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## Thinking against Heritage: Speculative development and emancipatory politics in the City of London

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## Abstract

What does a political conceptualisation of the relationship between urban development and heritage involve? Against the widespread idea that there is a conflict between densification and the protection of historic buildings and sites in the City of London, I show that a conservative heritage discourse promotes the construction of speculative towers. Arguing against a City that is privately owned, self-competing and socially homogeneous, I develop a democratic understanding of history that contests an essentialist reading of the city and challenges the idea that speculative developments direct attention to and visually enhance historic landmarks. Aligning historical analysis with political critique, I draw on the work of Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault and discuss notions of 'historical events' and 'cultural treasures' in order to think against the prevailing speculative logic in the city.

## Keywords

Speculative development, Heritage values, Urban politics, London, Critical Theory

## Development in a historical city

While, compared to metropolises like Hong Kong, New York City, Dubai or Shanghai, London has a low built environment, the city is currently growing upwards. In 2017, 455 skyscrapers were in the pipeline, i.e. either proposed, approved or already under construction (NLA 2017). This tall building boom poses important questions. In a city that is largely built by globally operating investors and private real estate developers with a state that acts as a hands-off manager, what do notions such as 'social justice' and 'democratic city-making' mean? The majority of proposed towers are residential buildings and a political debate about city-making must address the shortage of affordable housing

(see Madden and Marcuse 2016; Watt and Minton 2016). In this paper, however, I focus on office towers because they provide important insights into the ways in which an authorised heritage discourse does not prevent but promote private profit maximisation strategies and attempts to build particularly tall buildings.

London is a well-connected node within the network of advanced business service industries and it is this economic sector that is predicted to grow even more in years to come (GLA 2016). Financial service, insurance and real estate companies occupy more and more central space in the city and negotiations about Britain's looming exit from the European Union have so far not reversed this trend. Rents in London's skyscrapers are the highest across Europe with office space in the City of London (hereafter City) – London's historic centre and one of its financial centres – being in the lead (Vaish 2017). London's other financial centre is Canary Wharf. Built on the site of former docks from the 1980s, it is the built manifestation of the ideology that a city must be governed not despite but for the market.

Canary Wharf's development resulted from policies that encouraged economic growth and development through offering tax concessions, infrastructure incentives, and reduced regulations. The idea that spatial and economic growth can and should be encouraged in addition to the conservation of the city's historic centre was prevalent until the 2000s. Even though more than 200 sites were redeveloped between 1980 and 2000 in the City, from a distance these developments were less visible than skyscrapers in Canary Wharf (Gassner 2013, 14). Visual conservatism and economic liberalism were well attuned because they were spatially separated. In the 2000s, this spatial separation has been obliterated and a notion of heritage became prevalent that promotes the construction of speculative towers. In this paper, I explore this notion, show that there is no conflict between urban densification and the protection of historic buildings and sites, and argue that this is a political problem or, as radical geographers would argue, a feature of the post-political city (see Dikeç 2017; Swyngedouw 2017; et al.).

This paper has three sections. I start by introducing characteristics of speculative urban development in the City and suggest that the level of privately owned land in the City, the City's self-competitive behaviour in terms of building heights, and its homogeneity with regard to income levels among residents are related to inherited urban attributes such as site boundaries and historical buildings. I

argue that the inherited City consolidates as well as resists the prevailing speculative logic and suggest that a detailed exploration of the latter in both physical and discursive realms is crucial for political interventions.

In the second section, I analyse three dimensions along which speculative towers are being constructed for – rather than in conflict with – heritage. In Britain's discretionary planning system where decisions are made on a case-by-case basis, an analysis of relevant heritage policies is important. However, a critical engagement with speculative city-making requires a more fundamental examination of the different values that professionals attach to the built environment. My analysis focuses on statements regarding four towers: 20 Fenchurch Street (the 'Walkie Talkie'), which is a 37 stories tall building designed by Rafael Viñoly Architects; 122 Leadenhall Street (the 'Cheesegrater'), which was designed by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners and is 48 stories tall; 22 Bishopsgate, which was designed by PLP Architects and, with 62 floors, was proposed to be the tallest building in the City until 1 Undershaft, a 73 story tower designed by Eric Parry Architects, was granted planning permission. I examine *Design Statements*, which are planning documents in which architects explain the rationale of their designs, as well as 'Townscape, Heritage and Visual Impact Assessments', which are produced by townscape consultants and included in *Environmental Statements*. In addition, I draw on six interviews with architects, townscape consultants and urban historians who were involved in planning processes in the City in recent years.

