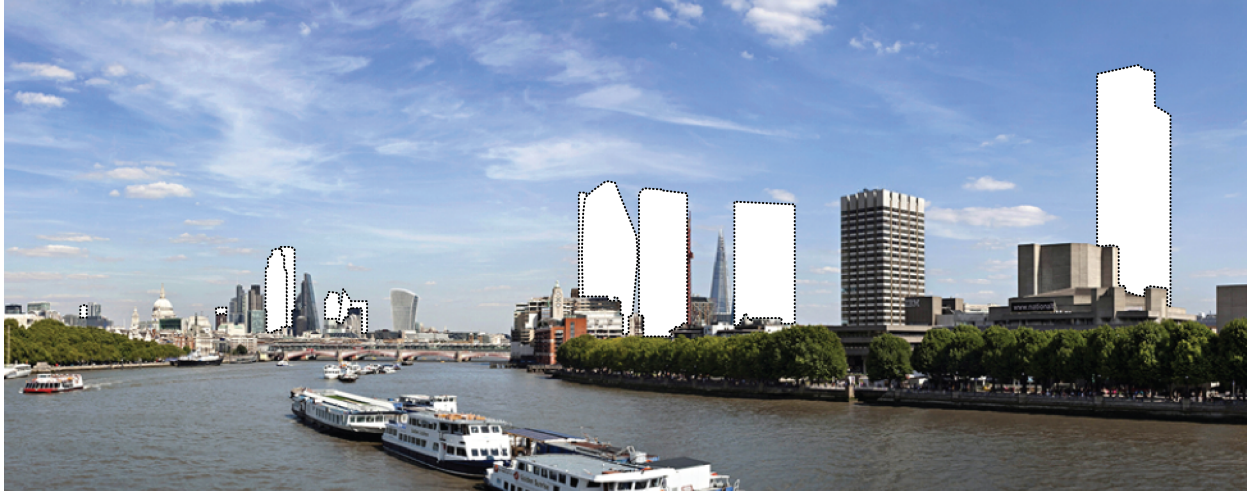


Radically conservative

by Günter Gassner



London's current tall building boom: more than 400 speculative towers will introduce a new urban order (Gassner 2017).

What is the political agency of urban design in conservative times with inequalities and discriminations on the rise and in cities that are largely built by globally operating investors and private real estate developers? What do paradigms of social justice and democratic city-making mean when it is these actors who drive planning processes and co-define what a public good is? It is useful to step back for a moment to do some conceptual groundwork. What do we mean by conservatism? We might refer to an attitude of holding on to traditional values, the commitment to a limited government, or the idea that one must govern not despite but for the market. Corey Robin, in turn, holds that conservatism's primary feature is the belief in 'the excellence of a world where the better man commands the worse'.¹ He draws our attention to the ways in which conservatives take action when they see their power threatened and try to win it back.²

Conservatives, in this sense, are counter-revolutionaries and respond to calls for equality with a belief in distinction. Designers who operate in the conservative city might be reminded that the term 'radical' was used in seventeenth-century England by those who were 'faced with the sovereign's real or possible abuses' with the aim to 'assert those famous original rights supposedly possessed [...] prior to the Norman invasion'.³ Along the same lines, 'revolution' was originally an astronomical term that described a movement of 'revolving back to some pre-established order'.⁴ It was only during the American and the French Revolution that they began to be thought of in terms of new beginnings; both were initiated by men who aimed to 'restore an old order of things that had been disturbed and violated by the despotism of absolute monarchy and the abuses of colonial government'.⁵

I introduce these historical accounts to bend thoughts from the idea that conservatism and radicalism are mutually exclusive categories without overlaps. Conservatives react to radicals and vice versa. Their motives for interfering in power relations differ but both fight against real or imagined threats in the present, often by making use of historical references. Urban designers can exploit these commonalities. They can look back in time; not to restore an old order but to make a detour through the past on the way to a just and democratic city. To this end, history is not to be read as a guide for political action, as conservatives have it, but untapped possibilities and unexplored paths in the past must be uncovered as potentially generative for the political imagination in the present.

Working with and against conservatism has become an important dimension of my current project, which focuses on strategies of private profit maximisation by means of building particularly tall buildings. Professional debates about London's cityscape are indeed conservative: they reinforce the idea that the city has a stable identity and draw hierarchical distinctions between historic buildings that apparently represent the whole city and historical buildings that are simply old, and between sacred buildings of civic significance and developments that are nothing but driven by private greed. While building height does not need to be reserved for the public, current professionals argue unlike advocates of the conservative nineteenth-century City Beautiful movement, selected historic and sacred buildings like St Pauls Cathedral should nevertheless remain the most visible and appreciable structures in the city.

