rear, between scene and obscene. Using the example of a rear façade in Edinburgh, he summarises this approach with the saying "Out of sight, out of mind" (136; Rowe and Koetter, 1983: 51). Modern planners were eager to eliminate the inequities that were encapsulated in such a visual understanding of the city. Hygienic and moral considerations were based on the principle: the same for all. That this can easily lead to monotony and undesirable places that are difficult to be appropriated, as Rowe and Koetter argue, can be frequently observed nowadays.

In this chapter I analyse the politics of the representing time in professional skyline debates. While in Chapter 1 I distinguished between a formal and an informal approach to a city's skylines, in this chapter I analyse the nature of this distinction in more detail, focusing on skyline debates relating to the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle. I commence by analysing the hierarchy of sight that plays out in these debates, emphasising the

⁵⁸ For a full text of Reynolds' "Discourses on art" see also http://archive.org/stream/sirjoshuareynold00reynuoft/sirjoshuareynold00reynuoft_djvu.txt [accessed 21 August 2013].

⁵⁹ See an online discussion regarding London's skylines and Turknology's statement in particular www.skyscrapercity.com [accessed 21 August 2013].

architectural, aesthetic and social reasons that were put forward. I then highlight the pivotal role of the visibility and appreciability of St Paul's Cathedral and the visual role office towers that are part of the Eastern cluster were given in these debates. I show that these debates are based on spatial closure and a linear representation of time and that these representational limitations can be critically examined using Hastings' collage-like understanding of the visual city. I relate Hastings' understanding of cityscapes in terms of surrealist pictures to Benjamin's literary montages and his understanding of montage as a historiographical principle. Furthermore, I argue that design-related professionals need to re-conceptualise compositional wholeness, in order to allow a critical engagement with the representation of both religion and financial capitalism on the new London skyline.

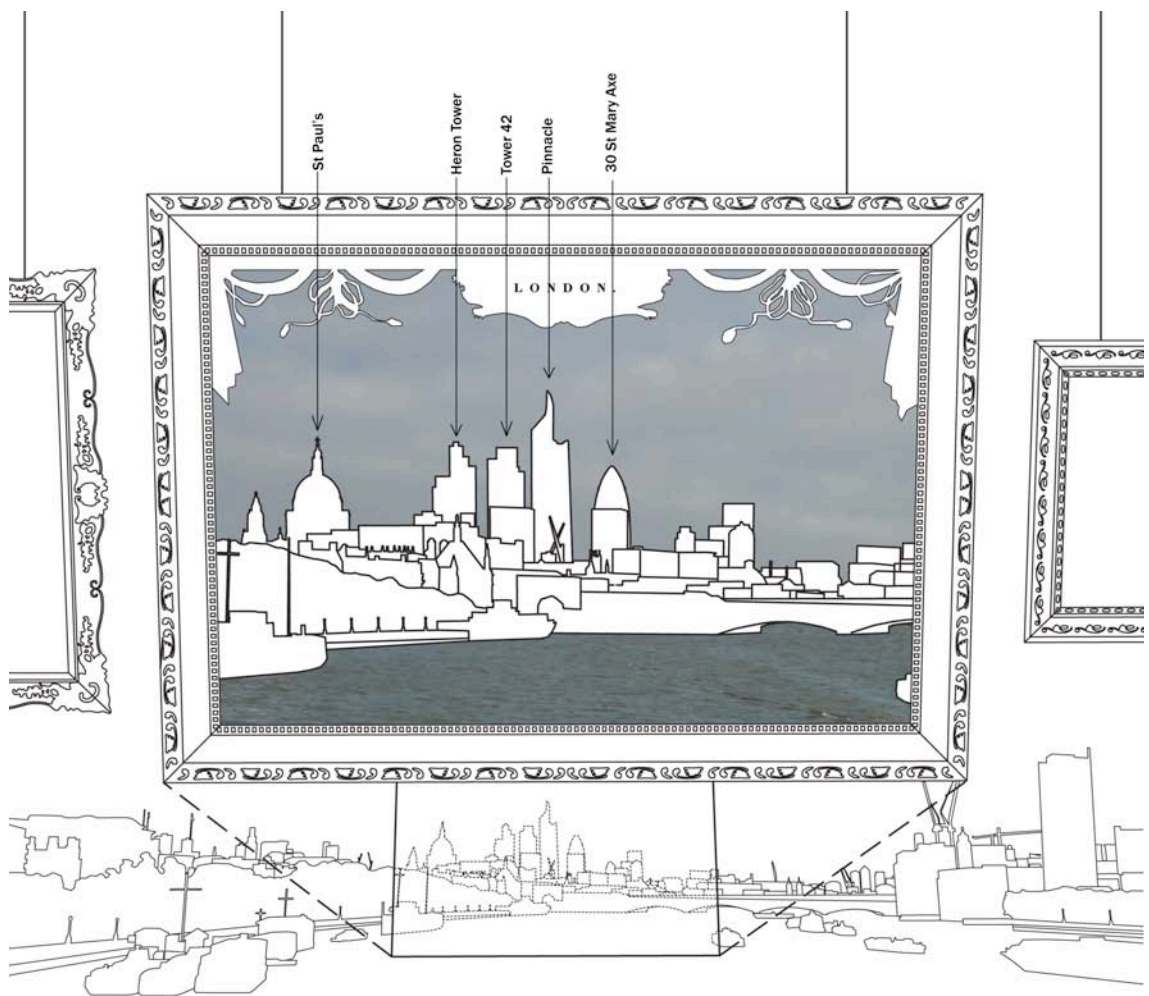


Figure 16: London's conceptualised in terms of a spatially closed, whole composition with a linear and continuous representation of time (Gassner, 2013).

3.2 London's front façade

3.2.1 Views from Waterloo Bridge

The planning processes for office towers in the City are undoubtedly complex. The applicant's team needs to be well prepared, in particular when it comes to visual assessments of the proposed development. That the applicants' teams in the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle were well prepared indicates the abundance of views that were included in the planning applications.

In the ES for the Heron Tower in 2005, a total of 176 views from 160 different viewpoints towards the proposed high-rise were assessed. The assessment involved eleven different view categories. A first group included seventeen views from the Tower of London and from Tower Bridge towards the office building; a second group, twenty-two views from the South Bank; a third group, nine so-called strategic views, which were distant views from viewpoints such as Richmond Park, and especially also from elevated viewpoints, for example, Parliament Hill, Primrose Hill and Greenwich. A fourth group included forty-nine 'River Views' involving viewpoints from the Embankment and from four different bridges (London Bridge, Blackfriars Bridge, Hungerford Bridge, and Waterloo Bridge) and the adjacent Somerset House River Terrace. In addition, seventeen 'Local Views' were assessed, twenty-two 'Approach views' and three views from viewpoints in Islington. An eighth group included nine 'High Level Views', mostly from rooftops, five 'Miscellaneous Views', and finally, thirty-two views from conservation areas and studies of listed buildings.

In the ES for the Pinnacle in 2006, a total of seventy-eight different views were assessed. The assessment included six different categories. A first group included seven panoramas from elevated viewpoints such as Parliament Hill and Primrose Hill. A second group included three 'Linear Views', which are distant views from low viewpoints, such as Richmond Park, towards St Paul's. A third group involved sixteen 'River Prospects' including viewpoints on London Bridge, Tower Bridge, Lambeth Bridge and Waterloo Bridge, viewpoints on the South Bank and one viewpoint on Somerset House River Terrace. A fourth group involved six views from the Tower of London, while a fifth group included seven views from the Royal Parks. Finally, thirty-nine 'Local Views', including views from Fleet Street, were also assessed.

This large number of assessed views (some of which were additionally evaluated under different light conditions, so as to imagine the view at different times of the day) suggests that professionals really tested the visual impact of the proposed buildings on the existing built environment “in the round” (CABE and EH, 2007). At the same time, it makes it also clear that different values were attached to different views. It was, in fact, a very small number of distant views that played a crucial role in the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle, and in the Public Inquiry of the Heron Tower in particular.

In the Public Inquiry for the Heron Tower, the principle visual battleground between applicants and EH focused on views from Waterloo Bridge (Tavernor and Gassner, 2010), as an architect suggested: the “Heron Tower was given its hardest battle of the view from Waterloo Bridge” (Arch2, 46). Anticipating the critical role of views from Waterloo Bridge, the ES from 2005 included seventeen view assessments from fourteen different viewpoints on Waterloo Bridge alone, including two night views. Furthermore, thirteen different views from the adjacent Somerset House River Terrace including three night views were assessed. In the planning process of the Pinnacle, as an architect suggested, views from Waterloo Bridge were also most crucial. While views from Fleet Street co-determined the building’s massing, views from Waterloo Bridge defined the building’s overall height. What makes views from west London towards the City’s skyline, and views from Waterloo Bridge in particular, so important and ‘critical’? The reasons were spatially, socially and historically justified.

From Waterloo Bridge one is offered a free line of vision towards St Paul’s. Views from the bridge are designated in the LVMF (GLA, 2012) and they are also controlled via St Paul’s Heights (see key diagram St Paul’s Heights, CoL, 2002a: 173). Furthermore, from Waterloo Bridge one is offered views towards the wider City including its very tall office buildings and the Eastern cluster. In these views, then, St Paul’s and corporate high-rises – a historical and listed building and recently built towers – can be seen side-by-side. There are not many low, distant and publicly accessible viewpoints in London, from which the viewer is offered a free line of vision to both the cathedral and the high-rise cluster. In views from elevated viewpoints, such as Parliament Hill, religion and financial capitalism in the City are simultaneously visible too. But in views from high

viewpoints, building heights are less readable. It really is in views from Waterloo Bridge or Blackfriars Bridge, for example, that the politics of verticality regarding urban shrines is legible.

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<http://www.planning2.cityoflondon.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=IME1FTFH51000>.

Figure 17: Distant view from Waterloo Bridge to the City of London; assessed in the planning process of the Heron Tower (Environmental Statement, Heron Tower).

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<http://www.planning2.cityoflondon.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=JA65AQFH02000>.

Figure 18: Distant view from Waterloo Bridge to the City of London; assessed in the planning process of the Pinnacle (Environmental Statement, Pinnacle).

Because Waterloo Bridge is located where the River Thames bends, it offers not only uninterrupted views towards the City – downstream – but also views towards the City of Westminster – upstream – and the Palace of Westminster, including Big Ben in particular. In an interview, a representative of EH emphasises that

Waterloo Bridge is on the bend of the river. You can see the City of London looking east and the City of Westminster, well, Westminster Palace looking west. So, it's a pivotal point to the public sphere in London. It provides the best panorama of the City of London where you see the whole of the City and St Paul's more or less in the centre of the view. So, yeah, it's a magnificent panorama (RoEH2, 37).

The City's multiple skylines, then, tend to be narrowed down to this "magnificent panorama" that is meant to show the City in its entirety with St Paul's in the centre. Does a panorama, a wide-angle or an even 360-degree visual representation actually have a visual centre? And what does such a statement mean in relation to representations of the city's past for its present and future as a world city? These are questions I will take up in a later section of this chapter. At this point, it is crucial to highlight that it was the idea that one can see the wider city, St Paul's and its local context, the dome of the cathedral and the top parts of office towers that EH saw as giving these views their superior relevance.

This last point, that St Paul's can be seen in its local context, is exactly one of the differences between Waterloo Bridge and Somerset House River Terrace, which is located adjacent to the bridge, just north of it. Behind the plane trees that are planted on the Embankment, only the top parts of the currently tallest buildings – St Paul's and the above-mentioned high-rises – are visible, while the rest of the City's built environment is hidden. Views from the terrace were also a visual battleground between applicants and EH in the planning process of the Heron Tower. Yet, in contrast to the views from Waterloo Bridge, the question of whether those views are significant or not had to be negotiated first. In the Public Inquiry, the planning inspector finally decided that they are not relevant for assessments of the visual impact of the proposed development on St Paul's, despite the fact that from the terrace the Heron Tower appears directly behind the dome of the cathedral:

I mean the chasing point is Somerset House River Terrace, we [EH] argued that the impact on the view from that position was very significant. And it is very significant. The inspector took the view, and it really, it was a fair view that he took, that it's not frequently visited. That particular viewing position, which was on the steps as you go up into Somerset House, looking eastwards to St Paul's Cathedral, it was really more of a passing view than a view where people pause and reflect. And also, there were trees sort of impinging on the view, and it was sort of slot, a narrow slot of a view, rather than a panorama. Whereas, of course, the views from Waterloo Bridge, are much more available and they are recognized, that's being, they are much more significant. So the inspector was able to dismiss the impact of the Heron Tower on the setting of St Paul's Cathedral. Largely because that viewing place wasn't all that significant, not all that much visited, basically (RoEH2, 34).

So, "hierarchically the Waterloo Bridge ones were more significant than the Somerset House River Terrace ones" (Arch1, 50) in the Heron Tower's planning process, because visitors of the terrace are not provided with what professionals describe as a magnificent panorama. Furthermore, visitors also seem to pay less attention to the City skyline from the terrace. On the bridge, however, visitors stop and appreciate the skyline; they pause and reflect, as the representative of EH put it. This is an important statement because, as I show in Chapter 6, it leads to a monumental conception of views.

The other important aspect is the use of the term 'visitors', which, I suggest, primarily stands for tourists who come and see London and spend good money in the city. An anticipated user group is another crucial argument for the importance of distant views towards the City from viewpoints in west London.

3.2.2 *The tourist and media view*

Waterloo Bridge is well used by pedestrians (mostly commuters and tourists), cars and buses. Sixteen different bus routes cross the Thames via the bridge and two tube stations – Temple and Waterloo – are located in walking distance, nearby the northern and the southern ends of it. The bridge strategically links the South Bank Centre with Somerset House and the well-known West End with its many mainstream professional theatres, Covent Garden and the Royal Opera House. It is also located nearby the London Eye, a major tourist attraction in London. However, while Waterloo Bridge is busy this does not mean that the bridge is a high-quality public space.

[...] in terms of it being a high quality space, no, it's not particularly a high quality space. But it's a very well-used space and you get also the kinetic experience of walking across the bridge and see, in a way, the different elements in the backdrop interact with each other (RoEH3, 37).

While I will discuss the kinetic experience of the new London skyline in chapters 4 and 5, what is important at this point is the idea that a place in the city, which has arguably little quality as a public space in its own right, is nevertheless regarded as a high-quality viewing place – and particularly because it is frequented by tourists. Waterloo Bridge, I suggest, offers a 'tourist view' of London as a world city. That does not mean that the bridge is not highly used also by citizens and commuters. But it is the social group of tourists that is highlighted by EH. In addition, distant views from Waterloo Bridge towards the City are also conceived as the "media view", as an architect suggested:

[...] the initial designs [of the Pinnacle] were very much about looking at the building from all around and the western ones perhaps more so, partly because of St Paul's but partly because the tourists are in the western part so they are crossing from Westminster or from the South Bank, and the river is perhaps as much as St Paul's the definition of London. People are on the river. And when pictures of London are put around the world it's this view that the news media uses. And the news media itself was something that Peter Rees [the City planning officer] was concerned with, especially, when we were designing the top of the building (Arch2, 24).

As this makes clear then, the City skyline as seen from Waterloo Bridge is one that we know from the media. It is also the one that many tourists come to see. Or better, it is the view that they have seen already before they visit and that they thus want to see in the city again. The City skyline from Waterloo Bridge is thus the not-so-surprising perspective of London that we know from guidebooks, souvenirs and the media.

The sociologist Martina Löw (2008) suggests that our understanding of the world and the visual lexicon of urban images is inverted nowadays as we tend to measure our understanding of the world in terms of the similarities it has with familiar images, rather than the other way round. In an age of visual overproduction and the easy accessibility of these images, selected views of places are seen on screen or in newspapers and magazines before these places are visually experienced in person. As a result, London's skylines are reduced to concerns with a tourist and media view, with architects and

representatives of EH hinting at a major driving force for London's skyline debates, namely the economic relevance of the new London skyline. Distant views from Waterloo Bridge are meant to attract tourists and investments. They are easily marketable pictures, in which St Paul's and the Eastern cluster appear side-by-side.

In her critique of current city planning and professional conceptions of heritage, Boyer (1996) describes the tourist as a person who "takes notes, catalogs experiences, follows guidebooks and itineraries" (374). She/he is a person who tries to find a synthetic whole and is on the lookout for "official narratives" (ibid.). Boyer distinguishes between the tourist and the observer, who "travels through space and time, alternating perspectives, experiencing fragmentations and permutations that may never coalesce into a coherent view" (374). The tourist, then, is a person who often engages less than critically with the city. Today, a clear-cut distinction between citizens and tourists is blurred. As a result of the increased mobility of people and of information, even more so in a world city like London, there is little value in a clear-cut categorisation, an idea Groys (2013) hints at when he talks about the era of post-romantic, total tourism in his essay "The city in the age of touristic reproduction". I suggest that rather than distinguishing between tourists and citizens it is more important to distinguish between observers and physiognomists. While the former gaze at the façade of a building and a city, the latter looks 'behind' the façade; she/he is a 'scrutinizer' (see Gilloch, 1996: 6). While the former employs a flat view, the latter develops a deep and critical view, which involves a process of conceptual deconstruction and re-arrangement as I discuss in a later section of this chapter.

In Benjamin's essay "The Work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility", the tourist features as a person who stares at the façade of a famous building, who receives the built environment optically but not 'tactically', as I discuss in Chapter 5. What is crucial here is that design-related professionals use the distinction between the tourist and the citizen, or, better, the viewer and the physiognomist, to emphasise the 'real world impact' of aesthetic debates about the new London skyline. The viewer, in these debates, is not the most critically minded person but the one with the most economic relevance. To think about the new London skyline as designed for tourists and viewers and not inviting a critical reading suggests, in my view, nothing less than another aspect of the commodification of London's cityscape, which is one of the reasons why, in

chapters 6 and 7 I argue that the ‘entire’ new London skyline (and this includes urban shrines that represent church authority as well as financial capitalism) represents capitalism.

The professional emphasis on views from Waterloo Bridge and the spatial and social reasons for such a prioritisation suggest that London does, indeed, have a front façade, as Mumford (1940) suggested for pre-modern urban planning, and that this front façade is designed for those who have (not only spatial but also psychological) distance to the city. The Waterloo Bridge view is the seen view, and it needs to be contrasted with an obscene view. It is, as EH repeatedly suggested in planning debates, *the* most important panorama of the City:

I think the City of London [Corporation of London] will always be looking at that view from Waterloo Bridge. They have always acknowledged that that view is important and that that has to have some kind of integrity or shape or massing on the skyline. So I think they will continue to judge it in the view of, as seen from Waterloo Bridge, because everyone recognises that is the most important panorama of the City of London (RoEH2, 44).

The resulting hierarchy of sight, in which distant views from west London are overvalued, was simply accepted and not critically engaged with in the planning processes discussed here, neither by the applicants’ teams nor by representatives of EH.

3.3 Historical legitimisation

The aforementioned spatial and social reasons for professional interest in views from Waterloo Bridge are coupled with the use of representations of history as legitimisation devices. This is a crucial point because it indicates in a direct way how London’s past is represented in its new skyline. The control of the new London skyline is justified historically, making use of selected historical representations. In the Heron Inquiry, EH argued that

St Paul’s Cathedral is an unchanging historic landmark; the [Eastern] cluster is a variable phenomenon, in space and time. [...] Over time, the cluster will change, as buildings are added, removed or altered. None of the high buildings is listed,

but the Cathedral is one of Britain's most important listed buildings (Higgott, 2002: 58).

EH regards St Paul's as a heritage asset, an example of the valued past that is frozen in time, or rather that is continuously scraped in order to keep an always-the-same appearance. This is a process – as the anti-scrape movement argued in the mid-twentieth century – that means a loss of evidence of the life of the building (Macarthur, 2007b). And what does it mean to preserve a particular view towards a building? It means to additionally freeze the visual relationship between a viewing place and a view. It is not simply the heritage asset that needs to be preserved, EH argued, but also a particular view towards the building. Why should this be the case? Because it is the particular view that turns it into a symbol of the city:

St Paul's is world renowned as one of Britain's most significant historic landmarks. It is London's most notable historic and architectural building and the view of St Paul's, particularly as seen from Waterloo Bridge, is an internationally recognised symbol of the City of London's skyline and has been previously accepted by the Secretary of State to be "undoubtedly one of the best known and best loved scenic views in the capital." [...] EH believe it inconceivable that any development should be permitted which damages this iconic view, enjoyed by thousands of people on a daily basis (EH, 2002).

Such a statement encapsulates a particular way of seeing an unchanging historic building within a changing setting: in order to keep the symbolism and the recognition of the City, this view needs to be preserved, so goes the argument. While EH acknowledged that the built environment has changed and changes in the City, the appearance of St Paul's and its visual dominance over the wider city is meant to remain, independent of socio-economic and spatial changes.

St Paul's was designed as a landmark to dominate London's skyline and has done so for almost 3 centuries, although that dominance has been reduced by the construction of tall buildings in the period post World War II. St Paul's remains a dominant element on the skyline (ibid.).

The argument here is that in the past, present and future, and even once new corporate towers have appeared and continue to appear on London's skylines, in these particular views from Waterloo Bridge, St Paul's is a constant in time: an unchanging and continuous red thread through London's past, an absolute and universal historical

reference point. In the Heron Inquiry, a townscape consultant argued differently based on his analysis of St Paul's setting throughout history. His argument was based on two historical arguments: first, London's historical development as a dual city and, second, the City's on-going adaption to needs of the time.

The City was founded in 47 AD. As it grew, it became a city of many distinctive parts with a great variety of architectural styles and building types (Tavernor, 2006: 10). Crucially, "[b]y the early 17th century a primary west–east ceremonial and functional route had been established in central London, with Westminster, Parliament, Whitehall and St James's as its western end and St Paul's Cathedral and the City as its eastern focus" (ibid.). Seventeenth-century London was thus two connected cities: a governmental city in the west and a city for both religion and commerce in the east. Especially in the past, then, the City was often approached from the west, coming from Westminster. This historical evolution of London gives Waterloo Bridge an important role, because it is located in between the Palace of Westminster and St Paul's, an area from which both listed buildings are still visible today.

The argument that Waterloo Bridge has current significance because it had significance in the past indicates the conservatism and the historical continuity that is at play in professional skyline debates, a conservatism voiced by both representatives of EH and developers' teams. The current hierarchy of sight and the superior importance of views from Waterloo Bridge reinforce London's inequity in the past. There is a historical west–east divide in London with the western part being generally richer than the eastern one. A bigger percentage of the high-income population resides in the west, while in east London live the poor. In the past, west London had the cleaner water because the Thames flows from west to east; west London had the cleaner air because the main wind direction is from west to east; and west London had the cherished and controlled views towards the City, which, historically, was the religious as well as the commercial centre of London.

This last point was also emphasised in the interpretation of historical references by a townscape consultant. In the past, the consultant argued, the City did not only solely combine religion and commerce programmatically but also in relation to its image.

This, so the consultant posited, can be seen, for example, in Wren's masterplan for the rebuilding of the City after the Great Fire 1666. Wren gave St Paul's and the stock exchange equal visual importance, because both were intended to be highly visible nodes and focal points in a pattern of straight vistas. In other words, the townscape consultant introduced a historical legitimisation for the visibility of commercial buildings, which, in the twenty-first century, primarily means speculative office high-rises.

While the Corporation of London – and the City planning officer in particular – hinted at the economic relevance of distant views from Waterloo Bridge as tourist and media views, EH and especially the townscape consultant emphasised that these views were also appreciated in the past. These views are thus said to be historically significant, and St Paul's was and is the visually dominant feature in these views. In this respect, EH and the townscape consultant agreed. But the latter put more emphasis on a positive evaluation of the changing setting of St Paul's down the centuries and highlighted that commerce and money-making buildings, functional and mundane structures, were always visible on London's skylines. The consultant and EH read London's past in a similar way, showing less a difference in kind than a difference in degree. St Paul's was and is the visually dominant feature on London's skylines, and this characteristic should be kept, they agreed, as a townscape consultant mentioned: "Everybody agrees St Paul's should be protected" (TC1, 18). Indeed, according to this consultant, it should be protected even more: "I currently still think that [...] there are viewpoints, for example from Fleet Street, which are now interrupted by a higher building to the north. And I think that is probably, that is a very pity" (ibid.). 'Everybody' also agreed that the City's built environment had changed in the past. But EH and the townscape consultant disagreed when it came to the visual impact that a proposed development would have on the setting of St Paul's. For that discussion, historical representations and paintings played a crucial role.

3.3.1 Enshrinement as heritage

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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:CanalettoSomersetHouseTerrace.jpg>.

Figure 19: Antonio Canaletto's eighteenth-century interpretation of London as 'Venice of the North'.

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<http://www.museumoflondonprints.com/image/64975/john-oconnor-the-embankment-1874>.

Figure 20: John O'Connor's nineteenth-century view of the City from Somerset House.

The townscape consultant argued for the historical significance of views from Waterloo Bridge not only because many people approached and still approach the City from the

west, but also because artists have ‘eternalised’ these views. And what these masterpieces show, the argument goes, is exactly how much the City’s appearance has changed down the centuries and how St Paul’s nevertheless remains visually dominant. Hence, new office towers, if designed accordingly, are no visual threat to the cathedral. To make this point, the consultant referred to so-called master paintings, two of which were particularly relevant in the Heron Inquiry: Antonio Canaletto’s painting of a view of St Paul’s from Somerset House Terrace from the mid-1750s and John O’Connor’s ‘The Victoria Embankment and St Paul’s from Somerset House River Terrace’ from 1874.

Canaletto’s painting is one of the most often referenced visual representations in professional debates about London’s skylines. The painting shows the dome of St Paul’s high above the City with multiple smaller church steeples in an almost regular rhythm protruding from the remaining built environment in the City. Nowadays, it is usually argued that the painting is not an accurate visual representation of London in the mid-eighteenth century. The townscape consultant echoed this, arguing that Canaletto’s painting is a *capriccio*, “an idealised interpretation of life on the river, and with a softened Venetian quality for its architectural backdrop” (Tavernor, 2002, par. 4.3.9). Fundamentally then, Canaletto’s painting is an interpretation of London as the Venice of the North; it is an idealised representation of what London could or should be, but not of what London really was.

Furthermore, so the consultant suggested, “much that was accurately represented there did not survive even the 18th century” (ibid.). Hence, so the argument runs, Canaletto’s painting cannot be regarded as a sacrosanct view, which is not to be transformed, as Prince Charles (1989) alleged in *A Vision of Britain*. By contrast, O’Connor’s painting does have evidential value, the consultant suggested:

Canaletto paints a skyline punctuated by a myriad of pointed church spires, while O’Connor’s is interrupted by large smoke and/or steam-belching cylindrical stacks (situated close to the site of today’s Eastern cluster of tall buildings). In front of St Paul’s are two gasometers (Tavernor, 2002, par. 4.4.1).

Smoke, stacks, gasometers: they all add to the historical skyline of London and the visual dominance of St Paul’s in views from Waterloo Bridge. And because they did so in the

past, new additions are not necessarily inappropriate but rather show London as a dynamic city. As mentioned already, in principle EH and the consultant read London's past in an equivalent way. But while EH emphasised that "[t]he result of an approval for the Heron Bishopsgate Tower would be a redefinition of the setting of the Cathedral on the wider skyline from Waterloo Bridge" (Higgott, 2002: 53), something EH was highly critical of, the townscape consultant highlighted that "St Paul's Cathedral remains prominent in the City of London's skyline, mainly because of its dome, which is still an unusual feature in London's urban landscape" (Tavernor, 2002, par. 4.7.1).

While I analyse the argument regarding St Paul's distinct skyline profile in Chapter 4, here I want to emphasise that the historically changing setting of St Paul's was interpreted in different ways: by EH, as a threat to the appreciability of the visual dominance of an "unchanging historic landmark" (Higgott, 2002: 58) and by the townscape consultant as providing more accurate evidence of London's past and contemporary role as a trading city, a world city. In the case of the latter, the changing setting of St Paul's was interpreted as complementary evidence to St Paul's representativeness and its symbolic character. Even if these two qualitative assessments differ from each other, however, they are based on the same conceptual logic: first, selected historical references (visual representations) are used to make an argument for the present situation and, second, St Paul's is the primary and constant reference point against which London's past, present and future are measured. I regard these two aspects as important, because they refer to the particular representation of time in the new London skyline that is peculiar to current skyline debates:

an Eastern cluster that incorporates 110 Bishopsgate [i.e. the Heron Tower] neither obscures nor diffuses the 'clear outlines of St Paul's' when viewed from the most frequented viewing positions. Its inclusion in the cluster will create an 'effective backcloth' to the Cathedral of distinctive tall buildings that form a modern unity with which the Cathedral, as a great symbol of the Baroque era, can be satisfactorily compared (Tavernor, 2002: 34).

In views from Waterloo Bridge, runs the argument, the cathedral can then be read in relation to corporate towers; thus, a particular representation of financial capitalism can enhance the reading of a historical, listed building on the skyline:

[...] provided the City of London maintains St Paul's Heights and doesn't allow anything intrude or block the view, then I think you can say that, to kind of keep that sort of dynamic contrast of St Paul's and the City in the foreground and the evolving Eastern Cluster in the background (RoEH1, 49).

Clearly then it is enhancement of the preserved old through comparisons with the new, without putting the visual dominance of the old in danger, that shapes the argument. But to argue for the Eastern cluster being an 'effective backcloth' has the consequence that it opens doors for additional commercial high-rises within the cluster because they too can be argued to strengthen the cluster and therefore enhance and not impair the reading of the historical building, just as long as it is visually distinct from the group. Indeed, in the planning process of the Heron Tower, the applicants made the argument that a stronger cluster, i.e. the addition of new high-rises, will reduce the dominance of existing individual tall buildings and, in so doing, will enhance the visual dominance and the appreciability of St Paul's. The underlying logic is that a quantitative increase of new office towers can increase the qualitative dominance of the listed St Paul's:

I suspect that the idea of a cluster is one that the City has supported in part because they can then say, well, there is a benefit to certain tall buildings in certain locations it's actually enhancement rather than it being talked about impact in a negative way. Whenever you see a building it's harmful and obviously there is a desire to move that out of that territory to something more positive and perhaps clustering is just a convenient way of talking about it (Arch1, 32).

In that respect then, the applicant's team and EH argued in different ways but essentially to the same end. Both argued for the visual enhancement and the visual preservation of an unchanging and historic St Paul's Cathedral.

3.4 Spatial closure and linear time

3.4.1 *City tableaux*

Professional skyline debates are defined by spatial closure. The formal skyline, the visual experience of which is formalised by means of the control of multiple static views towards heritage assets, is further reduced. The City's multiple skylines tend to become reduced to a spatially closed single view from Waterloo Bridge. This visual closure is and has been supported by spatial, social and historical arguments. Crucially, this spatial

closure was exemplified through the use of visual representations, so-called master paintings, as reference points.

The new London skyline tends to be conceived as a tourist or media view from Waterloo Bridge, in which St Paul's is argued to remain the visually dominant feature. Recently built corporate high-rises, which are meant to appear as a cohesive group in this view, visually enhance or, at the very least, do not disturb the reading of St Paul's. From Waterloo Bridge, St Paul's and the Eastern cluster are read next to each other. A particular representation of London's present and future as a world city – the cluster of financial service industries as seen in this view – can enhance the reading of the cathedral. Also, and equally, the visually isolated cathedral protruding from the surrounding flat ceiling of mid-rise buildings, acting as a particular representation of London's past is similarly meant to be beneficial in relation to the uniqueness of London's world city image.

The professional concern with maintaining St Paul's visual dominance in this view involves a particular conceptualisation of wholeness. A structure can only be described as the visually dominant feature and as the visual centre when its frame of reference is clearly marked out. This, then, together with the employed hierarchy of sight and references to paintings, suggests spatial closure. One particular part of the City as seen from one particular viewpoint in the city is wrested from the city and carefully controlled. It is regarded as a whole composition: the creation of a visually pleasing insularity within otherwise neglected visual experiences. This, at least, is how Boyer (1996) describes city tableaux: well-designed nodes within a patchwork of incongruous left-over pieces (11). For design-related professionals, it seems, the new London skyline, more specifically the visual relationship between Waterloo Bridge and the City, is such a node, a historical reference point. It is typical of city tableaux, which are “perspectival views, frontally composed, enframed and bounded” (ibid.: 124), i.e. they have a visual centre as well as a beginning and an end, an inside and an outside. Their purpose, Boyer suggests, is not to surprise spectators, nor to encourage them to critically engage with that particular representation of the city. Rather, they are “visual performances that please the admiring eye, for this is the expected and comforting view of the world

presented as a theatrical scene” (ibid.: 396). These then are the tourist views that design-related professionals talk about.

Understanding urban visual experiences as being like theatrical scenes, as Boyer suggests, has a long tradition, which is usually seen as running back to the Roman writer, architect and engineer Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (c. 80BC–c. 15BC) and his tragic, comic and satiric views for stage sets as visualised by the Italian architect Sebastiano Serlio (1475-1534), as Boyer (1996), Rowe and Koetter (1983) and others show. Crucial for city tableaux in the contemporary fragmented city is the high degree of control that is taking place:

These city tableaux become reference points and sites connecting the past to the present, but they are imposed scenes not part of a living memory, and like the popular panoramas of the nineteenth-century, they too are devoid of a host of unsavoury and unpleasant visions that their imagery refuses to show (Boyer, 1996: 372f).

Subsequently, Boyer reassures the reader that “walking through the city of deconstructed images, we are no longer offered a synthetic order that we can readily grasp, nor a reconstruction of a history we can collectively assume. Our sense of an urban totality has been fractured long ago. Thus our personal memories of places visited actually arise from a horizontal juxtaposition of different images, not one of synthetic wholes” (ibid.: 375).

Spatial closure and an understanding of a single perspective on the City as a whole composition are thus two main characteristics that define professional skyline conceptualisations. They further imply a linear and continuous representation of time.

If London’s past is meant to be encapsulated in so-called heritage assets, as discussed in Chapter 1, then concerns with the on-going visibility and appreciability of St Paul’s suggest historical continuity. This continuous representation of history is, I suggest, emphasised more as more new office towers become visible on the skyline – but this is only the case as long as they do not start to visually dominate St Paul’s. To put it differently, the appearance of recently built office towers does indeed contribute to a continuing representation of religion, or the Church of England, on the skyline, as long

as they remain an ‘effective backcloth’. This means that both EH and the applicant’s team put forward conservative arguments. They disagree in terms of their visual assessments of the impact of a new development on the setting of St Paul’s, but they certainly do not disagree in terms of their reading of the already visually dominant cathedral.

In my discussion in Chapter 1 I argued that the formal skyline is essentially a conservative skyline because its main concern revolves around the visibility of historical buildings, so-called heritage assets. Historical continuity, I suggested, literally implies the visual continuity in relation to selected historical buildings. In the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle, this aspect of historical continuity was effective too. However, another dimension was also put forward: the causal connection between different moments in time. Both the representatives of EH and the townscape consultant established historical narratives, in which a present situation was traced back to a cause in the past. For example, when a historical painting is used as a justification for a current design move, then this implies a continuity and linearity in the way history is approached. Because in nineteenth-century London industrial structures and chimneys appeared on the City’s skylines, in the twenty-first century office towers can appear on the City’s skylines too. And, of course, the other example: because St Paul’s was a visually dominant feature on London’s skylines in the past, it must be a visually dominant feature in the twenty-first century, too. These causal explanatory models refer to a linear and continuous representation of time.

Resultantly, London’s past is reduced to a particular perspective. The new London skyline is conceptually wedged in master paintings, that is visual representations of those masters in the past who looked at the City from nearby viewpoints. To visually assess the new London skyline in a painting-like fashion, to conceive it like a bounded and enframed master painting, means visual closure. It is a form of visual closure that is, in principle, the same as that encapsulated in the picturesque: “the power of pictorial composition to unify disparate elements” (Macarthur, 2007a: 200). The distant view from Waterloo Bridge towards the City of London with St Paul’s as visual centre is conceived as a compositional whole. In that respect, the new London skyline does

indeed follow picturesque principles. A non-linear and discontinuous historiography, by contrast, requires a different compositional logic.

3.5 Cityscape as surrealist pictures

3.5.1 *Hastings' surrealist pictures*

In Chapter 1 I discussed Hastings' conception of the cityscape as democratic art. In his 1944 article he already suggests a similar conceptualisation, arguing for diversity on a skyline:

old and new: The conventional approach is to try for an even skyline, even cornice lines and even window shapes, if the old buildings are accepted as good, or to brand the old building as an outcast by disregarding it completely. But similarity between buildings is not the only kind of good manners or good taste. Actually some of the best English architectural effects have been produced by contrast of complementaries (Hastings, 1944: 4).

His argument for visual diversity on a skyline relates to his understanding of radical politics more generally and which, in regard to the work of architects and planners, includes the acknowledgement and design of “relationships that have never been foreseen [and which] spring suddenly in to being between dissimilar or even hostile objects” (Hastings, 1949: 360). His conceptualisation of cityscapes as democratic art is also related to another conceptualisation of the cityscape, namely as one of “surrealist pictures” (ibid.: 361).

In its early phase, the Townscape movement was strongly influenced by avant-garde movements in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, and by cubism and surrealism in particular.⁶⁰ Hastings' reference to surrealism is directly related to the work of English painters such as Paul Nash and John Piper, who also published in the AR.⁶¹ This interest in surrealism and the collage-like conception of the visual city that is encapsulated in it was not a concern that all Townscape writers shared. Macarthur

⁶⁰ Aitchison (2008) shows that both Hastings and Pevsner were certainly aware of twentieth-century art movements such as surrealism and cubism, and that they incorporated them into Townscape's heterogeneous, pluralist and eclectic outlook (101).

⁶¹ “Nash contributed several articles on surrealism to the AR, which apart from being a novel aspect of early Townscape, was a mode of thought present at all times in Hastings' own writing” (Aitchison, 2008: 102). See Nash, 1936.

(2007a) emphasises that Hastings, much more than Pevsner, was interested in this artistic movement. Still, the idea that the English were in some way especially tolerant of as well as interested in visual incongruity connects the two writers (213).

Rowe and Koetter (1998) acknowledge these surrealist influences but argue that they tended to be minimised after WW II, “together with all things French” (35). As a result, Townscape became almost exclusively linked to the picturesque and to a “backward looking” (ibid.: 33) approach.⁶² While Aitchison (2008) shows that the movement’s early phase has received least attention in the literature surrounding the movement to date (25), I argue that it is exactly the conceptualisations that were particular to its early phase that speak most directly to a spatially closed, temporally linear and continuous representation of London as encapsulated in current professional skyline debates.

Hastings’ (1949) understanding of cityscapes as surrealist pictures is related to his understanding of them as democratic art and to his “radical idea of the meaning of parts”, which concentrates “on the urge of the parts to be themselves to make a new kind of whole” (361). In Chapter 2 I argued that this conceptualisation implies the valorisation of the particular. The informal skyline, I suggested, is not designed or controlled as a whole, but rather, the whole is the outcome of well-designed visual relationships between elements, which, in turn, are given the freedom to be themselves. But what is this ‘new kind of whole’? Hastings’ urges the planner to produce “his practical surrealist picture” (ibid.), and in an article from 1944 he suggests that the logic of this conceptualisation is to allow “people [to] see functionally incoherent objects in convincing visual relations” (Hastings, 1944: 8).

The term ‘collage’ usually describes an abstract form of art in which photographs, pieces of paper, newspaper cuttings, string, etc. are placed in juxtaposition and glued to the pictorial surface (OED). Surrealist collages, more specifically, use the principle of collage

⁶² While Pevsner concentrated on a historically argued ‘transfer’ of picturesque ideas into the twentieth century, and Cullen mostly emphasised a formal, ahistorical analysis of visual examples, Hastings’ writing is more political and polemical.

Pevsner concentrated on the transfer of these picturesque ideas into the twentieth-century urban context. In his article “Price on the Picturesque” (1944), in *The Englishness of English Art* (1955), and in his unfinished *Visual Planning and the Picturesque* (see Aitchison and Macarthur, 2010). He argued for an English specificity of modern architecture and town planning, which he saw as related to the picturesque.

to ‘thematise’ contradictory conditions of dream and reality. As a cultural movement, surrealism was most clearly formulated in 1920s Paris around Louis Aragon and Andre Breton. It is generally responsible for introducing psychoanalysis into French intellectual circles (Cohen, 1995: 2). These artists conceived of the city as the locus of modern myths that pay homage to the creations of humankind: the commodities, buildings and machines of the cityscape (Gilloch, 1996: 103ff).⁶³ Blurring the distinctions between life and art, waking and dreaming, the city was the privileged site of new forms of aesthetic experience and practice, in which the everyday was radically recognised; a dreamscape, the mundane a source of inspiration, illumination and intoxication (Gilloch, 2002: 106). In order to achieve such a blurring of distinctions and a radical recognition of the well known, surrealists created collages, in which elements were taken out of their conventional context and put in relation to seemingly incongruous elements: a process of decontextualisation.⁶⁴ They looked for the most unusual things in the least likely places and combined them in provocative configurations (Gilloch, 1996: 111).

The “fortuitous juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible elements”, as André Breton writes in the first “Manifesto of Surrealism” from 1924, makes up “the light of the image”, i.e. the ‘image’ is not manufactured but it imposes itself on the artist by means of juxtapositions. This statement summarises a main idea behind surrealist collages: seemingly incompatible elements, that is, elements that are taken out of their familiar contexts, are put in relation with each other with the aim being to see them differently and, also, in order to be politically unsettling. Surrealist collages are political, inasmuch as they visualise an alternative to an existing order “by bringing together pieces of this order that the reigning conceptual structures habitually held apart” (Cohen, 1998: 259).

When Hastings refers to a conceptualisation of cityscapes in terms of surrealist pictures then, he also refers to a critically engaged reading of politics, one that is not sufficiently

⁶³ Aragon notes: “I set about forming the idea of a mythology in motion. It was more accurate to call it a mythology of the modern [...] So it seemed to me right away that nature could play no part in this mythical conception of the modern world to which I was becoming attached ... Although supplanting the old myths of nature, the new myths cannot really be set up in opposition to them, for they draw their strength, their magic from the same source, and so have an equal right to be considered myths” (Aragon cited in Gilloch, 1996: 103).