In the third section, I develop a critique of the current heritage discourse. I discuss the work of Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault because both provide important insights into our understanding of two key concepts: 'historical events' and 'cultural treasures'. I do not suggest that these thinkers advance the same political programme. In contrast to Foucault, Benjamin retained the historical materialist promise of human salvation through revolution – although in contrast to orthodox Marxism he suggested that revolution is less about the socialisation of the means of production than 'a matter of bodily-collective exaltation' (Wolin 1994, xxviii). Yet, both developed fundamental critiques of a linear and continuous historical narrative. Relating their accounts to each other allows us to consider how a philosophy of history can motivate emancipatory politics and put an end to the dominance of a speculative logic in the city. The aim of this paper, therefore, is not to present a balanced account of how heritage can be brought together with urban growth, but to politically engage with speculative development by means of exploring different historiographical approaches.

(Figure 1)

## Speculative development in the contemporary City

In the capitalist city, land and towers are commodities with specific characteristics. They are fixed in space and often purchased by a large outlay, which gives actors who engage in profit accumulation through servicing and exchanging of money and financial instruments increasing power. While land is permanent, office towers' lifespans have become increasingly short with an average of not more than thirty-five years (Sennett 2007). These characteristics are crucial for urbanisation's 'particularly active role […] in absorbing the surplus product that capitalists are perpetually producing in the search for surplus value' (Harvey 2008, 25). The majority of proposed office towers are speculative, i.e. they are not built for an existing and announced demand but for a potential demand in the future. What kind of City do these developments belong to and create?

Saskia Sassen (2015) shows that a massive corporate buying of land and buildings is taking place in London and other cities since the financial 'crisis' in 2008. Her argument is that when 'what was small and/or public is becoming large and private' there is increasingly no place for those with less power and less wealth 'to make history in the city'. While London has long been a site for speculative development, the scale-up in the buying of buildings, the extent of new construction, the spread of mega-projects, and the foreclosing of modest properties, all are unprecedented characteristics that create a homogeneous and exclusive urban environment. Yet, the increasingly privately owned City has another characteristic. As we will see, many tower developments provide new publicly accessible spaces. Yet, privately owned and managed, these highly controlled spaces are 'dead'; not because they are not active but due to limitations of the potential range of spatial engagement (Sennett 2002, 12). Conviviality, spontaneity, encounter and chaos, which are key aspects of urban spaces, are stripped out. Certain groups – usually the most vulnerable – can be refused the right of entry and therefore cannot represent themselves as a legitimate part of the city. And yet, it is crucial to emphasise that the municipal governing body of the City still owns more land than anyone else in the City and with regard to Greater London is the second biggest landowner (Haslett 2017).

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The second characteristic relates to the City's attractiveness for developers. Money capital, i.e. money that is used to buy in order to sell and make a profit, flows to urban areas where the rate of return is highest and not to the least advantaged areas (Harvey 1973). The current tall office building boom is taking place not merely because there is an actual demand for more office space. Towers are built because of their speculative value as a real estate asset and in order to create further demand for office space (Gassner 2017). This is why the common criticism that the City does not need to be densified because the towers that have already been built are not fully rented out is misguided. At any rate, the office space vacancy rate in 2017 was way below the ten-year average, which is why investment management companies consider the 'speculative [office] space currently under construction' in the City as representing 'a healthy but contained level of development' (JLL 2018, 8).