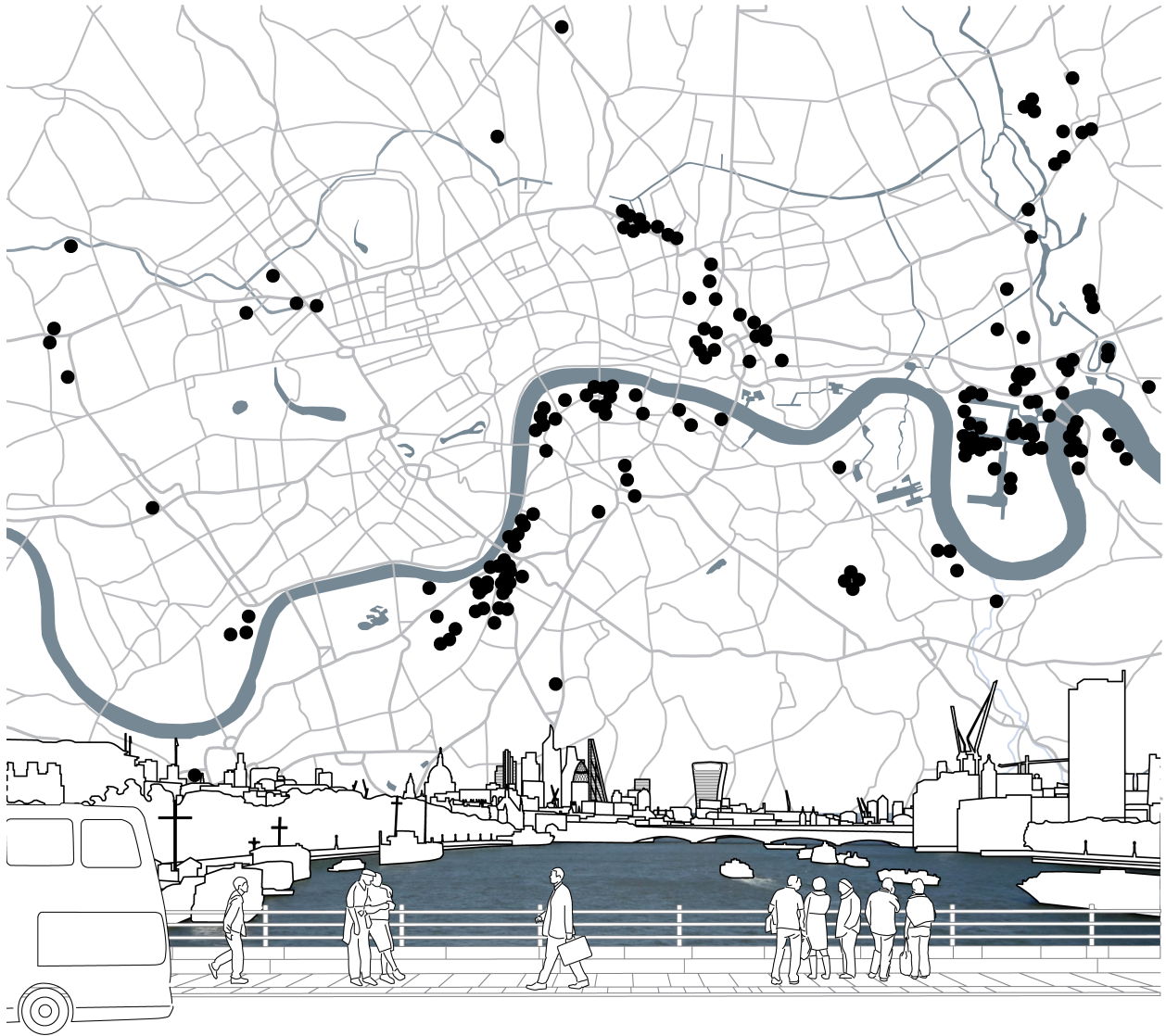
Strategies of private profit maximisation can be easily used to support this conservative and conservationist approach to the city. After all, drawing distinctions like the ones mentioned above provide reference points for new developments and allow architects and developers to offer office towers as structures that visually enhance historic sacred buildings. To this end, building profiles are carefully controlled in selected views of the city, which are arguably easily marketable visual representations that aim to attract investors and revenue-generating tourists. But it is not only on the sky that conservative and speculative cityscapes are allied. Building height is regularly described as an opportunity to minimise a building's footprint or to elevate the lobby level in order to provide greater permeability across the site and create highly controlled 'public' spaces with new visual links to so-called 'heritage assets'.

A radical response to conservative city-making should examine the sense of visual order and rightness that advocates and opponents of speculative developments agree on. Aligning historical analysis and political critique cannot accept a stable identity of the city or hierarchical distinctions between historic and historical buildings or between religion and financialised capitalism.⁷ Mapping histories that are invisible in professional debates, working against buildings' enshrinement as heritage, discovering recurrences between unprecedented ruptures in planning processes without creating a causal connection that can be easily co-opted by the market, these are some of the interventions that I explore in my current project with the aim to open up a space for emancipatory politics in the conservative city.