⁶⁴ In her discussion of Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution, Cohen (1995) mentions the following surrealist concepts: “objective chance, intersubjective desire, the lucky find, the encounter, the dream, bohemian resistance, the social unconscious, and the capillary tissue connecting the communicating vessels of psychic and material life” (3).

acknowledged when seeing Townscape as solely advocating picturesque planning principles. In fact, it needs to be argued that while the picturesque referred to an informal visual planning principle that is based on the idea that disparate elements are unified into one composition, there is a fundamentally different mechanism that is taking place in regard to surrealist pictures. Aitchison and Macarthur (2010) hint at the difference when they highlight that Hastings “meant something slightly different [to an assertion that visual unification leads to a ‘whole’ composition] in that visual planning was meant to make a pictorial unity out of disparate elements, particular modern, historic, and vernacular buildings that were in themselves aesthetically disjunct and ideologically antagonistic. The pictorial formalism proposed here is one modelled on collage and not the unity of the subject that was the basis of eighteenth-century painting composition” (15). This then is the main difference between the visual principle of the picturesque and that of surrealist pictures: in the former, different visual elements are unified into a whole composition, while in the latter different elements are in relation and in tension with each other, which implies a completely different understanding of wholeness.⁶⁵

So, surrealist collages aim to constantly create new meanings as a result of visual instability. Decontextualised, seemingly incongruous parts are constantly unstable. In that way, they are to be distinguished from whole compositions, in which each part has a determined relationship to other parts and the whole. A collage is a broken image that is made up of pieces. And each piece has autonomy; there is no one perfect, stable whole determining how the different pieces are to be put together. In a picturesque composition, wholeness derives from a logic of internal coherence, whereas in a surrealist collage the whole is defined by the dynamic incompatibility of its constituent parts.

⁶⁵ For a discussion of “the order of an unfinished collage rather than that of a unified organism” see Pinder, 2005: 120.

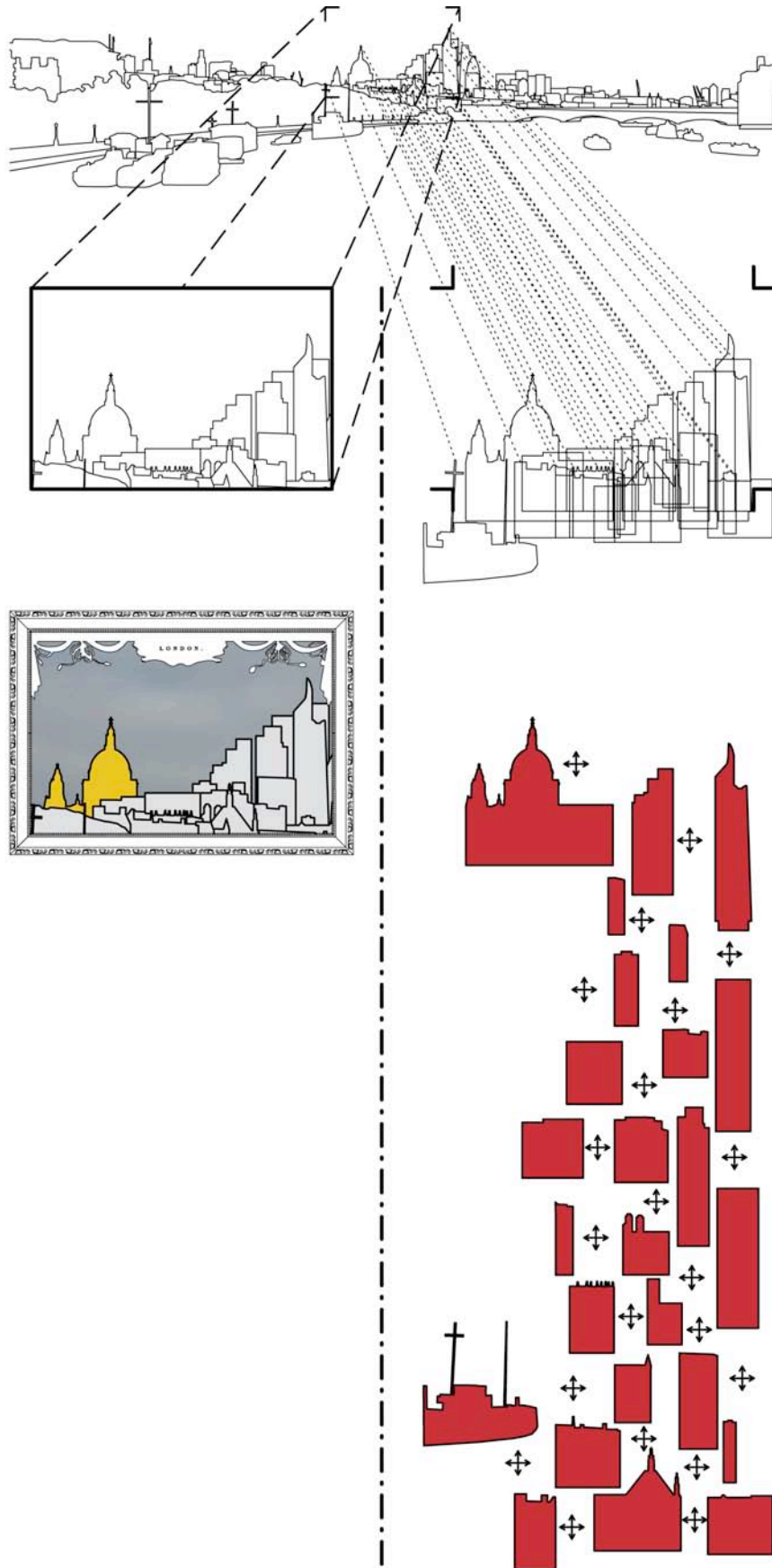


Figure 21: The difference between a conceptualisation of the new London skyline as a whole composition (left) versus a collage-like understanding of a skyline (right) (Gassner, 2013).

The autonomy of parts and the visual instability of the relationship between parts, which are encapsulated in surrealist pictures, is related to a particular representation of history, as Macarthur (2007b) hints at in “Strange Encounters in Mid-Century British Urbanism: Townscape, Anti-Scraper and Surrealism”. In this paper he alleges that surrealist painters “valued the remnants of the past not for the identifications they allowed but for the disjunctions they provided” (1). This means that surrealists neither negated an official and dominant historical narrative nor integrated historical objects seamlessly into the official account. Rather, remnants of the past were given the political power to critically engage with the reigning structure.

A particular instance of how objects can be set in relation to a dominant order is related to outdated objects and ruins. In Chapter 6 I discuss the revolutionary power that surrealists saw in outdated objects in more detail. At this point, however, I want to highlight that it was exactly the point that objects lost their meaning for modern capitalist society that they became relevant for surrealist artists, who were always also proactive critics of politics. Their interest in historical objects that are disjunct from history involves a representation of history that is fragmented. Understanding the historical built environment as fragments means that buildings are “dissociated from their original role and reassembled so that visual unity is always made unstable by the possibility of deciphering the original meaning of pieces” (Macarthur, 2007b: 6). This instability allows familiar buildings and the everyday to be seen differently and it may create a shock.⁶⁶ In 1947, the editor of an article in the AR (when Hastings was the owner and main editor of the AR), similar to surrealist artists, compares the cityscape to a dreamscape and argues that,

[t]he reconquest of architectural vision entails the use of many of the same methods that are employed in curing amnesia. A shock will often do it, or the focusing of attention on familiar objects, which have almost disappeared by being taken for granted. It is like the proverb often heard in childhood, whose significance is suddenly understood for the first time in later life, when it is used in an unfamiliar context. Through such experiences, the eye as well as the mind can discover fresh meanings, and through it the creative ability (AR, 1947: 31f).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Gilloch (2002) highlights that it was in the incongruous juxtaposition of fragmentary elements, in the technique of montage, that Surrealism maximised the shock-value of the trivial utterance (109).

⁶⁷ The AR editors wrote “The Architectural Review Employs Shock Tactics to Stimulate Visual Awareness” as part of a retrospection that marked the 50th anniversary of the AR.

Studying this article, Macarthur (2007a) argues that “here, Townscape comes close to Walter Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image” (214). He continues to suggest that,

[t]he ugliness of Townscape was instead a kind of historical awareness that arose through a critical understanding of the affects of nostalgia and the violence that it does to the past. [...] The persistence of buildings after their functional and social obsolescence was one way to experience these past dreams [dreams of people in the past about the present, but not the one that has occurred], and this put a shock into the self-evidence of the present (Macarthur, 2007a: 214).

Macarthur’s reading of Hastings’ understanding of cityscapes as surrealist pictures is thus informed by two of Benjamin’s concepts: ruins and dialectical images. Both concepts are important for my discussion of Benjamin’s “surrealist historiography” (Dodd, 2008: 420). I discuss the notion of surrealist collages in relation to Benjamin’s literary montages, so as to draw out the historiographical principle that underlies both. This is done because it speaks to my main concern: if the new London skyline is based on spatial closure and a linear and continuous representation of time, how is it possible to challenge these characteristics by means of a different visual conceptualisation?

3.5.2 Benjamin’s literary montages

In the essay “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia”, Benjamin (2005a) describes the surrealist experience as a “profane illumination” which is guided by a political and a “materialistic, anthropological inspiration” (209) and sets it apart from the sacred and moralistic illumination that is found in religion. Surrealism was an artistic as well as a political movement. The people around Breton were left-wing French intellectuals, who employed a historiographical “trick [that] consists in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past” (210). The political view is related to a particular way of representing history, one that actively and critically engages with the existing political order.

Benjamin was characteristically ambivalent, both enthusiastic and reserved about the surrealist movement. The movement’s political agenda and surrealist methods like surrealist collages and automatism influenced his own work. The possibility of profane illumination preoccupied much of his life and especially his monumental and unfinished

AP. The AP is a study of the pre-history of modernity for the twentieth century. It is an attempt “to recognize today’s life, today’s forms, in the life and in the apparently secondary, lost forms” (Benjamin, 2002: [N1,11] 458) of the nineteenth-century. Benjamin argues that “[c]apitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces” (Leslie, 2012).⁶⁸ His study of nineteenth-century Paris, then, aims at a historical awakening. This aim also shows Benjamin’s reservations about surrealism, when he notes in the AP that “whereas Aragon [here, exemplifying the surrealist movement] persists within the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening” (ibid.: [N1,9] 458). What he shares with surrealists, however, is the idea that in outmoded things there are latent energies, and that through political constellations the latent energies can be transformed into an intoxicating, revolutionary experience (Benjamin, 2005a: 210).

In his study of nineteenth-century Paris Benjamin recognises nineteenth-century arcades as ruins, because these formerly eclectic consumption spaces had become functionally and socially obsolete for twentieth-century capitalist society, having been replaced by department stores. Reconstructing them, Benjamin seeks to encapsulate the “pre-history” of modern Paris. This outmoded building type, then, he conceives as dream houses: the threshold of a primal world of fantasy and illusion in a world of dreamed objects, a phantasmagoria of capitalist society.⁶⁹ The revolutionary potential of them in the twentieth century is exactly that they are not monuments anymore; they need to be ‘constructed’, just as the AP itself.⁷⁰

The AP is a literary montage. The term ‘montage’ is often used in relation to the process of selecting, editing and piecing together of sections in films (OED), and it is for this reason that Benjamin makes use of it, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. At this point, where my main concern is to discuss the understanding of parts and the

⁶⁸ See Esther Leslie’s discussion, www.militantesthetix.co.uk/waltbenj/yarcades.html [accessed 21 August 2013].

⁶⁹ Benjamin argues that capitalism endowed objects with the means to express *collective dreams*. The city is full of dreams and the dream-world of modernity, which proclaims itself as the end of myth, is only its persistence in a new intensified, historical form. The city, then, is both the setting for and the product of the fantasies of the *collective unconscious*, the ‘*dreaming collective*’ (Gilloch, 1996: 105). For a discussion of contemporary architecture as dream houses see Thompson, 2010.

⁷⁰ Benjamin (2002) describes arcades as “monuments of being no-more” (833 [D°, 4]).

understanding of wholeness that are encapsulated in Hastings' surrealist pictures, I use the terms 'collage' and 'montage' interchangeably. The AP is a literary montage because it is not a continuous, linear text but a constellation of decontextualised citations and Benjamin's own remarks. The citations are not embedded in a singular narrative but they stand for themselves and in relation to each other, which is what Benjamin (2002) describes as "the art of citing without quotation marks" ([N1,10] 458). To write history, here, means to cite history, and to cite means to rip something out of its context, which is a form of decontextualisation.⁷¹ The AP is therefore a montage of what Adorno called 'image citations', which are designed to shock and to awaken. With the montage Benjamin "wants his reader to *see the images which are conveyed by the relations between citations*" (Dodd, 2008: 420).⁷² That is, he is concerned with the relationships between the parts without fixing their relationships. It is in relation to this aspect that I see an important parallel between Hastings' understanding of cityscapes as surrealist pictures and Benjamin's literary montages.

"[N]o face is surrealistic to the same degree as the true face of a city", Benjamin (2005a: 211) writes. This so-called true face is not a whole composition but rather a collage of diverse townscape elements, it thus follows. Furthermore, this true face is one that is politically motivated. It is in between townscape elements, Cullen suggests, that the city becomes visible in a deeper sense (see Cullen, 1995: 9). In a similar way, I suggest, Benjamin conceives of the true and surrealist face of the city in terms of relationships between urban elements. The method that concerns the relationship between parts of the AP, as well as the historiography that underpins it, he describes as dialectical image. The dialectical image is "dialectics at a standstill", an image "wherein what has been

⁷¹ A citation means that a piece of argument is taken from its context and put somewhere else. In law, 'to cite' also means to summon, to be called to judgement. For Benjamin, to *write* history is to *cite* history, to rip it out of context, to summon history to judgement, and "Benjamin underlines the capacity of citation to both save and punish: 'It summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely thereby calls it back to its origin'" (Benjamin cited in Dodd, 2008: 419).

⁷² The montage technique of the AP was pioneered by Surrealism, while the technique of awakening was inspired by Proust. For Benjamin, the surrealists were too immersed in the fantastical forms and uncanny experiences they discovered to provide the necessary sober criticism. At the same time, he criticised Proust, who was almost entirely interested in the past because he loathed the present. While Benjamin himself clearly formulated the limitations he saw in Surrealism, for Theodor Adorno "such notions – precisely those influenced by Surrealist motifs – possessed insufficient clarity, lacked discrimination and seemed naively to transpose individual psychological states and psychoanalytical categories to complex, material social processes" (Gilloch, 2002: 115). The concept of a dreaming collective neglects existing class distinctions and conflicts (Gilloch, 1996: 105). In Benjamin's later writings on Paris, the mythology of modernity is no longer articulated with respect to dreaming collectives, but in terms of a new constellation of concepts: repetition, reification and progress (ibid.: 108).

comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (Benjamin, 2002: [N2a,3] 462). When the opposition between parts is greatest, when the *Then & Now* are dialectically opposed, then, for a moment, historical continuity is interrupted and past and present recognise each other and form an image:

Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation with tensions – there the dialectical image appears. [...] It is to be found [...] where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest. Hence, the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself a dialectical image. The latter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process (Benjamin, 2002: [N10a,3] 475).⁷³

The wholeness that is encapsulated in Benjamin’s literary montages, then, is of a particular kind and has two main characteristics. First, decontextualised ‘image citations’ are monads, that is, they encapsulate ‘the world in miniature’.⁷⁴

Decontextualised, they are judged and tell their own story. Second, dialectical images too are monads: “Wherever a dialectical process is realized, we are dealing with a monad”, Benjamin (2002: [N11,4] 476) writes. The dialectical image understood as a monad, is, however, not a whole, fixed composition but a moment of completion, a momentary true image.

In “On the Concept of History”, Benjamin (2006c) reiterates his understanding of the dialectical image as a monad and emphasises that materialist historiography is “based on a constructive principle” precisely because the “historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad” (396). It is this understanding of history as a dynamic construction that I regard as crucial, because it speaks directly against the conception of London’s skylines as spatially closed, continuous and linear representations of time.

Benjamin’s (2002) undertaking in the AP involves the attempt “to carry over the principle of montage into history” ([N2,6] 461). As a historiographical principle, the

⁷³ Reconstructing the arcades in the AP, dialectical oppositions between the past and the present are to be found, then, in the tension between antiquity and modernity, or between dreaming and awakening (Frisby, 1985: 221).

⁷⁴ Monad is a pantheistic conception of nature derived, most of all, from the German mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716).

montage encapsulates an understanding of history that is opposed to a historicist conception. Historicism's method, Benjamin (2006c) alleges, "is additive: it offers a mass of facts, in order to fill up a homogenous empty time" ([XVII] 396). This homogeneous and empty time-space is filled up with selected events – but what and whose events? Benjamin's argument is that historicism always sympathises "with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors. Hence, empathizing with the victor invariably benefits the current rulers" (ibid.: [VII] 391). Historical continuity, then, is the narrative of the current rulers. Historicism establishes a causal connection between singled-out events and gives "the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary" (ibid.: [A] 397).

In contrast to historicism stands Benjamin's historical materialism, which is based on a "constructive principle" (ibid.: [XVII] 396). Crucially, this constructive principle requires a deconstruction or decontextualisation first. Historical materialism aims to explode the continuum of history. Such an explosion is a disruption of the 'false' continuity and linearity of historiography. The dialectical image is such a disruption. It confronts a moment's "fore-history" with its "after-history" (2002: [N7a,1] 470; [N7a,8] 471) and such a confrontation, then, is what he describes as "now-time", which is a conception of the present that is "shot through with splinters of messianic time" (2006c: [A] 397). At this point of my discussion, Benjamin's notion of messianic time can be roughly understood as a time when oppression and visual inequity have ceased to exist or better, the moment when they are about to cease to exist. For Benjamin, the messianic is the moment of tension, it is a moment of 'immanent explosion'. History as construction does not solely refer to a relational approach to history but moreover to one in which relations are in tension. Such a tension, to follow Benjamin, is required to disrupt historical continuity and to defeat the visual hierarchy that is imposed upon us.

By utilising Benjamin's account we can critically examine current professional skyline conceptions through Hastings' understanding of cityscapes as surrealist pictures. The new London skyline is discursively constructed in such a way that it is spatially closed and temporally continuous and linear. The skyline conceptualised as a surrealist picture is one that disrupts historical continuity and is non-linear. Visually different townscape elements are put into constellations that are designed to shock and to awaken, in order to let readers see 'behind' or rather 'in between' a city's front façade. This is a

construction principle, for which the compositional wholeness the new London skyline is defined by needs to be destructed first. After all, “[c]onstruction”, as Benjamin (2002: [N7,6] 470) highlights, “presupposes ‘Destruction’”.

In current professional skyline debates, compositional wholeness is based on the visual dominance of St Paul’s and the idea that other buildings are meant to visually enhance the cathedral. The conceptual destruction of this synthetic whole is not meant to give power to financial capitalism as prevalent in the skyline’s discursive construction. It is a conceptual necessity to turn viewers into physiognomists: to allow professionals and lay-people to see ‘behind’, or rather ‘in between’ the urban shrines to either the Church of England or financial capitalism and perhaps to see an implicit, unspoken but underlying moral link between religion and capitalism, as I suggest in Chapter 8.

3.6 Out of sight, in mind

From Waterloo Bridge, trees do not impinge on the view, as a representative of EH emphasised. A distant view from the bridge is not “a narrow slot of a view [but] rather [...] a panorama” (RoEH2, 34). However, more than this it is “the best panorama of the City of London, where you see the whole of the City and St Paul’s more or less in the centre of the view [...] it’s a magnificent panorama” (RoEH2, 37). A particular idea of representativeness is encapsulated in such a conception: a wide-angle view in which a historically valuable building is highly visible is regarded as the best view to allow us an understanding of the ‘whole’ city.

The surrealist collage, by contrast, allows us to think about representativeness differently. Rather than singling out a particular static view that shows the city ‘best’, the focus shifts to constellations in which townscape elements are in tension. While a wide-angle panorama is partially based on the idea that showing more elements means seeing ‘more’ of the city, the surrealist montage is based on the idea that putting seemingly incongruous elements in juxtaposition allows the viewer to encounter a fleeting but truthful moment. I suggest that it is one way to bring something into mind that is out of visual coverage.

London has a front façade; at least in professional skyline debates. The reasons, as I showed in this chapter, are spatial, social and historical, as well as being directly related to a linear and continuous representation of time. Historical continuity in London's front façade is based on, first, the visual continuity of a building that is regarded as historically valuable and, second, an attempt to create causal relationships between different views of London in the past. Such a continuous representation of history is based on an attempt to fix the visual relationships between different buildings, i.e. fixing what is visible in a static view.



Figure 22: Night view of the City of London from Waterloo Bridge emphasising the visual dominance of the floodlit St Paul's (Gassner, 2012).

Night views were less debated between preservationists' and applicants' teams. The floodlit St Paul's visually dominates the distant view from Waterloo Bridge by night more than by day. I want to suggest that this is another indication of professionals' understanding of the new London skyline in terms of a compositional whole. This night view becomes the compositional 'measure of value' against which day views are

measured: it includes both the cathedral and office towers without the former being visually ‘in danger’ by the latter.

I suggest that the compositional wholeness – an understanding of the new London skyline in reference to master paintings – is to be destroyed in order to critically engage with the established hierarchy of sight. When the tension between elements is greatest, to recast Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image, the pieces recognise each other across distance and, for a moment, the dialectical relationship between them comes to a standstill. This process can, I suggest, bring into mind what is out of sight and, furthermore, evoke a momentary completion of a view that can never be complete.

Chapter 4: The politics of form

4.1 Manhattanisation

In what ways does the new London skyline differ from the visual appearance of other world city skylines? ‘Manhattanisation’ has become a buzzword in tall building debates, a neologism that describes the appearance and character of a city in reference to a growing number of tall buildings that are densely situated. The coining was first used in an article in the *Washington Post* in 1969, intended as a pejorative term by critics of tall buildings in San Francisco in the 1960s.⁷⁵ These critics drew attention to the fact that high-rises in the city block off other views; in the case of San Francisco, these are not views towards historical landmark buildings but views of the bay and the surrounding hills.⁷⁶ Outside the US, the term has started to become part of the broader term ‘Americanisation’: Manhattanisation is Americanisation with an emphasis on Wall Street.

Is the City on its way to becoming another Manhattan, a mimicry of another world city’s iconic area? Reflecting on the towers currently being built in central London, a contributor to a blog suggests that London “just looks like [a] poor wannabe copy of US cities”.⁷⁷ But Hastings’ (1944; 1949) concern with visual relationships between buildings, with the urban pattern, based on his understanding of cityscapes as both democratic art and surrealist pictures, causes us to question whether there is ‘more’ to Manhattanisation than the sheer quantity and density of skyscrapers in the city.

Observing Manhattan’s new corporate skyline in the 1890s, the architectural critic Montgomery Schuyler lamented that “the skyscraper was manifestly an ‘unneighbourly’ object, and that no building ever attempted to enhance the effect of any other” (Schuyler in Boyer, 2002: 111). Boyer adds that “the architectural excellence of the skyline resided in its parts, not the unattainable whole” and thus argues that its resultant

⁷⁵ See “Skyscrapers Soaring in San Francisco”, *Washington Post*, 29 June 1969.

⁷⁶ “Since the early 1960s, when the first high-rise building emerged on the skyline, San Franciscans have voted against the ‘Manhattanization’ of the city” (Bosselmann, 1989: 125).

⁷⁷ For an online discussion regarding London’s skylines and Alterlee’s statement in particular, see www.skyscrapercity.com [accessed 20 August 2013].

image was “not an architectural vision, but it does, most tremendously, ‘look like business’” (ibid.). Does the new London skyline also simply ‘look like business’?

Skyscrapers are not designed to visually enhance their neighbours: such a statement either suggests a utilitarian laissez-faire approach as described by Mumford (1940), which I introduced in my discussion of an informal skyline, or it suggests an intentional competition between skyscrapers. In the former, visual neighbours are unrecognised. In the latter, visual neighbours are recognised but they are competed against rather than visually enhanced. The idea that the skyscraper is, more than anything else, a competitive element is also suggested by the architect Frank Lloyd Wright who referred to it as “a commercial expedient that by its nature has compelled its neighbors to rise to similar heights, to compete or perish” (ibid.: 122).

In an interview, an architect argued that “[f]or me [...] the World Trade Centre was really fantastic [...] because it wasn’t a kind of cluster and organic but these things kind of emerged out and became something that were utterly dominant in Lower Manhattan’s skyline. What actually probably wouldn’t have complied with the clustering as an idea because they were kind of different order scale but kind of quite successful” (Arch1, 30). This is an important statement, given professionals’ understanding that clustering high-rises reduces the visual dominance of individual towers and, in so doing, can visually enhance a building that stands apart from it, such as St Paul’s. Of course, building vertically generates a good deal of real estate value, and clustering is not simply a visual strategy to reduce the visual dominance of individual towers but also a strategy that allows politicians and design-related professionals to argue for a bigger number of office towers in order to reduce the visual dominance of office towers all together.

It is crucial for my discussion in this chapter that both visual enhancement and visual competition need to be distinguished from visual contrast, as conceptualised in the early twentieth-century Townscape debates. Hastings’ (1949) argument for a radical liberal understanding of cityscapes involves the idea that individual buildings are to be understood in their own right. They are neither compared with nor measured against each other and, to some degree, in so doing he argues against what architects and

planners usually describe as a contextual approach, i.e. the design of a building specific to its local context. So, what does that mean in terms of a building's relation to history?

In the 1920s, around the same time that Wright made his comment about the competing skyscrapers, the writer Henry James saw modern tall buildings as “crowned [...] with no history, but with no credible possibility of time for history, and consecrated by no uses save the commercial at any cost, they are simply the most piercing notes in that concert of the expressively provisional into which your supreme sense of New York resolves itself” (James in Boyer, 2002: 112). For James, the American skyscraper has no history and ‘no time for history’ because it solely expresses business in the works. Manhattanisation, he suggests, is characterised by timeless individualism and ruthless commercialism; by buildings that reveal no history and do not visually enhance those other buildings that do have history.

In this chapter I discuss the politics of form as played out in skyline debates relating to the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle. I suggest that, in contemporary London, office towers are meant to have ‘time for history’ because they are designed in direct formal relationship to heritage assets, i.e. to buildings, which are officially described as encapsulating the ‘valued past’. However, because such a conceptualisation is fundamentally dependent on spatial closure, as I showed in relation to the formal skyline and the politics of representing time, this time for history is a snapshot in time. I argue that a discontinuous and non-linear representation of time, as discussed in the previous chapter, can be conceptualised as a snapshot. But this conceptualisation involves an understanding of a snapshot as a cessation of movement in order to compose a legible figure and not an understanding of a snapshot that is an all-encompassing or representative whole. In order to make this distinction I draw on Benjamin’s work, in which cessation and standstill are not the opposite of movement but rather come from movement. Benjamin’s dialectical image is a redemptive historiographical device, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, which involves a dramatic interruption and which brings dialectics to a standstill. Such an understanding of the snapshot is part of my argument for a cinematic and not painterly skyline. The critical potential of the cinematic skyline, I suggest, goes beyond the acknowledgement of multiple different visual impressions. A cinematic conceptualisation goes beyond the limitations of spatial

closure that is typical of the discursive production of the new London skyline and critically engages with visual separation and formal uniqueness.⁷⁸

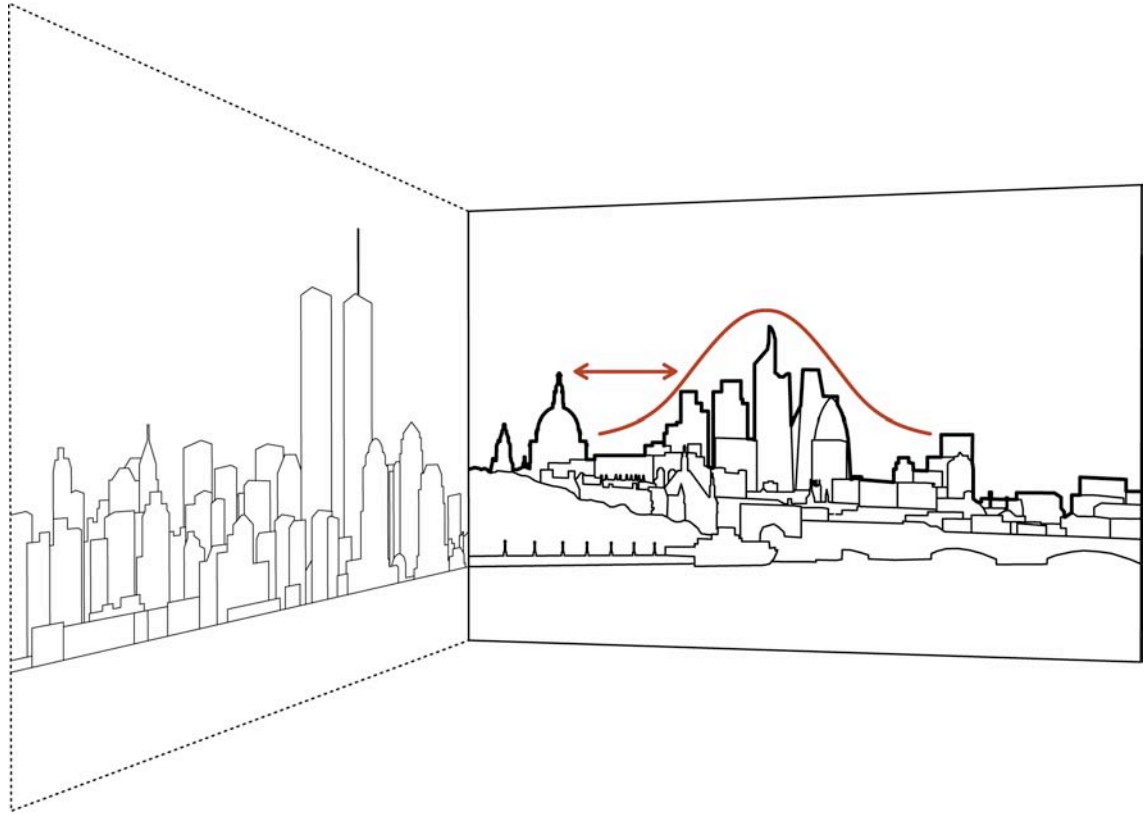


Figure 23: A Manhattan skyline before 9/11 (left) and the City skyline as seen from Waterloo Bridge as envisioned in the planning process of the Pinnacle (right) (Gassner, 2013).

I commence this chapter with a discussion of two ways in which the built environment was abstracted through the notion of skylines in the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle: skyline profiles and sky gaps. I show how design-related professionals argued for the historically unique skyline profiles of heritage assets and for visual separation between religion and financial capitalism on the new London skyline. I then introduce the relational logic that is encapsulated in Townscape writers' concern with the visual experiences of the wandering pedestrian, focusing on their conceptualisation of 'the eye as movie camera', before I discuss Benjamin's

⁷⁸ Mumford (1998) suggests that visual separation needs to be understood as a form of aesthetical zoning, an idea that I find particularly powerful for a discussion of professional debates in London, which is a city without a overall land use plan and is therefore less defined by functional zoning than Paris, for example: "With all the talk about zoning during the last twenty years, it is odd that so few people understand that it applies in aesthetics as much as it does in any other department of city design" (263).

understanding of the importance of film in capturing the city and Sergei Eisenstein's dialectical approach to film form. I argue that the critical impulse of a cinematic conceptualisation of skylines does not lie in the continuity of visual impressions but in the disrupted quality of independent snapshots.

4.2 Skyline profiles

4.2.1 Visual abstractions

Neighbourly buildings, Schuyler's statement suggests, are ones that enhance their neighbours in views. In Chapter 3 I showed that new office high-rises are, indeed, designed to visually enhance St Paul's in views from west London. This, in turn, contributes to a continuous and linear historical narrative. The cathedral is regarded as a heritage asset, seemingly unconquerable in time, despite a quantitative increase of office towers. In current skyline debates neighbourliness is measured, most of all, by means of two visual abstractions of the built environment: the abstraction of buildings to their skyline profiles and the measurement of distances between buildings in selected views, so-called sky gaps.

Skyline profiles are outlines of buildings against the sky. The term 'skyline' often describes the city reduced to the line where the built environment and the sky meet. It needs to be distinguished from the terms 'roofline' and 'roofscape', as I mentioned in Chapter 2, because of the emphasis on spatial distance and the high degree of abstraction, respectively. In general use, a skyline is a city's silhouette. As discussed in chapters 2 and 3, in current professional debates a skyline tends to describe a less highly abstract graphic notion. EH is concerned with the visual impact of a proposed development on the setting of a listed building in distant views. In these debates, a skyline does not solely describe a city's silhouette but tends to refer to distant views more generally or, better, to the visibility and appreciability of selected buildings in distant views. The term 'skyline profile', in turn, is again a highly abstract notion that reduces individual buildings to their outlines as seen against the skyline. A skyline profile is to be distinguished from a building's profile inasmuch as the former is an abstraction that can only be applied to the tallest buildings in the city. Lower buildings that are visible in

distant views, i.e. buildings with a profile that is seen against the built environment, do not have a skyline profile.

The term ‘skyline profile’ was used in different planning documents of both the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle as well as in interviews I conducted with design-related professionals. A townscape consultant, for example, argued that the taller the building the wider its impact and therefore “[i]ssues such as slenderness ratio and skyline profile become highly important” (Blee, 2000: 90). At times, professionals also used terms such as ‘profile’, ‘silhouette’ or ‘outline’. Throughout this research, I use the term ‘skyline profile’ because it describes the professional logic that underpins the assessment of visual enhancement and the constraints that go along with it more fruitfully than the other terms.

Related to the abstract notion of ‘skyline profiles’ is the notion of ‘sky gaps’, the term which describes visual gaps in the built environment not the sky. In distant views, gaps in the built environment start appearing only from a certain height onwards. In professional skyline debates, neighbours are buildings that appear next to each other in a particular view. These visual neighbours are tall buildings that protrude above the mid-rise built environment, and thus these are the buildings that have skyline profiles. Crucially, the notions of skyline profiles and sky gaps are interlinked. Only those buildings that can be read against the sky are regarded as visual neighbours and therefore have the capability of visually enhancing each other. Only a building that has a skyline profile – that is, only a building that can be read against the sky – and simultaneously, one with ‘enough’ space around it – that is, a building that is in a degree of isolation, as professionals describe it – is a building that is not only visible but also appreciable, or so the argument goes. Note that this understanding is primarily visual rather than spatial. Neighbours in views are not necessarily spatial neighbours. Skyline profiles and sky gaps are professional abstractions that are inseparable from the formal skyline, as was discussed in Chapter 2. Professionally acknowledged visual neighbours are thus neighbours in designated, static views.

4.2.2 The image of the natural growth of financial capitalism

The Heron Tower has four very different façades. It was designed in the round and is intended to relate positively to different orientations. Approaching from the north, “the exposed ‘defensive’ diagonal bracing of its structure symbolises a gateway”, which is a reference to its location adjacent to the old Roman gateway into the City (see KPF, 2005; Tavernor and Gassner, 2010: 103). In western long-distance views, such as the ones from Waterloo Bridge, its elevations are animated by lifts and glass and it steps up and away from St Paul’s (Tavernor, 2002).

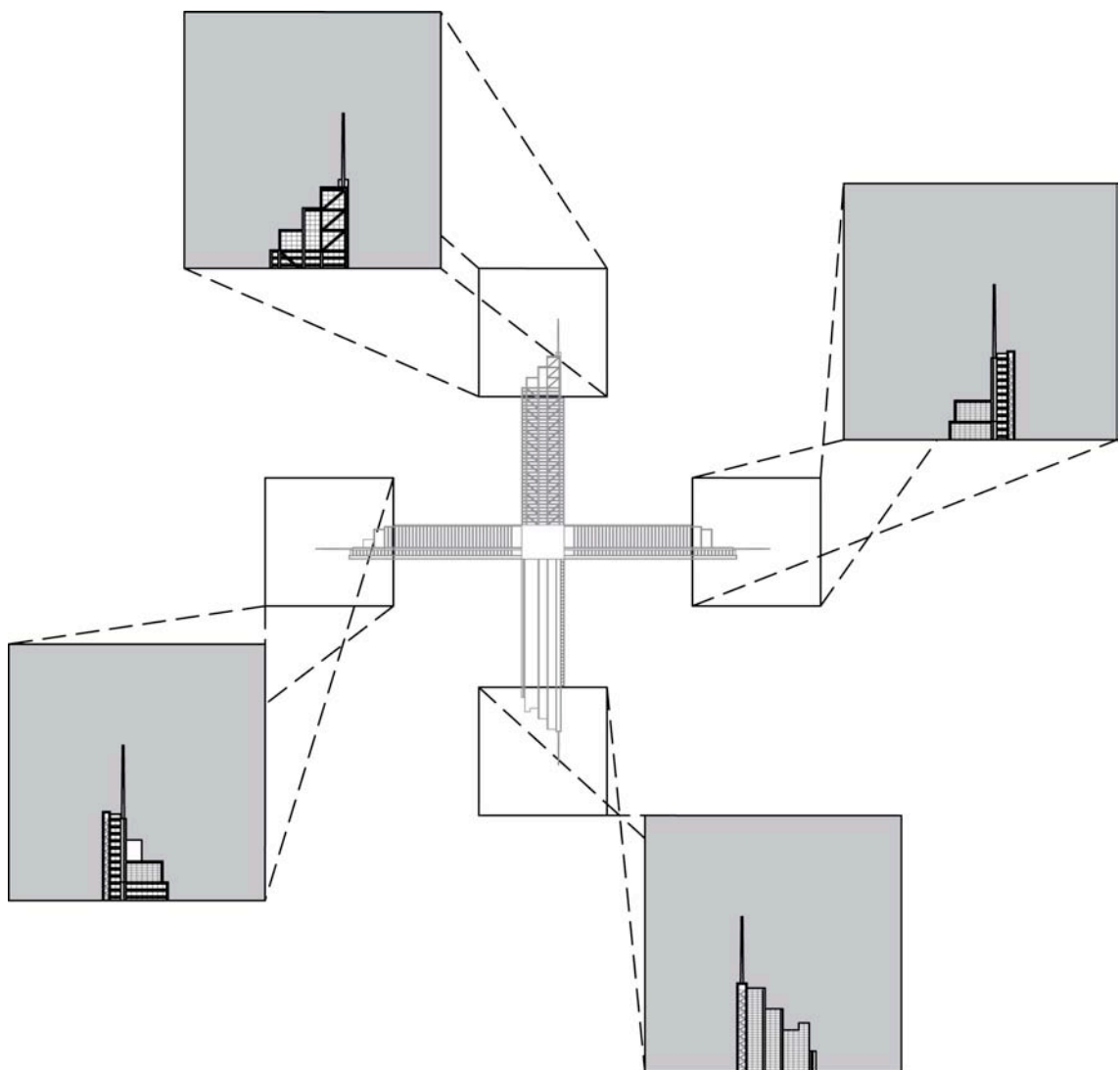


Figure 24: The top part of the Heron Tower as seen from the north, east, west and south (Gassner, 2013).

In the first ES in 2000, a townscape consultant argued that “[t]he massing rises toward Tower 42 emphasising the organic grouping of the cluster of City towers” (Blee, 2000) and an architect emphasised that it is exactly the superimposition of local historical significance and the representation of history in long views that was central to the design of the Heron Tower:

Clearly have the building stepping up towards the south allows us to define a line that was sensitive to views from Waterloo Bridge, rose from the edge near the Cathedral up towards the centre of the cluster. What I like is this simultaneous equation we have to solve [...] local and distant views simultaneously (Arch 2, 9).

The Heron Tower refers to London’s past, then, in two different ways. In local views, it is a focal point within the urban scene that signifies a historically important place in the city: the location of the Roman Broadgate. The historical significance of that location is visually expressed in the design of the north façade, the view of the tower when approaching the City from the north. In distant views from Waterloo Bridge, the Heron Tower shows a sensitive, neighbourly attitude towards St Paul’s by stepping up and *away* from the cathedral, giving way to it and not confronting it with a hard edge, which is exactly what Tower 42 did for quite some time. Thus, in local views the Heron Tower is argued to be dominant and *standing for* a historic place, while in long views it is argued to be subordinated and to *respect* a historic building. To put it differently, where there is officially recognised history, it is supposed to enhance it. Where there is an absence of recognised history, it is supposed to fill this absence with a reference to an officially recognised historical place and/or event. In both instances, an established, continuous representation of history is reinforced.

In general, professionals agreed that the stepping profile of the tower is a beneficial feature for the reading of St Paul’s on the skyline:

Certainly, that [the stepping profile of the Heron Tower] was a positive aspect of the design in terms of its relation to St Paul’s. You know, without that it would have been a non-starter let’s say. It had to address, it had to acknowledge the Cathedral to its left in views from westwards (RoEH 2, 23).

The Heron Tower’s stepping profile was regarded as a positive feature, however, not only because of its neighbourly attitude towards St Paul’s but more generally because of

its contribution to the Eastern cluster as a whole. It was widely regarded as beneficial for the reading of the cluster in relation to the cathedral more generally.