Approximately one-third of the office space that is being under construction in 2018 is pre-let (9). The remaining two-thirds are speculative, i.e. they are being built before tenancy agreements have been signed. There is no doubt that an industry can generate 'enormous speculative value on property by trading it multiple times while leaving it empty' (Echanove and Srivastava 2012, 800). When use values of urban space are dominated by its exchange value, then vacant space is not necessarily valueless. Furthermore, because tall buildings are often status symbols, developers 'do not care much whether full occupancy is achieved' as long as additional floors 'add value to the building as a whole' (802). Which tower is the tallest one in the City? One historian interviewed suggested that there is 'a peculiar challenge that clients [i.e. developers] and architects seem to create for themselves: to be a bit taller and a bit bigger than the one next door'. Developments such as 22 Bishopsgate and 1 Undershaft compete with each other or, put differently, the City does not merely compete with other financial centres but most of all with itself in terms of building heights.

The third characteristic regards different 'functions' in the City. Densification in London is often a code word for gentrification in that it leads to direct or indirect displacement of long-term residents and low-income groups by an incoming affluent population (see Deverteuil 2015). The residential population in the City is small. Arguably, this simplifies the work of developers and politicians who have to answer to only a small group of people in consultation processes. The Barbican and Golden Lane Estate have long been the only large residential developments in the City. Yet, increasingly more and more housing is being built, as developments such as Red Lion Court, Ludgate Broadway and St Mary at Hill demonstrate. The resulting functional diversification, however, is not

accompanied by a social diversification. New residential developments cater almost exclusively to a high-income group, which is why the City – with currently the second highest average income in the country – is likely to remain an 'island' in the city that is surrounded by areas with higher levels of deprivation (see Brodbeck 2017).

In sum, the City is increasingly privately but still, to a large extent, publicly owned land; it is a financial centre that not only competes with other centres in London and elsewhere but primarily with itself in terms of the provision of office space; it is a socially homogeneous area with regard to income levels despite a growing residential population. These characteristics are linked to inherited site boundaries and historical buildings in the City. To be sure, densification in London promotes financial and business service industries over local economic industries. An economic imaginary gains plausibility when it is discursively and visually anchored in urban space (Grubbauer 2014). Office towers are therefore used to demonstrate the City's existing success as an international business location and to further attract international actors. At the same time, 'London is one of the great historic cities', a historian suggested, which is 'hugely important for its economic vitality and success'. While historical buildings limit possible development sites, their visual appearances are also used to represent the uniqueness of the City as a financial centre. One architect interviewed emphasised that 'historic sites and historic buildings are crucial for persuading developers to come to the City'. Yet, compared to Canary Wharf, sites are relatively small and irregularly shaped. This makes them often less attractive for development. In short, inherited urban attributes both consolidate as well as resist the prevailing speculative logic in the City.

This double role is crucial. The built heritage can be made useful for a profit-making agenda but some of its attributes also work against a speculative logic. Examining the latter in both physical and discursive realms is crucial for disruptive and radical politics. The term 'heritage' is often used to refer to specific buildings and sites including St Paul's and the more than fifty historic church buildings in the City. However, heritage also refers to a cultural process of meaning-making and remaking and the attachment of different values to different inherited attributes (Smith 2006). In other words, professionals make a distinction between valued historic buildings on the one hand and historical buildings on the other. Rather than merely investigating the tools and policies to protect 'the valued components of the historic environment' (GLA 2016, 414), I argue that value systems need to be examined in the first place.

Contesting speculative development involves a critical engagement with 'current obsessions with the past' (Lowenthal 1998, ix). London's speculative towers, one architect alleged, 'could not be anywhere else' because London is 'different to Middle Eastern or most North American and Asian cities' where there is not 'so much existing fabric' to respond to. The current heritage framework adopts a highly selective approach to this fabric and puts selected objects, issues and concerns in the centre while excluding others. UNESCO lists only four world heritage sites in London none of which is located in the City. Preservation policy in London, in turn, sets up a framework for visually protecting so-called 'Strategically Important Landmarks'. Three historical buildings are assigned this status only one of which is in the City: St Paul's. The cathedral is offered as a visually prominent building that '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).