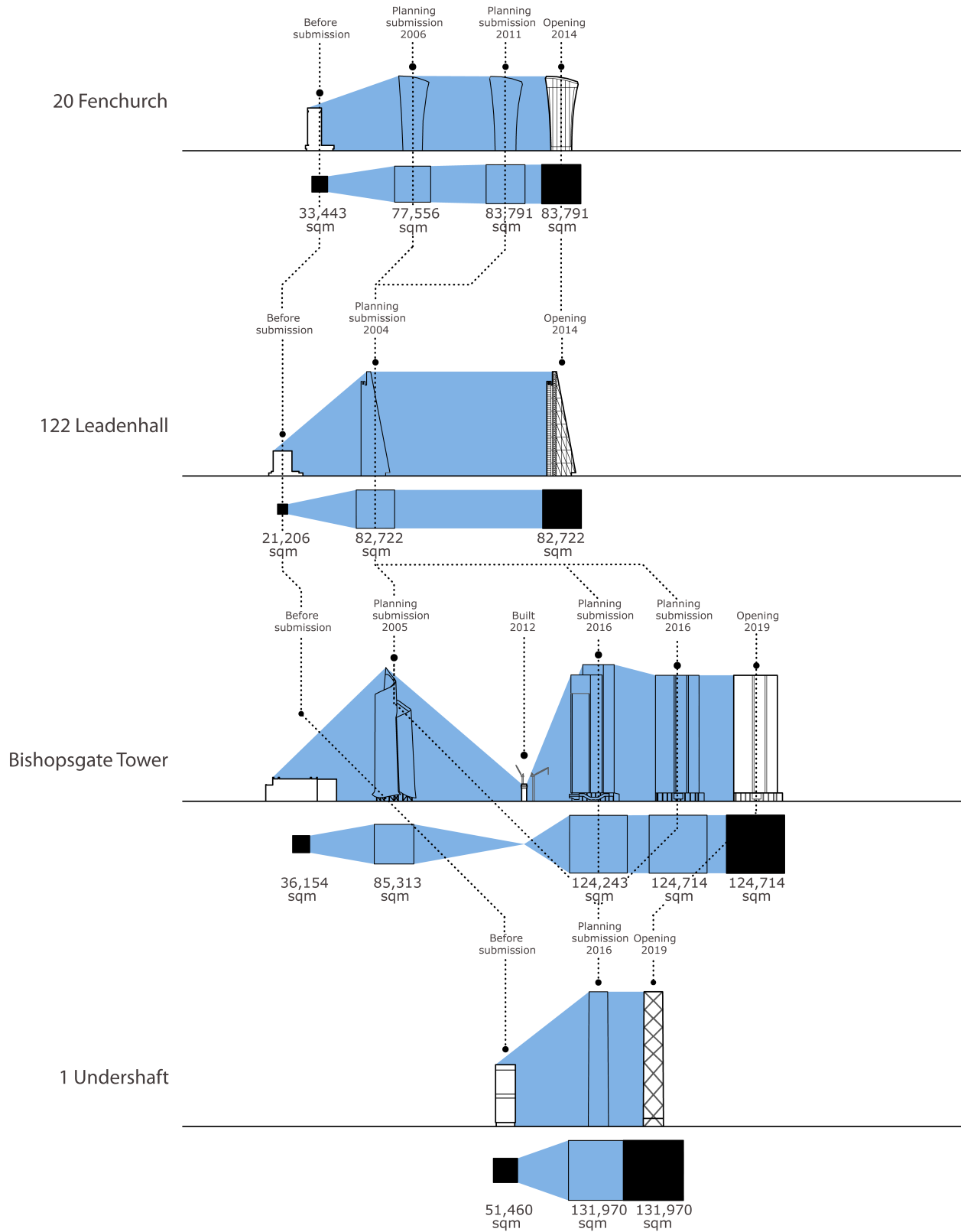
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The alignment of conservative and speculative cityscapes is not always visible from a distance: under Conservative Governments in the 1980s and 1990s office tower construction in East London invigorated the idea that the historic City of London is protected from economic neoliberalism despite extensive construction activity (Gassner 2017).



London's current tall building boom, which commenced under a Labour Government and a Labour Mayor of London in the 2000s, is enabled by the visual protection of selected historic buildings (Gassner 2017).



There is no conflict between private profit maximisation by means of building towers and the protection of 'heritage assets' in Britain's discretionary planning system (Gassner 2017).

¹ Robin, C. (2011) *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 16.

² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³ Foucault, M. (2008) *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-79*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 41.

⁴ Arendt, H. (2006) *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin Books, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁶ Gassner, G. (2017) 'Wrecking London's Skylines? A political critique of how the city is viewed. *City: Analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*: 21(6).

⁷ Gassner, G. (2017) 'A Religious Office Tower? Virgin Mary's Outspread Cloak in the City of London'. In B. Quash, A. Rosen and C. Reddaway (eds) *Visualising a Sacred City: London, Art and Religion*. London: I.B. Tauris.