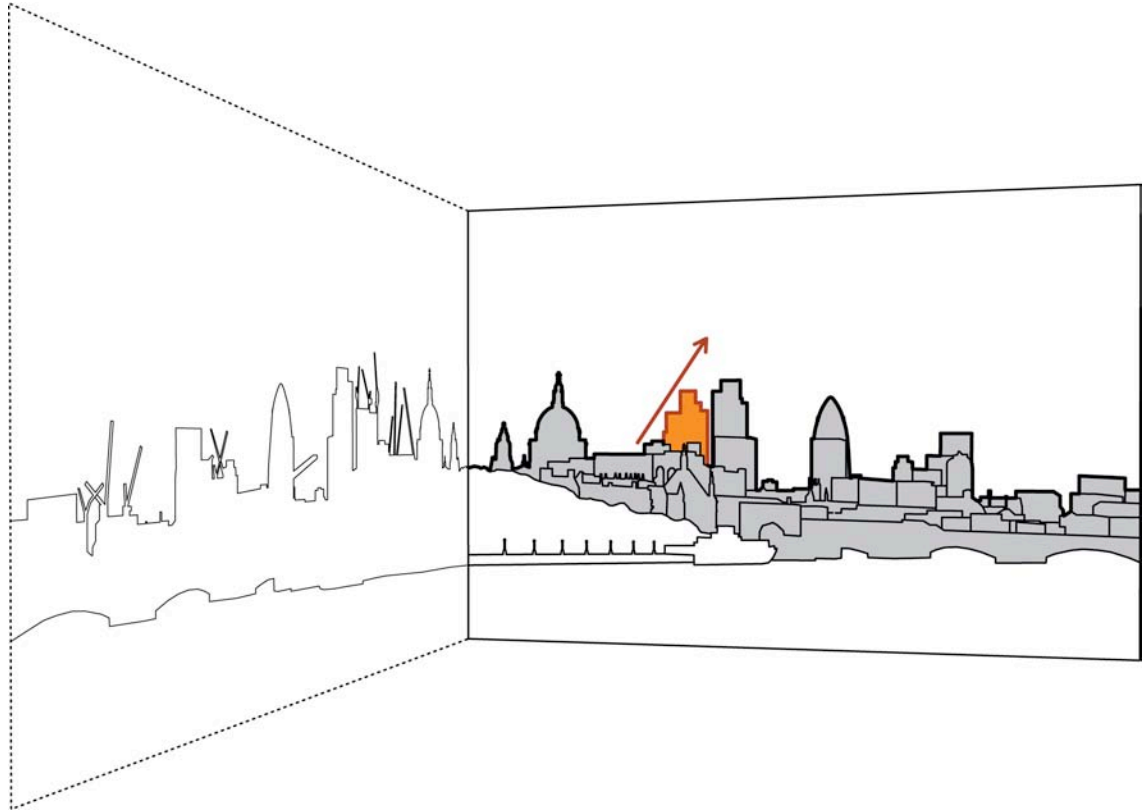


Figure 25: The stepped skyline profile of the Heron Tower as seen from Waterloo Bridge (Gassner, 2012).

The Heron Tower is located at the northern fringe of the Eastern cluster. In views from the west it appears as the most left building of the group, and hence as closest to St Paul's. Currently, it is St Paul's visual neighbour, which is why it creates the most crucial edge condition for the cluster; a cluster that is moreover professionally conceptualised in terms of a pinnacle – the Pinnacle – as the visual centre from which buildings gradually “fall away in height” (CoL, 2002a: 146).

In the City of London UDP (CoL, 2002a) it is stated that the Eastern cluster is defined by an existing building as visual centre, which should “retain a clear focus [...] with surrounding buildings generally falling away in height” (ibid.: 146). Buildings generally falling away in height; that is what design-related professionals also refer to as the ‘hill-like profile’ of the Eastern cluster: the gradually rising up and down of new office high-

rises from the medium-height building stock in the City. This hill-like skyline profile of the overall cluster is considered, by the applicant's team as well as by representatives of EH, as a visually pleasing way to insert urban shrines that represent financial capitalism into the traditional City.

When the Heron Tower planning process started in 2000, the definition of an ideal hill-like appearance of the Eastern cluster was at its initial stage. Apart from 30 St Mary Axe, which was granted consent in 2000, the Heron Tower was the first very tall office building in the City after Tower 42, which was constructed in the 1970s. Back then, the visual definition of the overall skyline profile of the Eastern cluster had to rely on three buildings only:

The massing of the tower rises towards the centre of the cluster away from St. Paul's. The singular dominant presence of Tower 42 is reduced, emphasising the commanding presence of St Paul's on the skyline. The Tower is balanced by 30 St Mary Axe giving an overall form to the cluster (KPF, 2005: 56).

Architects argued that as a result of the insertion of the Heron Tower's particular skyline profile as seen from Waterloo Bridge, the visual dominance of St Paul's is re-established and improved. Within the next few years, as more corporate high-rises were granted planning permission, the cluster was redefined and at the time of writing it can be described in terms of an overall hill-like skyline profile as seen from Waterloo Bridge, with the stepping profile of the Heron Tower as the edge condition of the cluster on the left towards St Paul's and the Pinnacle as the central and tallest building of the cluster.

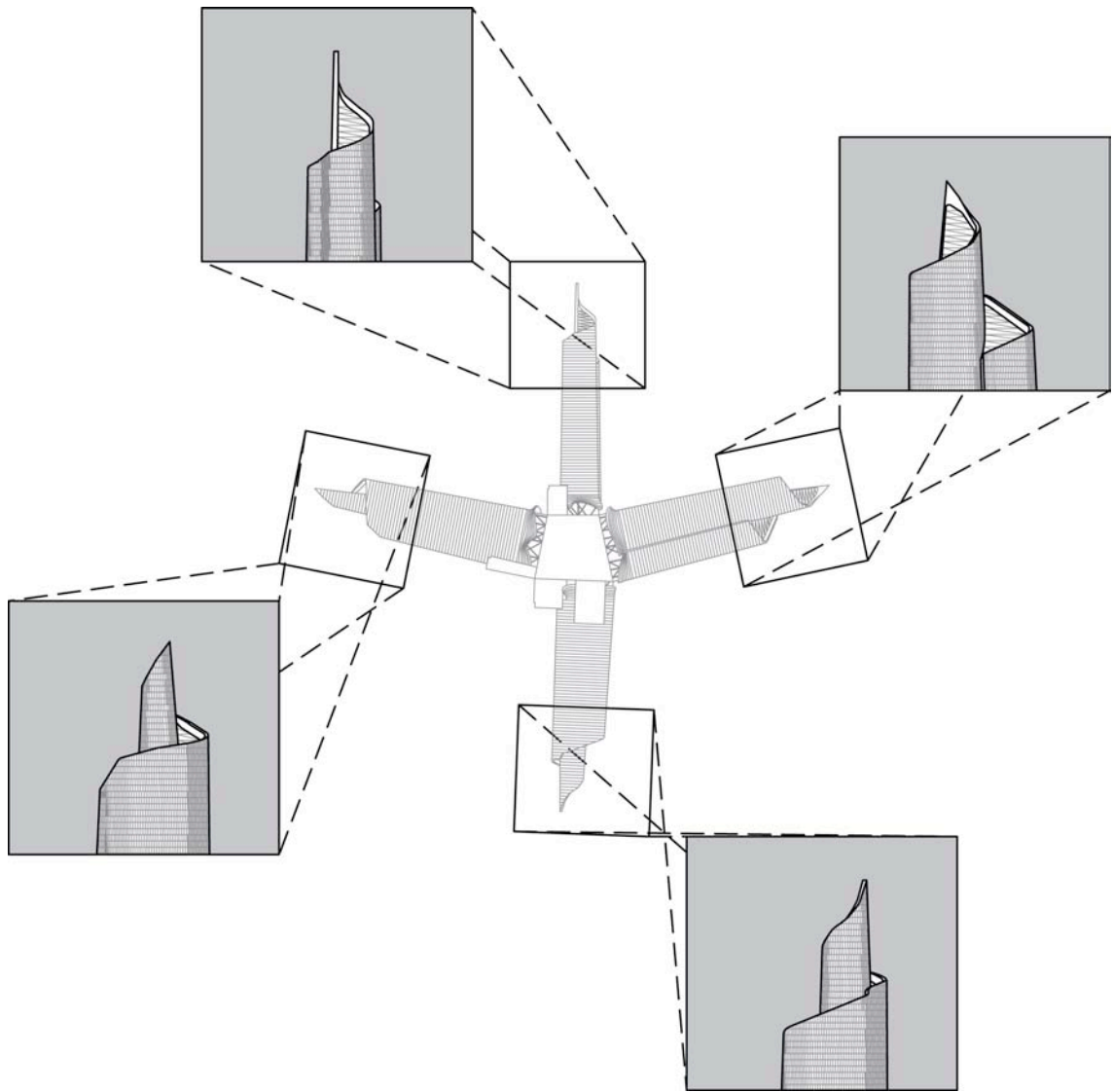


Figure 26: The top part of the Pinnacle as seen from the north, east, west and south (Gassner, 2013).

The Pinnacle is located approximately 200 metres south of the Heron Tower. These 200 metres have a crucial impact on professional skyline conceptions. While the Heron Tower is supposed to create a ‘sensible’ transition from the low and medium-rise building stock to the tallest buildings in the City as seen in views from west London, the Pinnacle will appear in the centre of the cluster in these views, and hence it was argued to be appropriate as the tallest building of the group in order to hold it together:

Being located at the centre of the Eastern Cluster, and in order to maintain the hill-like profile of the cluster when viewed from a distance [...] it is appropriate that the Bishopsgate Tower [i.e. the Pinnacle] should be the tallest building in

relation to existing and consented tall buildings in the Eastern Cluster (Tavernor, 2006: 16).

In order to hold the group together, the visual centre is not only the tallest building of the group but it is also designed with a specific top part, i.e. a unique skyline profile.

The Bishopsgate Tower [i.e. the Pinnacle] will taper upwards, and with the curving spiral a form will be created that will work effectively with the stepped profile of T42 [Tower 42] and the sensual curves of 30 St Mary Axe. The spiral will also reinforce the idea of a visual centre of the cluster, which can hold visually, as an inward force – centripetally – the array of different shaped tall buildings around it. It will achieve this with considerable élan (Tavernor, 2006: 54).

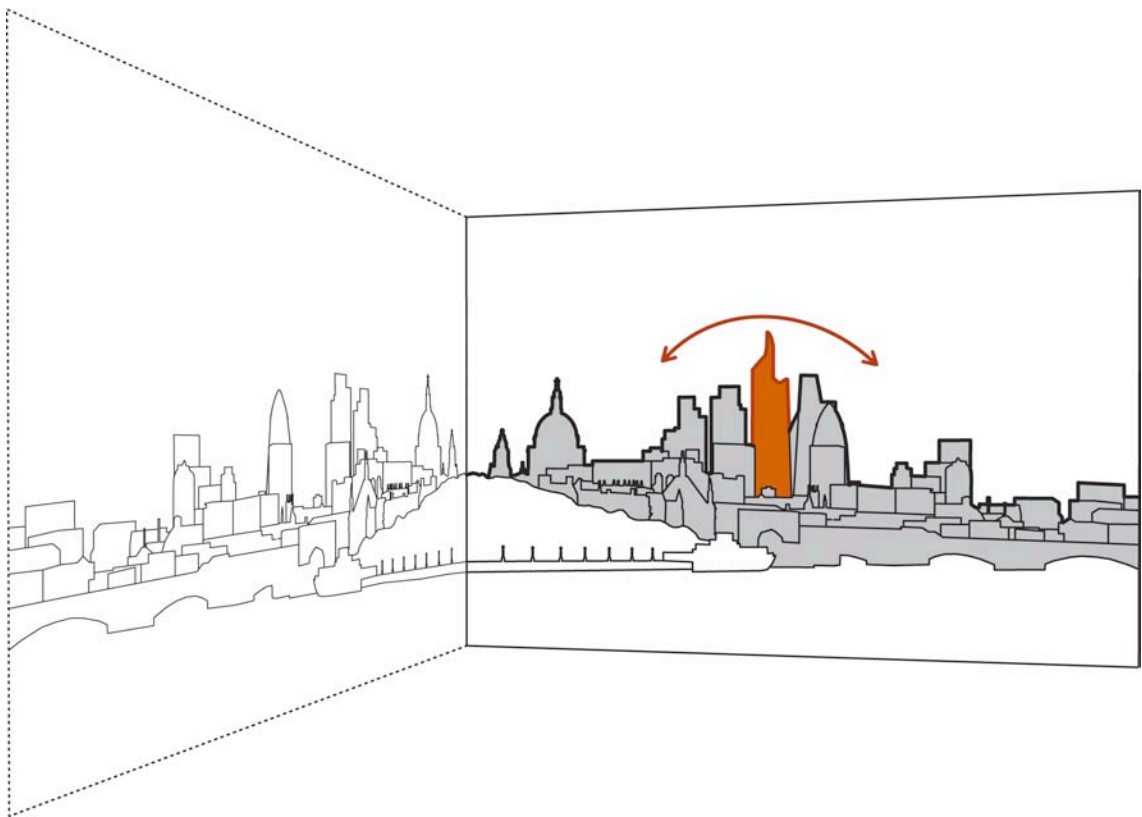


Figure 27: The spiral top of the Pinnacle as seen from Waterloo Bridge (Gassner, 2012).

The design of the top of the Pinnacle ‘closes’ the group by means of a centripetal top. It reinforces the wholeness of the group. Such a conceptualisation of a group is flexible in time only when the centre is redefined, which is exactly what happened in the past. As long as the Pinnacle is considered to be the visual centre, the growth of the visual cluster

in long views from Waterloo Bridge is clearly limited. And it is exactly these specific long views that professionals focused on in the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle. While the Eastern cluster is recognisable as one cohesive entity only in a few views from the west, the hill-like profile – this apparently smooth geometry that, following design-related professionals, so gently integrates itself onto the skyline and respects and enhances the reading and appreciation of the unchanging historic landmark that is St Paul’s – is recognisable only as such from Waterloo Bridge. And even on the bridge there are specific viewpoints from which the overall skyline profile of the cluster can be read most clearly. In short, the geometrical definition of the overall skyline profile of the cluster further narrows down the multiplicity of London’s skylines to one, perfectly controlled new London skyline. It is the definition of this one, perfectly composed, static view that reinforces the socio-visual hierarchy that is typical of the formal skyline.

The hill-like skyline profile of the Eastern cluster is meant to be beautiful, in the sense of Burke’s association of beauty with “smoothness, gentle curves, polish and delicacy” (Burke in Pevsner, 1944: 47). In that respect, it is not picturesque and nor is it sublime. Such an understanding differs from an interest in visual accidents, which is part of an informal conceptualisation of skylines. It also differs from Cullen’s (1995) concern with “visual drama” (7f) and Hastings’ understanding of cityscapes as both democratic art and as surrealist pictures.

The valorisation of the individual buildings, individual stories and counter histories that Hastings’ conceptions refer to, especially when enriched with Benjamin’s (2002) notion of the dialectical image, speaks for visual contrast and hard, confronting edges. I suggest that the image of a ‘naturally grown’ Eastern cluster with a smooth, hill-like skyline profile refers to a pleasing, harmonious compromise that is unlikely to pose critical questions about how religion and financial capitalism are represented on London’s skylines.

4.2.3 Formal uniqueness

As has frequently been referred to, the Pinnacle forms the visual centre of the Eastern cluster. In the design statement an architect explains that the skyline profile of the Pinnacle was developed as “a spiralling top [...], which relates to the surrounding building but is essentially self-generating and self-contained” (KPF, 2006: 41). The Pinnacle thus holds the cluster together. But at the same time it is an iconic building, shapely and expressive. The architects argued that it must be a visually unique building in its own right. As the visual centre of the Eastern cluster, it is required to be all the more distinctive, so the argument goes:

A group of buildings needs to be like a group of people. And you have to be able to accommodate different shapes and sizes of people. And if the thing to do would be to talk about how a new building is to join the group and how do they fit into that group. [...] I think it was important to him [the Townscape Consultant] finally that if the building was going to be the tallest that it both respects the other buildings, reacts to them, but has its own identity. So, it really has to complement as well as dominate. And I think, it's not an easy trick to pull to complement and to dominate at the same time (Arch2, 35).

The Pinnacle is distinctive because it is iconic. It is a shapely, post-modern tower. It is also distinctive because of its height. However, at the same time it is part of the group and it unites the Eastern cluster due to its centripetal, spiral top – so the architects argue. In that way, then, it can be both complementing and dominating.

Material removed for copyright reasons. See
<http://www.planning2.cityoflondon.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=JA65AQFH02000>.

Figure 28: The architects' diagrams that explain the urban constraints that influenced the design of the top (Design Statement, Pinnacle).

However, there is another aspect that determines why the Pinnacle can be both. It shares a common characteristic with other very tall buildings in the City, yet it expresses this characteristic in a distinctive way.

The idea of this movement, for me, was something that actually, when we learnt that we won the competition, I'm not a high-rise designer per se, [...] the idea of the movement, for me, I think was really suggested by the Swiss Re project and the Nat West project [Tower 42], where, and maybe it's for me where the Cheese Grater is often felt a little out of the group, and it wasn't really something I had identified until recently, it was part of an intuitive thing, the Nat West tower is three, a trifold plan, that steps in height so that you have this movement, this turning movement, it's a roundy turning movement. And the Swiss Re, I know it's uniform, all way around, the black glass ribbons, they spiral around. These buildings really set up a – and the dome of St Paul's as well. So, you get very much a roundy feeling and a turning feeling (Arch1, 42).

While this architect suggested that this idea of movement as a common characteristic in the City was the architect's subjective reading that might not be shared amongst the wider public, the crucial point here is that the architect attempted to identify a common characteristic at all. The interviewee was keen to emphasise that the new corporate tower was not designed in isolation, without history and with no possibility for history, but exactly in relation to history: a characteristic that tall buildings in the City, which might differ in terms of age, style and function, have in common.

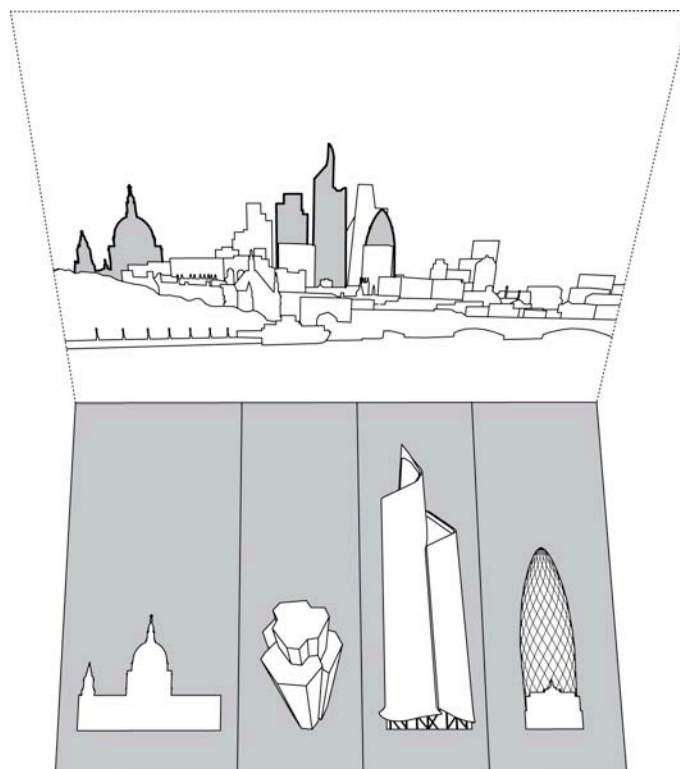


Figure 29: The idea of 'movement' as a characteristic of very tall buildings in the City (Gassner, 2012).

In their appearance, the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle are very different. The former is a modern, rectilinear building, while the latter is a post-modern, round and shapely one. The former has a top that steps away from St Paul's while the latter has a spiral top that holds buildings visually together. But both designs were argued to directly relate to the City's past. The Heron Tower respects a particular representation of history – i.e. the appreciation of the unchanging historic St Paul's – by creating a sensitive edge to the very tall new office buildings. The Pinnacle continues a historical tradition in the idea of movement that is encapsulated in the massing of very tall buildings that are located in the City.

Identifying this idea of movement, the architect compared individual skyline profiles with each other. In the planning process of the Heron Tower, different individual skyline profiles were also compared, but for different reasons. Note EH's opening statement in the Heron Inquiry:

The claim that there is currently tension between Tower 42 and St. Paul's is fiction [...]. It is argued that the proposal would mediate between St. Paul's and Tower 42, reducing the stark contrast between the two buildings. The contrast between the vertical, relatively simple form of Tower 42 and the complex form of St. Paul's is entirely beneficial and helps the viewer to readily differentiate between the two structures as well as marking a clear boundary to the cluster of tall buildings rising above the plateau of lower structures. The introduction of the proposed building would blur this distinction [...]. As to the suggestion there would be 'domical competition' between St. Paul's and Swiss Re [30 St Mary Axe], it is hardly likely that the cigar shape of Swiss Re, only the top of which would be seen rising above the CGU building, would be confused with the complex form of St. Paul's dome, drum and peristyle (OotDPM, 2002: 61).

EH thus argued that there was no formal and visual tension between Tower 42 and St Paul's; there was a visual contrast but no tension. Furthermore, there was also no 'domical competition' between 30 St Mary Axe and St Paul's. Hence, the Heron Tower was not required, in fact it was not wanted, because it solely further impoverishes the setting of the cathedral. There is, so the argument runs, contrast but not tension, which means that contrast can mean visual enhancement when the contrast emphasises the uniqueness of a particular building.

The above quote indicates how visual diversity can be conceptualised in fundamentally different ways. Hastings' (1949) "radical idea of the meaning of parts" (361), the basis of his radical visual philosophy, valorises diversity in order to critically examine a centralised vision of the way the city is represented, the 'aesthetical symmetry' that Simmel (1968; 2004) refers to. This, I argue, is an inherently political concern in which a hegemonic, centralised planning approach is critically examined by means of a collage-like understanding of the city. In a collage, as Frascina (1998) suggests, "distinct signifiers are brought together and the 'surface' relationship between them invested with meaning through the inventiveness of the practitioner [...] can act to destabilize notions of 'fixed' meanings or dominant distinctions between 'real' and 'false' connections" (384). Such a destabilising and questioning of fixed meanings and real and false connections exactly needs tension or, to put it differently, the readiness that elements affect each other. EH, by contrast, used the notion of visual contrast in order to reinforce a visual dominance.

In Chapter 3, I analysed how EH and applicants' teams examined the changing setting of St Paul's down the centuries and how a townscape consultant argued that "St Paul's Cathedral remains prominent in the City of London's skyline, mainly because of its dome, which is still an unusual feature in London's urban landscape" (Tavernor, 2002, par. 4.7.1). Tavernor (2004b) alleges that despite London being "a multi-layered palimpsest of buildings and spaces, constructed across the ages", a London-typical mix of different styles, there are hardly any domed structures visible on London's skylines. The stylistic complexity within the city – and in particular the City – is not readable from a distance.

While the Stuart monarchy in the seventeenth century favoured classical architecture for its royal public buildings, the Anglican Church preferred Gothic (ibid.).⁷⁹ Canaletto's "View from Somerset House River Terrace" also suggests that complex tower forms and spires are more typical of England's historical skylines than domes. The painting shows a filigree "zig-zag pattern" (Attoe, 1981: 57) created by multiple churches in the

⁷⁹ "The vertical skyward push of complex tower forms and spires is more typical of England's historic urban skylines than domes. The dome was essentially a Florentine and Roman development of an ancient architectural form, which became popular during the 'Catholic' Italian Renaissance. It was also popular in Baroque France, where the Stuart Court were in exile before the Restoration" (Tavernor, 2002: 9).

City, a visual quality Cullen (1995) refers to as “netting the sky”: as buildings soar up into the blue vault they also capture it and bring it down to the buildings (40).⁸⁰ The dome of St Paul’s is the formal exception in Canaletto’s view. It occupies a substantial amount of space and breaks with the spiky geometry.

The dome is an essentially Florentine and Roman development of an ancient architectural form, which became popular during the Catholic Italian Renaissance, as Tavernor (2004b) suggests. Still, the English were reluctant to break their attachment to Gothic forms and details and Wren’s warrant design for St Paul’s in 1675 was a blend of Gothic and Classical forms and details. However, when he made substantial changes to his warrant design, he thoroughly classicised the appearance of the building.

After the Great Fire of 1666 had destroyed massive parts of the City’s built environment, Wren not only proposed a new masterplan for the City but he was also commissioned to redesign St Paul’s Cathedral and multiple smaller churches in the City. While his masterplan for the City was never realised, his designs for many churches and the cathedral were. In particular the latter went through several design iterations, as a townscape consultant explained in the Heron Inquiry:

Sir Christopher Wren designed a new Cathedral in the classical style and proposed a radically new street layout for the City, inspired by the Baroque planning of Rome and Paris. Not that he had an easy ride of it: the Stuart monarchy favoured classical architecture for its royal public buildings in London, while the Anglican Church preferred Gothic. Wren’s Warrant Design for St Paul’s of 1675 was a diplomatic compromise, a blend of Gothic and Classical form and details. [...] However, the English were reluctant to break their attachment to Gothic forms and details. [...] The contract Wren obtained to build St Paul’s permitted him to make certain ornamental changes during its construction. In fact, he made substantial changes to the overall form of his Warrant Design, thoroughly classicising the appearance of the building that was constructed. As the first Protestant Cathedral it was intended to rival the magnificence of St Peter’s in Rome – which it does, although it also looks remarkably similar to that great symbol of Catholicism (Tavernor, 2002: 8f).⁸¹

⁸⁰ Attoe (1981) takes up Cullen’s notion of ‘netting the sky’ when he compares a then current view of Manhattan with a seventeenth-century view of Constantinople, suggesting that in both “the man-made and the celestial are interlocked in an almost zipper-like fashion” (57).

⁸¹ Even into the eighteenth century, Gibbs combined Gothic and Classical elements. His St Martin-in-the-Fields (1720–26) has a low horizontal classical temple form and a tall vertical tower. This blending of styles continued into the nineteenth century, and Barry and Pugin’s Parliament building combines a classical body with Gothic details. Similarly, Big Ben is a landmark tower adjacent to the medieval

‘Ornamental changes’ became substantive ones and St Paul’s, as we know it today, was built in the baroque style and not in a blend of Gothic and Classical forms. There is, then, a historical tendency to link Protestantism with Gothic architecture and Catholicism with classical architecture, with St Paul’s being a noticeable exception.

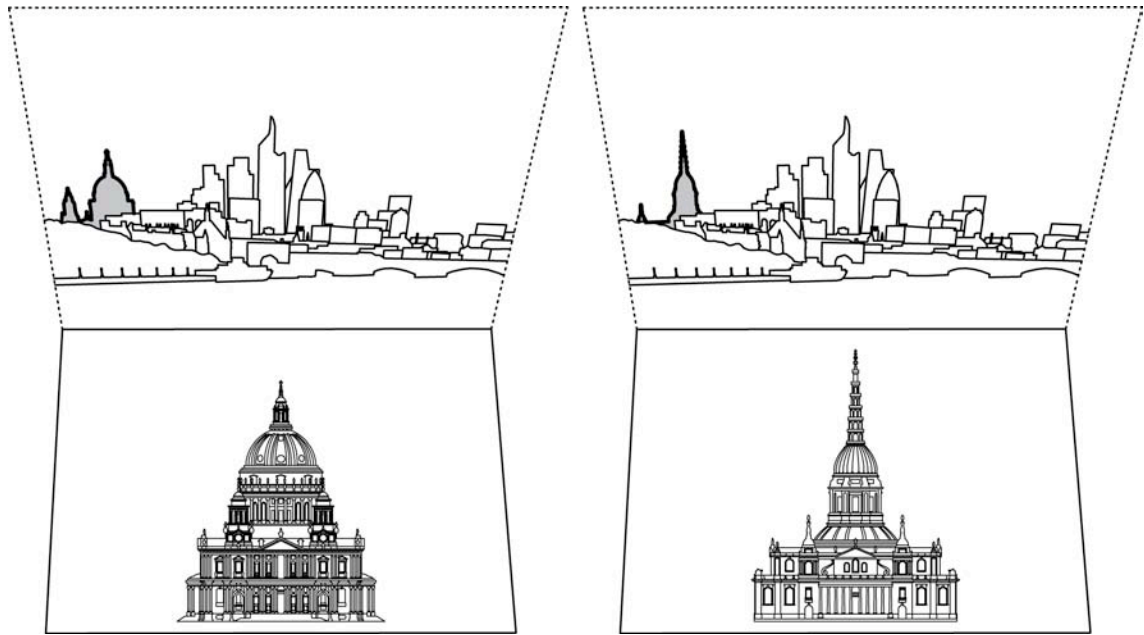


Figure 30: The City of London viewed from Waterloo Bridge with the existing St Paul’s Cathedral (left) and with Wren’s Warrant Design (right) (Gassner, 2011).

One of the reasons why a townscape consultant argued that St Paul’s and 30 St Mary Axe’s dome-like profiles might visually compete with each other was the fact that this concern was raised by the Dean and Chapter of St Paul’s in the planning process of 30 St Mary Axe:

[W]e believe that the form and size of the proposed building will make a strong visual link with the dome of the Cathedral by virtue of its intrinsic shape, which will inevitably invite comparison with the dome of St. Paul’s. The dome of the Cathedral at present makes a unique contribution to the skyline: it is the only domed structure which projects clearly above the surrounding buildings. Indeed, it is precisely this unique dominance which has given the dome iconic status for

structures of Westminster Hall and Abbey. Although relatively modern, it has become a popular symbol of the British Parliament, as indeed has Barry’s Tower Bridge, which he was required to design in Gothic style by an Act of Parliament.

London and the Nation (Report of the City Planning Officer on Swiss Re, the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's cited in Tavernor, 2002, par. 5.2.9).

It is this statement that a townscape consultant referred to in the Heron Inquiry, and which was the basis for his argument that the proposed development will reduce a possible comparison between the skyline profile of the dome of the Cathedral and the one of the domed 30 St Mary Axe:

Once Swiss Re [30 St Mary Axe] is completed it will acquire with the dome of St Paul's and Tower 42 the status of a prominent building on the City skyline. Also with its completion a north-south rhythm will be established of dome, vertical tower and domed tower. This, I believe, will have the effect of displacing St Paul's as the focal point when viewed from the west. From the viewpoints along Waterloo Bridge it will appear as if Tower 42 has been positioned in-between two prominent domed structures. Tower 42 will become the central focus of the composition and St Paul's will appear as if it has become part of the Eastern Cluster. [...] The addition of 110 Bishopsgate [Heron Tower] will alleviate this optical effect. Its placement next to Tower 42 will consolidate the central part of the Eastern Cluster and its stepping summit will ensure that it reads as distinctly separate from the dome of St Paul's. Thus, St Paul's will be appreciated as an isolated and unique structure on the City skyline. As a single building it will be viewed in relation to the Eastern Cluster, which in turn will be viewed against the more distant Canary Wharf Cluster (Tavernor, 2002, par. 6.2.2).

Four skyline profiles are of particular relevance here: St Paul's, Tower 42, 30 St Mary Axe and the Heron Tower.⁸² Both the Heron Tower and Tower 42 are rectilinear towers with stepped profiles. St Paul's and 30 St Mary Axe are domed structures. Architects argued that this distinction, and the rhythm that different skyline profiles create, are relevant for the appreciation of the visually isolated dome of St Paul's. And although EH rejected the argument that the Heron Tower would be beneficial to the appreciability of St Paul's as a result of its skyline profile, in an interview a representative of EH said:

Yes, I accept that. If it was a similar shape as St Mary Axe, the Swiss Re tower, then it would set up a kind of dualism. You would almost confuse looking towards the City. Seeing the dome of St Paul's and Swiss Re Tower, you know, let's say immediately to the right of it (RoEH1, 25).

⁸² The construction of 30 St Mary Axe started in 2001. The tower was completed in 2003 and opened in 2004. The Heron Tower's planning process lasted almost five and a half years, from June 2000 to April 2006.

Professional concerns relating to skyline profiles, then, operated on different scales. The profile of an overall hill-like skyline profile of the emerging Eastern cluster was argued to be beneficial for the reading and appreciation of St Paul's: it respects the unchanging historic landmark. As a result, Heron Tower's and Pinnacle's skyline profiles were measured in terms of their contribution to the overall profile of the cluster and their profiles were also assessed in terms of their relation to the skyline profiles of other individual buildings. The Pinnacle's spiral top, so an architect argued, will take up a common characteristic most very tall buildings in the City share: the idea of movement. The Heron Tower's stepped profile, a townscape consultant argued, will not only be beneficial for consolidating the group of corporate towers, but will also be read distinctly from the dome of St Paul's, which will be seen as a formally distinct and unique structure on the new London skyline.

4.3 Sky gaps

In order to read individual corporate towers as one group, they need to be 'close enough' next to each other in a view. In the planning process of the Pinnacle, this was an important argument that was put forward by the applicant's team. The Pinnacle will fill an existing sky gap and so consolidate the group by reducing this gap:

[The City Planning Officer] felt that if he could argue publicly that the cluster would be formed as one group, at that time he had this notion that it's flexible and could be [...] what you want to do is fill in the missing teeth, because isolated buildings compete with St Paul's (Arch1, 36).

If buildings are not 'close enough' next to each other, they don't share an overall skyline profile, such as the hill-like profile of the Eastern cluster as seen in western views and from Waterloo Bridge in particular. By contrast, in the planning process of the Heron Tower, EH's main concern was the opposite; the organisation was concerned about the Heron Tower appearing too close to St Paul's.

As mentioned already, professionals regularly argued that only if buildings are visually separated, they can be appreciated individually. A building needs to be seen against the sky, and not against another building in the background, in order to allow the viewer to

appreciate its appearance. This statement show the interrelatedness between the concern with skyline profiles and that with sky gaps, which are distances between skyline profiles in singled-out views:

RoEH1: “[The] backdrop to the view [...] is a significant part of the viewing experience. It’s the dominant effect of this large building [i.e. the Heron Tower] close to the backdrop, which is detracting from the setting of the building. The need to see the building in order to appreciate the building requires a degree of isolation”.

RoEH2: “The significance, we will keep that significance if there are no large buildings, which impinge on that large clear sky setting behind it. So, that becomes a very important part of the make up of that view. The fact that you can appreciate the silhouette of the building, its construction” (RoEH1 and 2, 15).

Because Waterloo Bridge is located where the River Thames bends, the oblique angle to the City’s embankment and the location of individual tall buildings in the City imply that sky gaps between individual tall buildings constantly change when walking from the south to the north end of the bridge. From the south end of the bridge, there is a substantial sky gap between St Paul’s and the Eastern cluster (in the form of the Heron Tower, as it is St Paul’s visual neighbour in these views). The further north one walks, the smaller the sky gap becomes.

CABE (2000) distinguishes between three instances of how an office tower can relate to a historical listed building: first, there is a substantial sky gap between the two; second, the tower hides the historical building; third, the tower appears behind the historical building. EH argues that only the first instance is acceptable, based on CABE’s (2000) suggestion that “skylines are sensitive to being obscured by high buildings in front of existing buildings or having their silhouette spoiled by high buildings behind them” (20). Hence, EH argued that in views from Somerset House River Terrace, the appearance of the Heron Tower is not acceptable because the office towers appears behind the dome of St Paul’s. Moreover, they also argued that in views from the north end of Waterloo Bridge, where the tower does not appear behind but directly next to St Paul’s, the appreciability is diminished.

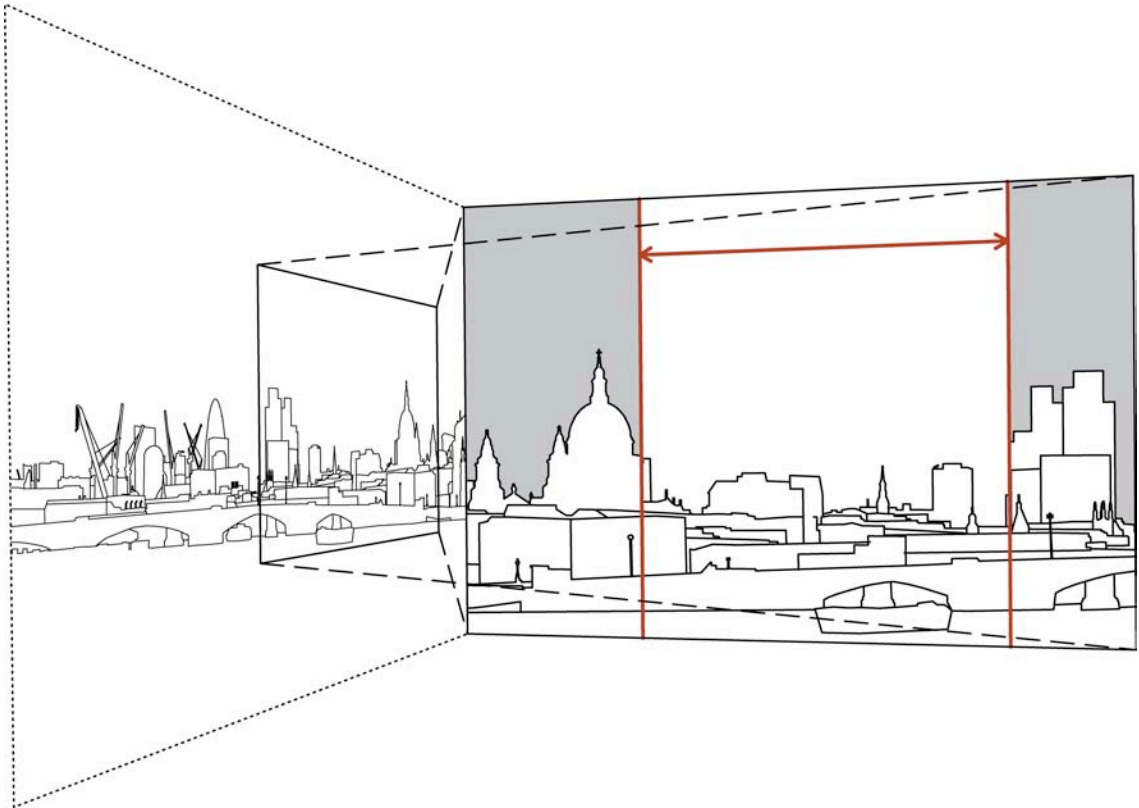


Figure 31: The sky gap between St Paul's and the Eastern cluster as seen at the south end of Waterloo Bridge (Gassner, 2012).

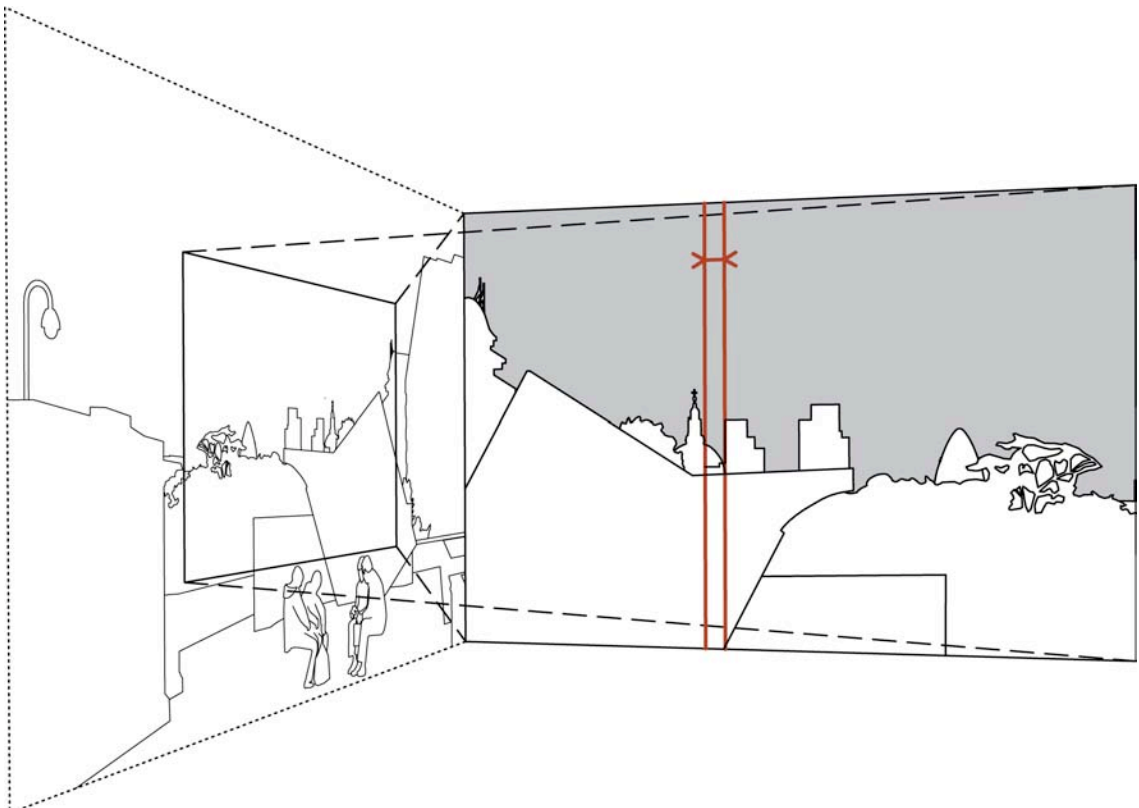


Figure 32: The non-existent sky gap between St Paul's and the Eastern cluster in views from Somerset House River Terrace (Gassner, 2012).

In the Heron Tower's ES from 2005, fourteen different viewpoints on Waterloo Bridge were assessed, including two night views. The reason behind the great number of visual assessments was exactly because of the changing sky gap. In the Heron Inquiry, EH argued that the tower would "gravely injure the historic environment of its severely detrimental effect on the setting of St Paul's Cathedral", in particular in the "world famous prospect of London from Waterloo Bridge" (OotDPM, 2002: 59):

The blue sky gap separating St. Paul's from Tower 42, as seen from approximately the centre point of the bridge northwards, is already the irreducible minimum to ensure a fitting setting on the skyline for St. Paul's (OotDPM, 2002: 60).

The Dean and Chapter of St Paul's also stated that the Heron Tower "would reduce the gap between Tower 42 and the Cathedral, introducing a building whose design would be at odds with the clean lines of Tower 42. Furthermore it would almost merge with the left hand side of the existing tower, thus emphasising the massive bulk of a building that the two towers would represent" (ibid.: 95f).

It is the word 'almost' that is crucial in the statement above. A townscape consultant's assessment of the sky gap between St Paul's and the Heron Tower went as follows:

When viewing the City towards the southern end of Waterloo Bridge St Paul's is an isolated form, and the embryonic Eastern Cluster is distant from it. Moving northward across the bridge St Paul's and the Cluster appear to move towards one another and the cluster gradually reshapes and opens its form. Before the Embankment trees obstruct the view at the bridge's northern end, 110 Bishopsgate [Heron Tower], Tower 42 and Swiss Re form a definite assembly, with the dome of St Paul's closer, but still distinctly separate from the Eastern Cluster, appearing slightly forward and to its left (Tavernor, 2002, par. 6.2.10).

The Mayor of London highlighted this observation that in all views from Waterloo Bridge St Paul's and the Heron Tower are distinctly separated. Emphasising the "thrilling dynamic between the old and new", the mayor stated that,

[a]t no point in any view from the Bridge would 110 Bishopsgate [i.e. the Heron Tower] close the gap with the Cathedral and at all points the Cathedral would be seen with clear space around it [...] there would be no harm to the setting of St. Paul's in any view from Waterloo Bridge. [...] Far from causing harm, 110

Bishopsgate would actually enhance the setting of the Cathedral [...] [which] would no longer be seen in competition with Tower 42, which would be absorbed into a cluster of tall buildings together with 110 Bishopsgate and the Swiss Re building (OotDPM, 2002: 56).⁸³

Furthermore, the Corporation of London argued that “a tall building on this site is probably the only opportunity to achieve a better shape to the left hand edge of the cluster in the various views from Waterloo Bridge. Further left would intrude into the gap to the left of Angel Court in views from the north end of the bridge, further right it would disappear behind Tower 42 in many views” (ibid.: 38).