Also important is the framing of Historic England (2012), which distinguishes between four different heritage values: while 'evidential value' derives from 'the potential of a place to yield primary evidence about past human activity', 'aesthetic value' results from 'the ways in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place' (28). 'Communal value', in turn, derives from 'the meanings of a place for the people who related to it, or for whom it figures in their collective memory' and 'historical value' results from 'the ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present' (28). This is not the place to unpack these definitions in detail. Crucially, however, they are all based on the assumption that there is an existing or, at least, a potential consensus on which inherited attributes people value. This assumption forecloses a debate about what type of connection – or rupture – between the past and the present is required.

I suggest that the relationship between the past and present must be problematised and argue for an alignment of historical analysis with political critique. In the third section of this paper, I will distinguish between conservative and emancipatory approaches to historiography. While the former read history as a guide for political action in the present, the latter uncover and recover 'untapped possibilities or unexplored paths in the past as potentially generative for the political imagination of the present' (Greenberg 2016, 37). I will make an attempt to think against authorised heritage in order to substitute 'a political for a historical view of the past' (Benjamin 2005, 210). At first, however, I

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explore how speculative office towers are framed in order to consolidate an authorised heritage discourse.

(Figure 2)

## For authorised heritage

The current tall building boom commenced at the beginning of the 2000s when Ken Livingston (2001) stated that 'high buildings should be assessed by what they add to the skyline, rather than what they take away'. Arguing for a more compact city, he referred to the conclusions reached by the Urban Task Force (1999); a research group that suggested that cities with densely populated, compact, well-connected cores would create a more walkable city and more livable places. To be sure, researchers did not suggest that tall buildings are the best way of achieving these ends. Still, densification is often put on a level with building upwards. In the City, these towers are used to consolidate an authorised heritage discourse along three dimensions.

*Essence*

The first dimension derives from the idea that old as well as new, low as well as tall buildings are crucial for the City's character. When you walk towards 30 St Mary Axe, a historian claimed, '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 […] that dynamic contrast is something quite exceptional'. Assessing a view from Bank junction towards the proposed 22 Bishopsgate, a townscape consultant alleged that the 'juxtaposition of high quality old and new built forms is characteristic of the City' (PDh, 208). The City's characteristic quality, then, is a non-uniform cityscape. Crucially, the juxtaposition of old/low and new/tall is usually offered not merely as one of the City's many urban characteristics but is regarded as its essence.

An architect alleged that 'one of the reasons the City still feels characterful and it retains its urban quality is that 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'. After the Great Fire of 1666 destroyed vast areas within the City and 89

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churches including Old St Paul's, Christopher Wren, John Evelyn, Robert Hooke and others drew up plans that were based on a tabula rasa approach and envisaged grand piazzas, the rational order of the Roman grid and the ceremonial order provided by axes connecting public spaces (Inwood 2000, Richardson 2001). None of these plans, however, was realised and the City remained a 'medieval warren' (Rykwert 2000, 49). The sustained bombing of central London by Nazi Germany also features prominently in planning processes. Fires adjacent to St Paul's were burning out of control and destroyed vast areas while the cathedral itself survived the Blitz. 'The internationally famous war photographs', a historian highlighted, show the cathedral 'rising phoenix-like through the fires and smoke of the Blitz, when large swathes of the City were destroyed once again' (PDi, 11).

In short, the City's essence is linked to the visual-spatial juxtaposition of old and new, low and tall buildings due to an inherited street pattern that changed little over centuries and an inherited St Paul's. It is because the City resisted rebuilding schemes after 1666 and because the cathedral survived the Blitz that speculative towers find a place in the City today. The City's essence, here, is not a static visual-spatial quality. Framed in a way so it becomes useful for speculative development in the future, the City's essence is being described as its 'strength' to resist visual-spatial uniformity. The City is not a museum, architects and historians keep emphasising alike, but a 'dynamic, evolving city'.