It is a characteristic of skyline debates in London that history, aesthetic qualities and the visual impact of one building on another tend to be measured and argued in quantitative ways. But when is a sky gap ‘big enough’? How much air space – if any at all – is needed in order to be able to appreciate the skyline profile of a historic building? An architect suggested that there is actually no quantitatively useful way of measuring sky gaps; the question is more absolute: if a gap exists or not, i.e. any gap is big enough. It is not a question of degree then but rather a question of kind.

In order to assess the changing sky gap between St Paul’s and the Eastern cluster on Waterloo Bridge, in addition to multiple still images an animation was produced on behalf of the developer of the Heron Tower. It showed the visual experience of the City, walking from the south to the north end of the bridge. For the first time in London’s planning history an animation was accepted as planning document.⁸⁴ One of the qualities that professionals highlighted in regard to an animation is that it re-introduces a city’s three- and four-dimensionality. In static views, the city tends to appear as flat; changing visual relationships between buildings create depth.

I think one of the things that the still view doesn’t show but the dynamic view did, and we commissioned a film company, was that you can tell very quickly that the cathedral is foreground and the cluster is twice as further away and is the background (Arch2, 51).

⁸³ In his argument the Mayor cites as successful juxtaposition of buildings of totally different styles Kings College Chapel and Clare College in Cambridge and the glass pyramid at the Louvre.

⁸⁴ At a later point in the planning process of the Pinnacle an animation was also presented as a planning document, which showed the distance visual experience of St Paul’s and its setting walking down Fleet Street.

So, while each still image flattens the city, a cohesive representation like an animation brings out depth. This, then, applies to the visual relationship between St Paul's and the Eastern cluster, but also to visual relationships between the individual towers that are part of the cluster:

What is fascinating for me about this video sequence [the animation that was presented at the Heron Inquiry] is the gentle movement of objects on the City skyline relative to each other and the viewer. It is a changing view involving many combinations of forms. Pedestrians are of course free to choose their favourite viewing position – almost to compose the skyline an artist might do (and Canaletto most probably did!) (Tavernor, 2002, par. 6.2.9).

An animation allows professionals to simulate the visual experience of a wandering pedestrian in a more accurate way than a series of still images, ran the applicant team's argument in the Heron Inquiry then. But EH was concerned with the complications for visual assessments the representational form of an animation brings with it:

[...] evolving technologies illustrate the effects of kinetic experience. So, that's become accepted as a means to evaluation. You know, we've had to accept it. We were resistant to it when we were discussing the impacts on the views from Waterloo Bridge. In a sense we had to accept it because [...]. Presenting these moving images, saying, yes, it's less badly than it is there. And therefore, the whole thing became a kind of a series of relative judgements. There was not anything that was absolute (RoEH1, 38).

While animations might be a more accurate simulation of visual experiences in the city, within the logic of the current professional framework, which is based on the definition of static views towards strategically important landmark buildings, they are more difficult to assess. They are more difficult to assess than still images, only because the latter are conceptualised as whole, bounded and self-referential. In an animation a snapshot is related to the before-and-after and the sense of an all-encompassing wholeness is destabilised by relationality.

4.4 Eye as movie camera

4.4.1 Narratives in the city

In *The Conscience of the Eye*, Sennett (1992) describes a walk from Greenwich Village to Grand Central Station in New York City and suggests that walking through the city the narrative process is not building up in the way a plot usually builds up, so that the closer you get to the end you feel that more meaning is accumulated. “You’re accumulating experience; you haven’t actually experienced a sequential narrative” (Frisby et al., 2010: 16). Sennett suggests that “[e]ven though these spaces [the spaces on his walk from Greenwich Village to Grand Central Station] have no narrative connections to plot, that one didn’t lead to the other, [...] nonetheless [a] spatial narrative unfolded” (ibid.).

Sennett’s account is important because it suggests that narrative connectivity is not a prerequisite for a spatial narrative. Places in the city differ, and their differences are not ‘linked’. A city’s infinite skylines differ from each other. There is no plot but rather the accumulation of distinct impressions that unfolds a visual narrative. Narrative discontinuity unfolds a visual narrative. When EH lamented that in an animation a visual impression cannot be assessed in itself, and when a townscape consultant praised the “*gentle* movement of objects on the City skyline” (Tavernor, 2002, par. 6.2.9; my emphasis), then this implies the understanding of an animation primarily as like a continuous and linear sequence of still images, a series of well-designed compositions. This is an approach to and use of animations that refers to a temporally linear and historically continuous conception, which I aim to challenge drawing on Benjamin’s account. It also partially differs from – but is partially also supported by – the writings of the early Townscape thinkers.

4.4.2 Movie camera versus serial vision

The Townscape writers’ concern with the visual experience of the wandering pedestrian, that is with the kinetic experience of the cityscape, finds an early expression in Cullen’s “Townscape Casebook”, which, together with Hastings’ “Townscape” officially launched the movement in 1949. Cullen introduces the visual category called ‘Eye as a movie camera’ and includes a linear sequence of visual impressions of the Palace of Westminster, Big Ben and Westminster Abbey. He simulates a half-circular walk along which those historical buildings are seen from different angles and in

different visual relations to each other. These different relations are shown by mean of seven static images. Under the title “Free development” he writes:

As a novelist creates drama by the juxtaposition of characters, a with b, b with c, c with a, so in this example movement brings an everchanging juxtaposition of masts, towers and turrets which appear and disappear only to reappear in a quite different context (Cullen, 1949: 366).

Similar to debates in the planning process of the Heron Tower, Cullen also emphasises the dynamism that is the reward of the moving eye. In contrast to EH, he does not aim to assess each of the seven visual impressions individually. Rather, he is interested in the changes from one impression to the next. A single impression is not ‘absolute’, to use EH’s terminology, and not self-referential. In *The Concise Townscape*, Cullen (1995) shows the same visual sequence and includes a different caption:

[T]he shifting interplay of towers, spires and masts, all the intricacy of fresh alignments and grouping, the shafts of penetration and the sudden bunching of emphatic verticals into a dramatic knot, these are the rewards of the moving eye, but an eye which is open and not lazy (Cullen, 1995: 19).

Both captions suggest that the visual quality of the moving eye lies in dynamism, in constantly changing visual relationships between townscape elements – not in harmonious and fixed visual relationships and a continuity of slowly changing visual impressions but in the release of visual drama (Cullen, 1995: 7). A building that might be part of a group in one view might be visually isolated in another. Cullen’s concern is with an open and not a lazy eye, with a so-called ‘freshness’ of alignments and grouping and, ultimately, with the visual drama that is meant to be achieved by means of creating sudden changes and visual surprises:

Our original aim is to manipulate the elements of the town so that an impact on the emotions is achieved. A long straight road has little impact because the initial view is soon digested and becomes monotonous. The human mind reacts to a contrast, to the difference between things, and when two pictures [...] are in the mind at the same time, a vivid contrast is felt and the town becomes visible in a deeper sense. Unless this happens the town will slip past us featureless and inert (Cullen, 1995: 9).

The representation of a visual experience within the representational format of a book or magazine makes it difficult for Cullen to communicate the quality he is concerned with visually. It can be argued that it is due to representational constraints that Cullen selects only seven impressions to describe the open and not lazy eye continually experiencing Westminster. But Cullen has a particular understanding of continuity and wholeness in mind when he argues that “although the pedestrian walks through the town at a uniform speed, the scenery of towns is often revealed in a series of jerks or revelations. This we call SERIAL VISION” (ibid.).

According to Cullen, serial vision implies visual hierarchy. The statement above can be interpreted as support for the hierarchy of sight as played out within the current planning framework and which is typical of the formal skyline. Professionals, then, might argue that Waterloo Bridge is just such a ‘jerk’ or ‘revelation’. But the very word ‘jerk’ indicates that Cullen has a relational understanding in mind with relations that are in tension. These so-called revelations are not views but relationships *between* views. The scenery of a town is not revealed in one or in many views but in relationships between different views, in particular in ones that differ dramatically from each other:

Although from a scientific or commercial point of view the town may be a unity, from our optical viewpoint we have split it into two elements: the *existing view* and the *emerging view*. In the normal way this is an accidental chain of events and whatever significance may arise out of the linking of views will be fortuitous. Suppose, however, that we take over this linking as a branch of the art of relationship; then we are finding a tool with which human imagination can begin to mould the city into a coherent drama. The process of manipulation has begun to turn the blind facts into a taut emotional situation (Cullen, 1995: 9).

Here, Cullen describes the visual city not in terms of a unity but in terms of an accidental chain of events, which, in combination with the imagination, moulds the city “into a coherent drama” (ibid.). In principle, this relational and accidental understanding of the visual city can be related to the montage principle in film. But the difficulty of Cullen’s account of a conceptualisation of the kinetic experience of the cityscape, his understanding of the eye as a movie camera, is that he tends to reinforce a linear reading of the visual city. To break down the visual experience of a cityscape into a linear sequence of visual impressions, first, does not acknowledge the multiplicity of the visual city and, second, exactly allows the visual abstraction of the city to skyline

profiles and sky gaps, which in turn allow notions of visual dominance, visual separation and visual enhancement to be employed. It is thus necessary to take Cullen's emphasis on the value of the in between visual impressions, which I regard as important and beneficial for a critique of the discursive production of the new London skyline, and frame it apart from the principles of a linear reading of the city, therefore bringing it closer to Sennett's (1992) distinction between narrative connectivity and spatial narrative in the city.

It is not clear in what ways and to what degree Cullen, Hastings, Pevsner and other early Townscape writers were influenced by more general debates about aesthetic experience that challenged the idea of a static and sovereign viewpoint, which is the conceptual basis for an understanding of an urban view similar to a theatrical scene (see Boyer, 1996). Early filmic experiments, as well as those of Soviet filmmakers, were recognised in western European intellectual circles. Dziga Vertov's "Man with a Movie Camera" from 1929, for example, presents urban life in Ukrainian cities and deploys several cinematic techniques such as double exposure, fast and slow motion, freeze frames and jump cuts. Vertov conceived of a montage of 'attractions' in terms of a creative tool with emotional and psychological influence. For him, the 'Kino-eye', which is a montage method that is based on the rhythm of machines, is an attempt to influence the evolution of man by bringing man closer to machines. Vertov regarded the montage technique as an attempt to help man to evolve from a flawed creature into a higher form.

In 1949, the same year Townscape was officially launched in the AR, the Soviet Russian film director and film theorist Sergei Michailovich Eisenstein published "A Dialectical Approach to Film Form". In this text, Eisenstein (1949) puts forward a "dynamic comprehension of things" (2), for which conflict is the fundamental principle. A dynamic comprehension of things involves "irregularity of the part in relation to the laws of the system as a whole" (ibid.: 3). For him, shot and montage are the "basic elements of cinema" (ibid.). Citing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who describes architecture as "frozen music" (ibid.), he argues against filmmakers who "regarded montage as a means of description by placing single shots one after the other like building-blocks. The movement within these building-block shots, and, the consequent length of the

component pieces, was then considered as rhythm” (ibid.). For Eisenstein this is a false concept because the “mechanical process of splicing would be made as principle” (ibid.). By contrast, he conceives of montage as an “idea that arises from the collision of independent shots – shots even opposite to one another: the ‘dramatic principle’” (ibid.: 4).

Eisenstein conceives of montage as an action of fragmenting reality and then reassembling it under the principle of conflicting order. This, I suggest, is the crucial conceptual difference with Cullen’s account of the eye as movie camera, which is also based on a ‘dramatic principle’ but which remains within a linear logic of representing the city. Cullen (1995) suggests that when existing and emerging views that are in visual conflict with each other are superimposed in the viewer’s mind, “the town becomes visible in a deeper sense” (9). But Eisenstein’s account of the conflicting order of the montage principle is richer, more critical and political. Moreover, it is more useful for an understanding of a cinematic conceptualisation of skylines in relation to a critical and redemptive historiography.

4.4.3 Snapshots

In Chapter 3 I distinguished a montage-like from a panoramic conceptualisation of skylines. A wide-angle panorama is primarily based on the idea that to see ‘more’ is to reveal more. A montage-like approach, by contrast, means that in order to reveal more, and especially, in order to reveal critically, one must ‘look’ in between difference.

Buck-Morss (1991) suggests that there is another use of montage as a representational form that “creates illusion by fusing the elements so artfully that all evidence of incompatibility and contradiction, indeed, all evidence of artifice, is eliminated” (67). This understanding of montage as ‘realistic illusion’ is close to the principle of nineteenth-century panoramas as replicas of scenes from history and nature (ibid.), and it is this understanding of montage that needs to be distinguished from the one of Eisenstein but also that of Cullen. A non-illusionary understanding of montage, I suggest, relates to an understanding of skylines as both democratic art and surrealist pictures, in which seeming incompatibility and contradiction are not to be eliminated.

Such an understanding means that incompatibility and contradiction are not negated but rather need to have a recognised status.

A famous illusionary panorama in the nineteenth century was the *Kaiserpanorama*, which was a form of stereoscopic entertainment with a number of viewing stations from which people peered through a pair of lenses showing a number of rotating glass slides.⁸⁵ *Kaiserpanoramas* provided “sweeping views that unrolled before the spectators, giving them the illusion of moving through the world at an accelerated rate. The experience corresponded to that of moving along a street of commodity display windows” (ibid.: 82). The *Kaiserpanorama* was a precursor to film. But, according to Benjamin, the potential of film in understanding and representing the city does not solely lie in a film’s accuracy in representing visual experiences in the city, but in its relationship to the modern metropolitan experience.

Benjamin (2005c) suggests that “only the cinema commands optical approaches to the essence of the city” (599). It is the representational form of the film that best captures the city and for Benjamin it becomes the model for his cityscapes (Gilloch, 1996: 45). This is the case because the hallmarks of film and the hallmarks of the modern metropolis, he suggests, are similar. Among these hallmarks are shock, tactility and violent impact (see Gilloch, 2002: 189).

In “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, Georg Simmel (2000 [1903]) argues that “[t]he psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli” (175).⁸⁶ The shock experience of modern life, he suggests, drives the individual to avoid negative encounters as life becomes a defensive strategy. The response is to block them out and to develop a blasé attitude, in which things are perceived but “the meaning and differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial” (ibid: 178). Referring to Simmel’s account, Benjamin (2006b) distinguishes between a tradition-bound long experience [*Erfahrung*]

⁸⁵ For a discussion of the *Kaiserpanorama* see Comment, 1999: 70f; Oettermann, 1980: 183ff.

⁸⁶ For a discussion of Simmel’s metropolis with an emphasis on its spatial dimensions see Frisby, 2001: 100–158. For a discussion of Simmel’s essay on the social experience of the metropolis see Frisby, 1985: 77–86.

and the modern experience, which is an isolated experience of the moment [*Erlebnis*]. He suggests that in modernity, and in particular in the modern metropolis, our capacity for long experience and remembrance has been reduced.⁸⁷ Although such a loss of memory needs to be overcome for the sake of the present, Benjamin suggests that the loss cannot be overcome consciously.⁸⁸ We need to ‘draw on’ our involuntary memory and, in fact, the most powerful memories are those that were never consciously registered (317).⁸⁹ The involuntary memory, of course, cannot be simply ‘drawn on’. Rather, the loss of remembrance must be surprised or shocked in order to trigger forgotten, unconscious feelings and to give access to a fragment lost in time. Hence, shock is related to both the loss of remembrance and the overcoming of the loss of remembrance. “Shock”, Gilloch (2002) analyses, “does not engender amnesia but results in indelible memories, and prompts our most precious recollections” (232).

In his well-known essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility”, Benjamin (2006a) describes the “shock effect” of a film as a “distracting element” (267). This ‘shock effect’ is “primarily tactile, being based on successive changes and focus which have a percussive effect on the spectator” (ibid.):

The train of associations in the person contemplating these images is immediately interrupted by new images. This constitutes the shock effect of film, which, like all shock effects, seeks to induce heightened attention (Benjamin, 2006a: 267).

I discuss the political potential of the tactile and distractive quality of the cityscape in detail in my discussion of the non-auratic skyline in the following chapter. At this point,

⁸⁷ Benjamin alleges that *Erfahrung* relates to the gathering of often unconscious data [*Gedächtnis*; usually translated as ‘remembrance’]. *Gedächtnis* is conservative and aims to protect our impressions and therefore only those experiences that have not been isolated can become part of the involuntary memory, that is the unintentional recollection of memory traces. *Erlebnis*, on the other hand, relates to the isolation of individual memories [*Erinnerung*], which is destructive.

⁸⁸ Frisby (1985) discusses the relationship between the discontinuous nature of modern experience and the notion of fragments in the work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin in detail. “Benjamin’s physiognomy of objects seeks to do justice to the displaced world of things by setting them in a new context, by destroying the world of false images of these things. In order to do so, his starting point is the fragment and cannot be the totality” (213).

⁸⁹ “Benjamin distinguishes between an event as it is experienced and as it is remembered. ‘For an experienced event is finite – at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is merely a key to everything that happened before and after it,’ he writes in ‘On the Image of Proust’” (Dodd, 2008: 418). His conception of involuntary memory is enhanced through reference to Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*. But while Proust’s “memory-image works backwards in Benjamin [it] emanates from the past into the present; it is neither consciously willed nor strictly individual but profoundly utopian” (Boyer, 1996: 80).

I want to highlight that Benjamin's understanding of the shock effect of the film is related to the AR's early twentieth-century campaign to make "use of many of the same methods that are employed in curing amnesia" (AR, 1947: 31) in an urban context. Cityscapes become a 'learning tool' or, as I suggest in Chapter 6 drawing on Hastings and Pevsner's accounts, part of the 'visual education' (Pevsner, 1946) of the wider public.

In order to draw out the critical impulse of a cinematic approach towards skylines, film needs to be conceptualised as a series of disconnected, discrete elements, and in that way it needs to be distinguished from the integral whole of a theatre performance (see Gilloch, 2002: 188). Benjamin describes film as follows:

It is a world of strict discontinuity; what is always again is not something old that remains, or something past that recurs, but one and the same crossed by countless intermittences. [...] Intermittence means that every look in space meets with a new constellation. Intermittence the measure of time in film [...] (Benjamin, 2002: [G°,19] 843).⁹⁰

His urban *Denkbilder*, Gilloch (1996) suggests, are "based on the disruption of established contexts and the juxtaposition of diverse elements in order to startle the reader. They engender shock. Benjamin emphasises the shifting, multiple perspectives offered by montage. Photography and film provide "the model of representation" (116). I suggest, however, that it is not only the multi-perspectivism related to montage that is important here, but an inter-perspectivism is equally important.

Understanding the montage principle as a historiographical principle, Gilloch (1996) suggests that the dialectical image can be understood as a "historical snapshot or, better, a frozen film image" (113):

The metaphor of the photographic snapshot encapsulates and illustrates several of those attributes which characterise the conditions and modes of this historiography: the transience of the chance which presents itself; the suddenness

⁹⁰ "On the rhythm of today, which determines this work. Very characteristic is the opposition, in film, between the downright jerky rhythm of the image sequence, which satisfies the deep-seated need of this generation to see the 'flow' of 'development' disavowed, and the continuous musical accompaniment. To root out every trace of 'development' from the image of history and to represent becoming – through the dialectical rupture between sensation and tradition – as a constellation in being: that is no less the tendency of this project" (Benjamin, 2002: [H°,16] 845).

with which the motif appears; the momentariness of the truth which is to be established; the fleetingness of the spatio-temporal constellation in which one must act; the visualisation of the past as an image which receives its illumination from references to the present (Konersmann in Gilloch, 1996: 113).

It is important, however, that the frozen film image is not understood as a symbolic and representative image but rather as the cessation of movement. For Benjamin, cessation and movement are not opposites but cessation comes from movement, the dialectical image as a cessation when it is a “dramatic interruption” (Gilloch, 2002: 162) that composes a “legible figure” (ibid.). The snapshot as an interruption, as ‘dialectics at a standstill’, is an understanding that relates to a discontinuous and redemptive historiography. It works against an established hierarchy of sight and critically engages with a seemingly harmonious ensemble. It is crucial, I want to reiterate, to distinguish the photographic snapshot from a technologically reproduced city-image that is sent around the world in order to attract investment and that is regarded as representative of the ‘whole’ city. A view needs to be both understood in a relational way and as an interruption. To put it differently, a visual snapshot of the city is in danger of being easily exploited for capitalist urbanisation as long as it is brought together with the notion of representativeness.

4.5 Uniqueness

It is absolutely possible that a view of the City might remind a viewer of Manhattan. It is, however, unlikely that this view is the new London skyline as conceived by design-related professionals in the skyline debates analysed here. The new London skyline is a media and tourist view that is highly controlled in order to create an easily marketable and unique city-image. Crucially, however, I argue that the uniqueness of a place – here, the City – is not to be revealed in a so-called ‘key view’. Indeed, to represent the uniqueness of a place a static view is simply insufficient. I regard currently used professional tools of visual assessment, such as the control of buildings’ skyline profiles and sky gaps between buildings, as by and large not appropriate and argue that professionals’ attempts to fix visual relationships need to make a place for the recognition of visual encounters and visual accidents.

Urban form is not a finished or finishable composition but rather a process in which different perspectives of the city accrete. The uniqueness of a cityscape is, however, not simply related to a process of multi-perspectivism but rather to a process of inter-perspectivism. Uniqueness lies in between the urban visions, representations of history and visual impressions of a place; it is precisely because it lies *in between* representations that it is not visually reproducible as such.

If shock is the hallmark of the experience in the modern (and post-modern) metropolis, as Simmel (2000) suggests, and if a redemptive historiography that reacts against formalised vision implies a shock frozen out of time, then shock also needs to be understood in relation to visual strategies. For early Townscape writers, visual shocks involved the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous townscape elements. Smooth transitions and edges, such as the ones of the imagined Eastern cluster, would have to make place for hard contrasts; the visual separation of difference would have to make space for the visual juxtaposition of difference.

While I regard such visual strategies as important, I also want to suggest that an “uneven skyline” as described by Hastings (1944: 4) is insufficient for a critical engagement with the new London skyline. More fundamentally, the visual enhancement of a singled-out historic building has to make a place not for visual detraction but for the visual independence of townscape elements and for distraction in the reception process. In order to emphasise the critical impulse of informalised vision, the new London skyline – defined as a compositional whole – needs to be destroyed. This conceptual destruction can assume different shapes. In Chapter 5 I focus on an understanding of skylines as visual ruins, while in Chapter 6 I discuss programmatic and in Chapter 7 symbolic ruins on skylines.

Chapter 5: The non-auratic skyline

5.1 In the skyline

Who is the person we most likely encounter *in* the new London skyline? To 87% the person is white and to 59% the person is male.⁹¹ To 70% he is below the age of 40 and to 94% he is not self-employed. Most likely, he is working in a finance-related job.⁹² In a professional environment that values work experience less and less, more than one-quarter of the people who belong to this “transnational capitalist class” (Sklair, 2000; 2005) is under the age of thirty and is flexible, hard-working and goal-oriented – character traits that have become indispensable within neoliberal capitalism (Sennett, 2006).

Flexibility usually involves a willingness to move wherever there is a job opportunity, and so this “global elite” has sometimes been described as “placeless” (Meier, 2007: 119). But London the global city or world city is also London the local city, made up of ‘real’ local places just as much as any other city. For this ‘placeless’ group mundane casual encounters and face-to-face contact are in no way less valuable than for any other group. An urban capitalist logic of this is related to the idea that a high-quality public realm such as the City of London, as some professionals argue, facilitates and provokes such encounters, contact and non-monetary exchange, which, in turn, is essential for the satisfaction of employees and their efficiency at work. Professionals suggest that not only the design of a building but also the design of the public realm influences corporations when they are deciding where to locate. Hence, it is the City’s goal not only “to provide bigger buildings to compete with Canary Wharf” but also a “better public realm to compete with the West End”, as an architect (Arch2, 27) emphasised in an interview. The placeless global elite is not so placeless after all, and it “feels the power of place in their everyday life in London”, as Lars Meier (2007: 119) finds in his interviews with German bankers who work in the City. But what does the City’s skyline mean to them?

⁹¹ See Census of Population from 2001 http://217.154.230.195/NR/rdonlyres/3181A629-BB40-43F1-926D-126C8F52889B/0/DP_PL_EmploymentWorkforceInfo.pdf [accessed 21 August 2013].

⁹² In 2009, 41% of employees in the City worked in the financial sector, 28% in Professional and Real Estate industry categories, and other sectors combined made up 31% of employment in the City, the most significant of which is Administrative and Education, which accounts for 13%. See Business Register Employment Survey from 2009 http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/2480B451-CD2A-4BE6-8CA5-0D6568BB91DE/0/DP_PL_EmploymentTrends_2009BRESdata__1.pdf [accessed 29 March 2012].

In “Working in the Skyline”, Meier (2007) discusses the intertwining of images, places and everyday actions in the City. His interviews with German bankers suggest that working in the City is regularly seen as a sign of personal success, an achievement that is usually regarded as important for the CV. Dressed like most of the others (the dark suit), these bankers feel not just part of a local place but part of *the* centre, part of one of the most important nodes in the world of advanced business services.⁹³ In such a node, quick lunch breaks and after-work drinks are important socialising events. Because of the short distances within the City, most places are reachable by foot and one regularly bumps into friends or colleagues on the street and has a quick chat or even initiates a business deal.⁹⁴

The person who works in *the* skyline – not just any skyline – is conscious of this status even when he is outside of it. A German banker recalls:

[t]hen I drove from the south to the north over Waterloo Bridge. On the right side you see the city of London, on the left side you see Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. That is a moment where I thought: It is so great to work in the City. It is so impressive that I made it, that I can work in the City. ... That was the key experience for me and then I said to myself, I fit exactly into this city (Meier, 2007: 123).

But does the banker single out any buildings to the east, just as he singles out Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament looking west? Meier suggests that German bankers tend to “specifically perceive buildings that reflect the history of the City and stand for its tradition as the colonial center (Tower Bridge) and for its everlasting strength (St. Paul’s). The City in this view seems to be historically grounded and affirmed as ‘the center of economy’” (ibid.).

St Paul’s representing the ‘everlasting strength’ of the City for a successful banker; a sacral building standing for ‘the center of economy’: this is probably one of the most

⁹³ Meier (2007) suggests that “[v]ariations in clothes are limited only to the colour of the shirts, to the often multicoloured ties and to the choice of cuff-links. All wear their hair cut short and most have trained bodies, which they form in the gyms of the City” (126).

⁹⁴ The City is a relatively monofunctional place. In 2001, approximately 312,000 people worked in the City, while only 7,000 lived there. See Census of Population from 2001 http://217.154.230.195/NR/rdonlyres/3181A629-BB40-43F1-926D-126C8F52889B/0/DP_PL_EmploymentWorkforceInfo.pdf [accessed 21 August 2013].

direct accounts that suggests the degree to which religion, business and history are intertwined in the City's image. St Paul's is neither mentioned as a religious symbol nor as a symbol of the Church of England. It is, more generally, a historical symbol or even, as part of an overall symbolism related to the City, a symbol of capitalism. In Chapter 7 I will analyse how professionals attach multiple symbolisms to St Paul's and other buildings that are highly visible on the new London skyline. Here I want to highlight that although the Bank of England, for example, superimposes a representation of history with a representation of commerce, it is not mentioned by the German banker, most likely, because it is not visible from a distance. In fact, none of the commerce-related, historical buildings is. Until the 1970s, the tallest buildings in the City were sacral buildings. In today's 'secular society', it seems, the dome of St Paul's and other church steeples tend to become placeholders for all kinds of readings of history.

It is interesting that the interviewed banker does not mention any buildings that are related to his own contemporary 'contribution' to the skyline, such as office towers. The spatially distant view is a temporally very distant one. Through his particular reading, he relates a reading of the city's past to his personal past, present and future; looking at the skyline, he experiences personal success and a sense of achievement (*ibid.*). The banker's reading is an attempt to make a skyline relevant for his personal life. He reads it in terms of its monuments, selecting buildings with 'historic significance' that, related to his CV, evokes a sense of achievement and personal success.

The banker visually appropriates a skyline and, in so doing, he operates less within history than through memory. In this context, history and memory need to be understood as opposing terms. The former is "manipulable and re-presentable in a play of lost significance", as Boyer (1996: 67) suggests, while the latter is "plural, alive, and cannot be appropriated" (*ibid.*) by professionals 'for' the wider public. History is a dominant and often factual account that operates through "synthetic wholes" (*ibid.*: 375), such as historic city centres and protected views of historic buildings. It is a synthetic order. But our sense of an urban totality, I agree with Boyer, is fractured, as our personal memories "arise from a horizontal juxtaposition of different images" (*ibid.*). I argue that these images are diverse and often not compatible. They cannot be easily harmonised in a visually pleasing ensemble, which is why I argue against an

understanding of the new London skyline in terms of a compositional whole in chapters 3 and 4.

In this chapter I discuss relationships between spatial-temporal distance and different types of reception. Continuing from my discussion of the politics of form in Chapter 4, I further distinguish between a painterly and a cinematic conceptualisation of skylines. Critically engaging with established approaches towards a skyline's spatial distance, I discuss the notion of aura and argue for a non-auratic and political understanding of skylines. More specifically, I discuss different ways of how to visually relate the *There & Then* to the *Here & Now* of the viewer, and how a critical reading can displace a historical reading of the past.

I commence this chapter by taking up the categories of distant views I introduced in Chapter 2. I highlight the idea that is established among design-related professionals, that a fine distant view is one that is characterised by a free line of vision towards selected historical buildings and the wider city. Such an approach implies that an immediate visual foreground is largely absent. Emphasising my concern with the 'depth' of skylines, I introduce the picturesque distinction between landscapes and prospects as well as two visual strategies that Townscape writers introduced, which are truncation and netting. I continue by showing how spatial and temporal distances are interlinked on the new London skyline by translating visual strategies into historical ones. In so doing, I argue against historical empathy and for an understanding of history as a dynamic and political construction.



Figure 33: The fragmented City in the distance as seen from the main walkway on the Southbank in 2009 (Gassner, 2013).

5.2 Skyline taxonomy

In Chapter 2 I introduced different types of distant views, referring to four different ways of how the City can be described, conceptualised and understood from outside its borders. I encountered these four types along a walk from the viewing balcony near Gabriel's Wharf on the South Bank to Somerset House River Terrace via Waterloo Bridge. In the first category, the City appears flattened, reduced to an elevation in the distance. In the second category, the City is momentarily visually absent. In the third category, the City is reduced to the visibility of a few urban shrines that serve to represent it. In the fourth category, the City is visually fragmented; it is visually incomplete and unstable.

Within the current planning framework and in skyline debates relating to the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle, only the first category was acknowledged. Formalised vision by means of static views towards selected historical buildings is related to spatial closure and a linear and continuous representation of time, as I discussed in chapters 3 and 4. Such a formalised vision that aims to present a

harmonious ensemble that is visually fixed by means of the control of skyline profiles and sky gaps relies on a free line of vision towards the wider city. The idea of St Paul's having a unique skyline profile that keeps visually dominating the skyline and which is visually separated from the Eastern cluster that, in a seemingly natural way, grows out of the medium-height built environment – this is a conceptualisation that becomes less effective when the City is reduced to very few buildings or when it is visually incomplete and unstable.

River Prospects 15B.1 and 15B.2, which are protected views from the centre and the north end of the downstream pavement on Waterloo Bridge (GLA, 2011; 2012) are described in the LVMF as follows:

The location provides important views east towards St Paul's Cathedral and the City of London. The river frontage buildings on the Westminster and Southwark sides of the Thames frame the middle ground views and the river dominates the foreground. The viewer's eye is drawn towards Temple Gardens, St Paul's Cathedral and the City's financial district. There is also a good view of the tall buildings at Canary Wharf, in the distance. Both river banks are softened by trees in the foreground of the view. From the north end of the bridge, St Paul's Cathedral appears above the trees on the Embankment, with only the river and tethered boats also in the foreground. While the principal cluster of tall buildings in the City remains to the right of the Cathedral in views from Waterloo Bridge, recent developments close to the north-east edge of the City have begun to create a second cluster on the left side of the Cathedral. The view of the south side of the river includes several large individual buildings, including the Shard. There is little sense of a coherent composition of buildings at this location (GLA, 2012: 137).

River Prospects 16B.1 and 16B.2 from the viewing balcony close to Gabriel's Wharf are described in a similar way. The "rich and intricate skyline" between trees on the Embankment is emphasised, as well as the gradual increase in scale of buildings from Westminster to the City and the "fine network based on a medieval foundation of alleys, courts and interlocking squares forming part of the Temple". According to the LVMF, in this views the "three-dimensional form" of St Paul's can be "fully appreciated", despite "some existing tall buildings in the backdrop [which] have started to damage the clarity of the Cathedral's overall form" (ibid.: 146).

These different qualitatively assessed protected views are thus described in the LVMF in a similar way. While I suggested in Chapter 2 that in these views the City appears

flattened, here they are divided in a fore-, middle and background with the River Thames being the visual foreground, in between the viewing place and the skyline. The fore-, middle- and background tripartition of quantitatively assessed protected vistas is conceptualised accordingly:

Each designated view can be considered in three parts. The front and middle ground areas are the areas between the viewing place and a landmark, or the natural features that form its setting. The background area to a view extends away from the foreground and middle ground into the distance. Part of the background may include built or landscape elements that provide a backdrop to a strategically important landmark (GLA, 2011: 224).

Material removed for copyright reasons. See
<http://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/LVMF%20low%20res%20part%201.pdf>.

Figure 34: Components of a designated view showing that the viewing place is located outside the view (LVMF).

In views from Waterloo Bridge and the viewing balcony close to Gabriel's Wharf, the river is described as the dominating foreground, trees and buildings along the Embankment as the middle ground, and the City as the background. As a result of the free line of vision towards the wider city in the distance and the related absence of a

visually rich streetscape at the viewing place, the viewing place is not mentioned in terms of its contribution to the viewing experience. In other words, the immediate surrounding of the viewer, which is reduced in terms of its visual richness, is unmentioned; the viewing place and the viewer are placed outside of the view and not part of it.

Yet this does not mean that professionals generally do not acknowledge that the viewing place has an impact on the viewing experience. Regional planning policy 4B.15 of the *London Plan* from 2004 highlights in the description of the criteria for designated views that the viewing place must be “open, publicly accessible and well used, a place in its own right allowing for a pause and enjoyment of the view” (GLA, 2004: 185). A place in the city that is fit for the act of visually experiencing London’s skylines is one that needs to have both viewing and lingering qualities. And yet, as discussed in Chapter 3, representatives of EH described Waterloo Bridge as “not particularly a high quality space” (RoEH3, 37) and at the same time as the place that “provides the best panorama of the City of London where you see the whole of the City and St Paul’s more or less in the centre of the view” (RoEH2, 37). These two statements suggest that when it comes to ‘fine views’, to concerns with the quality of the viewing place and the quality of the view, the latter tends to be regarded as more important than the former by EH.

So, the viewer is placed outside the distant view. The relevance of this aspect of formalised vision becomes clear when we consider the fourth category of distant views that I introduced in Chapter 2, in which the City is visually fragmented. This category involves views that are characterised by a rich and visually interrupting viewing place but they are not mentioned in the *London Plan* or the LVMF.⁹⁵ In these views, the viewing places are so visually rich that they can only be understood as building the foreground. This means that the Thames is ‘pushed back’ into the middle ground and the viewing place becomes part of the view. The viewer is part of the view. Because of the visually rich viewing place, these views cannot be held on to easily. The viewing place ‘disturbs’ the visual harmony of the distant view. It plays hide and seek with the distance. Just a small turn with your head or a step to the left or the right, and the visual impression has changed fundamentally.

⁹⁵ For a discussion of protected and ‘unprotected’ distant views see Gassner, 2010.

5.2.1 Landscapes and prospects

Following the classification of designated views in the *London Plan* and the LVMF (GLA, 2011; 2012), views from Waterloo Bridge and from the viewing balcony close to Gabriel's Wharf are described as river prospects. This is important, because in eighteenth-century picturesque debates, the term 'prospect' had a particular meaning that I see as crucial for a critical and political conceptualisation of spatial distance.

Nowadays, the term 'prospect' describes a view that is characterised by an extensive or commanding range of sight. Following the OED, it also describes the action of looking forward in time or seeing to a spatially or temporally distant event or object. There are often aspects related to the future and to expectations in the term. In regard to visual dimensions, picturesque theories referred to the term in a more specific way. A prospect "connoted the elevation of the viewpoint and was a kind of kingship where the power to see analogized the power to dispose" (Macarthur, 2007a: 228). In that respect, it was distinguished from the compositional type of a 'landscape', which relied on contingency and where "the viewpoint had no significance in itself but allowed a surreptitious appropriation, a proprietorship, that relied on opportunity rights, and a power that did not exist in exclusivity of possession so much as in position" (ibid.).

The term 'landscape' is usually used in a broad sense these days. It often describes the sum of all visible features of an area of land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal and as a picture representing an area of countryside. It also describes distinctive features of a sphere of activity, such as the political landscape (OED).⁹⁶ But in the eighteenth century the distinction between landscape and prospect referred to the distinction between views from low viewpoints and those from elevated ones, and to the distinction between views from contingent and views from 'representational' viewpoints. The low and contingent viewpoint is one that can be occupied, in principle, by 'everybody', while the elevated and 'representational' one is one that is reserved for

⁹⁶ The OED defines the term 'landscape' as follows: first, as the sum of all visible features of an area of land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal; second, as a picture representing an area of countryside; third, as distinctive features of a sphere of activity, such as the political landscape; fourth, as a format of printed matter, which is wider than it is high. The origin of the English term 'landscape' can be found back in the sixteenth century. It arises in the Middle Dutch *lantscap*, from *land* 'land' + *scap* (equivalent to *-ship*). '*Lantscap*' had earlier meant simply 'region, tract of land' but had acquired the artistic sense, which was brought over into English, of 'a picture depicting scenery on land' by Dutch painters referring to paintings of inland natural and rural scenery.

those who are in power. Interestingly, eighteenth-century picturesque writers suggested that there were aesthetic qualities that were exclusive to landscapes, that is to say, to everyday visual experiences on the ground.

Landscape, as a genre of painting and as a view, was concerned with the detail and the incidental and accidental aspects. It focused on the particularity of life as it was lived by necessity, which implied the presence of a lively foreground. The viewpoint was on ground level and these paintings, due to a visually rich viewpoint, had 'depth', i.e. they showed a clear tripartition (fore-, middle- and background) with the viewpoint being located within the foreground. A prospect, by contrast, was concerned with an overview, an analysis and a higher understanding of the area (Macarthur, 2007a: 190). Picturesque theorists argued that visual depth is a precondition for visual pleasure, which is why they argued that prospects do not make good pictures because "their viewpoints were too high and therefore as pictures, their horizons would be too high or too low (ibid.):

From a prospect one looks out or down, but not 'into'. [...] Looking down from a high place gives too much plan information that lacks the articulation of successive depths, which achieves the spatial illusion of looking into a picture. Without foreground, their surface distributions look very similar to one another. The differences between them are geographical rather than pictorial: all are governed by the line of the horizon splitting sky from the earth (Macarthur, 2007a: 191).

The landscape looked into a scene and had depth, while the prospect looked out and down at a scene and was flat. A landscape, where the viewpoint has no representative significance in itself other than that it was chosen by the viewer and where details, the accidental, mundane and everyday were co-defining the distant view is not only a view that is visually pleasing but it is one that is pictorially unique. In Hastings' (1949) words, it has 'character'. It is a 'deep' and three-dimensional view that is changing quickly. I argue that a political aspect of it is that it is hard to pin down. Landscapes, as understood by picturesque writers, challenge the definition of stable and fixed representational views. In regard to the new London skyline as an easily marketable and easily reproducible city-image, they are 'useless for the purpose of capitalist

urbanisation’, to rephrase one of Benjamin’s (2006a) well-known lines in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”.⁹⁷

5.3 The aura of skylines

My concern in this section is to draw out the historiographical logic that underpins an understanding of skylines as views that are defined by a free line of vision towards the wider city, as compared to one that underpins an understanding of them in terms of visual fragments. I argue for a political understanding of distance that forms the basis for my analysis of different visual strategies of how to visually relate the viewing place to the City in the distance. In order to develop this argument, I draw on one of Benjamin’s best-known concepts, that of the aura of art objects.

In his description of New York in *Skyline: The narcissistic city*, Hubert Damisch (2001) writes:

It is true that much of the impact of modern Manhattan, much of its ‘aura,’ in Benjamin’s sense, whether viewed frontally or from the air, derives from its monumental geometric outline, the invention of its skyline paralleling that of its site [...] far from being reducible to a silhouette, to a simple façade-effect, Manhattan stands out against the sky like a series of profiles, creating what Le Corbusier called a ‘spectacle plastique’ (Damisch, 2001: 93).⁹⁸

In a footnote, Damisch quotes Benjamin’s definition of aura in the Artwork essay.

We define the aura [...] as the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye – while resting on a summer afternoon – a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch (Benjamin, 2006a: 255).

⁹⁷ The line I am referring to is the following: “In what follows, the concepts which are introduced into the theory of art differ from those now current in that they are completely useless for the purposes of fascism. On the other hand, they are useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art [Kunstpolitik]” (Benjamin, 2006a: 252; original emphasis).

⁹⁸ In *Skyline: The narcissistic city*, Damisch (2001) analyses architecture and cities through the twin lenses of cultural theory and psychoanalysis and includes a wide range of subjects, from the reconstruction of the Egyptian labyrinth to architectural museums and national parks of the American West.

Aura is one of Benjamin's most ambiguous and complex concepts. While I will focus on a very particular and urban interpretation, it is nevertheless necessary to understand the concept in a broader context. Fundamentally, Benjamin's concept of aura refers to an object's authenticity, "the here and now of [it] – its unique existence in a particular place" (ibid.: 253). An auratic object is one that can be uniquely located in space and time. Because uniqueness cannot be reproduced, aura can also not be reproduced, which is why in an age of technological reproducibility aura 'withers'.