*Visual enhancement*

Second, speculative towers consolidate an authorised heritage discourse because they are offered as structures that visually enhance historic buildings like St Paul's. This is especially the case for distant views from Waterloo Bridge in which the cathedral can be seen next to the Eastern high-rise cluster in the City. Professional debates about these views exemplify what a group of architects and historians who affiliated themselves with the English Townscape movement warned of soon after the Blitz: an 'obsession with the monumental' (Architectural Review 1945, 107). St Paul's is a building, a historian explained, that like nowhere else in the world 'controls such a vast amount of land across a prime […] capital city, a great financial centre'. Towers, therefore, have to be framed as structures that have a positive impact on the cathedral as a monument. The most important way to do so is by highlighting their contributions to the overall skyline profile of the high-rise cluster.

20 Fenchurch was designed to define a sensitive edge for the cluster. This tower is top-heavy, i.e. the mass of the building increases as its height increases. With large floor plates on top levels, it is

particularly visible in distant views. Still, due to a south-directed bend of the overall massing, the building contributes to the 'triangular shape' of the cluster (PDd). 122 Leadenhall is a tapered tower, i.e. the mass of the building decreases as its height increases. The architects claim that this overall massing 'provides a logical termination to the form […], allowing it to create its own distinctive profile and take its place within the existing and emergent cluster of tall buildings' (PDa, 6). As seen from Waterloo Bridge, the tower will 'reduce the impact of the isolated silhouette of [30 St Mary Axe] on the skyline' (PDb, 146). By consolidating the cluster, it draws attention to the cathedral and away from 30 St Mary Axe, which will not be seen in isolation anymore.

Proposed as the tallest building in the City, 22 Bishopsgate's 'clarity completes the cluster, giving the whole cluster unity' (PDg, 44). The tower will 'create a major new focus to the Eastern Cluster occupying the sky gap between Heron Tower and Tower 42 […] and the Leadenhall Building' (PDh, 83). This, in turn, 'will enhance the heritage assets in view, and the Eastern Cluster will read as a distinctively separate and distant urban form from St Paul's Cathedral, enhancing its setting' (83). At the time when 22 Bishopsgate was in the planning stage, 1 Undershaft had been proposed as the tallest building in the City. A townscape consultant alleged that it is now the latter that will 'create a major new focus to the Eastern Cluster to the right of the sky gap defined by Heron Tower and Tower 42 […] and the Leadenhall Building' (PDf, 16). Together, these buildings will 'reinforce the hill-like character of the Eastern Cluster' (PDf, 16). In short, 1 Undershaft will 'enhance and not harm the heritage assets in view, and the Eastern Cluster will read as a distinctively separate and distant urban form from St Paul's Cathedral, enhancing its setting' (PDf, 90).

Towers' massings, heights and skyline profiles are described as features that can have a positive impact on the visibility and appreciability of St Paul's. In this context, heritage values of the cathedral are rarely critically examined nor is its role as a major tourist attraction mentioned. St Paul's becomes a stable and uncontested reference point in a linear urban narrative; a monument that works in the service of speculative towers, the latter of which are required in order to further enhance the former.

*Visual connectivity*
The third dimension concerns the public realm because if one of 'the City's goals is to provide bigger buildings to compete with Canary Wharf', as one architect argued, another one is 'to compete with the West End in terms of a better public realm'. Many speculative developments provide publicly

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accessible spaces with visual connections to historic buildings. The top-heavy 20 Fenchurch has a footprint that is relatively small compared to its top floors. This allowed architects to design a publicly accessible space that 'opens up views to the Church of Margaret Pattens' (PDc, 29), which is a Grade I listed church that was designed by Wren in 1687. Put differently, a massing that maximises rent income by increasing the size of highly valuable office space with great views across the city creates heritage connections on the street level.