Technologically reproduced objects and artworks have lost their uniqueness, and therefore also their "embeddedness in the context of tradition" (ibid.: 256). According to Benjamin, this, however, is their political potential.⁹⁹ An object that is released from historical fixation has the potential to gain political value, which, I suggest, is most of all a disruptive and revolutionary value. The non-auratic object can be understood as one that does lend itself easily to assistance of the powerful. In so doing, it can be used to work against historical continuity by the means of its reproducibility and 'nearness'. But what does nearness mean?

According to Benjamin, over long historical periods our mode of perception changes. He sees the decline of aura as related to a broader cultural phenomenon: "*the desire of the present-day masses to 'get closer' to things spatially and humanly, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness [Überwindung des Einmaligen jeder Gegebenheit] by assimilating it as a reproduction*" (Benjamin, 2006a: 255; original emphasis). Benjamin's statement is important because it hints at the ambiguous sense of distance (and hence also nearness) that is encapsulated in the notion of aura. Aura does not refer to a fixed spatial or temporal distance, but more to the *appearance* of distance. In the second version of the Artwork essay, Benjamin (2006e) describes aura as a "strange tissue [*Gespinnst*] of space and time" (104). I suggest that in regard to a city's skylines, this strange spatial-temporal tissue refers to, first, what is perceived and, second, how it is perceived. Take Benjamin's description of the work of the French photographer Eugene Atget:

⁹⁹ With technological reproducibility, with artworks that can not only technologically be reproduced but that are designed to be technologically reproduced, "the age of auratic perception [...] is now coming to an end" (Benjamin, 2006e: Footnote No. 23).

With Atget, photographic records begin to be evidence in the historical trial. This constitutes their hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of reception. Free-floating contemplation is no longer appropriate to them (Benjamin, 2006a: 258).

Atget photographed empty, ordinary street scenes. For Benjamin, these photographs – which are like records of a crime scene (Frisby, 200: 94) – are non-auratic and political because they avoid showing monuments, landmark buildings and other well-known historical sites of the city. They avoid the representation of buildings that are embedded in the continuum of tradition and in that respect the representations themselves are not embedded in the continuum of tradition either. The ordinary, empty street scenes cannot be uniquely located in history and they refuse to assist those who are in power.¹⁰⁰

‘Urban shrines’ (Kaika and Thielen, 2006) are buildings of superior scale and in prime locations, which visually dominate their physical context, as mentioned in the Introduction. They are embedded in the context of tradition, which is what gives them their uniqueness and ‘distance’ to the perceiving subject. It is exactly such ‘urban shrines’ that Atget avoids with his focus on the ordinary or, better, on ‘non-monuments’. The representation of hitherto ‘unrecognised’ objects disrupts a continuous representation of history. While the auratic skyline is one that assists the powerful by representing her/his monuments, a non-auratic skyline is not reduced to the celebration of singled-out monuments and aims to bring the spatially and temporally distant nearer.

An understanding of aura as the celebration of monuments finds a parallel in Nietzsche’s (1997) description of monumental history. While Benjamin (2006a) defines aura in relation to natural objects and a mountain range on the horizon (255), Nietzsche writes:

That the great moments in the struggle of the human individual constitute a chain, that this chain unites mankind across the millennia like a range of human mountain peaks, that the summit of such a long-ago moment shall be for me still living, bright and great – that is the fundamental idea of the faith in humanity which finds expression in the demand for a *monumental* history (Nietzsche, 1997: 68).

¹⁰⁰ In her discussion of Benjamin’s notion of aura in relation to portrait photography, Esther Leslie (2000) emphasises that as long as the subject in power finds an authentic representation of her/himself, there is still a rest of aura in this representation (145).

A conceptualisation of the past as a ‘range of human mountain peaks’ is an attempt to “‘memorize’ the monuments of the past” (Foucault, 2009: 7). Understood spatially and temporally, this conception, I suggest, is related to an understanding of skylines that focuses on the visibility and appreciability of monuments from afar, which are understood as being representative of the city.

If the professional production of the new London skyline revolves around the visibility and appreciability of St Paul’s, then it must be understood as having an auratic quality. This quality, in turn, is dependent on the fixing of visual relationships. The visual relationship between St Paul’s and the Eastern cluster can only be fixed if a visually disrupting and destabilising foreground is absent. On the one hand, this absence might not only flatten the city in the distance but also ‘aestheticise’ it, as several literary accounts of New York’s skylines at the end of the nineteenth century, for example, suggest (see Lindner, 2006; Burchard and Bush-Brown, 1967). From a distance, it seems, buildings tend not to reveal their ‘ugliness’, which requires a view from close by; skyscrapers tend to be turned into abstract compositions (Warner, 1984). An auratic skyline, I want to emphasise, is not only a ‘beautiful’ but also a ‘powerful’ image. The beautiful image, in which the visual relationship between urban shrines is fixed, is a stage for showcasing and further enhancing power.

Developing this argument further, I want to go back to Benjamin’s description of Atget’s photographs of cityscapes and highlight his suggestion that these representations evoke and demand a particular type of perception, which is not ‘free-floating contemplation’. In this context, ‘free-floating’ needs to be distinguished from an engaged and political reception. This is a distinction that also refers to the difference between the reception of a painting and that of a film, as discussed in Chapter 4. Furthermore, contemplation needs to be distinguished from distraction:

The painting invites the viewer to contemplation; before it he can give himself up to his train of associations. Before a film image, he cannot do so. No sooner has he seen it than it has already changed. It cannot be fixed on” (Benjamin, 2006a: 267).

Watching a film, viewers’ trains of associations are constantly disrupted. Benjamin describes this as the tactile quality, the interrupting element of a film (ibid.). This

interrupting element is crucial because to be absorbed by an object's aesthetic quality might result in an uncritical and apolitical reading of it. Contemplative immersion can become a "breeding ground for asocial behaviour" (ibid.). Free-floating contemplation describes a type of reception in which we are both absorbed by an object and, at the same time, distant from the object. These two characteristics together allow us to be able to create a kind of dialogue with the object, what Richard Wolin (1994) describes as "the ability [of an auratic object] to look at us in return" (237):¹⁰¹

Distraction and concentration [*Zerstreuung und Sammlung*] form an antithesis, which may be formulated as follows. A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work [...]. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. This is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through the collective (Benjamin, 2006a: 268).

The distinction between the reception of an auratic painting and that of a non-auratic film is one between individual and collective reception. And it is also one between concentration and distraction. For Benjamin, distraction is related to repetition, as Gilloch (2002: 191) emphasises; not to inattention but to paying attention elsewhere: "Distracted, one acquires and demonstrates habits; yet one is also distracted when these habits are disturbed and interrupted" (ibid.).

The political dimension of distraction lies in the "reorientation towards, and re-evaluation of, the excluded and despised" (ibid.). There is a political potential in being distracted from the hegemonic vision of the city, in not concentrating on the so-called 'key view' that is defined by a free line of vision towards a heritage asset and the wider City. This connection between distraction and destruction – which, in my discussion, implies the visual destruction of the City in the distance – is related to Benjamin's (2006g) "Theory of distraction", where he writes of "Distraction and destruction [...]" as the subjective and objective sides, respectively, of one and the same process" (141). Distraction refers to a destruction of historical continuum and, visually, to a destruction of the wholeness of an image that encapsulates a continuous historical narrative.

¹⁰¹ "Derivation of the aura as the projection of a human social experience onto nature: the gaze is returned" (Benjamin, 2006d: 173).

5.3.1 *Tactility*

In the previous chapter, I argued for a cinematic rather than painterly conceptualisation of skylines. Building on that argument, in this chapter I further emphasised the political dimensions of an interrupted, distracted and disturbed reception of skylines, in which the free-floating train of associations is not given free rein. At this point, I want to emphasise the spatiality of this concern:

Buildings are received in a twofold manner: by use and by perception. Or, better: tactilely and optically. Such reception cannot be understood in terms of the concentrated attention of a traveler before a famous building. On the tactile side, there is no counterpart to what contemplation is on the optical side. Tactile reception comes about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which spontaneously takes the form of casual noticing, rather than attentive observation (Benjamin, 2006a: 268).¹⁰²

The tactile quality of a movie is its interruption of a free-floating train of associations. This tactile quality can, to a certain degree, be seen as a parallel to the haptic quality of a place. The street furniture along the main walkway on the South Bank provides the user not only with pleasant spatial qualities but it is also useful for the process of visual destabilisation of buildings on the skyline and, in so doing, for the critical engagement with a meta-narrative.

While a painterly conceptualisation of skylines aims at visual stability (the full control of a distant image of London as a world city), a cinematic and non-auratic conceptualisation is instable, multiple and near. The latter, then, is fundamentally different from an understanding of skylines as representational city-images that are sent around the world. Of course, visual experiences of a skyline in the city are unique and auratic. However, the idea that I want to put forward is that a non-auratic and critical approach towards skylines highlights and makes use of the auratic quality of the immediate visual surrounding, the viewing place, in order to ‘distract’ from the aura of a skyline in the distance:

¹⁰² In different English versions the German term ‘*rezipieren*’ (Benjamin, 1991, Vol. I: 465, 504) is translated differently. While in this translation it is translated as ‘received’, in other translations it is sometimes translated as ‘appropriated’. The German ‘*rezipieren*’ means both to get to know something and to process it mentally.

To follow with the eye – while resting on a summer afternoon – a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch (Benjamin, 2006a: 255).

However, in order to disenchant the ‘mountain range of office towers in the City’, the smooth hill-like skyline profile of the Eastern cluster, just as much as the visually unique and isolated St Paul’s Cathedral, it is crucial that the visual nearby does not play into a skyline’s hands, but that it visually destroys it.

I argue that a conceptualisation of a skyline as a distant view without a visually interrupting viewing place – a distant view from Waterloo Bridge, for example, such that professionals describe not only as a fine view but also as “a magnificent panorama” (RoEH2, 37) and as “the best panorama of the City” (ibid.) – is in danger of turning both old and new buildings, St Paul’s and office towers, representations of the Church and of financial capitalism, into auratic and apolitical objects on a skyline. When, at the beginning of the twentieth century, some photographers stepped away from the nearby townscape to turn to distant views, they turned skyscrapers into abstract compositions, Warner (1984) suggests. In so doing, they moved the skyscraper “from a position of conflict in the ideology to the older position of the tradition of civic pride” (194). Such a process can only be interrupted through detailed realities. Visual proximity is a precondition for the distraction of a skyline’s aura, similar to the proximity of a film that is the prerequisite for the disenchantment of the artwork (see Gilloch, 2002: 161):

The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue. The images obtained by each differ enormously. The painter’s is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer is piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law (Benjamin, 2006a: 263f).

When I ask design-related professionals to approach a skyline not like a total image but like manifold parts that are put in a critical constellation, I do so because I see this as the basis for a critical historiographical approach to formalised vision. In the next section I want to discuss different visual strategies of how to relate the distant to the nearby and explain how these visual strategies are related to historiographical ones.

5.4 Visual appropriation

5.4.1 *The picturesque and visual appropriation*

One of the critical dimensions of a distant view with a visually rich foreground is its complicated reproducibility as a static image with fixed visual relationships between elements. Furthermore, I suggest that the *Here & Now* of the viewing place cannot only help to make a view ‘visually pleasing’ but, more importantly, it can make it topical. It can help the viewer to visually appropriate a distant view. I want to highlight the term ‘appropriation’ (from late Latin *appropriatio* (n-), from *appropriare* ‘make one’s own’), which describes an act of setting apart or taking for one’s own use; a deliberate act of acquisition, often without the permission of the owner (OED). It also refers to the idea of making a thing private property, whether another’s or one’s own.

Visual appropriation is an active act. It is an attempt to approach the *There & Then* from the *Here & Now* in order to make use of it. This was a common concern among picturesque landscape designers, such as Humphry Repton, who even claimed to have coined the term. Literary sources in the OED suggest, however, that the term had actually been in use since the end of the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, Repton certainly did develop concrete visual strategies that explain how visual appropriation can be conceived as a critical strategy.

Repton’s task as a landscape designer was to master viewing experiences for clients who often owned relatively small properties near to cities. The late eighteenth century was a time of gradually opening land. This so-called enclosure was a process that ended traditional rights such as mowing meadows for hay or grazing livestock on common land. Repton identified a natural propensity to enjoy looking at what one owns and imagining of what one looks at (Macarthur, 2007a: 177). In this context, visual appropriation meant to sufficiently control and compose the foreground, in order to enable a greater, if more ephemeral, appropriation of the whole of one’s view (ibid.: 176). In other words, the landowner of a small property acquired someone else’s land visually, in order to have the visual impression of owning a bigger property. Such a visual appropriation required a particular spatial arrangement of those elements that could be re-arranged; i.e. those in the landowner’s property in the foreground.

Repton used the foreground and changes in topography to create a degree of exclusivity and compositional unities in views. What was outside the property should be made to seem part of it. To stop the boundary from becoming a major feature of the property, he reduced the contrast between the owned parkland and the agricultural countryside and allowed the boundary to be permeable both in terms of the view and of movement (ibid.: 181). One of the devices he made use of was the haw-haw, which is defined as follows:

a channel dug into the ground along the edge of fields; along the bottom of the channel a fence was laid. From the ground, at some distance, one might thus see cattle and horses roaming in the field and think the animals were free to wander; miraculously, they never strayed or escaped (Sennett, 1992: 74).¹⁰³

Repton's strategy of visual appropriation implied the manipulation of the foreground in order to make use of the background. For him, the visual relationship between the near and the distant is what defines the 'character' of a view (see Macarthur, 2007a; Daniels, 1999).¹⁰⁴ While Repton's concern with the character of a view implied the removal of interrupting and disturbing elements in the foreground, I suggest that in the context of skylines it can mean exactly the opposite: to include visually disrupting elements in the viewing place. This is an understanding that can be derived from selected Townscape principles.

5.4.2 Townscape and visual appropriation

Concerns with nearness have an important place in Townscape articles. In Cullen's "Townscape Casebook" from 1949, for example, several cases included skyline-related aspects that show a concern with the visual relationship between the far and the near. In principle, Cullen introduces two very different visual strategies. The first one is called truncation and implies "the cutting off by foreground of part of a building, either by street or ground or steps" (370). According to Cullen it has "the quality of making the building part of the scene and not an end in itself" (ibid.) and refers to a visual principle that aims at shortening the middle ground in order to bring the background into the

¹⁰³ The haw-haw, originally developed by French gardeners in the seventeenth century, was taken up by English gardeners, who began to play with the device and made it both more irregular and more invisible.

¹⁰⁴ Macarthur (2007a) suggests that in urban design throughout the nineteenth century, "the emphasis gradually shifted from how a building could make use of the greater site beyond the property to how a building could change and inflect the whole 'Townscape'" (176).

foreground. It makes distant objects appear closer to the viewer. An example of truncation involves the manipulation of the topography. When the viewer stands on a sloped, transcending ground, and when the ground is flat before the location of the buildings, then in the viewer's eye that flat part of the ground is 'cut out'.

Another important visual strategy that Cullen introduces is called 'netting'. Under the heading 'eye as netter', he includes an example of a 'netted panorama':

The effect of screening is to relate, and thus create, detail of the general. The everyday dull scene ceases to be utilitarian. It becomes a piece of scenery that you are attending to (Cullen, 1949: 365).

Cullen refers to an historical etching that shows a scene of the sea with several ships and a palace in the foreground and writes:

As though to underline the point the artist has carefully placed ships in the spaces between columns. This is the effect that netting produces, but a photograph is usually too instantaneous to capture it (Cullen, 1949: 365).

These two quotes are important because they allow us to think about netting as both an aesthetical and a historiographical principle. Cullen suggests that netting involves the decontextualisation of what he regards as everyday dull scenes by relating them visually to an appreciated scene. By means of visually relating the utilitarian to the artistic, or so it seems, the utilitarian gains value. In a way, netting is another example of the montage principle discussed in chapters 3 and 4. Two different urban scenes, which are usually not seen in visual relationship with each other, are juxtaposed by means of which the viewer can see them in a new light. This, at least, is a surrealist interpretation of Cullen's visual principle.

Note that there is also an aspect of ephemerality in Cullen's account when he argues that a photograph can be too instantaneous in order to reproduce the transforming effect of netting. Yet by arguing against photography as an appropriate representational form he acknowledges and highlights the ephemeral quality of netting; this is important in the current context because both decontextualisation and ephemerality are important aspects of a critical historiography.

5.4.3 History as construction versus historical reconstruction

I suggest that Cullen's (1949) two strategies of how to visually appropriate the distant for the nearby can be roughly paralleled to two different approaches to history: historical empathy, or what I also call historical reconstruction and history as construction.

Truncation is an attempt to overcome distance. It refers to the visual 'trick' of an elusive shortening of distance. It is the creation of an illusion that the distant object or event can be brought into the present without 'damage' – or that the distant object or event can be reconstructed in the way it really was. In historiographical terms this is called historical empathy, which refers to the idea that it is possible to put oneself in somebody else's shoes, principally somebody who lived in the past. In arguing for a critical reading of history that starts from the *Here & Now* of the viewer it is undeniable that historical empathy is problematic. Benjamin (2006c) describes it as process that aims to "blot out everything [one] knows about the later course of history" (391), and therefore it is related to a process of uncritical reconstruction: a reconstruction of the past that is based on the belief that temporal distance can be overcome easily and in a controlled and conscious way.

Netting, on the other hand, refers less to a visual illusion than to the construction of productive visual relationships. It relates to an understanding of history in terms of a construction of the present and the past or, better, a construction of the *Here & Now* and the *There & Then*. History as construction is a dynamic structure that links past and present but, ultimately, it is motivated by a present concern. Such a construction has the power to blast a past "out of the continuum of history" (ibid.: 395), i.e. the power to disrupt historical continuity.

In my discussion of the politics of representing time, I mentioned Benjamin's distinction between an additive approach towards history and a constructive principle of history. The former characterises historicism, the latter Benjamin's conception of historical materialism. An additive conception of time is the basis for the narrative of the victorious and powerful. Together with historical empathy it is a recipe for maintaining traditional power relationships.

Historicism ultimately sympathises with the victor, Benjamin argues, and because “all rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors”, as we saw earlier, “empathizing with the victor inevitably benefits the current rulers” (Benjamin, 2006c: 391). A conception of history as construction, by contrast, has the power to disrupt traditional lines of domination. The difference between history as reconstruction and history as construction is clearly present in the AP:

It is important for the materialist historian, in the most rigorous way possible, to differentiate the construction of a historical state of affairs from what one customarily calls its ‘reconstruction.’ The ‘reconstruction’ in empathy is one-dimensional. ‘Construction’ presupposes ‘destruction’ (Benjamin, 2002: 470 [N7,6]).

History as construction is not an attempt to overcome distance, but rather to make use of it. The construction of *Here & Now* and *There & Then* is not a stable and easily controllable one, as Benjamin’s (2002) notion of the dialectical image suggests. It is, like a ‘flash of lightning’ – a moment of illumination. Cullen’s (1949) visual principle of netting is primarily concerned with aesthetics rather than politics. However, I argue that when netting is enriched with a constructive understanding of time, it turns into a relevant tool to critically engage with the conservatism that is typical of formalised vision.

What current professionals regard as a fine distant view is a view that refers to both historical continuity and historical empathy. Design-related professionals argue for the continuing visual dominance of St Paul’s in views from Waterloo Bridge. This conceptualisation is based on spatial closure and a linear and continuous representation of time, as I showed in Chapter 3. In this chapter I showed that the current planning framework suggests that visual appreciation of a skyline is related to a visually non-disrupting viewing place. Building on that discussion and arguing against an auratic skyline, I now want to give a concrete example of a non-auratic skyline that highlights the constructive principle of time.

5.5 Non-auratic urban images

One of the main reasons why distant views from Waterloo Bridge are so important in professional skyline debates is the argument that the bridge is one of the very few publicly accessible places in London from which St Paul's can be visually appreciated from a distance. Crucially, it is also one of the few publicly accessible places from which both St Paul's and the Eastern cluster can be read side-by-side. Trying to read the new London skyline "against the grain" (Benjamin, 2006c: [VII] 392), I have thus found myself on the lookout for alternative viewing places for London's skylines.

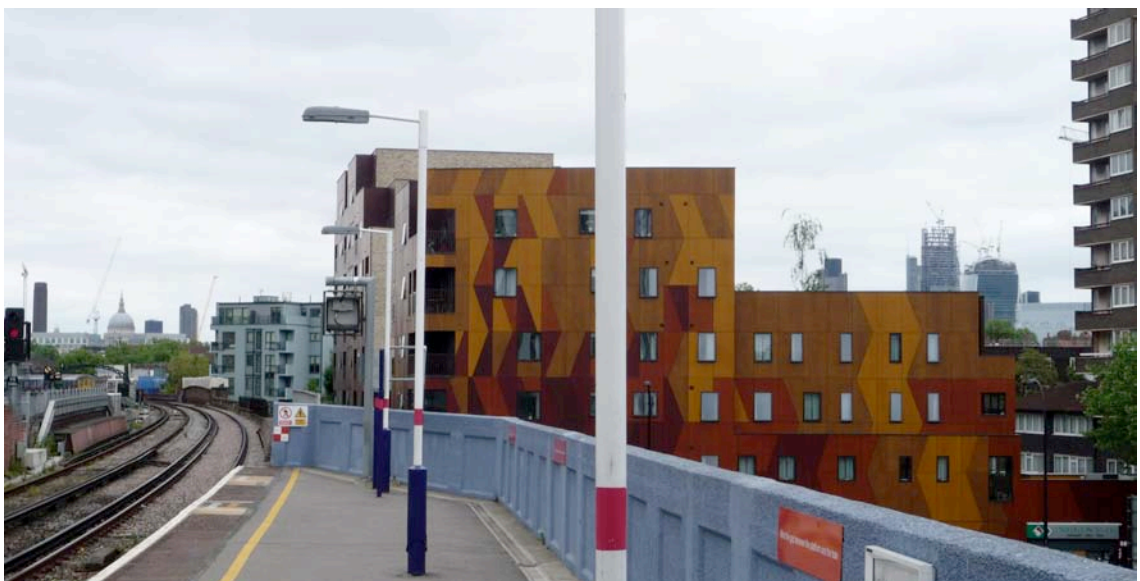


Figure 35: The City skyline as seen from Elephant and Castle Station in 2013 (Gassner, 2013).

I end up south of the Thames, in Elephant and Castle in Southwark, which is historically one of the poorer boroughs in London. Standing on the elevated platform at Elephant and Castle train station, I get a glimpse of both St Paul's and several office towers. With a new building development close by, the dome of the Cathedral, the chimney of Tate Modern and a Barbican tower on the left-hand side and Tower 42, the Heron Tower and another tower that is currently under construction on the right-hand side, I realise that from this distant viewpoint the City's skyline does not conform with the professional construct of what makes a fine and appreciable view. This is the case for two key reasons. First, the skyline is interrupted by the visual nearby: newly constructed housing developments, which may or may not be visually pleasing. The foreground

visually breaks the skyline. Second, the dome of St Paul's is visible, it is also appreciable, as it can be seen in a degree of isolation with 'sufficient' air space around it, but it is not the visually dominant feature in the distance. This is true because several other tall structures, such as the chimney of the Tate Modern, are also visible next to it, and also, because the Eastern cluster is not recognisable as such. There is no smooth hill-like skyline profile that unites office towers and, in so doing, allows the cathedral to stand out; instead, the high-rises that are part of the cluster look visually uncoordinated. I read them as a series of individual towers and not as a coherent group.

I turn my head to the right and see that I'm standing right next to the 'remains' of the Heygate Estate. This large estate with its neo-brutalist architecture was built in the 1970s. It was once a popular place to live as it provided light and spacious flats in modern blocks that are arranged in a modernist planning fashion, surrounded by large, open green spaces. Since the 2000s, however, the Heygate Estate has fallen into severe disrepair and has now been empty for several years. Windows and corridors are barricaded and elevated pedestrian platforms, which connected different blocks with public spaces, are fenced off. I imagine that one must have had uninterrupted views towards the City in the distance from some of the flats in the estate and from some of the elevated platforms.



Figure 36: The Heygate Estate with an elevated pedestrian platform (centre of the image) in 2013 (Gassner, 2013).

The estate is in its final stage of decay, soon to be demolished in order to make a place for a new urban development. At this stage, it attracts young people from the neighbourhood. I see some graffiti sprayers and other young people who just hang out. The run-down aesthetics of the estate and the graffiti also attract ‘tourists’: photographers, journalists, artists, and the like.

I walk over to the estate, jump over some fences, give myself access to the elevated pedestrian network. Having just arrived at one of the more central and higher platforms, a police horn blares; young people run or cycle away. I run and jump too. What has caught the police’s attention? Four policemen patrol through the estate.

What happens when the total image, the harmonious ensemble of the new London skyline meets the realities of the Heygate Estate on the ground? When the new London skyline is not designed for Westminster, which is one of the richest boroughs in London, but for boroughs in the east or south of London, which include historically the most deprived areas in London?¹⁰⁵

What happens when the promise that the financial industries in the square mile create wealth the ‘whole’ country benefits from meets poverty in London and the gap between rich and poor that is widening at an increased speed? The Corporation of London emphasises the “the City’s long established business role and its importance to London and the country as a whole” (CoL, 2002a: 141) and Tavernor (2004b) highlights the relevance of the City’s image suggesting that “[i]t is widely recognized in the UK that the richest urban environment – visually as well as politically, economically and culturally – will draw wealth to London” (45). The argument that the City ‘sustains’ the rest of the economy was prevalent during Thatcherism and it was probably turned upside down during the financial crisis. In visual terms, the question is as follows: what happens to the celebrated dome of St Paul’s as well as to shiny, iconic high-rises when they are confronted with the run-down Heygate Estate?

¹⁰⁵ For London’s poverty profile, see www.londonpovertyprofile.org.uk/about/an-overview-of-london-borough/ [accessed 21 August 2013].



Figure 37: The City skyline with one block of the Heygate Estate close by (Gassner, 2012).¹⁰⁶



Figure 38: The Eastern cluster of the new London skyline as conceptualised from Waterloo Bridge seen from the Heygate Estate (Gassner, 2012).

¹⁰⁶ For a discussion see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/davehillblog/2013/feb/28/london-regeneration-principles-southwark> [accessed 21 August 2013].

Having studied professional conceptualisations of London's skylines, which focus almost entirely on aesthetic aspects rather than on an aesthetical-political, spatial and temporal understanding of skylines, the Heygate Estate experience has 'depth' for me. It opens up tensions between professional debates and personal visual experiences, and also between the City of London and the estate.¹⁰⁷ Such tensions are not easily solvable. For me, looking at the City from the elevated platform turns the skyline into a subject of critical political appropriation by means of the aesthetics of the *Here & Now* and the *There & Then*. This, I want to suggest, is a politicisation of aesthetics, in which a politically charged *Here & Now* awakes the *There & Then* from its beauty sleep.

5.6 Outside the skyline

A skyline that is not visually disrupted by a foreground is one where the viewer is conceptualised as outside the view. Such a skyline, I suggest, can be described as having an auratic quality, in that it keeps the viewer at a 'distance'. In my discussion of the non-auratic skyline I highlight two political concerns: first, the resistance to defining a skyline solely by the visibility and appreciability of well-known landmarks and established historical monuments and, second, the resistance to being absorbed by the aesthetic value of an abstract visual representation of the City in the distance. I argue for visual destruction of the 'whole' image of the City from outside its borders.

A critical approach to a skyline's in-built spatial-temporal distance, I want to suggest, starts from a present concern. In that respect, I regard Nietzsche's (1997) plea "to serve history only to the extent that history serves life" (59) as important. For a political rather than historical reading of the past, the conceptualisation of history as a dynamic construction that is opposed to historical reconstruction is highly relevant and I suggest that Cullen's (1949) strategy of visual netting can be understood as something of a spatial 'ally' to a conceptualisation of history as dynamic construction.

Netting is usually regarded as a solely aesthetic and visual concern; however, I understand it in terms of its potential to be a critical historiographical device. In a non-

¹⁰⁷ For a discussion of urban ruins as dialectical images that are politically instructive see Rendell, 2011; Borden, 2007.

auratic skyline, in which the cityscape is not reduced to “cultural treasures” in historicism’s “triumphal procession” (Benjamin, 2006c: [VII] 391), monuments are not undervalued but rather the past is read from the present. It is an attempt to read aesthetic, architectural and historical values politically and, most importantly, from a topical perspective.

With many of the buildings being financial services-related, the City of London is not one of London’s most diverse and multi-functional areas. It is quite likely that many citizens who do not work there and who are not interested in pilgrimaging to the historical sites of the City have little reason to go there (with the possible exception of cocktail bars and restaurants, which are increasingly often located on office towers’ top floors, as this is sometimes a precondition for granting planning permission – or, at the very least, a strategy to persuade those who are critical of office towers in central London of their utility). The non-auratic skyline is an attempt to conceptualise the City from outside its borders not as a beautiful and pleasing image but as part of a critical reading of history. My concern is not solely with the visual appropriation of a skyline’s inbuilt *There & Then* for achieving visual pleasure, as was argued in the eighteenth-century picturesque debates, but with the opposition of a skyline’s *There & Then* and a viewer’s *Here & Now* as part of a critique from outside.

Chapter 6: The multidirectional skyline

6.1 Celebrating historical progress

The Skylon was a futuristic-looking, slender, vertical, cigar-shaped steel tensegrity structure that was located on the South Bank for the 1951 Festival of Britain.¹⁰⁸ With its base nearly fifteen metres from the ground, it looked as if it floated above the surface. With the top nearly ninety metres high, it was highly visible on many of London's skylines. According to the OED, the name was probably derived from 'pylon', which describes a monumental gateway to an Egyptian temple that is usually formed by two truncated pyramidal towers that are connected by a lower section containing the gate. Other sources, which are also mentioned in the OED, indicate that both the name and the form referred to 'Trylon', a popular feature of the 1939 World's Fair in New York. However, the name could have also been derived from 'skyhook' and 'nylon' in a more technological-descriptive fashion.

Material removed for copyright reasons. See
<http://www.patternpeople.com/interiors-the-festival-of-britain-revival/skylon/>.

Figure 39: The Skylon representing the Festival of Britain in 1951.

¹⁰⁸ The Skylon was designed by the architects Philip Powell, Hidalgo Moya and Felix Samuely, and a structural engineer who had worked with the German-Jewish architect Erich Mendelsohn. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/artblog/2008/jul/09/skylonwhatsthepointofrebu> [accessed 21 August 2013].

The British architect Sir Hugh Casson was the Chairman of the Committee of Festival Architects and a supporter of the Townscape movement.¹⁰⁹ According to him, the Skylon's purpose was "simply to hang up in the air and to astonish".¹¹⁰ But the astonishment it might have created had a short lifespan. It was removed in 1952 on the orders of Winston Churchill, who saw it as a symbol of the preceding Labour Government.¹¹¹ According to Jude Kelly, the current artistic director of the Southbank Centre, the structure was thrown in the River Lea in East London. However, rumour also has it that it was dumped in the Thames, buried under Jubilee Gardens, cut into pieces and turned into ashtrays or simply sold for scrap.¹¹²

The Festival of Britain was a national exhibition in London and around Britain with the principle exhibition site at the South Bank. Part of its purpose was to give Britons a feeling of recovery and progress after WW II. The reanimation of the riverside in central London and the promotion of better quality design were meant to play their part in doing so. The festival looked both back and forward in time. It was a reminder of the 1851 Great Exhibition, which was the first of a series of World's Fair exhibitions of culture and industry, housed in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park.¹¹³ And it looked forward to a new era of greatness after the destruction of the war.

Casson's description of the festival architecture is based on an argument for cultural and historical continuity of informal design principles under the pretext of 'Englishness':

The British don't generally like rhetoric in their buildings, there are few ceremonial avenues in our cities, on purpose then, the South Bank had no processional way and no great vistas. On purpose, it didn't have the symmetry and the repetitive grandeur of some other great cities and their exhibitions. It was

¹⁰⁹ Aitchison (2008) describes Casson as one of the 'developers' of Townscape and identifies fifteen Townscape-related articles in the AR produced by him (310ff).

¹¹⁰ This quote is from the documentary "Brief City: The Story of London's Festival Buildings" from 1952. For a transcription see http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/films/1945to1951/popup/transcript/trans_bc.htm [accessed 21 August 2013].

¹¹¹ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/reunion/reunion5.shtml> [accessed 21 August 2013].

¹¹² See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/8270118/Festival-of-Britain-divers-to-searching-for-missing-Skylon.html#> [accessed 24 August 2013].

¹¹³ The Crystal Palace was a cast-iron glass building that was 564 metres long with an interior height of 39 metres, designed by Joseph Paxton. After the exhibition it was moved to a new park next to Sydenham Hill, which is a suburb of London. It stood there until 1936, when it was destroyed by fire.

planned intimately, like rooms opening one out of another. Each room or courtyard differed in size and shape, and colour, character and furniture. Sometimes the change from room to room was made between the narrow openings between the shoulders of buildings. Sometimes by a sudden change of level and sometimes by a change in the pattern and texture of the ground. Every courtyard contained the hint of another to follow, or the memory of one just passed. And this was not merely exhibition antics, devised to surprise and impress, it was in fact basically the traditional way of building in this country (Casson, 1952).¹¹⁴

The avoidance of great vistas, a plea for intimate and small-scale open places, an interest in sudden changes and visual surprises, and attention to the sequential visual experience of the city: all this is what the Townscape movement promoted.¹¹⁵ Yet at the same time it promoted modernism in architecture. Suspended balconies, light open railings, the Skylon and festival buildings such as the Dome of Discovery, the Telekinema and the Royal Festival Hall: these were structures that showcased both modern aesthetics and advanced technologies.

The 1851 Great Exhibition was arguably a celebration of progress. In the nineteenth century, progress became a religion, Buck-Morss (1991) suggests in her analysis of the AP, with “world exhibitions its holy shrines, commodities its cult objects, and Haussmann’s ‘new’ Paris its Vatican City” (90). Benjamin (2002) quotes Victor Hugo: “Progress is the very footstep of God” ([d2,2] 746). Progress, here, means technological progress, which tends to stand in for historical progress. For the 1951 Festival, just six years after WW II ended, such an equation of technological progress with historical progress was arguably difficult to evoke.

In this chapter I discuss different notions of visual, technological and historical progress with regard to skylines. In previous chapters I showed that in current skyline debates London’s past is represented in a linear and continuous way. I suggested that both advocates and opponents of tall buildings argue for the continuing visual dominance of historical buildings, such as St Paul’s. In what ways then, if at all, does the new London

¹¹⁴ Festival structures that were located on the Southbank included the Dome of Discovery (the largest dome that had ever been built then; demolished in 1952), the Telekinema (demolished in 1957) and the Royal Festival Hall.

¹¹⁵ Two years before the festival the AR published a comprehensive plan entitled “Bankside Regained: A Scheme for Developing the South Bank of the Thames with an Eye to the 1951 Exhibition”. For a discussion see Aitchison, 2008: 206.

skyline represent progress or a regress from London's historical skyline? In this chapter I critically examine different notions of progress and argue against the over-simplification of a one-directional and progressive understanding of time.

The non-auratic skyline, which I discussed in Chapter 5, is a conception that aims to politicise spatial-temporal distance. It is a visual strategy to destruct the wholeness of an easily marketable city-image. Visual destruction in order to allow a process of critical re-arrangement is a process that I see as related to a more proactive engagement with how the City is represented than "free-floating contemplation" (Benjamin, 2006a: 258). The non-auratic skyline is a visual fragment, a visual ruin, which challenges the totality of the city-image. Along a similar line, in this chapter I use the notion of physical and programmatic ruins to critically examine a linear and progressive understanding of history as represented in a city's skyline, and argue instead for a multidirectional understanding of history.

I commence this chapter with a brief discussion of how design-related professionals debate what type of cityscape the City needs now and in the future, before I go back to professional debates about the very same question after WW II. I emphasise three dimensions of the AR's proposal for post-war construction in the City: first, the attempt of a non-monumental reading of monuments; second, the argument for office and retail blocks in close proximity to St Paul's; and third, the campaign to save bombed-out churches in the City and to keep them in their ruined state. I then move on to a discussion of the 'revolutionary energy' of ruins and outdated objects, focusing on a close reading of Benjamin's conceptualisation of ruins, his interpretation of the early Romantics' immanent criticism and his conceptualisation of an object's afterlife. I take these theoretical concepts and use them to revisit the new London skyline in 2013, or rather what has been materialised of it at the time of writing. I argue that the new London skyline is full of ruins too. These are programmatic rather than physical ruins, and to acknowledge these contemporary ruins, I suggest, is an act of avoiding an over-simplistic reading of a linear and progressive historical narrative. I then move on to examine the understanding of history that acknowledges and emphasises ruins and not only 'celebrated masterworks' and I finish with a cross-reference to Hastings' idea of an

alternative – and progressed – society and the critical role the cityscape he sees in achieving it.

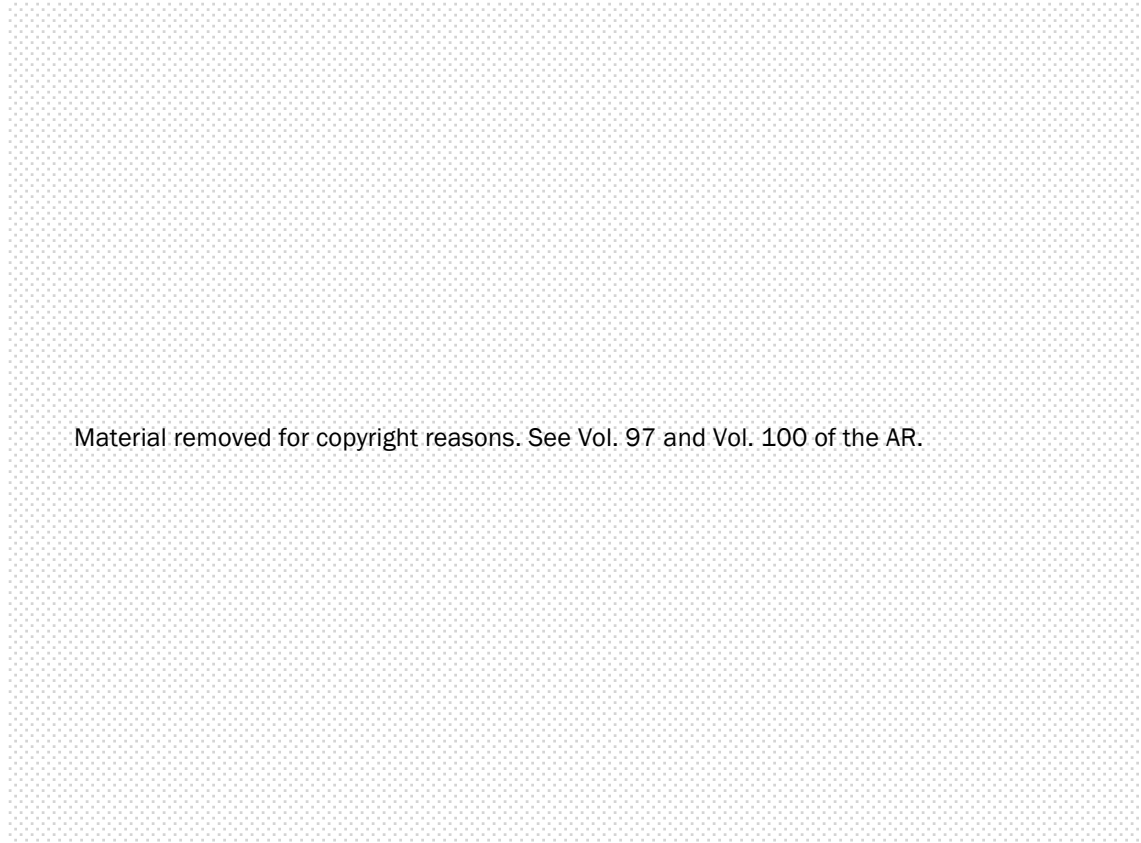


Figure 40: Post-WW II photographs of the City of London as shown in the AR.

6.2 Progress on London's skylines?

“In the city, time becomes visible”, Mumford (1940: 4) writes, and he continues by suggesting that through the “material fact of preservation, time challenges time, time clashes with time [...] past times preserve themselves in the city until life itself is finally threatened with suffocation: then, in sheer defense, modern man invents the museum” (ibid.). Two approaches towards history are to be distinguished in this context: the museum in the city and the city as a museum.¹¹⁶ Current professional debates about London's post-industrial city and the protection of views towards heritage assets often

¹¹⁶ See Frisby's (1985) discussion of the museum that renders history “harmless” (243).

revolve around the notion of the city as a lived-in museum. The main question that is put forward in this context is: what cityscape does contemporary London need?

EH is not opposed to the principle of high buildings in London. It does not advocate that London should be preserved as a museum piece. It recognises that London as a world city and the City of London as its financial centre must respond and adapt to changing requirements. However, EH is insistent that high buildings should only be permitted in locations where the historic environment is not damaged and where such structures would not harm the unique qualities so important to London's role as a world city (EH, 2002).

Are office towers what contemporary London needs? "There is a belief among politicians, architects and developers", Tavernor (2004b) states, "that tall buildings are a necessary part of London's future if it is to remain a leading world city" (37). On the one hand, they tend to argue that new office towers are necessary in order to be able to accommodate additional office space. And this in the face of recurring suggestions from some architects that, for some sites at least, a lower and fatter building is capable of accommodating a similar amount of office space as a taller and thinner one.

On the other hand, the need for a new office tower is sometimes also linked to the desire for a new image. The lifespan of buildings has become shorter and shorter. The average lifespan of new skyscrapers in New York, for example, is not more than thirty-five years (Sennett, 2013). One reason for the short lifespan is not that an existing building is not fit for purpose anymore, or that refurbishment would be too expensive, but rather that a new image will raise the real estate value and attract new tenants.¹¹⁷ However, while a new image for a particular site in the city is commercially valuable, an entirely new image for the whole city is not. Heritage is important for the city's economy (Larkham, 1999). Rather than arguing for a completely new skyline then, design-related professionals argue for visual improvement if not for the maintaining of the visual status quo.

¹¹⁷ I draw here on my own experience as an architect. In 2005, I worked on an office development in the City of London, a development intended to replace an existing office building that was thirty years old. While the existing office building would have needed refurbishment, the two main reasons for a new development the developers put forward were, first, the increase in the amount of office space and, second, the economic benefit of an entirely different image.

When it comes to the visibility and appreciability of St Paul's, EH rarely accepts that new structures in close visual proximity to St Paul's are acceptable. A representative argued that "St Paul's was designed as a landmark to dominate London's skylines and has done so for almost 3 centuries" (EH, 2002) and lamented that with the construction of tall buildings in the period post WW II, its "dominance has been reduced" (ibid.). Such a statement suggests that visual improvement would imply a reversion to a pre-WW II skyline, the destruction of the tall buildings that currently impinge on the visibility and appreciability of St Paul's in views from the west. EH rejected the idea that was put forward by a townscape consultant that the Heron Tower would solve an existing visual tension between Tower 42 and St Paul's, insisting instead that "any further tall building between the two will further impoverish St Paul's setting and dominance" (ibid.). A townscape consultant, by contrast, argued that the Pinnacle will minimise the sky gap between office towers, which will reduce the visual dominance of individual high-rises and, in so doing, will visually enhance St Paul's.

As different as these statements of the representative of EH and townscape consultant were, they were both based on the argument that St Paul's should stay the visually dominant feature on the skyline. Individual towers were not argued as favourable in terms of a progressive course of history, but in terms of a visual improvement of the reading of a historical building. The inclusion of the Heron Tower in the cluster "will create an 'effective backcloth' to the Cathedral of distinctive tall buildings that form a modern unity with which the Cathedral, as a great symbol of the Baroque era, can be satisfactorily compared", Tavernor (2002: par 5.2.7) suggests. Visual improvement is thus meant to further visually enhance or to create an 'effective backcloth', but in no way to challenge the visibility and appreciability of the listed St Paul's. This "sort of dynamic contrast of St Paul's and the City in the foreground and the evolving Eastern cluster in the background" (RoEH2, 49) is something EH accepted, but only as long as the distribution of the visual dominance of individual townscape elements with St Paul's visually dominating over all other buildings is maintained.

What cityscape does the City need? In a deeply conservative planning system that is characterised by formalised vision and pressured from preservationists, the Heron Tower's and the Pinnacle's applicants' teams argued in a way that spoke to EH. They

argued, of course, for the proposed development, and in ways that followed urban design ideas that are included in planning guidelines, some of which EH authored or co-authored. In the analysed skyline debates the main line of argumentation went that tall office buildings are what the City needs but these buildings are not necessarily a visual improvement to the skyline. To put it differently, London needs office towers; it needs them in the 'representative' city-image, in order to showcase London as a world city. But it does not need a different and a more critical historical narrative, so it seems.

6.3 The needs of the City after WW II

What cityscape did the City need after WW II, when the Townscape movement was in its early phase? The AR published two special issues on the topic of post-war construction in the City, one in June 1945 and the other in November 1946. In these two issues, the AR argued that the City did not need protected views, that it did indeed need commercial and retail structures, and that it needed reminders of the past. I want to address each of these arguments in more detail, as a conceptual foundation for my discussion of the multidirectional skyline.

6.3.1 *The City Peep-Show*



Figure 41: The 'City Peep-Show' as argued for in the special issue of AR in June 1945.

The AR (1946) argued against the definition of static views towards historic buildings, against an “orthodox and formal system of fixed view-points” (148). While contributors to the issue were convinced that the war not only destroyed buildings but also revealed visual opportunities, they also argued against the opening up of vistas towards St Paul’s and promoted, by contrast, a “City Peep-Show” (AR, 1945: 171), in which brief visual moments reveal themselves to the wandering pedestrian. They did not understand a glimpse towards St Paul’s as a static view towards a monument but as a beautiful – or rather sublime – moment that is the result of a striking visual contrast that momentarily leaps to the eye. For them, this was a form of ‘Romantic drama’:

The City has also its moments of grandeur. They are not of the serene, classical type, or monumental in the ordinary sense. They are born of the drama of the unexpected: chasms, great canyons, gleaming pinnacles. Effects not obtained from fixed viewpoints, but appreciated by wandering through a landscape that reveals itself in the surprise of buildings caught in perspective relationship, with intersecting building forms, and always a number of spires in staggered succession piercing the field of vision all around. A highly romantic, fluid, singular landscape, evoking the fearful and the sublime. Bomb destruction freakishly reveals the visual potential of this historic site (AR, 1945: 183).

This highly romantic landscape that evokes the fearful and the sublime is not a quaint landscape. It is one in which “drama is contrasted with serenity, intimacy with grandeur, enclosure with openness” (ibid.: 148). In such a landscape then, “the architecture of individual buildings is in a sense less important than the skill with which the buildings are grouped together” (ibid.).

The conception of the City as a romantic and sublime landscape implied the idea that visual relationships between buildings should not be fixed and that monuments should not be read as monuments. Such concerns with a “non-monumental London” (AR, 1945: 168), with a non-monumental reading of monuments and against an “obsession with the ‘monumental’” (ibid.: 167) were made particularly clear in a published interview with the architecture historian John Summerson on the question “How to look at St. Paul’s?” (ibid.: 192ff). While Summerson argued that in distant views from the south-east the dome of St Paul’s looked “embarrassingly independent” (ibid.: 193), from the south-west, on the other hand, “the bell-towers dramatise and unify the pictures. But the main purpose of the dome is, of course, to preside over the city silhouette” (ibid.). As

an architecture historian, his main interest was to show the cathedral in its best light. By contrast, the AR emphasised opportunities for new developments in the City and argued for an informal approach towards the visibility of the cathedral. The AR argued that the City did not need an “obsession with the monumental” (ibid.: 107) but a functioning urban fabric that displays difference and that is professionally controlled in a non-static and more fluid way.

6.3.2 *Office and retail blocks*

While Summerson argued that “[t]here should be height limitations all around the Cathedral” (AR, 1945: 193), AR contributors suggested building buildings both high and low in close proximity to St Paul’s, which were meant to be “grouped in an informal pattern. Their height depends on function, daylighting and access, but in no case exceed ten storeys” (ibid.: 143):

There are the ten-storey high office blocks and the dome beyond, but no great and obvious vista on to the side aisle. We have no cause to regret that, for the plan allows many rewarding glimpses of St. Paul’s (AR, 1945: 188).

The majority of the construction work that the AR proposed was allocated to vastly bombed areas in the City, near today’s location of the Eastern high-rise cluster. AR contributors did not suggest the invisibility of St Paul’s in distant views, but its visual juxtaposition with visually different townscape elements. They argued that what the City needed was difference in close proximity and an urban fabric that was evaluated based on its functionality and suitability for everyday use, not by the celebration of an individual building that famously survived the blitz.

6.3.3 *‘Save our ruins’*

This last point is crucial, because just as much as the AR proposal suggested a non-monumental reading of St Paul’s, it also argued for the salvation of bombed churches in the City. The basis for this suggestion was a comparison between the blitz and the Great Fire from 1666:

The general appearance of the ruins [after the Great Fire] is not unlike that of the ruins after the blitz, except that the destruction of secular buildings has been

rather more thorough, while on the other hand, the shells of the majority of the churches, and not only their towers, are left standing (AR, 1946: 140).

Such moments of destruction, the AR suggested, are opportunities for a critical assessment of the course of history. Bombed-out churches, such as St Mary-le-Bow, should neither be removed nor reconstructed.¹¹⁸ Instead, they should remain in their ruined appearance and that way become war memorials surrounded by green spaces, so-called rest gardens.

The AR had already formulated a similar suggestion during the war. In the January 1944 issue, it started the campaign “Save Us Our Ruins”, which was also supported by the Dean of St Paul’s W. R. Matthews:

The devastation of war has given us an opportunity which will never come again. If we do not make a City of London worthy of the spirit of those who fought the Battle of Britain and the Battle of London, posterity will rise and curse us for unimaginatively fools” (Matthews, 1944: 13).

These ruined churches, I suggest, were not simply understood as “objects of visual delight” (AR, 1944: 14) but also as critical representations of London’s past in built form. On the one hand, they were picturesque objects in Price’s sense. They were not beautiful in an idealistic sense, but they were associated with the “visual delight of a beautiful building in an advanced state of decay” (Pevsner, 1944: 47). On the other hand, they were sublime in terms of their role within the City after WW II as a landscape that evoked “the fearful and the sublime” (AR, 1945: 183). They were, as Aitchison (2008) suggests, part of the “shocking, radical, provocative and creative character of the [AR] proposal”, which included “modern buildings [that] were to be juxtaposed with bombed churches, resulting in a striking visual contrast” (148).

I argue that a development proposal like the one of the AR involves a strategy of multiplying historical narratives. Through the juxtaposition of not only old and new buildings but also old ones that represent the victorious resistance against the Nazi regime and others that showcase London’s injury, a simplistic one-directional reading of

¹¹⁸ St Mary-le-Bow on Cheapside was founded in 1080, destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666 and in the blitz in 1941. It was rebuilt and reconsecrated in 1964.

history can be avoided. It is also important to emphasise that the bombed-out churches were not simply argued to be war memorials but also embedded in rest gardens, primarily for employees who work in the City. These are not solely places to remember the cruelties of the past but places in which to have a quick snack in one's lunch break, chatting with fellow employees or initiating a business deal. These are therefore not so much places for passive contemplation and historical empathy but rather places for distraction in close spatial proximity to destruction, as I discussed in the previous chapter.

So, what the City of London needed after the war, the AR argued, was not the opening up and protection of views towards St Paul's but a well-functioning economy, the juxtaposition of visual contrast and the multiplication of historical narratives by means of an informal approach towards the visual city. Glimpses should be allowed, rather than views protected. The following is how the AR described a particular glimpse from the bombed St Mary-le-Bow to St Paul's Cathedral:

Bow's own interior, roofless and free-marbled, is today that rare thing a piece of pure architecture, more architectonic indeed than when it was entire, but the ruling-off, locking-out process is in full swing, and the west door, open for the last year or two, now has Yale locks to keep you out, so that the view's brief moment has been successfully cut short by the wise and good, but not highly understanding men who have authority over us (AR, 1945: 171).

This is an important statement because it introduces an additional idea that is crucial for understanding the critical role of ruins in regard to representations of history through the built environment: the idea that a bombed-out church is more architectonic than when it was entire. This description is conceptually close, I suggest, to Benjamin's (2005a) approach towards ruins and the "revolutionary energies" (2010) he sees appearing in the outmoded.

6.4 Ruins and buildings' 'afterlives'

Simmel understands the ruin, Campkin (2013) notes, as a "place of resolution between the past and the present" (44). In the ruin, "purpose and accident, nature and spirit, past and present [...] resolve the tension of their contrasts – or, rather, preserving this

tension, they yet lead to a unity of external image and internal effect” (Simmel, 1959: 266). Such an understanding of the ruin in terms of the preservation of a tension is important for my discussion, which focuses on a re-evaluation of picturesque ruins.

Ruins feature prominently in Romanticism and in picturesque texts. While Price’s argument for the “visual delight of a beautiful building in an advanced state of decay” (Pevsner, 1944: 47) suggests a reduction of a ruin to its aesthetical quality, I suggest that it has a political dimension too. In my reading of AR’s proposal for developing the City after WW II, the bombed-out church is less “an object of aesthetic contemplation, but a poignant image of the catastrophes, massacres and other bloody works of history”, to quote from Löwy’s (2005: 47) analysis of Benjamin’s historiography.¹¹⁹ My reading is supported by the following suggestion from Hastings:

By calling the Picturesque Movement ‘romantic’ one gets nowhere at all; the moment it is seen as radical [...] it can be identified as the product of the individualizing impulse traditionally associated with the English outlook; with the differentiating as against the universalizing tendency. Be *thysself* translated into Picturesque (Hastings, 1949: 360).

What follows is an attempt to filter out the ‘radical’ and political dimensions of ruins, which I discuss in relation to Benjamin’s reading of the work of the early German Romantics and his concept of an object’s afterlife. The latter I see as directly related to the AR’s suggestion that a bombed-out church can be more architectonic than when it was entire.

Goethe’s novel *Elective Affinities* [*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*] is situated around Weimar, at a country estate and a picturesque garden.¹²⁰ In his discussion of Goethe’s novel, Benjamin (2004b) distinguishes between commentary that seeks the material content [*Sachgehalt*] of a text and critique, which seeks its truth content [*Wahrheitsgehalt*]. The task

¹¹⁹ In his *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin (1998) quotes Borinski in relation to ‘picturesque ruins’: “The broken pediment, the crumbling columns are supposed to bear witness to the miracle that the sacred edifice has withstood even the most elemental forces of destruction, lightning and earthquake. In its artificiality, however, such a ruin appears as the last heritage of an antiquity which in the modern world is only to be seen in its material form, as a picturesque field of ruins” (178).

¹²⁰ Goethe was a devotee of the picturesque. According to Aitchison (2008), Wörlitzer Park, for example, had such an impact on him that he turned his attention to garden design and that he laid out the park at Weimar according to picturesque principles (87f). See also Goethe’s “The Triumph of Sensibility”, a critical essay that deals with contemporary garden fashions.

of the critic, Benjamin suggests, is to seek out the supra-historical truth content that is encapsulated in the work.¹²¹ To do this requires a process of ‘mortification’ of the work. Benjamin (2004b) argues that “the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up with its material content” (297). And while material content and truth content are “united at the beginning of a work’s history”, in the course of history they “set themselves apart from each other” (ibid.). Thus, as the material content crumbles away, the truth content of the work comes to the fore, because ruins can be reassembled according to a constructive principle.

Historical distance, then, is crucial for the critique of works because “the history of works prepares for their critique” (ibid.: 298). As nature decays the physical object the truth content of the object comes to the fore. For Benjamin, it is the critic’s task to mortify the work and to reassemble its pieces in order to reveal its truth content. Benjamin identifies this understanding of criticism in the work of the early German Romantics who argued for a form of immanent criticism, which, as the term suggests, involves the unfolding of the truth content of a work from within. Its task is to “awaken the tendencies and potentialities which lie dormant within the work of art” (Gilloch, 2002: 33), which is why Benjamin (2004a) talks about the “self-knowledge” and “self-judgment” (151) that the critic helps in providing the work with. A simple subject–object relationship between the critic and the work is thereby rejected. The critic does not pass arbitrary judgement on the work but aims at “getting nearer to the object and finally drawing it into himself” (ibid.: 148).¹²²

To Romanticism, immanent criticism then is a medium of on-going renewal of the work. The intended meaning of the producer – the architect of a church, for example – is not more important than the meanings that emerge posthumously. Such a form of criticism, as Gilloch (2002) suggests, is an “immanent illumination and actualization of

¹²¹ Gagnebin suggests that for Benjamin the task of the critic was “to wrest the elements of a work from their false context and to reconstruct them in a new one in such a way that the original, hidden truth of the work is revealed” (Gagnebin in Frisby, 1985: 226).

¹²² The truth content of an artwork for early Romantics is related to their understanding of the individual artwork of a monadological fragment. The individual artwork is “a particular moment, a concrete manifestation, and indicative fragment” (Gilloch, 2002: 36) of the Idea of Art. It is both the artwork and the immanent criticism on the artwork that are part of the total work of art, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. So, when the individual artwork is destroyed and ‘ruined’ by the critic, this is a process that contributes to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is in the medium of criticism that both “the endless process of ‘completing’ of the individual work of art and the ceaseless becoming of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* occur” (ibid.).

the artwork in the present moment of reading” (33), which is related to what Benjamin (2004c) describes as the work’s “afterlife” (254) in “The Task of the Translator”.¹²³

Reception is production. Texts, objects and images have their own lives that go beyond the producers’ intentions. An object’s afterlife is its openness to reconfiguration and re-evaluation. It is a period of “critical appreciation and political appropriation” (Gilloch, 2002: 2f). This conceptualisation is therefore highly important for filtering out the critical impulse of skylines.

For in its afterlife – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process. The obvious tendentiousness of a writer’s literary style may in time wither away, only to give rise to immanent tendencies in the literary creation (Benjamin, 2004c: 256).

Benjamin’s thoughts about translation and historiography are coloured by theology. The task of the translator can be related to the aim of establishing the one original paradisiacal language of names. This understanding refers directly to the biblical account of a tower: the Tower of Babel. According to the Book of Genesis, a united humanity who spoke a single language built a tower to make a name for themselves so that they would not be scattered around the world. The tower was meant to reach unto heaven. God came down to look at the city and the tower and remarked that as one people with one language, nothing they sought would be out of their reach. He therefore confounded their speech so that they could not understand each other and scattered them over the earth.¹²⁴

The work’s afterlife then is not an arbitrary interpretation. It is the self-disclosure of its truth, conceived as an on-going criticism and dissolution (Gilloch, 2002: 21). I suggest that such an understanding of immanent criticism and an object’s afterlife helps us to interpret the AR’s approach towards bombed-out churches in the City. Such churches have escaped their intended function as places of worship; they have also escaped the stylistic judgements embedded in architectural history. They reveal their own style and

¹²³ Benjamin (1991, Vol. IV) uses the German words ‘*überleben*’ (10) and ‘*fortleben*’ (ibid.: 11f), which literally translated mean ‘to survive’ and ‘to live on’. Compared to the term afterlife, these terms suggest less the supposed end or the ‘finished’ production of the original producer that is overcome than the on-going production process.

¹²⁴ For a discussion of Benjamin’s understanding of the kinship between languages, see Wolin, 1994: 45.

their own history. They have stopped being fit for an intended purpose and, in so doing, allow a counter-reading of a fully functional square mile.

The bombed-out churches are, of course, not the result of a process of natural ruination but a process of brutal destruction, which, I suggest, could be likened to Benjamin's own role as a critic. They help us to critically engage with an over-simplistic singular and progressive historical narrative. Their individual histories involve destruction and decay. They are visible incisions in a linear, continuous and progressive representation of history; they certainly do not sit comfortably in a harmonious ensemble, such as the new London skyline, because after their ruination, their appearance cannot be understood in terms of the visual enhancement of another building, such as St Paul's. They have to be understood in their own right, not as supporting the historical narrative that the cathedral represents. While historical progress can be understood as an arrow from the past into the future, their continued existence is reversed. Hence, they multiply the direction of history.

So, "[c]riticism means the mortification of work", Benjamin (1998: 182) argues, i.e. a process of 'bombing' the worked out. His *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* is a text in which he aims to rescue the baroque *Trauerspiel* with its main poetic advice of allegories from their longstanding reception as minor classical dramas. The closing sentences reads as follows:

In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are; and for this reason the German *Trauerspiel* merits interpretation. In the spirit of allegory it is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment. Others may shine resplendently as on the first day; this form preserves the image of beauty to the very last (Benjamin, 1998: 235).

In my discussion of the empty skyline in Chapter 7 I discuss allegories as the pendent to ruins in the realm of meaning. I will argue that the visual ruination that is in-built in the non-auratic skyline and the programmatic ruination that is in-built in the multidirectional skyline are related to the hollowing out of meaning that is characteristic of an empty skyline. In the remaining sections of this chapter I want to first draw

attention to contemporary ruins on London's skylines in 2013 and, second, discuss the conception of history the multidirectional skyline refers to.

6.5 Contemporary ruins

Benjamin's conception of the afterlife of an object refers to an conceptualisation of the work as incomplete that is to be completed by the critic. The critic is not lulled by the aesthetic of an image but she/he is actively constructing and producing the image. With regard to skylines, such a conception of incomplete coordinated scenes involves the idea that individual elements are not solely designed contextually, visually enhancing another building, but that they are taken out of their conventional context and put into visual relationships with seemingly incongruous elements. This process of decontextualisation aims to destabilise fixed visual relationships that are typical of formalised vision. If we follow Breton (1924) in understanding the collage principle as a political act that disrupts the continuum of history, then such a conceptualisation of skylines not only implies an understanding of them as unfinished compositions but also as compositions that are ultimately unfinishable by professionals.

The visibility of physical ruins works against a linear, over-simplified understanding of history. Looking at the City's skylines in 2013, there are hardly any physical ruins visible. Despite the AR's plea to save St Mary-le-Bow, for example, the church was rebuilt and reconsecrated in 1964. And yet I want to suggest that physical ruins were a typical characteristic of the City's distant image in the past. The Great Fire of 1666 destroyed many sacral and secular buildings on the City's skylines. Already before the Great Fire, the City's skylines featured a physical ruin prominently, as the following account of St Paul's history shows:

The physical destruction [of St Paul's] wrought during the Reformation had only been the start of a series of threats to the fabric [of the City]. In June 1561 lightning struck the Cathedral spire igniting a fire which destroyed the steeple and roofs, the heat and falling timbers causing such damage to the Cathedral structure that it would never fully recover. Plans were made for restoration and the architect Inigo Jones (1573–1652) was engaged to carry out work in 1633, but his work was left incomplete at the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642. [...] By 1650 the building was in a serious state of disrepair and it was only after the Restoration in 1660 of King Charles II (1630–1685) that repair was once again considered in

earnest as an architectural proclamation of the restored Church of England and the monarchy. [...] Christopher Wren (1632–1732) proposed the addition of a dome to the building, a plan agreed upon in August 1666. Only one week later The Great Fire of London was kindled in Pudding Lane, reaching St Paul's in two days. The wooden scaffolding contributed to the spread of the flames around the Cathedral and the high vaults fell, smashing into the crypt, where flames, fuelled by thousands of books stored there in vaults leased to printers and booksellers, put the structure beyond hope of rescue.¹²⁵

Wren's design was not completed before 1708, which means that for 147 years the City's skylines were visually dominated by a physical ruin. And it might be argued that the new London skyline is full of ruins too. These twenty-first century ruins are not physical but programmatic ones; sacral and secular buildings that are unused, underused, or used in a different way to that originally intended.

Churches that have been turned into residential buildings are such programmatic ruins. These churches are listed: they cannot be demolished, but some of them have become obsolete as places of worship. Churches that have become heritage sites and tourist attractions are programmatic ruins too. St Paul's is a prime example. According to the *Guardian*, 1,892,467 people visited the cathedral in 2010, which is more than 5.000 per day and makes it the ninth most-visited tourist attraction in the UK.¹²⁶

Some office towers are programmatic ruins too. Office spaces in the City of London, and in particular office spaces in high-rises, are never fully booked out, even less so during an economic recession. Between 2001 and 2009 the vacancy rate of office spaces in the City fluctuated between 3.8% and 14.7%.¹²⁷ In fact, high-rise buildings, which tend to be programmatically less flexible than low and fat buildings, are often frontrunners in terms of vacancy rates.

¹²⁵ See www.stpauls.co.uk [accessed 21 August 2013].

¹²⁶ St Paul's was the ninth most-visited tourist attraction in London in 2010 after British Museum, Tate Modern, National Gallery, Natural History Museum, Science Museum, V&A, National Maritime Museum and Tower of London See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/feb/23/british-tourist-attractions-visitor-figures> [accessed 21 August 2013].

¹²⁷ See <http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/services/environment-and-planning/planning/planning-policy/local-development-framework/Documents/City%20of%20London%20Office%20Evidence%20paper.pdf> [accessed 29 March 2012].

It is absolutely possible that the new London skyline will be full of programmatic ruins with a cathedral that foregrounds its economic value as a tourist attraction and with office high-rises that are partially unoccupied. To put it differently, it is absolutely possible that the new London skyline needs to be understood in terms of a reversed relationship between capitalism and religion. Capitalism is represented by “that great symbol of Catholicism” (Tavernor, 2002: 9) and office towers represent an almost religious belief in financial capitalism and economic growth.

6.5.1 *The new London skyline in 2013*

In the early stages of my doctoral research in 2009 I walked from the viewing balcony close to Gabriel’s Wharf on the South Bank to Somerset House River Terrace via Waterloo Bridge. In Chapter 2 I discussed my visual experiences of the City along this walk. Four years later, in the final phase of my PhD, I returned to these viewing places.

In addition to the analysis of my own visual experiences, in previous chapters I examined visual representations that were used as planning documents in the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle. According to these photomontages, by now I should be seeing a visually isolated St Paul’s that continues to dominate the new, corporate skyline. I should be able to read a smooth, hill-like skyline profile that looks as if it grows naturally out of the mid-height built environment in the City, and which visually enhances the cathedral.¹²⁸ In 2013, one of the key views from Waterloo Bridge that was minutely assessed in planning processes looks, however, different and more chaotic to me. Let me compare the 2009 view, the prognosis and the actual 2013 view in more detail.

¹²⁸ View 14, Cumulative impact, Waterloo Bridge – North of North Plaque; The Bishopsgate Tower: Environmental Statement, Volume 2 (Tavernor, 2006: 55).

Material removed for copyright reasons. See
<http://www.planning2.cityoflondon.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=JA65AQFH02000>.



Figure 42: The City skyline from Waterloo Bridge as shown in the planning process of the Pinnacle (top), in 2009 (middle) and in 2013 (bottom) (Environmental Statement, Pinnacle; Gassner 2009; 2013).

The Heron Tower, which was still under construction in 2009, has been completed. It was opened in 2012. Four years ago, its super structure was only half finished; now, the building shows a skyline profile which steps away from St Paul's. It creates, to follow professional descriptions, a sensitive edge for the Eastern cluster.

As expected, the development at 122 Leadenhall Street, which is nicknamed the Cheesegrater due to its distinctive wedge shape, has appeared on the skyline. The development was approved in May 2005 and included as one of the consented schemes in visualisations that were assessed in the planning process of the Pinnacle. At the time of writing the building is under construction, with the super structure being almost finished. The Cheesegrater is expected to open in 2014.

Furthermore, the development at 20 Fenchurch Street, nicknamed the Walkie Talkie as a result of an increase of floor space in height that creates an unusual skyline profile, has appeared on the skyline too. The development is located at the southern fringe of the Eastern cluster. Arguably, it does not contribute to an overall hill-like skyline profile of the cluster as seen in views from the west. It was not approved before 2006, which is why it was not included in visualisations that were assessed in the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle. With its 160 metres in height, as compared to the Heron Tower's 230 metres, it is not 'too tall' to create an edge condition that is as similarly sensitive as the Heron Tower one; however, because it is closer to Waterloo Bridge and further off the geographical centre of the cluster, it arguably stands out.

A final highly visible arrival is the development near London Bridge, the Shard, also referred to as the Shard of Glass. With its 310 metres it is currently the tallest building in the European Union and unmissable from many places in London. I only need to turn my head slightly to the right and I can clearly see it from my viewpoint on Waterloo Bridge. This development arguably visually dominates London's cityscape as a result of its sheer height. But because it is not located in the City of London, it is outside the harmonious ensemble professionals argue they need to preserve or create on the City's skyline.

So far it is as expected; now to the unexpected. A building is missing. The Pinnacle has not arrived on the new London skyline yet. Why not? Because it is difficult to get information from developers, architects and politicians on that matter, I need to rely on media coverage. In January 2012, *Construction News* and *Reuters* reported on another construction halt of the Pinnacle, after construction had been put on hold in 2011 already. In September 2011, Arab Investments, which is a consortium of Middle Eastern investors including the Saudi Economic and Development Holding Company announced that it had signed a deal to get the project work on track. Shortly after the announcement, work re-started, but a failure to sign a major pre-let agreement once again halted construction in 2012. The complex geometry of the Pinnacle results in unusual floor shapes and sizes, which are not attractive to some potential tenants.

In December 2012, *Building* reported that a settlement offered by Arab Investments to the contractors had paved the way for construction to resume very soon.¹²⁹ Yet, in February 2013, the *Guardian* reported that it is possible that the part-built skyscraper could be demolished and rebuilt from scratch, which is what the *Architectural Journal* confirmed in April 2013.¹³⁰ The Pinnacle will therefore not restart construction under the current design.

The information available about the Pinnacle's premature death demands closer inspection. In the distant view from Waterloo Bridge, the sky gap between Tower 42 and 30 St Mary Axe is filled with tower cranes. These cranes, it seems, do not represent construction but destruction. I make my way to the City. Having arrived at the 'destruction site', I can see that not only the foundations and the basement but also a seven-storey high concrete core have been constructed already. The partly built core is likely going to be destroyed in order to make place for an alternative and cheaper design. The remains of the Pinnacle are likely to be replaced by an 'Austerity Tower'.¹³¹ According to the *Guardian*, several architectural practices have been asked to submit

¹²⁹ See www.building.co.uk/professional/legal/pinnacle-offers-to-settle-brookfield-legal-claim/5047237.article [accessed 21 August 2013].

¹³⁰ See www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2013/mar/11/gherkin-architect-london-tower [accessed 21 August 2013]. See also www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/astragal/bye-bye-helter-skelter-pinnacle-to-be-redesigned/8646394.article?blocktitle=Astragal&contentID=30 [accessed 21 August 2013].

¹³¹ See www.building.co.uk/news/pinnacle-may-be-scrapped-and-rebuilt-from-ground-up-5049526.article [accessed 20 September 2013].

alternative designs. Standing in front of the destruction site, the concrete core of the Pinnacle looks like a stump in the ground (Bill, 2012). This stump, I suggest, appears like a premature ruin. It is a physical ruin before its intended life within economic globalisation. This is the building's 'beforelife' in a material sense. And it is its afterlife as an idea.



Figure 43: The premature ruin in the City of London (Gassner, 2013).

“Bye bye Helter Skelter [Pinnacle]”, the *Architectural Journal* wrote. What to say bye bye to? To an idea. The Pinnacle was never constructed in a physical sense. But, for several years, it was a crucial part of the discursive production of the new London skyline. As an image, placed into photorealistic montages, it shaped professionals’ perceptions of the Eastern cluster and the city-image more generally. In London’s case study-oriented and experiential planning system, it influenced the assessment of succeeding planning decisions, especially because of its important role as the imagined centre of the Eastern cluster that holds the whole group visually together.

In the planning processes of the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle, professionals suggested that with the help of a hill-like overall cluster profile a harmonious relationship between St Paul’s and the office towers could be achieved. In the city-image, financial capitalism

is meant to look as if it would naturally grow out of the mid-height built environment, as I discussed in Chapter 4. But history has entered this image of nature. The Eastern cluster *hill* has started to crumble away before its intended completion. The Eastern cluster is in decay.¹³²

I want to suggest that the demolition of the partly built core of the Pinnacle invites us to enquire about the state of the financial services industry in the City. Since the economic recession started in 2008, several office high-rises, such as the Heron Tower, the Walkie Talkie, the Cheese grater and the Shard of Glass, were constructed and so one was left to believe that politicians, developers and architects attribute financial capitalism an undiminished staying power. As a result of a tension between successfully constructed office towers on the one hand and the premature death of the Pinnacle on the other, viewers are invited to critically examine the limitations of a conception of skylines that revolves around total visual control and a harmonious composition.

6.6 History as catastrophe and cityscapes as visual education

One of the main political values I see in the acknowledgement of physical and programmatic ruins on London's skylines is their power to multiply the direction of history. Bombed-out churches after WW II and partly finished concrete cores of office towers share a 'revolutionary energy', which allows us to critically engage with an overly simplified progressive historical narrative. These structures sit uncomfortably within a representative city-image that is meant to show a 'healthy relationship' between continuity with the past (using the example of a visually dominant St Paul's on the new London skyline) and the needs of now and the present (using the example of a visually highly controlled Eastern cluster). A cluster that is ruined before it has been completed in a material sense poses questions regarding the ways time is visible in the city (see Mumford, 1940). However, rather than turning ruins into representations of an alternative meta-narrative, their critical potential is dependent on them being understood in their own right.

¹³² Nature in decay is a main strand in Benjamin's (1998) analysis of the baroque *Trauerspiel*. For a discussion see also Buck-Morss, 1991: 161.

The premature death of the Pinnacle does not simply mean that financial capitalism is dead, or that it will die soon. Several other office buildings with representative, high-end office spaces have been built and are currently under construction, including the Shard of Glass, the Walkie Talkie and the Cheesegrater. The Pinnacle ruin and the simultaneous construction of the Shard allow us to conceptualise time as being in tension. So, how can we conceptualise a critical history that is in tension?

Benjamin's (2002) critique of notions of historical progress is extremely direct. For him, it is an "elementary doctrine of historical materialism" to form an "immanent critique of the concept of progress" ([N11,4] 476). The concept of historical progress, he suggests, needs to make space for "actualization" (ibid.). A critical political appropriation of history, as I suggested in my discussion of the non-auratic skyline, does not involve an attempt to re-construct the past in the way 'it really was', but rather refers to a dynamic construction of the past from the viewpoint of the present. Actualisation means to reconfigure and re-evaluate the past, and thus history itself can be understood as an afterlife:

Historical 'understanding' is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the 'afterlife of works,' in the analysis of 'fame,' is therefore to be considered the foundation of history in general (Benjamin, 2002: [N2,3] 460).

When the once famous building has passed into oblivion, the building might be critically understood. Such an understanding of history as afterlife helps us to highlight two aspects of Benjamin's critique of the notion of historical progress. The first is the relationship between a continuous and a progressive representation of history. Benjamin rejects a progressive historical narrative, because he sees it related to a homogeneous and empty understanding of time, that is, to an additive conception of history, as explained in Chapter 3. An over-simplistic progressive historical narrative tends to be one in which events are selected by the victors (see Benjamin, 2006c: [XVII] 396):

The concept of mankind's historical progress cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself (Benjamin, 2006c: [XIII] 394f).

This additive conception of time is to be distinguished from a constructive principle of history. While the former can be easily used to benefit the powerful and the victorious, the latter is a redemptive approach towards historiography, in which discontinuities and interruptions are constructed or, better, revealed and used in order to work against historical continuity. Rather than following a progressive historical account, what is needed, so Benjamin (2005a) asserts, is a radical break “in the service of the oppressed classes” (9). This is because the only moments of freedom are those that interrupt a continuous and progressive understanding of history (see Löwy, 2005: 85f).

The second aspect is the distinction between technological and historical progress. Benjamin makes a clear distinction between the progress of knowledge or, better, science, on the one hand, and the progress of humanity, which includes moral, social and political dimensions, on the other (ibid.).¹³³ While he acknowledges technological and scientific progress he also warns that these forms of progress lead to new forms of oppression, which is why we cannot speak of historical progress or the progress of humanity. In his redemptive approach towards historiography, he therefore focuses exactly on the salvation of those aspects that build up the flipside of the progress of knowledge. “The tradition of the oppressed”, Benjamin (2006c) writes, “teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” ([VIII] 392). He argues that history is in a constant state of emergency and, therefore, that history is a permanent catastrophe:

The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given. Strindberg’s idea: hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now (Benjamin, 2006d: 184f).

This assessment of history as one single catastrophe is famously expressed in Benjamin’s (2006c) interpretation of Paul Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus”. Benjamin suggests that it shows the angel of history who is backward looking at the past. The past is a heap of ruins, the “piling wreckage upon wreckage” ([IX] 392). The angel of history, posits

¹³³ In the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” of the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin (1998) distinguishes between knowledge or, better, science as a particularly narrow conception of knowledge, and truth. “Knowledge is open to question, but truth is not” (30).

Benjamin, would like to “make whole what has been smashed” but a “storm drives him irresistible into the future. What we call progress is this storm” (ibid.).

Benjamin reverses the direction of the discourse on progress “from a vindication of the forward course of history to a radical critique of history when viewed with a backward gaze” (Buck-Morss, 1991: 93). Progress, for him, means progress for past generations, which, first and foremost, means to remember past injustices, as well as to act upon this remembrance in the present.

The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. [...] like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this (Benjamin, 2006c: [II] 390).

Progress therefore means to remember past struggles collectively, because it is redemption in a Jewish sense. Such a remembrance sheds light on the conflicts of the present. These moments of remembrance can be moments of “now-time” (ibid.: [A] 397), i.e. messianic moments of a just time. But these moments are also weak, because as Benjamin suggests in the “Theological-Political Fragment”:

Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic (Benjamin, 2006f: 305).

Furthermore, for Benjamin, the conception of history as catastrophe also means to resist from Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence.¹³⁴ The key to modernity, he suggests in the AP, is not repetition but sameness. The doctrine of eternal recurrence is “an attempt to reconcile the mutually contradictory tendencies of desire: that of repetition and that of eternity” (Benjamin, 2002: [D9,2] 116f). And so, “what is always again new” he suggests, “is not something old that remains, or something past that recurs, but one and the same crossed by countless intermittences” (ibid.: [G°19] 843). Crucial for my discussion, Benjamin suggests that the doctrine of eternal recurrence is auratic.

¹³⁴ “Indeed, for Benjamin, Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence is part of the mythology of the nineteenth century, not the breaking of its spell” (Gilloch, 1996: 106).

Life within the magic circle of eternal return makes for an existence that never emerges from the auratic (Benjamin, 2002: [D10a,1] 119).

A multidirectional skyline works against the aura of eternal recurrence, just as much as it works against the aura of historical progress. If that leaves us with an understanding of history as ‘standstill’ and ‘catastrophe’ then, I suggest, it leaves us with a task of ‘completing’ history. As time goes on, this process of completion is never completed; it is an infinite process. We might be endowed ‘only’ with a “*weak* messianic power” (Benjamin, 2006c: [III] 390), but that does not mean that we have not to make use of it.

How can we make use of the weak messianic power we are endowed with in regard to cityscapes? In a seemingly related way to Benjamin, Hastings also distinguishes between scientific and technological progress on the one hand and historical progress on the other. The political dimension in Hastings’ account lies in his suggestion that both “savage capitalism” in the US and “managerial and authoritarian socialism” in the USSR confuse the two. In two texts that he wrote at the time of the cold war – “The Unnatural History of Man” and *The Alternative Society* – Hastings argues that the UK needs to develop an alternative model, because historical progress cannot be achieved through industrial growth by the help of science and technology alone (see Aitchison, 2008: 145).

Hastings’ alternative is essentially a mixture of capitalism and socialism, in which the state provides the individual with her/his consumptive needs for designated amounts of work given to the service, but if she/he is not content with offers of the state, she/he can switch to the opportunities of the private sector. This economic model, he argues, is the fundament for a one-class society, in which class differences are abolished. However, this vision is not a classless society because Hastings does not argue for the elimination of classes as such but for the abolition of the working class. He suggests that wealth should be radically redistributed and that everyone should be made part of the bourgeoisie by means educating everyone “into gentility” (Erten, 2004: 144).¹³⁵ This is an important

¹³⁵ “The plain truth is we have to get rid of the working class. We can’t afford a class of persons confessing to low consumer values. [...] In twenty years we must have a value-educated England, bursting with the vitality that will spring from the disciplined release of the energy of the ‘workers’ who after all have not exactly deserved ill of their fellow countrymen” (Hastings in Erten, 2004: 144).

point, because of his argument that the true class distinction is one that emerges out of one's habits of consumption, rather than one's possession of the means of production.

The reason why I introduce Hastings' highly obscure idea about an alternative society and historical progress here is because at various points he suggests the critical role of cityscapes for this process. For Hastings, it seems, the visual city is a crucial part of educating everyone into gentility.¹³⁶ The cityscape – conceptualised as democratic art, which can give “satisfaction to all tastes” (Hastings, 1944: 7) – is for Hastings one that promotes a “radical liberal” democracy (Hastings, 1949: 358). Such a radical liberal democracy differs from the current democracy, so he argues, because it does not provide false freedoms behind which lurk another form of dictatorship: the enslavement of the individual by the dictatorship of the masses (Erten, 2004: 141). In other words, I suggest that for Hastings a cityscape that is based on Townscape principles is not only the conceptualisation of a pluralist democracy but also a tool for getting closer to this ideal.

Hastings makes an important point, albeit one that is certainly highly contested. Can the visual city – cityscapes and skylines – contribute to historical progress and to a more equal society? His plea for a holistic vision of life and his warning about the current cult of expertise are often conservatively framed. But his argument that an appropriate cityscape is not one that simply meets the needs of now but it is one that transforms society and prepares for the future is a bold and revolutionary dimension, and it is one that is based on a messianic idea.

Hastings (1980) refers to the idea that an ideal cityscape is one that is prepared for “the coming of the Christ” (21), not necessarily in a bodily but in a spiritual sense (ibid.: 19). He refers to the vision of the realisation of a New Jerusalem and is particularly interested in the idea that in the seventeenth century, “the City of London, besides the House of Commons, lived in hourly expectation of the establishment on English soil of the saintly kingdom” (ibid.) and the practical implications this had for the physical structure of the City, which included, for example, the idea that the Fleet River should be enlarged ten

¹³⁶ Pevsner emphasised this aspect of visual education in *Visual Pleasures from Everyday Things: An Attempt to Establish Criteria by Which the Aesthetic Qualities of Design Can Be Judged*, which was published in 1946. See also “Townscape” (Address at Annual Meeting of the Council for Visual Education), *Journal of the Institute of Registered Architects*, Vol. 10, No. 3, Jul–Sep 1955, pp. 41f.

times (ibid.: 8). “Why not bring Jerusalem into line with modern notions of townscape?” (ibid.: 26), he asks.

A skyline that promotes a different society to the one we live in, a skyline that is meant to explore how to approach values and not simply superimposes a particular value system and excludes counter narratives, this is one that needs to be open. When Sennett (1992) suggests that contemporary cityscapes do not represent the culture’s values in religion and politics, so Hastings suggests that cityscapes can showcase and teach us not particular values but how to critically engage with a given value system; how to promote diversity and how not to ‘harmonise’ difference.

6.7 Opening up narratives

The multidirectional skyline is one that aims for the opening up of multiple different and contesting narratives. One way to multiply narratives on a skyline is not only to include more different histories but also to visually juxtapose narratives that are in tension with each other; contesting narratives that neither ‘fit together’ nor cancel each other out but, rather, that are in a relation with each other that cannot be fixed and that constantly changes.

I suggest that the multidirectional skyline refers to a reading of the cityscape for which the ‘immersion’ into individual townscape elements is crucial. The aim is that the viewer does not simply criticise a skyline, by applying values and judgements. She/he rather unveils, uncovers and critically re-examines “the convincing logics and operations of [...] truth claims”; this is how Rogoff (2003) describes critique, which she sets apart from both criticism (the simple application of values and judgements) and from criticality, which is propositional and proactive. Criticality is based on an “emphasis on the present [...] of understanding culture as a series of effects rather than causes, of the possibilities of actualising some of its potential rather than revealing its faults” (ibid.).

In my reading of Benjamin’s account, immanent criticism is situated in between critique and criticality. It shares with the former that it re-examines over-simplified truth claims and with the latter that it does so in a proactive and propositional way. When Hastings

conceptualises a cityscape that is based on Townscape principles not only as a expression of pluralist democracy but moreover as a tool to get closer to this ideal, then this ideal is not to be understood in a fixed and static way. In order to be relevant for today's skylines' conceptual problems, Hastings' radical pluralist democracy needs to be understood as a process, as democracy at work, constantly acting and reacting. It needs to be proactive and propositional and avoid following fixed visual rules and an overall theory.

Chapter 7: The empty skyline

7.1 An inferior St Paul's

The American writer James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) visited London in the early nineteenth century and wrote:

Although I no longer looked on St. Paul's with the fresh and unpractised eyes of 1806, it appeared to me now, what in truth it is, a grand and imposing edifice. In many respects it is better than St. Peter's, though, taken as a whole, it falls short of it. When the richness of the materials, the respective dimensions, the details, the colonnade of St. Peter's are considered, it must be admitted that St. Paul's is not even a first class church, St. Peter's standing alone; but I am not sure that the cathedral of London is not also entitled to form a class by itself, although one that is inferior (Cooper in Baron, 1997b: 246).

Cooper, who went to Europe after having been dismissed from Yale University and after he had spent time in the navy, published five volumes of travel writing: two on England, two on Switzerland and Europe, and one on Italy. In his day, he was heavily criticised for his writing, which was described as “unreasonable and absurd”.¹³⁷ His apparent lack of taste and blunt criticism of European politics and culture were viewed as hostile and offensive. Nowadays, he is much better known for his historical novels than his account on European cities, architecture and politics.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, even if his blunt criticism of politics and culture were viewed as hostile and offensive, his assessment of St Paul's was not uncommon back then.

Around 1800 Wren's architecture was not greatly appreciated, as Simon Thurley, chief executive of EH, argued in a lecture on “Architecture in inter-war England”.¹³⁹ The term ‘Wrenaissance’ describes the revival of late seventeenth-century architecture in the period from about 1890 to 1914, and partially still in between the wars. It describes a revival in which themes from designs by Wren were prominent; hence the term. The

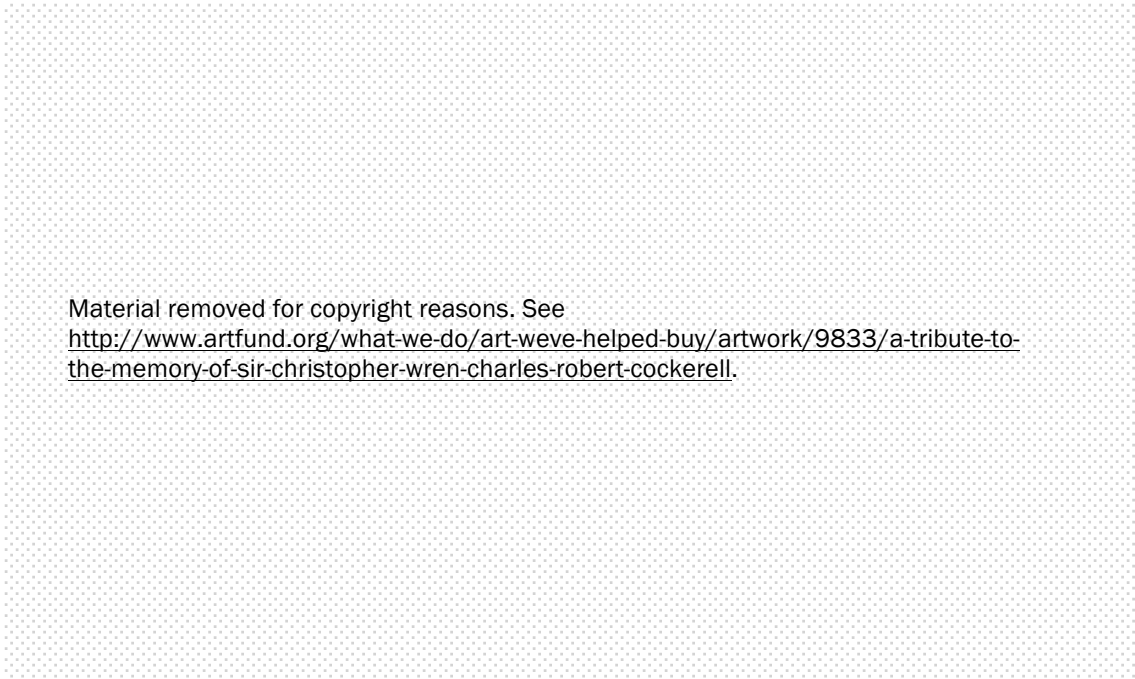
¹³⁷ Quote from the *North American Review*; see Baron, 1997b: 238.

¹³⁸ See Robert E. Spiller, ‘Introduction’, *Gleanings in Europe: France* by James Fenimore Cooper, ed. Robert E. Spiller, (New York, 1928), pp. xv–xix.

¹³⁹ Thurley gave the lecture “Forwards and Backwards: Architecture in inter-war England” on 6 February 2013 at the Museum of London.

term ‘Wrensaissance’ also of course hints at the tastes of the preceding period, in which Wren’s architecture was not widely appreciated and copied.

Thurley suggested that it was the publication of Wren’s first biography by James Elmes in 1823 that started to change the public perception. And so it came that, by WW I, Wren’s buildings as well as Tudor architecture from the early seventeenth century became widely appreciated and also seen as uniquely English. Such a re-evaluation of Wren’s work was likely also to be the outcome of two visual representations that are collages: Charles Robert Cockerell’s “A Tribute to the Memory of Sir Christopher Wren” from 1838, which shows an “assembly of all the buildings attributed to the celebrated English Baroque architect Sir Christopher Wren [...] with St Paul’s as its centre”, and “A parallel of some of the principle Towers and Steeples built by Sir Christopher Wren”, which is a collage that Charles Knight included in his *Old England: A Pictorial Museum* from 1845.¹⁴⁰



Material removed for copyright reasons. See <http://www.artfund.org/what-we-do/art-weve-helped-buy/artwork/9833/a-tribute-to-the-memory-of-sir-christopher-wren-charles-robert-cockerell>.

Figure 44: Wren’s buildings juxtaposed in a collage.

¹⁴⁰ See <http://www.artfund.org/what-we-do/art-weve-helped-buy/artwork/9833/a-tribute-to-the-memory-of-sir-christopher-wren> [accessed 21 August 2013].

Material removed for copyright reasons. See
<http://www.fromoldbooks.org/OldEngland/pages/2029-Towers-and-Steeples-by-Sir-Christopher-Wren/>.

Figure 45: Some of Wren's church towers building a linear sequence.

The discursive construction of the new London skyline revolves around the visibility and appreciability of St Paul's, which professionals seem to universally regard as a historical building with architectural, aesthetic and historical merits. Although it is not an UNESCO World Heritage Site, EH described it as an "unchanging historic landmark" (Higgott, 2002: 58) and as a building that is "world renowned as one of Britain's most significant historic landmarks" as well as "London's most notable historic and architectural building" (EH, 2002).¹⁴¹ It is a Grade I listed church and, as a consequence, it cannot be demolished, extended or altered without special permission from the Corporation of London. St Paul's is also the visual focus of eight out of a total of thirteen protected vistas (GLA, 2011; 2012), as mentioned in my discussion of the formal skyline. In addition to the historical, architectural and aesthetic value that professionals attach to St Paul's, as analysed throughout the thesis, what else does it signify, i.e. what is its symbolic value? Furthermore, what symbolic values attach professional to office towers?

¹⁴¹ Currently there are four World Heritage Sites in London: (1) Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey, including Margaret's Church; (2) Tower of London; (3) Maritime Greenwich; and (4) Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. The Darwin Landscape Laboratory is on the Tentative List.

In this chapter I discuss the different symbolisms that were attached to different townscape elements in the discursive production of the new London skyline. I argue that in skyline debates not only symbols but also icons and allegories played an important role and I highlight the critical and political potential of an understanding of the latter. I suggest that an allegorical conceptualisation of skylines is one that acknowledges an, in principle, arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. This acknowledgement is a political act because it resists a desire to fix meaning (see Sennett, 2013). While the non-auratic skyline is a visual ruin, and the multidirectional skyline is one that acknowledges programmatic ruins that do not sit comfortably within a singular, progressive narrative, the empty skyline is one in which symbolism is ruined.

The conceptual basis for the empty skyline is the rejection of a distinction between valued and 'valueless' historical buildings. I commence this chapter with a reiteration of Hastings' understanding of aesthetical and historical values of townscape elements and critically engage with the professional construct of listing. I then move on to a detailed discussion of the different symbolisms that professionals attached to St Paul's and office towers. I show that St Paul's was overloaded with multiple and sometimes contradictory symbolisms and argue that this overloading results in a hollowing out of meaning. In so doing, I suggest that St Paul's is less to be conceived as a symbol of the baroque era (Tavernor, 2002) than as a baroque allegory, as described by Benjamin (1998).

An allegorical understanding of visible buildings on skylines aims to open up the discursive closure that is typical of professional debates. This, however, requires a fundamental examination of the notions of symbolism and iconicity. I suggest, first, that recognisability increasingly displaces symbolism in professional debates and, second, that the new London skyline as envisioned at the beginning of the twenty-first century is a deceiving image, a conservative image despite the appearance of new office towers. It is an image that, literally described, shows the Eastern cluster as being visually controlled by St Paul's, while, in fact, financial services industries and developers seem to have the decisive power. A close reading of Benjamin's allegories of modernity helps us to foreground an understanding of both St Paul's and office towers as commodities.

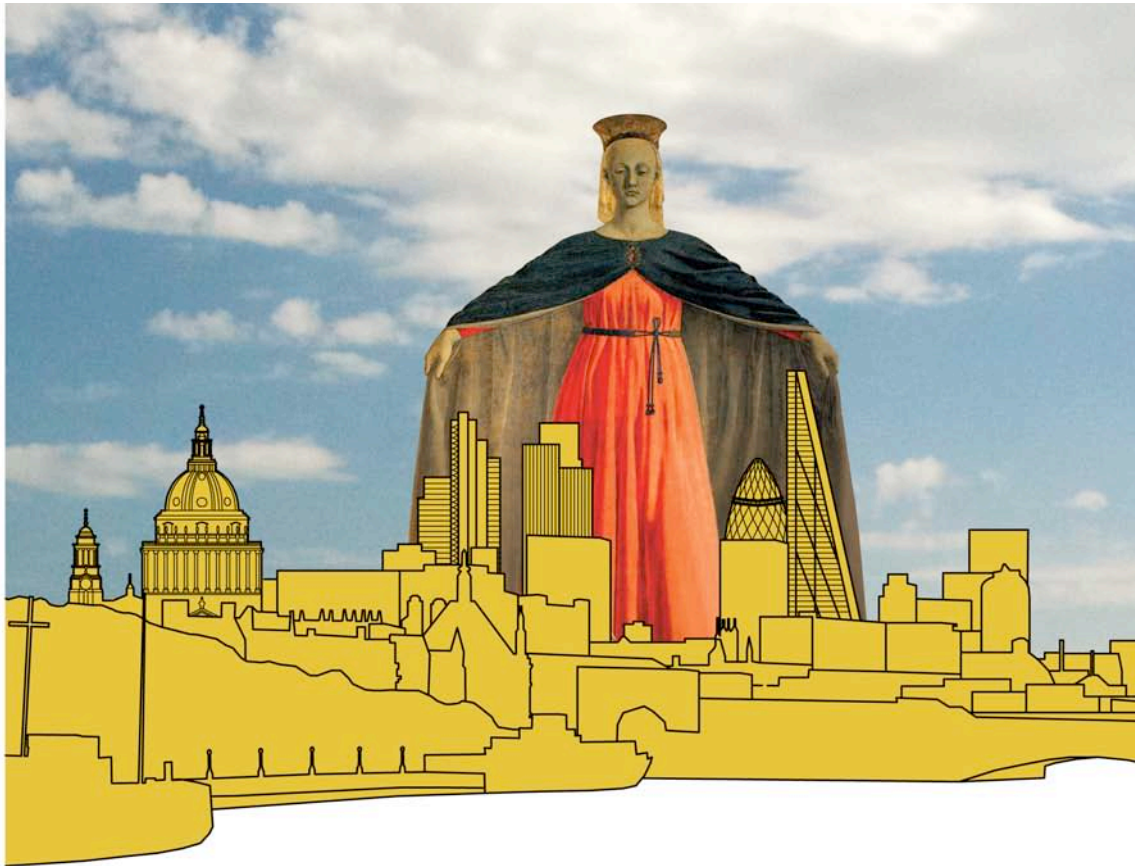


Figure 46: Religion, the Church of England and financial capitalism on the new London skyline (Gassner, 2013).

7.2 Rescue

7.2.1 *Revolt against aesthetic idealism*

In my discussion of the formal skyline, I showed that in the current planning policies and guidelines a distinction is made between heritage assets, on the one hand, and buildings that are prominent in distant views but apparently without historical value, on the other. This, I suggest, is a distinction that resonates in the two terms ‘historic’ and ‘historical’. While the former refers to something in the past that is famous or regarded as important (a historic moment but also a historic monument, for example), the latter refers simply to something that concerns the past (an event, an object, etc.). To put it differently, a historic building is one that is regarded as important, i.e. that is value-laden. By contrast, a historical building is merely old.

Hastings (1949) rejects such a distinction because, for him, cityscapes are meant to give “every object the best possible chance to be itself” (360). This is his conceptualisation of

cityscapes as democratic art and it is, I suggested, the conceptual basis for an informal conceptualisation of skylines. In a related way, he also rejects an idealistic understanding of beauty. Drawing on Price's distinction between beauty and picturesque – the former he associates with smoothness and symmetry, the latter with irregularity – Hastings alleges that,

what he [Price] was trying to say is that there is an accepted ideal of beauty represented by Greek art, and there is another kind of beauty, distinguished by its departure from 'that perfection of ideal beauty so diligently sought after.' There is a beauty that identifies with an ideal and one that differentiates from it (Hastings, 1949: 359f).

Buildings that differ from that accepted ideal of beauty represented by Greek art, however, are in no way less aesthetically valuable. Ugly buildings are not those which do not follow a certain ideal of beauty, but "the ugliest buildings are those which have no feature, no character" (ibid.: 359). For Price, the picturesque in particular – more than the beautiful and the sublime – encompasses all "those irregular charms which are sometimes said to create 'character'" (ibid.).

This, then, is why Hastings refers to both Townscape and the picturesque in terms of a revolt against Platonic idealism and a revolt against Palladianism with its order that is strongly based on symmetry, perspective and the formalism of the classical temple architecture of the Ancient Greeks and Romans.¹⁴² To follow this or any other aesthetic ideal was exactly what picturesque theorists were critical of. For Hastings, the picturesque was a revolt against the ideal, "a revolt against that old bore Plato, a protest against merely ideal Beauty which, together with frightening beauty (the sublime), up to that highly psychological moment, had been the eighteenth century's password to the visible Humanities" (ibid.: 360).

But, crucially, Hastings suggests that the judgement of aesthetics against an ideal is as limited as the maxim of modernism that reads "form follows function" (Sullivan, 1896) and "functional beauty" (Hastings, 1944: 7). He is against architectural ornaments because there are "no binding conventions of iconography left that would make allegory

¹⁴² Palladianism is named after the architect Andrea Palladio (1508–1580) and refers to buildings in a style inspired by Palladio's own work.

and symbol acceptable” (ibid.). Instead, he proposes to understand the urban pattern and the visual relationships between buildings as ornamentation. To put it differently, he frees individual elements from the representation of something else other than representing themselves, exactly because of the loss of binding conventions in today’s society. At the same time, he suggests that the cityscape can signify something else, namely a “radical liberal” (Hastings, 1949: 358) approach to politics that showcases a “radical aesthetic” (ibid.: 360), as discussed in chapters 1 and 6.

Hastings sees an “essential concordance” (ibid.: 356) between the visual urban pattern and the political pattern. I suggest that the visual urban pattern as conceptualised by Hastings does less symbolise a particular value but, rather, that it expresses an approach towards politics as well as promoting a pluralist and liberal democracy. The problem I see in Hastings’ argument for an understanding of the urban pattern in relation to ornamentation is that he measures symbols and allegories against the same yardstick. That said, before I discuss their differences in detail it is important to critically engage with the notion of listing buildings, which is the basis for a symbolic understanding of individual buildings in skyline debates.

7.2.2 Listing

The new London skyline can be understood as an accretion of past conceptualisations of how London’s past, present and future should be represented in relation to the city’s image as a world city. I suggest to refrain from a simplistic dualism between ‘old’ and ‘new’ buildings and to think about a skyline as an accretion of buildings with different ages instead. Recently built office towers are not ‘new’ buildings but are simply newer than St Paul’s. They are also ‘old’ in the sense that they have been envisioned and planned years and sometimes even decades ago.

“Different epochs of the past”, Benjamin (2002) suggests, “are not all touched in the same degree by the present day of the historian (and often the recent past is not touched at all; the present fails to ‘do it justice’), continuity in the presentation of history is unattainable” ([N7a,2] 470). A redemptive historiography works against a homogeneous conception of time and against a continuous historical narrative, exactly because notions of continuity “smooth out and neutralize – or *seal off* – our relationship with the past”

(Dodd, 2008: 415). They do not address multiple contesting histories, nor those pointing in different directions.

One of the main problems of a homogeneous and empty conceptualisation of time that waits to be filled with ‘major events’ by the historian is that the historian then needs to establish what criteria make up major as opposed to minor past events. This is a selective procedure and therefore highly political. Furthermore, when the recent past is not touched by the historian at all, then this additive conception of time simply stops at one point without affecting or, better, being effected by the present. History as construction – Benjamin’s alternative to an additive conception of time – can be likened to a “slender but sturdy scaffolding – a philosophic structure – in order to draw the most vital aspects of the past into his net” (Benjamin, 2002: [N1a,1] 459). This is Benjamin’s description of the “aesthetic experience of present-day architecture” (ibid.) or, more specifically, of the Eiffel Tower transferred to historiography. I suggest that an additive conception of time finds direct resonance in current approaches to conservation and preservation, and especially in the criteria for listing buildings.

A listed building is one that is placed on the “Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest”. This is a status that is applied to around half a million buildings in the UK. The older a building is, the more likely it is to be listed. All buildings built before 1700 and which have survived in anything like their original condition are listed, as are most of those buildings built between 1700 and 1840. The criteria become tighter with time, so that post-1945 buildings have to be ‘exceptionally important’ to be listed and a building normally has to be over thirty years old to be eligible for listing. EH assesses buildings that are put forward for listing (or de-listing) and provides advice to the Secretary of State on the architectural and historic interest. The Secretary of State, who may seek additional advice from others, then decides whether or not to list or de-list the building.¹⁴³ On their website, EH states that “[l]isting helps us to acknowledge and understand our shared history. It marks and celebrates a building’s special architectural and historic interest, and also brings it under the consideration of the planning system so that some thought will be taken about its

¹⁴³ For a full list of listed buildings see www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk [accessed 22 September 2013].

future”.¹⁴⁴ It is exactly the idea that through the selection and celebration of selected historical buildings we can ‘acknowledge and understand our shared history’ that I am critical of. A critical political appropriation of history is not one that keeps celebrating old masterworks. This, however, does not mean that St Paul’s long history, which is impressive indeed, should go unacknowledged.

The cathedral, as we know it today, was built from 1675 to 1697, and so it is more than three hundred years old. St Paul’s as the site for a cathedral is much older. While there is not enough evidence to know where exactly the first two cathedrals were located, a third cathedral at the location of today’s St Paul’s was begun in 962 AD and burnt down in 1087. A fourth cathedral – usually called Old St Paul’s – was begun by the Normans after the 1087 fire and was, throughout its lifetime, several times damaged and partially rebuilt, before it was completely destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666 and replaced by Wren’s design. St Paul’s thus has an exceptionally long history, and EH draws attention to that.

The main problem with the concept of listing is that it reinforces a distinction between historic and very old buildings, on the one hand, and historical and less old buildings, on the other. This distinction is one that other current professionals are critical of. In a recent article in *Building Design*, for example, the architect Ken Shuttleworth called for new viewing corridors to be introduced to protect and list one of the buildings he co-designed: the Gherkin (and that despite the fact that the building is not more than ten years old).¹⁴⁵ Out of the already built office towers in the City, it is usually the Gherkin that is mentioned as worthy of such visual protection and listing; likely because, as an interviewed architect suggested, it is “manifestly popular; people like it” (Arch1, 36).

¹⁴⁴ See www.english-heritage.org.uk [accessed 21 August 2013].

¹⁴⁵ See <http://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/the-gherkin-deserves-protected-views-says-ken-shuttleworth/5056394.article> [accessed 31 August 2013].

Material removed for copyright reasons. See
<http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/yyy/gherkkk.jpg> and
<http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/yyy/bigboo.jpg>.

Figure 47: Snapshots from Klassnik's "More-numents for London", an animation that shows the impact that a view protection of the Gherkin could have on the existing built environment.

Even if Shuttleworth's suggestion critically engages with the timeframe in which listing is currently judged, it does not doubt the distinction between historic and historical buildings. It merely asks to include another 'masterpiece' or so-called "cultural treasure" (Benjamin, 2006c: [VII] 391) in historicism's "triumphal procession" (ibid.). What is important is that Hastings' and Benjamin's rejection to distinguish between historic and historical buildings, i.e. between major and minor past events, is to be understood as a twofold process that includes, first, to remember the forgotten past so as to pay tribute to 'minor' past events and, second, to push 'major' past events from their thrones:

What are phenomena rescued from? Not only, and not in the main, from the discredit and neglect into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination, their 'enshrinement as heritage.' – They are saved through the exhibition of the fissure within them. – There is a tradition that is catastrophe (Benjamin, 2002: [N9,4] 473).

To enshrine selected past events as heritage and to thread them on a string to create historical continuity means to "cover up the revolutionary moments"; it misses the "places where tradition breaks off – hence its peaks and crags, which offer footing to one

who would cross over them” (ibid.: [N9a,5] 474).¹⁴⁶ In the original German text, Benjamin uses the terms ‘*Schroffen und Zacken*’ for ‘peaks and crags’ (Benjamin, 1991, Vol. 5: 592). Peaks, here, are not to be understood as ‘pinnacles’ but rather as ‘prongs’ and ‘cracks’ of civilisation. They represent a ‘non-smooth’ feature that makes sure that the historical materialist does not ‘slip off’ from the past, falling into the realm of uncritical reception of tradition.

In current urban debates landmarks tend to be understood primarily as visual landmarks in regard to issues of the legibility and imageability of the city, helping people to find their way (Lynch, 1995).¹⁴⁷ Historical landmarks tend to be described as old buildings that help us to acknowledge and understand our shared history. Benjamin avoids landmarks, because he conceives of them as objects that are enshrined as heritage, therefore being the instruments used by those who are in power to maintain their power through a historical legitimisation. Going back to the origin of the term ‘landmark’, I suggest that landmarks did have a critical impulse too.

Originally, the term ‘landmark’ described “a mark showing the boundary of a piece of land”. Since the seventeenth century the term has often, however, been used to refer to “an object in the landscape, which, by its conspicuousness, serves as a guide in the direction of one’s course [...]; hence, any conspicuous object which characterizes a neighbourhood or district” (OED). But the term also describes “an object which marks or is associated with some event or stage in a process; esp. a characteristic, a modification, etc., or an event, which marks a period or turning point in the history of a thing” (ibid.). Following this definition, a landmark, then, is not necessarily a building that summarises and symbolises a place, an era, or a style. It can also be one that marks a turning point and also a discontinuity of history. While such an understanding might

¹⁴⁶ “The ‘enshrinement,’ or *apologia*, is meant to cover up the revolutionary moments in the course of history. At bottom, it seeks to establish continuity. It sets store only by those elements of a work which have already emerged and played a part in its reception. It ignores the peaks and crags, which offer footing to those who want to move beyond this view” (Benjamin, 2006d: 162).

¹⁴⁷ Concerns with urban landmarks and way-finding are often referred back to Pope Sixtus V’s five-year papacy from 1585 to 1590, in which an entire reorganisation of Rome was established with a comprehensive masterplan, which was based on a new street system that connected major holy places and aligned new roads to ease movement throughout the city. Straight roads linked main churches and holy shrines, all of which had to be visited by the faithful during the course of a day’s pilgrimage (Giedion, 1982: 92). The roads became visual axes (Sennett, 1986: 84) and Egyptian obelisks as monuments at every focal point were included as visual anchor points (see Bacon, 1974).

be better encapsulated in the term ‘counter-monument’, it is crucial to keep this dimension in mind when considering the symbolism that professionals attach to visual landmarks.

7.3 Symbols and icons

We value this building [St Paul’s] for lots of different reasons, not purely aesthetic, but for its historic, what we feel about it, its community values [...] It is not just a religious symbol, there are many more things associated with it (RoEH2, 18).

What symbolisms are attached to St Paul’s by professionals? The cathedral as we know it today is built in baroque style and not in gothic, as favoured by the Anglican Church. And so today it is not only “the first purpose-built Protestant Cathedral”, as a townscape consultant characterised it, but also “a great *symbol* of the Baroque era” (Tavernor, 2002: 5.2.7, my emphasis) as well as “a *symbol* of the once supreme authority of the Anglican Church and the British Monarchy” (ibid.: 11, my emphasis). A townscape consultant further argued that,

[St Paul’s] has become an *icon* of international significance for modern times too. During the 20th century it provided a backdrop for the major state ceremonials that were broadcast to the Commonwealth and around the world. The internationally famous war photographs show it rising phoenix-like through the fires and smoke of the Blitz, when large swathes of the City were destroyed once again. It has become a quiet centre for all faiths in the midst of the physical and economic changes that are continuously taking place around it (Tavernor, 2002: 11, my emphasis).

St Paul’s, then, symbolises the baroque, the church, the British Monarchy, and it is an icon of Britain’s resistance against the blitz. The last point is regularly made in professional skyline debates, usually referring to Herbert Mason’s famous photograph that shows St Paul’s towering over the fires of the blitz, and which was published in the *Daily Mail* in December 1940.¹⁴⁸ This image tends to be interpreted in terms suggesting the ‘immortality’ of St Paul’s, the Church and religion, amidst a seemingly collapsing

¹⁴⁸ In August 2011, the Daily Mail published an article about this picture and how it came into being, describing it as “THE iconic image of the Blitz”. See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1342305/The-Blitzs-iconic-image-On-70th-anniversary-The-Mail-tells-story-picture-St-Pauls.html#ixzz1VFTiFrLq> [accessed 21 August 2013].

world. In the most direct sense then, St Paul's stands for a reassuring historical continuity of values at a time when moral values seem to end up in smoke.

Material removed for copyright reasons. See
<http://blogs.wsj.com/ianmartin/2010/12/29/st-pauls-seventy-years-ago-tonight/>.

Figure 48: Mason's well-known photo of St Paul's towering over the fires of the blitz.

In professional debates, St Paul's was sometimes also described as a symbol without specifying what it exactly symbolises. EH, for example, underlined "the incredible *symbolic*, historical importance of St Paul's", which is indicated by the fact that it controls "such a vast amount of land across [...] a prime [...] capital" (RoEH 2&3, 55). Similarly, the Corporation of London argued that "St Paul's Cathedral is an internationally recognised *symbol* in the London skyline" and hence "careful attention will be given to the effect of the development on views of the Cathedral" (CoL, 2002a: 155, my emphasis). Furthermore, the Corporation of London suggested that "the evolution of the City's buildings, areas and spaces together with its archaeological heritage, has shaped and influenced the modern townscape. This *symbolises* the

continuity of the City's long established business role and its importance to London and the country as a whole" (CoL, 2002a: 141, my emphasis). With St Paul's being mentioned as a major element in the City of London's built environment, this statement suggests a seeming paradox: the cathedral is part of the symbolisation of business in the City and the alleged country-wide wealth the business in the square mile brings. The paradox here is not only that the wealth of business in the City goes hand in hand with a country-wide increase of poverty, making the gap between rich and poor constantly bigger, but also that St Paul's is meant to co-represent commerce and financial capitalism.

And then there are the corporate high-rises, also ascribed symbolic and iconic values in professional skyline debates. Referring to an advertisement for the London Open House Event in 2001, a townscape consultant alleged that "[i]t is clear that tall buildings are significant *symbols* of contemporary London alongside the dome of St Paul's" (Tavernor, 2002: 6.2.1, my emphasis). In fact it was often a particular high-rise that was mentioned in this context: the Gherkin. Another townscape consultant suggested that "[t]he incredible thing is how the profile of high-rise buildings, the skyline, can become the signature of a city. So that the Gherkin has become a *symbol* of London" (TC1, 70, my emphasis). Is the Gherkin today a symbol of London just like St Paul's?

Buildings that have been prominent on the skyline in the past have been church or state. [...] And it's only relatively recently that that *symbolism* has changed. And one can argue, well, that may be, in terms of the economic significance of London, it's appropriate to mark clusters of activity, like the Eastern cluster and perhaps Canary Wharf (RoEH1, 17, my emphasis).

Has the symbolism of London's skylines really changed? The answer depends on who the image is sold to, i.e. what skyline is selected, speaking to what usergroup (tourists, potential developers, etc.). In general, a city's skylines can surely incorporate different symbolisms. In principle, the appearance and the visual overpowering of a particular building on a particular skyline does not mean that the city's multiple skylines have changed their symbolism altogether. But what is crucial in the statement above is the idea that if the symbolism of London's skylines has changed from Church/state to commerce/financial capitalism, then, in principle, office towers and cathedral therefore have a similar 'symbolic capacity'. However, this is exactly EH was critical about. St

Paul's is "a structure of supreme quality in terms of architectural design and of historical significance, symbolic significance", while a corporate high-rise "is simply a commercial office building" (RoEH 2, 16).

Nonetheless, such a statement is questionable. The Gherkin, for example, is arguably not only a commercial office building but also a tourist spot that stands in the cityscape, showing off without inviting us in. A townscape consultant also disagreed with EH's statement above. "London is the Gherkin, New York is the Empire State Building" (TC1, 70), the consultant suggested. And if a corporate high-rise does not symbolise a 'whole' city, then, at least, it might symbolise the historical significance of its location and so signify "a major focus in the urban scene" (TC1, 9), such as the Heron Tower, which "symbolises a gateway when viewed from the north, with the exposed 'defensive' diagonal bracing of its structure" (Tavernor, 2002: 5.2.5).

To sum up, professionals attached different symbolisms to individual buildings in order to concentrate meaning in the new London skyline. Preservationists and the applicants' teams suggested that St Paul's symbolises the Baroque era, the once supreme authority of the Anglican Church, resistance against the Nazi regime, London, the 'whole' country and, as a part of the City's stratified built environment, business in the City and the apparent wealth it brings to the whole country. The cathedral was also mentioned as an icon of international significance and its unique dominance and skyline profile give it iconic status. A corporate high-rise can become a symbol of London and symbolise the historical significance of its location, some professionals suggested. However, the preservationists most often regarded it simply as a visual landmark, orientation point, and importantly, nothing more than a piece of real estate investment.

It is a particularity of the discursive production of the new London skyline that the two terms 'symbol' and 'icon' are used in sometimes ambiguous ways. I suggest that it is important to keep them conceptually apart. The OED defines 'symbol' as "something that stands for, represents, or denotes something else (not by exact resemblance, but by vague suggestion, or by some accidental or conventional relationship)". Often, a material object represents something immaterial or abstract (an idea, quality or condition). By contrast, an icon is defined as "a representation of some sacred

personage, in painting, bas-relief, or mosaic, itself regarded as sacred, and honoured with a relative worship or adoration”. The term ‘icon’ also describes “a conventional religious painting in oil on a small wooden panel, venerated in the Eastern Church” as well as “an image, figure, or representation; esp. applied to ‘figures’ of animals, plants, etc. in books of Natural History”.¹⁴⁹

I want to emphasise the religious roots of the term ‘icon’, especially because in current skyline debates the term tends to be used much more often in regard to office towers than churches. The very terminology being used to define the standing and status of office towers thus has an in-built religiosity. More specifically, it is the term ‘iconic’ that is usually used:

We [the City planning officer and the architects] talked about whether the buildings should be just a simple slab building or whether it should be a shapely building, the reconciliation says *iconic*, which is so awful to me because a cross is *iconic*, it’s two sticks of wood, it’s iconic because it has meaning that was given to it. And a building is the same. If it’s shapely, it could be ugly or *iconic*, not necessarily *iconic* (Arch2, 36, my emphasis).

So, a shapely building, such as the Pinnacle, is an iconic building, and a “slab building” (ibid.), such as the Heron Tower, is not? Sklair (2006) defines iconicity in terms of a unique combination of fame with symbolism and aesthetic quality. An iconic building is famous among well-educated architects, among non-architects, and/or both. In this definition, symbolism is a part of iconicity. Charles Sanders Peirce’s (1839–1914) structuralist symbol-index-icon triad, on the other hand, draws a clear line between symbols and icons. Symbols, Peirce argues, have a convention-based relationship with their objects, while icons have specific properties in common with their objects (Peirce, 1894).¹⁵⁰

The new London skyline is increasingly populated by commercial high-rises, which are shapely and are designed to resemble something else. This resemblance is usually

¹⁴⁹ See <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn> [accessed 21 August 2013].

¹⁵⁰ Peirce (1894) argues that symbols have a convention-based relationship with their objects – for example, alphanumeric symbols. They are ‘agreed upon’ for given purposes. Indices, by contrast, are directly influenced by their objects; they are defined by some sensory feature A that correlated with and thus implies or ‘points to’ B. Icons, in turn, have specific properties in common with their objects.

reflected in their nicknames: Gherkin, Pinnacle, Shard of Glass, Cheesegrater, etc. Since the form of a tall building has been freed from many technical constraints the value of a building as a form is often at odds with the value of a building in use (see Sennett, 1992: 98).¹⁵¹ Formal freedom regularly leads to forms that have the main purpose of being looked at. In skyline debates, the term ‘iconic’, then, is often used for buildings with a strong “imageability” (Lynch, 1995). Office towers that are located in the City tend to be ‘iconic’, which is a partial result of the power of preservation groups and the accompanied complex planning processes. Iconic buildings can more easily be argued to be ‘contextual’ than generic slab buildings and contextual design, in turn, can easily be argued to be high-quality design, because it acknowledges the existing urban context and in particular the visibility and appreciation of historic, listed buildings. Paradoxically, then, complex planning processes in the City, which are complex most of all because of preservationists’ concern with the visual protection of St Paul’s, tends to produce iconic and shapely additions that arguably draw a lot of attention to them – and, in so doing, away from St Paul’s.

What we have, then, is a skyline full of symbols and icons with a blurred conceptual boundary between them. Rather than arguing that the symbolism of London’s skylines has recently changed, however, it is the change from a symbolic to a recognisable conceptualisation of skylines that I regard as important. For an easily marketable city-image, icons – in their contemporary guise as ‘iconic buildings’ – are much more useful than symbols, as I show in this chapter. But at this point I want to be reminiscent of the context in which we have to understand symbolic and iconic notions. Financial capitalism, I suggest, keeps up an image on the new London skyline; namely, the image that it is kept in check by St Paul’s; the image that it is controlled and controllable, and that its growth will achieve a level of saturation. But that, of course, is an image. And given an understanding of London’s skylines as city-images that aim to attract investment, it is moreover a deceiving one. However, in order to further support this image – and keep the deception hidden – financial capitalism absorbs religious symbolism into business-driven iconicity.

¹⁵¹ Just as the origin of the office high-rise building is closely related to the development of steel constructions, lifts and air-conditioning systems, further structural and thermal technical achievements and now available ‘new’ materials make architectural shapes that were infeasible until recently not only possible but increasingly also financially viable.

Before I show a concrete example of how this is done, I need to highlight the main difference between the symbolism of a church's dome and the iconicity of an office tower's top part. The cruciform shapes of church plans resemble the Christian cross. In that way, the plan is an icon of the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. However, the cruciform shape also symbolises Christ's suffering on the Cross. In distant views we do not see the cathedral's plan. Yet the Ascension was equally explicit and "registered in the extraordinary efforts to build upward" (Sennett, 1992: 15). Originally, a church's height was conceived more "as a matter of looking up from within, in the act of prayer, and so of having a visual experience of the Ascension. [...] You can see the bottom of Heaven" (ibid.). But as Earl Baldwin Smith (1950) shows, the symbolism of domes is complex and the result of two different symbolisms that are in tension.

In the Stone Age, dome-shaped tombs were used as a venerated home of the dead. Later, in Hellenistic and Roman times, the dome was a cemetery symbol. Increasingly, however, it also became associated with celestial and cosmic significance. The Christians used the dome in tombs as well as in buildings erected in homage to martyrs. The spread of the cult of relics transformed the latter into the domed churches of mainstream Christianity (Smith, 1950). The dome is thus located at a tension point between two different symbolisms: a sepulchral and a heavenly one. To put it differently, the dome symbolises both death and heaven.

This dual symbolism is convention-based, historical and highly complex. The iconicity of the Gherkin, on the other hand, operates on a less complex level: mainly through a simple visual resemblance. Now, in principle, this is what makes iconic buildings so important for a city-image that is supposed to attract global investment. It is a simple visual resemblance, which is particularly effective for an understanding of skylines that solely revolves around concerns with the recognisability of an image. A tower that is not iconic, that does not visually resemble anything else and, furthermore, is not easily reproducible, is one that has the potential to be a counter-monument, despite its visibility within the cityscape. But it is equally important to emphasise that the visual resemblance can be more complex than the visual resemblance of the 30 St Mary Axe with a gherkin suggests.

Material removed for copyright reasons. See <http://www.planning2.cityoflondon.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=JA65AQFH02000>.

Figure 49: The Pinnacle's appearance resembling a religious symbol (Design Statement, Pinnacle).

In the Design Statement of the Pinnacle, the architects (KPF, 2006) included many visual references and visual analogies. In regard to the design of the façade they included two different ones: first, an image of a snakeskin and, second, an image of Piero della Francesca's (c. 1415–1492) "Madonna della Misericordia".¹⁵² The latter I regard as particularly interesting because it helps us to further question the visual relationship between religion and financial capitalism as represented and conceptualised on the new London skyline.

The central piece of Francesco's polyptych shows the common Roman Catholic motif of the Virgin of Mercy: a group of people sheltering for protection under the outspread cloak of the Virgin Mary.¹⁵³ The wrapping façade of the Pinnacle is thus revealed as

¹⁵² Piero della Francesca was a painter of the Early Renaissance. To contemporaries he was known as a mathematician and geometer too. Today he is chiefly appreciated for his art, which is characterised by serene humanism and its use of geometric forms and perspective.

¹⁵³ A polyptych is a "painting, typically an altarpiece, consisting of more than three leaves or panels joined by hinges or folds" (OED). The motif of the Virgin of Mercy was very popular in Italy from the thirteenth until

inspired by a religious symbol: the Virgin Mary's spread-out cloak. As the Virgin Mary's cloak protected a group of people, so the Pinnacle will protect a group of buildings in the City of London.

I suggest that if we read this image of the Pinnacle resembling the cloak of the Virgin Mary literally, this allows for two key interpretations. First, religion protects financial capitalism in this image. The arrangement of office towers is not only visually controlled by concerns with the visual dominance of St Paul's, but individual office towers that are part of the Eastern cluster are actually protected by theology. Second, religion has absorbed financial capitalism, in the sense that every object, no matter how profane, has become part of theology, or, vice versa: financial capitalism shows its "religious structure" (Benjamin, 2004e: 288), as I will suggest in the conclusion in Chapter 8.

But how literally should we read this image? Are office towers really the 'new cathedrals'? In a professional context, in which London's skylines are, more than anything else, easily marketable city-images that are used to attract tourists and global investors, the different interpretations become highly vexed in questioning an established value system.

7.4 Symbols and allegories

The Pinnacle resembling the Virgin Mary's cloak is an example that poses questions about the relationship between a signifier and a signified. In professional debates, I suggest, St Paul's and iconic office towers have somewhat gained the role of an open work, as described by Umberto Eco's book of the same title. For Charles Jencks (2005), an iconic building that is designed as an open work is one that "demands to be decoded, but not according to any script" (63). It has "many suggestive meanings that point in a direction and ask that one travels along an unknown route with the search as part of the goal" (ibid.). The final interpretation of an open work is ultimately left up to critics and the wider public (ibid.: 203). "The trick", he suggests, is "to make the familiar surprising, as if seen for the first time" (ibid.: 201). This, then, sets up tensions that are enhanced by

the sixteenth century but can also be found in other countries and later art, especially in Catalonia as well as in Latin America.

the distorted perspective; in this way, the iconic building with its ‘riots of visual connections’ activates the viewer.

For Jencks (2005), the Pinnacle might be an open work, but probably not to the same degree as the Gherkin is. In a world without a strong belief in a meta-narrative, ideology and religion, Jencks suggests, nature- and cosmos-related images are the ones we are all most likely accept. This direction rather than the fixation of the signifier–signified relationship has to be open and invite multiple different metaphors in order to be a successful iconic building. Jencks (2006) demonstrates that 30 St Mary Axe can easily not only be associated with a gherkin, but equally plausible with a spaceship, a screw, a penis, a brain, a finger, an acorn, a babushka doll and a cigar (14), all as a result of its distinct skyline profile.

Jencks (2005) goes one step further and suggests that iconic high-rises have not only become idolised object, but they are ‘new monuments’, which have partially replaced traditional ones in the perception of the wider public. They are enigmatic and trigger “a riot of visual connects” (185), being designed as monuments without knowing what to monumentalise. While I am highly critical of a comparison between St Paul’s as a monument and an office tower such as the Gherkin as a ‘new monument’, it must be noted that some architects and townscape consultants did put a similar comparison forward too. In my discussion, however, I want to focus on the ‘openness’ as well as the contrariness of St Paul’s and individual office towers in the discursive production of the new London skylines, because it is these aspects that shed a light on the relationship between St Paul’s and the Eastern cluster.

To some degree, it might be argued that the overloading of multiple different and contradictory symbolisms turns St Paul’s into an empty symbol as described by Roland Barthes (1979) in regard to the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The Eiffel Tower, so Barthes, attracts meaning and can mean everything. It is a pure signifier of a form “in which men unceasingly put meaning (which they will extract at will from their knowledge, their dreams, their history), without this meaning thereby ever being finite and fixed” (5). In regard to the Eiffel Tower, this is, to a substantial degree, the case because it is unmissable and because it is an “empty monument” (ibid.: 7) that is seemingly without

use other than being a pure signifier. I suggest that Barthes' suggestion regarding an empty symbolism can be fruitfully discussed in relation to Benjamin's (1998) distinction between symbols and allegories in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.¹⁵⁴

In this text Benjamin argues that the German baroque morning play is not a failed tragedy nor a minor art form. The *Trauerspiel* needs to be understood in its own right with allegory and not symbolism being its main poetic device. In an age of "politico-religious problems" (160), in a fragmented world in which man's relation to the absolute has become problematic and not sustainable, allegories are the consequent way of looking at the world.

Allegories are figures of speech in which one element or object signifies something else, and thus they have something in common with symbols. But their peculiarity is that they are highly subjective and that they are "extensive (moving from one term to another) and diachronic (this movement occurring through time)" (Gilloch, 2002: 80). This means that they are part of a chain of different and unpredictable meanings, in which "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else" (Benjamin, 1998: 175). Meaning then, is solely bestowed by the allegorist and, furthermore, "allegory may, as referents multiply, suddenly reverse direction to act as the negation of its other possible meanings" (Gilloch, 2002: 80).

In times of a fragmented world characterised by the decline of tradition, continuous and collective experience, allegories – themselves not absolutes – are the only absolute.¹⁵⁵ The main question for my discussion is how such a 'not absolute' and uncertain relationship to meaning can be brought together with an understanding of the new London skyline as a compositional whole? Hence, it is important to emphasise the brokenness and 'openness' of allegories that Benjamin identifies.

The *Trauerspiel* "represents human life as the futile search for meaning in an abandoned world, as the relentless accumulation of broken fragments" (ibid.: 58). Allegories are

¹⁵⁴ For a discussion of 'urban allegories' see Rendell, 2008.

¹⁵⁵ Benjamin (1998) suggests a parallel between the baroque and expressionism in that "like expressionism, the baroque is not so much an age of genuine artistic achievement as an age possessed of an unremitting artistic will. This is true of all so-called periods of decadence" (55).

broken images that are “eternal[ly] fleeting” (Buck-Morss, 1991: 167). Symbols, on the other hand, operate in “fleeting eternity” (ibid.: 166). A symbol resides in the unity and immediacy with which it expresses an idea, it is a “momentary totality” (Benjamin, 1998: 165): full, complete and self-contained. An allegory is a process, a process of decay, which, in the baroque, is expressed in the corpse, the skull and the ruin:

In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things. This explains the baroque cult of the ruin” (Benjamin, 1998: 177f).

The brokenness of the allegory, Benjamin suggests, is to be understood in relation to a ruination for the sake of truth:

In the search for truth, both allegory and criticism are concerned with the ruination of (beautiful) appearance and the illusion of totality which characterize the work of art and, in particular, the symbol (Benjamin, 1998: 55).

How can we understand the relevance of baroque allegories in relation to contemporary forms of capitalist urbanisation? In his analysis of the work of the French poet Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin draws a parallel between baroque allegories as expressed in corpses, skulls and ruins and commodities in the nineteenth century. He suggests that the commodity is an allegory in capitalism, with an equally arbitrary relationship between values attached to the commodity and the commodity (see Benjamin, 2002: [J]; 2006d). In the commodity, ‘value’ outshines ‘meaning’ (ibid.: [J67,2] 347). The only “meaning of the commodity *is* its price; it has, as commodity, no other meaning” (ibid.: [J80,2; J80a,1] 369). Moreover, the price of the commodity is always, to a certain degree, ‘arbitrary’. To put it differently, in the commodity the use-value has been emptied out, leaving an arbitrary, conventional exchange value (Gilloch, 1996: 136).

Benjamin’s conceptualisation of commodities as allegories in modernity makes us wonder if the overloading of different and contradictory symbolisms to St Paul’s and office towers that are ‘dressed up’ as religious symbols are related to such a process of value outshining meaning. Is an allegorical understanding of buildings in current skyline debates an undeniable reference to the commoditised nature of individual buildings

(additional to the one of the skyline as a city-image)? The overloading of St Paul's with multiple symbolisms can be understood as an indication that the totality of representational city-images is indeed problematic, also among professionals. It is, then, all the more surprising – and contradictory indeed – that design-related professionals are able to agree and hold on to an understanding of the new London skyline as a compositional whole.

I want to suggest that the allegories that are at play in professional skyline debates can be understood as a critique of the compositional wholeness 'from within'. The allegorical gaze, as described by Benjamin (2002), is an attempt "to demolish the harmonious façade of the world" ([J55a,3] 329); to both shatter and preserve the harmonious façade (ibid.: [J56,1] 329), which is what he also describes as "petrified unrest" (ibid.: [J78a,2] 366). This process of not 'abolishing' the commodity's arbitrary relationship to its value within capitalism but exposing and preserving it, so Benjamin argues, is a process that involves getting close to and indeed 'into' the object. It is, in that respect, a process that he brings together with an overcoming of "the unique apparition of a distance" (2006a: 255) to an object, i.e. an object's aura:

The dissolution of semblance [*die Scheinlosigkeit*] and the decay of the aura are identical phenomena. Baudelaire places the artistic device of allegory in their service (Benjamin, 2006d: [19] 173).

The allegorical gaze destroys the whole image and conserves the broken image. It destroys the aura of a skyline, as discussed in Chapter 5, in order to overcome spatial, temporal, psychological and social distance. In so doing it reveals the "fetish character of the commodity" (Benjamin, 2002: [H2,6] 207): relationships between individual buildings on the new London skyline are reduced to their economic relationships.

7.5 Recognisability

Formalised vision, as analysed throughout the thesis, is based on the principle distinction between historic and historical buildings, i.e. buildings with historic values attached to them and other buildings that are simply regarded as old. In order to critically engage with contemporary forms of formalised vision, we need to reject such a distinction.

Furthermore, I suggest that ascribing a particular symbolism to a building on the skyline is not appropriate for a pluralistic society. I see the multiple and contradictory symbolisms that design-related professionals attach to St Paul's and the visual analogies they refer to when arguing for or against the particular design of an iconic high-rise as indications of the 'brokenness' of the new London skyline.

In today's society it is not surprising that professionals cannot agree on the particular symbolism of individual buildings but it is rather surprising that they can seemingly easily agree on visual and formal principles. The stepping or spiral tops of office towers, the formal uniqueness of the dome of St Paul's, the visual separation between St Paul's and the Eastern cluster in distant views from west London – all of these strategies are meant to draw attention to the cathedral, so as to ensure the visibility and appreciability of St Paul's.

If, indeed, "[e]verybody agrees St Paul's should be protected" (TC1, 18), then this seems to be less related to the cathedral being "a religious symbol" (RoEH2, 18), and also less to its aesthetic, historic and community values (*ibid.*), than to its heritage value, which is always also its economic value:

Because London as a whole is one of the world's great historic cities [historic buildings are] hugely important to its economic vitality and success, the reason why people locate here (RoEH1, 19).

Heritage, as Larkham (1999) notes, is most of all "a process of selection and presentation [of history and place] for popular consumption" (115). It is "history processed through mythology, ideology, nationalism, local pride, romantic ideas, or just plain marketing, into a commodity" (Schouten in Larkham, 1999: 115f).

I suggest that the attachment of multiple different symbolisms to St Paul's by professionals is a process that needs to be understood in relation to the recognisability of a skyline which is of primary importance for a city-image intended to attract investment. Jencks (2005) suggests that "almost any building type can produce an icon, there is no overriding direction to global culture, the market prevails and demands continuous differentiation" (203). In regard to London's image as a world city, such a process of

continuous differentiation is paralleled by a process of continuous heritage protection. One of the main purposes of St Paul's is to make London's city-image recognisable for the global market. This aspect of recognisability hints at the commodity character of both secular and sacral buildings on a skyline. However, the commodification does not mean that all the attention is drawn away from religion, as I suggest in the following conclusion.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

This thesis explored the professional production of London's skylines and the way of seeing London this production implies. I analysed experts' conceptualisations of skylines in the pre-recession years between 2000 and 2007, focusing on the historiographical approaches that were encapsulated in current planning policies and guidelines as well as in skyline debates relating to two office developments in the City of London.

My aim was to explore the relationships between aesthetics and politics that are played out in professional skyline debates in order to better understand how representations of history, religion and financial capitalism shape current forms of neoliberal urbanisation. I argued for the need for an inter-disciplinary analysis that draws attention to skylines' spatial and visual as well as social, economic and political dimensions. At a time when the aesthetic aspects are prioritised in planning debates, I suggest that an accompanied aestheticisation of politics needs to be set against a politicisation of the aesthetics of skylines.

In the closing chapter of this thesis I reiterate my critique of the discursive production of the new London skyline in which London's multiple different skylines are reduced to a flat, harmonious, compositional whole, also critiquing the hierarchy of sight this reduction implies. Moreover, I want to speculate about different possible appearances of the City skyline as seen from Waterloo Bridge. How do we see London? How do we see its past, present and future, and how do we see religion and financial capitalism on the city's skylines? I suggest that the crux of formalised vision in contemporary London lies in professional efforts to create an easily marketable city-image. So, what is it that turns the new London skyline into a city-image that is easily marketable? My analysis highlights three main areas. First, London's skylines as conceived by professionals represent an approach to London's cityscape that includes historical and new buildings, as well as sacral and secular buildings, side by side. It does so, and this is crucial, in the form of a 'visual compromise'. London, Tavernor (2004b) suggests, is able "to meet the needs of now and the future, but also to provide continuity with the past" (58). The new London skyline is easily marketable because it provides us with the apparently reassuring idea that historical continuity and present and future needs can easily be

brought together; we are being fed the comforting message that there is no tension or, at the very least, no irreconcilable gap between them.

Second, the new London skyline is easily marketable because in its image different townscape elements are not given equal value. As a city-image that is meant to attract investment and tourists, it is designed as a composition in which St Paul's remains the visually dominant feature and the visual centre. Both preservationists and applicants' teams suggest that this visual role should not be changed by proposed developments. While architects and townscape consultants alleged that new developments will benefit the reading of St Paul's, and while EH was highly critical of these arguments, ultimately all of the professionals involved agreed that office developments must serve to visually enhance the cathedral. To this end, distinct skyline profiles for individual towers and an overall hill-like skyline profile of the Eastern cluster were designed. Moreover, these professionals also agreed that St Paul's and the Eastern cluster should be visually separated because this allows the dome to be seen against the blue sky, which allows it to be visually appreciated. These visual strategies, I suggest, evoke the idea that, although representations of financial capitalism are an important part in London's contemporary cityscape, the new London skyline is not just profane, mundane, and business-driven because history and theology hold the upper hand.

Third, the new London skyline is easily marketable due to its specific conceptualisation as a visual representation. It is, above all, a tourist and a media view – a key view in which visual relationships between different townscape elements are fixed. It is a singled-out distant view from west London to the City, London's historical core and traditionally both a religious and financial centre. EH describes the view from Waterloo Bridge as a 'magnificent panorama', but it is not conceptualised in terms of a continuous, 360-degree view but rather as a bounded composition with a meticulously controlled inside and an outside. This compositional definition, which again transmits the narrative that history and religion hold the upper hand, is meant to be at the crux of our understanding and appreciation of contemporary London. Crucially, such a conceptualisation of wholeness involves not only spatial closure in regard to what is viewed but also to the viewing place. The new London skyline is easily marketable because it is characterised by a free line of vision towards the wider city. Avoiding a

visually interrupting foreground, I suggest, means that a skyline remains a spatially and temporally distant concern. In so doing, the City is both abstracted and aestheticized. “[O]ur appreciation of the object [...] becomes aesthetic only as a result of increasing distance, abstraction and sublimation” Simmel (2004: 77) writes, establishing an analogy between economic and aesthetic value.¹⁵⁶ Avoiding a visually interrupting foreground also means that the viewer is ‘distant’ from the view. This, I suggest, approximates the embodied visual experience of a skyline in the city to the reading of a technologically reproduced city-image on a screen or in a magazine.

In chapters 3 and 4 I maintained that the new London skyline is defined by spatial closure and a linear and continuous representation of time. It is spatially closed because London’s multiple skylines are reduced to a few distant views, which stand for the whole cityscape. It is based on a linear representation of time because London’s multiple conflicting histories are reduced to an official narrative. Historical continuity is related to two dimensions. First, it means visual continuity as bestowed on selected historical buildings, which are argued to represent London’s past. More specifically, professionals employ a three-step process: the singling out of a particular historical building that is regarded as a heritage asset; the definition of static views toward this building; and the idea that other buildings, which are visually prominent, are meant to visually enhance this building, improving both its visibility and appreciability. London is not a museum. Time is visible in the City. In skyline debates, this involves mostly a conservative approach to the visual city in which an existing visual dominance is further enhanced. The new London skyline is conservative exactly because it includes office towers which are given a particular role – the visual enhancement of St Paul’s.

Moreover, in skyline debates, historical continuity is also related to causal reasoning; a causal nexus of various moments of history is established by both preservationists and applicants’ teams. A townscape consultant, for example, argued that the reason for the appropriateness of the appearance of office towers on the new London skyline is the fact that in the nineteenth century industrial structures such as factory chimneys appeared on many of London’s skylines. EH suggested that the reason for St Paul’s being the visually dominant feature on the new London skyline is Christopher Wren’s particular

¹⁵⁶ For a discussion of Simmel’s impressionistic and distant view see Frisby, 1981.

design of the cathedral “as a landmark to dominate London’s skyline [that] has done so for almost 3 centuries” (EH, 2002). Both accounts reinforce historical continuity. The political problem with historical continuity is its inbuilt legitimisation of traditional power relations. A continuous historical narrative, as Benjamin (2006c) shows, is one that is employed by those who are in power precisely because it gives their power historical justification. The inbuilt conservatism in skyline debates means that the way we saw London in the past is the way we are supposed to see it in the future. As long as this way is hierarchical and exclusive, historical continuity needs to be interrupted.

It is a particularity of current skyline debates that visual representations – the so-called ‘master paintings’ – are used to turn a particular reading of history into a legitimisation device. The new London skyline is conceptualised as an enframed painting with a possible compositional closure. References to historical paintings, such as Canaletto’s eighteenth-century interpretation of London as the Venice of the north, reinforced this static and bounded understanding of London’s skylines. My critique of current skyline debates involves the destruction of compositional wholeness and the destabilisation of visual relationships in order to work against the established model of formalised vision and the hierarchy of sight it implies. In other words, my critique seeks to work against the easy marketability of the new London skyline.

I challenged the ascribed wholeness of the new London skyline with a cinematic approach to skylines. I understand the corresponding montage principle as a “political contestation against architectural order” (Pinder, 2005: 122) and against formalised vision more generally, and I regard two dimensions as particularly important. First, a cinematic understanding of skylines does not mean that their visual experience is conceptualised in terms of a linear sequence of static views, as the often-referred-to notion of ‘serial vision’ suggests. Rather, their visual experience is conceptualised in terms of multiple collisions of independent snapshots. Each visual impression is considered independent without being a compositional whole, and thus the visual experience is not determinable or predictable. Collisions are the result of the superimposition of strikingly different views in a viewer’s mind. Such a superimposition of different impressions might reveal the city in a deeper sense, as Cullen (1995: 9) suggests, but I argue against the idea that this necessarily refers to an essentialist

understanding of the city. A cinematic approach to skylines avoids the definition of a static totality because it is driven by the exploration of difference with an emphasis on visual ephemerality.

The montage principle that a cinematic approach is based on also means that each townscape element is understood in its own right as well as in relation to other elements. This implies a shift in concern, from the visual appearance of a single building to the visual relationships between buildings. At the same time, visual relationships are not fixed but destabilised. Buildings are in tensions that cannot easily be solved. Influenced by avant-garde movements, for Townscape writers this meant a process of de-contextualisation. Seemingly incongruous elements were put in visual relationship with each other in order to “see functionally incoherent objects in convincing visual relations” (Hastings, 1944: 8). The political impulse of such a strategy is to bring elements into close proximity that reigning conceptual structures habitually hold apart. In the case of the new London skyline, this might imply the juxtaposition of St Paul’s and speculative office towers. Visual separation between the two is currently evoking the reassuring narrative that religion and financial capitalism are clearly distinguished from each other and that religion has not been replaced by capitalism.

The montage principle is an attempt to critically engage with formalised vision. In line with Benjamin, I understand an understanding of cityscapes as surrealist collages as a “political instrument” (Benjamin, 2005b: 775) in which the “superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted” (ibid.: 778). The process of destruction and re-arrangement is one in which the expert – the architect, townscape consultant or the representative of EH – is a producer who critically engages with contemporary forms of capitalist urbanisation.

In order to further filter out the critical impulse of an informal planning approach to skylines, I discussed three different readings of skylines. The non-auratic skyline, which I discussed in Chapter 5, is one that looks out for a political understanding of spatial-temporal distance in addition to its aesthetic dimensions. The multidirectional skyline that I discussed in Chapter 6 aims at a multiplication of historical narratives. The empty skyline, which I focused on in Chapter 7, emphasises the limitations of a symbolic

understanding of buildings. All three readings of skylines are based on a strategy of ruination, which I understand as a way to conceptually re-arrange the parts in order to create a critical and enlightening constellation. One of the aims of a conceptual destruction, I suggest, is to evoke a proactive and critical process on behalf of readers of skylines, which involves professionals and the wider public, once skylines debates have been translated into built form.

The non-auratic skyline is a visual ruin in that it makes deliberate use of a visually interrupting viewing place. Acknowledging visually rich places is an attempt to work against a monofunctional definition of designated viewing places. Viewing the City from outside its borders is only one of multiple unexpected activities that these places should allow. Crucially, if we define skylines by a free line of vision toward the wider city, then the viewer is conceptualised as not being part of the view; to put it differently, the viewer's present is not in relation to the spatially and temporally distant image. To start the reading of the *There & Then* of a skyline from the *Here & Now* of the viewer is, I suggest, one way to politicise distance.

The non-auratic skyline is not a harmonious whole in front of which one passively contemplates and concentrates. Instead, it is 'tactile' and 'near'. Distracted by the *Here & Now* at the viewing place, a viewer's train of associations is interrupted and she/he is invited to perceive a skyline not solely in terms of its aesthetic, architectural and historical values, but, most importantly, in terms of its topicality. I follow Benjamin (2006c) in warning about historical reconstruction and support his understanding of history as a dynamic construction. The non-auratic skyline starts from a present concern and writes and reads history in a way that is critical and politically useful in order to challenge the current hierarchy of sight that is imposed.

While the non-auratic skyline is a visual ruin, the multidirectional skyline acknowledges physical and programmatic ruins and identifies in them the shortcoming of an oversimplistic linear and progressive historical meta-narrative. These buildings become tools to multiply the temporal direction a skyline represents. A programmatic ruin is a building that has lost its originally intended purpose and expresses its own individual history. Hence, it cannot be judged within a framework of aesthetic idealism and thus

proves to be useless for the visual enhancement of historic buildings that are enshrined as heritage.

In his concept of the afterlife, Benjamin (2004c) suggests that the truth of an object is manifest in the moment of its ruination. I suggest that the crumbling away of a building's purpose within capitalism can indeed be revealing. As part of an intact cityscape, programmatic ruins provoke the question of what cityscape the City needs. This is a question that relates to both its functions and the narrative it conveys. The multidirectional skyline is an attempt to open up an understanding of skylines that solely revolves around the visibility and appreciability of existing landmarks by including 'counter-monuments'. Such a skyline points time in different directions – as long as these different buildings are not visually reconciled.

The empty skyline is a symbolic ruin. It is a conceptualisation of skylines that suggests that, in principle, a building can mean everything. It acknowledges that in contemporary society the ascription of a singular symbolism and a singular meaning is not sustainable, and draws attention to professionals' attempts to fix the symbolic meaning of buildings in skylines. In so doing, I suggest, it not only prompts us to resist a desire to fix meaning (see Sennett, 2013) but also draws our attention to the commodity character of the new London skyline.

In professional skyline debates, St Paul's was regularly turned into a commodity by emphasising its relevance as a tourist attraction and as an important distinctive feature for a unique and globally recognisable city-image. Speculative office towers are, of course, commodities too. At the same time, St Paul's was overloaded with multiple different and sometimes contradictory symbolisms. I argue that such an overloading is a process that leads to – and reflects – the hollowing out of meaning. The ruination of meaning that is typical of the empty skyline implies the destruction of the wholeness of a symbol and conserves the image in its broken state rather than putting the pieces together in a mosaic-like fashion to create a re-arranged whole. I suggest that the empty skyline is one where meaning is in fact the search for meaning.

8.1 The politics of disguise

Describing St Paul's as *the* historic building in London often means that a particular representation of history is used as a legitimisation device for capitalist interests. It is true that the system of visual protection limits possible locations for office towers in central London. However, under the pretext of 'design quality', the superior role of St Paul's in the cityscape also gives architects, developers and politicians arguments for the design of expensive and formally complex high-rises. St Paul's not only limits the amount of high-rises in central London but also 'creates' a particular type of office tower – one that is visually particularly noticeable.

As a sacral building, St Paul's clearly has an aura of inviolability in professional skyline debates. This aura has to do with the fact that the cathedral is hundreds of years old and also that it is a religious building that survived the sustained bombing of London by Nazi Germany. Tavernor (2002) describes it as a "quiet centre for all faiths in the midst of the physical and economic changes that are continuously taking place around it" (11). Such a description can make it difficult to see a value in buildings that do not visually enhance and further protect the inviolable cathedral. "Everybody agrees St Paul's should be protected", a townscape consultant (TC1, 18) suggested. St Paul's is an absolute.

Behind the image of the continuing visual dominance of St Paul's, which defines the discursive production of the new London skyline, however, is another historical continuity: that of capitalism. St Paul's aura of inviolability and its economic/heritage relevance mean that financial capitalism has to do its work in less obvious ways. It is important to emphasise that EH objected to several office developments in the last fifteen years and initiated several public inquiries, but "we [EH] have lost every high building inquiry in London that we have fought [...] since Heron Tower" (RoEH2, 26). It seems, then, that developers and their teams have found ways to turn arguments for St Paul's as an inviolable heritage asset into design strategies for speculative developments.

Protecting views to listed buildings and proposing new towers were not opposites, nor were these concerns disconnected. Proposed developments were argued to somehow

help the view protection of a building, for example when professionals argued that the quantitative increase of office towers would reduce the visual impact of individual towers. However, in the analysed planning processes, developers and their teams did not openly lead the debate; they exercised rhetoric reservation. Having been aware of the power of preservationists and EH in particular, even an iconic feature of the Pinnacle – its façade – was argued for ‘in relation to’ religion, seemingly respecting St Paul’s status as the “unchanging historic landmark” (Higgott, 2002: 58). I argue that the politics of verticality of “urban shrines” (Kaika and Thielen, 2006) – i.e. the politics that define the visibility of individual buildings by means of their superior scale in a prime location – is increasingly coupled with a politics of disguise in their discursive production. In the analysed skyline debates, the power of financial capitalism appeared in the guise of a visual strategy to assist St Paul’s.



Figure 50: The City skyline from Waterloo Bridge in 2013 (Gassner, 2013).

When we look at the City from Waterloo Bridge in 2013, we see a few seemingly uncoordinated individual office towers; the hill-like skyline profile of the Eastern cluster is arguably not readable yet. But it is important to remember that if, one day, the new London skyline is translated into built form as originally planned, financial capitalism will curtain its power in this image.

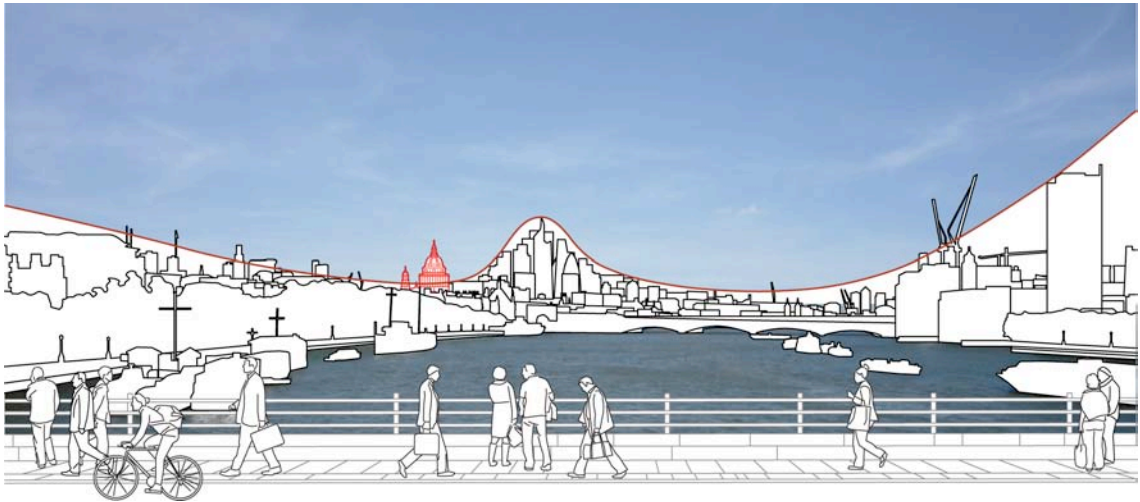


Figure 51: A 'perfect' hill-like skyline profile of the Eastern cluster (Gassner, 2013).

Interpreting the image of a perfectly smooth hill-like skyline profile literally can lead to different outcomes. The image can suggest that the financial services industry in the City of London is visually controllable, and is controlled from the seemingly 'outside' source that is St Paul's. This is not the image of a utilitarian skyline, of a laissez-faire approach to urban planning and visual order (Mumford, 1940); indeed, it is quite the opposite. The religious St Paul's seemingly dictates the visual order in the City. Another reading of this image suggests that financial services grow (or, better, grew) and that this growth has achieved a level of saturation. This is an important aspect, because it withdraws an intimidating aspect of economic growth.



Figure 52: A valley skyline as suggested by Catchpole in 1987 (Gassner, 2013).

There have been professional debates about a different type of overall skyline profile for office towers in central London in the past. In his study of high buildings and views, Catchpole (1987) proposed the idea of St Paul's Cathedral in a 'saucer'. Such a valley skyline does indeed visually protect St Paul's; however, the worrisome idea related to it is exactly that financial capitalism is unstoppable, that it will grow into infinity or, better, that it will grow "up right through the sky" (Benjamin, 2004e: 289).



Figure 53: A 'perfect' valley-like skyline profile of the Eastern cluster (left and right half of the Eastern cluster shifted) in a view from Waterloo Bridge (Gassner, 2013).

Once St Paul's is not *in* the valley it is confronted by a 'hard edge', which I regard as productive in that it opens up questions. What makes the edge on the right stop? Would the edge on the left have stopped if the cathedral were not in its way? I suggest that the image of a smooth hill-like profile, with its image of the 'natural' growth of the Eastern cluster from the mid-height built environment in central London, chokes off such questions.

If we accept the conception of a hill-like skyline profile of the Eastern cluster that has been promulgated by design-related professionals for more than a decade, we can nonetheless still identify moments in which this understanding of visual order is challenged. These are moments in which the compositional wholeness of the new London skyline is destroyed and it reveals itself as unfinishable in a compositional and/or material sense.

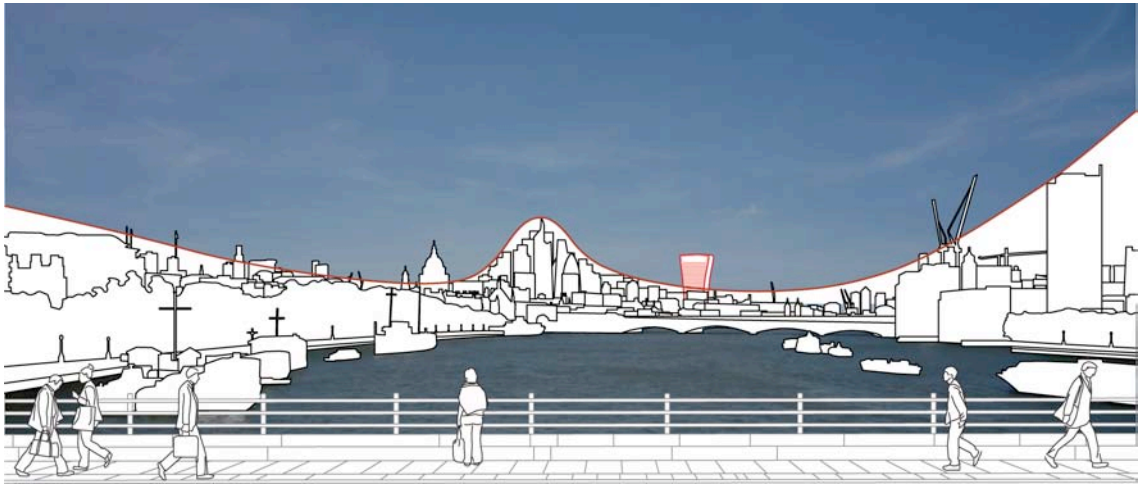


Figure 54: The vision of a 'perfect' hill-like skyline profile of the Eastern cluster with the Walkie-Talkie as the one deviation in a view from Waterloo Bridge (Gassner, 2013).

The Walkie Talkie is currently the only office tower in central London that is top-heavy. It does not have a stepped or spiral top, which are designs that can easily be argued to help the visual enhancement of St Paul's. If the Eastern cluster were complete, then the Walkie Talkie would be an even more noticeable visual deviation from the group of office towers in the City. As a deviation from an established visual order, it thus opens up questions. Is financial capitalism not as modest as the gentle curve of the hill-like skyline profile of the Eastern cluster suggests? Has financial capitalism in fact not yet achieved a level of saturation in the City?



Figure 55: The vision of a 'perfect' hill-like skyline profile of the Eastern cluster with the Walkie-Talkie right next to St Paul's (the Eastern cluster mirrored) in a view from Waterloo Bridge (Gassner, 2013).

Arguably, the Walkie Talkie was granted planning permission because it appears to the far right of St Paul's in views from west London. Let us imagine, for a moment, if it were instead to appear to the left, in close proximity to St Paul's. Would this mean that St Paul's and the Walkie Talkie would be visually confronted with each other? Would it mean that the Eastern cluster would form the visual background to an argument between religion and financial capitalism in the City? Townscape writers in the 1940s would have argued that this is a case of 'visual confrontation' as opposed to 'visual compromise'.

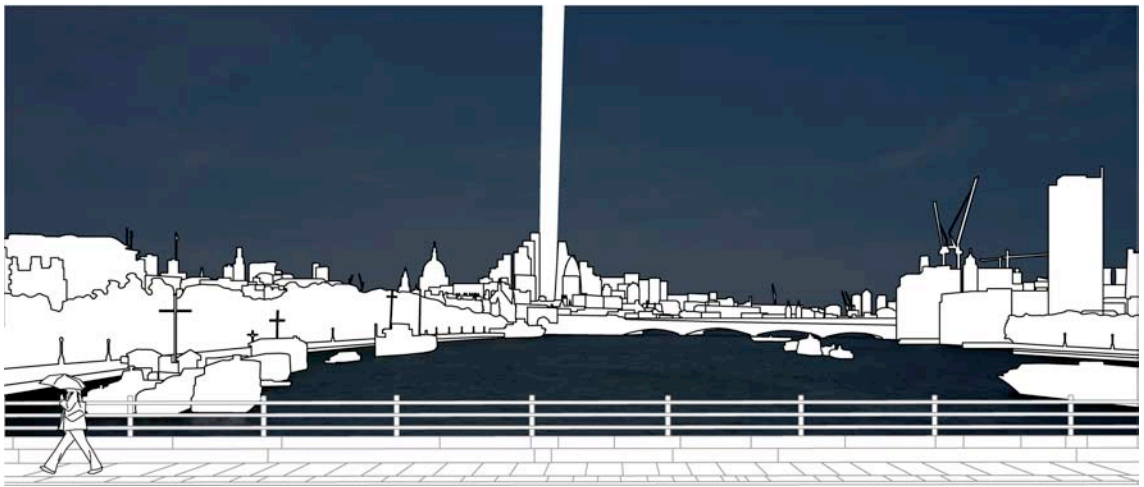


Figure 56: The vision of a 'perfect' hill-like skyline profile of the Eastern cluster with one tooth missing in a view from Waterloo Bridge (Gassner, 2013).

The abovementioned speculations are related to the idea that the Eastern cluster will be translated into built form as it was envisioned more than a decade ago. As discussed in Chapter 6, however, this is unlikely to happen. The Pinnacle will not appear on London's skylines due to the failure to sign a major pre-let agreement. The developer, it seems, has still not been able to find another major tenant for a building in which floorplate sizes and geometries vary significantly. A cheaper design – the so-called 'Austerity Tower' – now appears likely to be constructed instead.

8.2 The Austerity Tower

Even if the Pinnacle will never be built, as an idea it shaped professional conceptualisation of London's skylines fundamentally. As a consented scheme, it was part of the visualisations assessed in several successful planning applications. The Eastern cluster as a premature ruin invites us to enquire about the nature of neoliberal capitalism as it exists in London. How does the momentarily unfinishable cluster fit into a singular and progressive narrative? A reading of the cluster as a premature ruin, to conceive the cluster's afterlife, as I suggested in Chapter 6, means to read the 'rubble' of the cluster as the wish image of politicians, developers, architects and historians in the past. Acknowledging a "missing tooth" (Arch2, 36), a gap that cannot be filled easily, is a political act in which past visions of London are critically examined. Questions emerge about the design principles involved in a 'cheap Pinnacle'.

The Austerity Tower is a chance to rethink design ideas for buildings in central city locations. It is likely to be a building that looks cheap because it has to be cheap, at the very least cheaper than a shapely and iconic tower. This does not necessarily mean that it will provide working spaces that are not up to the current standard; it rather entails that it probably will not be iconic for the sake of it or, better, for the sake of the London city-image. A cheap tower is a welcome opportunity to activate debates about sustainability. Is the Austerity Tower cheap in regard to its design and construction and/or 'cheap' in the long run? To put it differently, is the Austerity Tower required to be flexible? Can it accommodate different functions, such as office spaces and residential units, depending on temporal requirements? The main challenge of a functionally flexible tower is that its construction is more expensive, primarily because vertical services and the building structure need to be measured according to different possible contingencies and occupations. Maybe the Austerity Tower will not be a tower at all, at the very least not a slim and elegant one. Maybe it will be a lower building that, despite its limited height, will be capable of accommodating an amount of useable space that is 'appropriate' for this location in the City and is 'viable' for developers. These questions point in one direction. The Austerity Tower is likely less to be a building that compromises its logic as a building in order to support a particular city-image. In fact, it is likely to work against its logic as developed by design-related professional in the past because an iconic, very tall and slender central building in the Eastern cluster that visually enhances

St Paul's in distant views from west London is likely to be prohibitively expensive. It might thus be a visual deviation, because it does not seem to be economically, socially and politically viable for it not to be. However, are such design principles at a time of 'austerity urbanism' to be understood in terms of a critical engagement with hegemonic ideas about London's city-image as a world city or simply as help for developers to develop quicker and/or to make more profit?

The Austerity Tower episode reminds us that a group of developers has not managed to sign a major pre-let agreement for the iconic Pinnacle. But what does that vignette tell us about the state of financial capitalism in the City? Studies show that the financial sector has grown since the banking crisis in 2008 and not contracted as many expected. Indeed, the financial sector has benefited from attempts by governments in Europe and the US to deal with the crisis. The bigger banks are now bigger and not smaller than five years ago; the shadow banking system is taking over more activity and the rich have become richer.¹⁵⁷ A study by Oxford Economics shows that the employment in financial and business services and the economy in the City grew steadily between 2008 and 2012.¹⁵⁸

It might be tempting to read the Austerity Tower as a sign of the financial services industry in the City suffering from poor health then, but this does not seem to be the case. The Austerity Tower is, as it were, a misleading or failed piece of signification, just like a skyline as a whole might be. In the Introduction I referred to a recent study that suggests that the visibility of office towers does not signify economic wealth but rather heralds an economic crash. Building tall tends to be a sign of a building boom, which, in turn, often involves the misallocation of capital. The Austerity Tower, on the other hand, might therefore in fact indicate the strength and health of big banks and, simultaneously, suggest that the financial sector is paying lip service to the moral critique it has been subjected to since the crises by the wider public. Such a reading of the

¹⁵⁷ See www.ft.com/cms/s/0/e622fa00-1bbf-11e3-b678-00144feab7de.html?siteedition=uk#axzz2fK09gmxE [accessed 27 September 2013].

¹⁵⁸ See www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/business/economic-research-and-information/statistics/Documents/oxford-economics-economic-outlook-for-London-dec-2012.pdf [accessed 27 September 2013].

Austerity Tower refers to an underlying moral link between religion and capitalism that Benjamin (2004e) suggests in the fragment “Capitalism as Religion”.¹⁵⁹

In this text Benjamin suggests that a “religion may be discerned in capitalism [which] serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers” (288). Identifying in capitalism a ‘cultic religion’ that does not offer questions of ultimate values but only superficial comforts, he suggests that it is a cult “that makes guilt pervasive” (ibid.). Here, Benjamin refers to Nietzsche’s (1996) remark that ‘guilt’ and ‘debt’ have a connection (the German term ‘*Schuld*’ means both), and that “the central moral concept of ‘guilt’ [*Schuld*] originated from the very material concept of ‘debt’ [*Schulden*]” (44). Benjamin refers to the idea that capitalism expands through the accumulation of debt and to the moral economy – akin to a cult – that underwrites the debtor and holds the debtor and not the creditor responsible for sustaining it.

The Austerity Tower signifies a financial climate of austerity to which all of us are subject – except big banks, it seems. What the tower conveys is at odds with what has actually happened since the crisis and is probably a public display of sacrifice. There is a gap between the signifier and what is signified. A ‘missing tooth’ or an Austerity Tower that does not visually ‘complete’ the Eastern cluster splits the group of high-rises in half. This, to follow lines of argumentation that were voiced by design-related professionals, draws attention to the office towers and away from St Paul’s, because the Eastern cluster is thus not read as one coherent group. However, to follow Benjamin, this does not mean that attention is drawn away from religion. The missing tooth and the Austerity Tower might suggest the apparent atonement of financial capitalism. Understood as a destructive cult religion, as Benjamin (2004e) posits, capitalism is, however, not able to atone for its sins.

¹⁵⁹ For detailed discussions of Benjamin’s fragment see Baecker, 2004; Dodd, 2013.

8.3 Skylines as unfinished and unfinishable, adversarial processes

Throughout the thesis I argued against the conceptualisation of the new London skyline as a compositional whole. When some preservationists argued that a skyline is ‘finished’, or when architects and townscape consultants put forward the idea that with the inclusion of a proposed development it will be ‘finished’ or, at the very least, will be ‘more finished’, then they all suggested that, in principle, a skyline is finishable. To put it differently, they suggested that there exists something like a finished and whole skyline, an ‘ideal’ London skyline that will be made real in the future. Recent events pose questions about the finishability of London’s city-image in a material sense. At the same time, I draw attention to its unfinishability in an epistemic sense.

I suggest that a critical engagement with current forms of capitalist urbanisation and official representations of history, religion and financial capitalism is one that conceptualises a skyline as unfinished and unfinishable. I regard this as a form of political contestation of formalised vision that challenges urban visions in which professionals are “in literal control of an entire field of vision to incorporate visual order in cities” (Jacobs, 1992: 378). Visual order needs to be understood as an ongoing process that includes visions of London that are antagonistic to London’s image as a world city.¹⁶⁰

Understanding the new London skyline as a compositional whole can support a linear and continuous representation of time. Hastings’ (1949) descriptions of the cityscape as democratic art and surrealist picture introduce two main criteria that define an unfinished and unfinishable conceptualisation of skylines: inclusiveness and visual destabilisation. An unfinished and unfinishable skyline invites difference in, which implies both functional and aesthetic diversity. It does not operate according to a kind of ‘visual zoning’ and includes residential buildings and other tall physical structures too. It includes different functions and different aesthetics, but not solely in order to visually enhance the cathedral.

¹⁶⁰ For a discussion of visions of London’s past that are antagonistic to London’s image as a global city see Campkin, 2013.

A skyline that is unfinished and unfinishable as a composition is a process, although not a linear and telic one. It is a process that includes different and contradictory perspectives and neither pursues a single vision nor seeks a visual compromise. It is one in which the terms that Hastings mentions – such as radicality, liberty and pluralist democracy – are taken seriously. Hastings’ encouraging starting points end up too often in a ‘happy’ compromise that pleases ‘everybody’. Instead, I argue against a centralistic understanding of visual order and against the attempt to visually reconcile difference. To work against the fixing of a harmonious ensemble, I suggest, is a political act (see Mouffe, 2007). A truly “radical idea of the meaning of parts” (Hastings, 1949: 361) implies an adversarial conception of parts that suggests that conflicts cannot be easily harmonised, that different perspectives are necessary for a lively democracy and that these different perspectives need to be exposed.

Understanding London’s skylines as unfinished and unfinishable, adversarial processes is related to both planning processes and their translation into built form. In regard to planning processes, it means that different actors need to be able to voice their perspective without risking putting themselves at a disadvantage in subsequent debates. One of the complexities in current skyline debates is that concerns with the preservation of listed buildings and arguments for new developments are not only seemingly easily compatible but, furthermore, that new developments are argued to strengthen and support visual protection concerns. In that respect, architects and townscape consultants tend to come across as even more conservative than preservationists because they proactively seek out strategies to continue a dominant visual narrative, while preservationists, on the other hand, often simply argue against change.

An adversarial understanding of skyline-related planning processes means that different and contradictory perspectives are invited. But in the British planning system, where precedent cases can help an argument, power can be easily handed down from one planning process to the next. It is inherent in such a system’s nature then that linearity and continuity are strengthened. In the planning process of the Gherkin, EH argued that the building’s “high quality architecture outweighs a limited adverse effect on the setting of St Paul’s” (RoEH2, 26). The very same argument was used by architects and townscape consultants in subsequent planning processes, who argued that the proposed

development in question was a piece of ‘high quality architecture’ too. This is one of the cases in which a case study-oriented planning system served to create an argumentative interruption before birthing a persistent historical continuity.

A planning system that invites different perspectives in, and that consequently encourages and reveals conflicts, is a discontinuous one. Interrupting continuity, then, means that when a particular perspective has become hegemonic it needs to be counteracted. Such a planning system is one in which preceding cases are not only used as evidence to make a case, but sometimes also as evidence to make a counter-case. A series of precedent cases might simply indicate that a particular perspective has become prevalent and therefore that another perspective needs to be strengthened.

Different perspectives need to be visible on a skyline. This, however, also means that we have to understand that power and representations of power are not always as simply linked as we might think. The power of representations lies in the opening up of debates. In order to sustain these debates, we need to think of a city’s skylines as never achieved and always to come.

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Appendix: Photographic journeys

From Gabriel's Wharf to Somerset House in 2009 (left) and 2013 (right); photos taken every 100 steps (Gassner, 2009; 2013).