The argument for 122 Leadenhall's reversed massing was made along the same lines. While a tapered building often has a large footprint that covers the entire site, here the lower levels 'are recessed on a ranking diagonal to create a large public space which opens up to the south and to Lloyd's of London' (PDa, 12). This creates, so architects argued, a 'semi-enclosed cathedral-like space' as well as an 'extension of the existing public space of St Helen's Square' (PDa, 12). Furthermore, the recessed public levels 'reveal the presence of St Andrew Undershaft' (PDa, 13), which is a church that was built in 1532 and survived both the Great Fire and the Blitz. Again, new visual connections to historic buildings are being created.

1 Undershaft has a 'gentle vertical taper' that 'accentuates the visual perception of the "tallness" of the building, and enhances the proportional reading of the form' (PDe, 15). More importantly, the building's reception is elevated, 'allowing uninterrupted public access across the site from north to south' (PDe, 17). The elevated reception provides greater permeability and creates 'strong visual linkages between the southern end of the site and the north, and between the listed churches of St Helen's and St Andrew Undershaft, two of the most ancient places of worship in the City' (PDe, 40). From the West entrance of St Helen's Church, 'there will be a glimpsed view under the proposed main tower […], and on advancing from this position the space beneath the proposed tower will be open and publicly permeable with access to the enhanced public realm of St Helen's Square' (PDf, 202). As a result, 'the setting of the Grade I listed St Helen's Church [is] enhanced, and no heritage assets will be harmed' (PDf, 202).

Building height frees up space on the street level. Opening up views towards historic buildings heightens their visual presence in the City. Historians support this strategy and refer to evidential, aesthetic, communal and historical values of these selected buildings. In so doing, they also support

speculative developments without problematising social and political characteristics of these privately owned and managed, publicly accessible spaces.

## Against authorised heritage

Speculative development and authorised heritage are not in a conflictual relationship in the City. This non-conflict is the result of an essentialist reading of the city and claims that towers direction attention to and visually enhance historical buildings. I argue against the current conservative historiographical approach and for a democratic understanding of history. Thinking against authorised heritage does not involve a process of discrediting the past. Instead, it involves a process of re-evaluating the socio-political nature of different historiographical approaches in order to open up a space for multiple and antagonistic histories.

*Historical events*

A conservative approach to historiography revolves around the conviction that the city has an essence. An emancipatory approach, on the other hand, holds that the city's visual appearance does not allude to or obscure 'a timeless and essential secret' (Foucault 2000a, 371). If there is a secret, then it is that the city has no essence. The problem of an essentialist reading is that it puts us puts us 'outside of time' (379) and into a pseudo-objective realm from where we cannot 'listen to history' (371). As explained above, the current essentialist reading encapsulates the idea that the City resists visual and spatial uniformity. It turns out that this seemingly inclusive narrative is linear and continuous and, hence, consolidates existing power relations. By selecting only a few valued moments in the past and by ordering them chronologically, this was, is, and always will be the narrative of victors; of rulers who are the 'heirs of prior conquerors' (Benjamin 2006, 391).

One key aspect of such a historiographical approach is the creation of a causal nexus that holds selected moments together as a single narrative and, in so doing, lays claim to being a universal account. As universal history, its 'procedure is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time' (Benjamin 2006, 396). But time, according to Benjamin, is not homogeneous and empty but full of struggles as well as revolutionary possibilities. This is why he claims that history must be constructed: a connection between *then* and *now* that is 'saturated with tensions' has to be established; a connection that shocks and which creates 'a revolutionary chance in

the fight for the oppressed past' (396). One of Benjamin's key arguments is that the oppressed past must be redeemed in the fight for a just future. This redemption, as we will see, involves a monadological view of history with the aim to make an object's inward history useful for an interruption of the course of history.

Foucault also warns against the political consequences of creating a causal connection between historical moments. Rather than provoking a shock that reveals a reality riven by contradictions, however, he argues for a 'causal multiplication' (2002, 227). Before exploring this aspect in more detail, it is important to debunk the idea that an event is something that 'can only exist in time' (Foucault 2000b, 351). For Foucault, an event is the occurrence of a change in the now with meanings 'indefinitely repeated on either side' (350). To reiterate, seen from a political viewpoint, a historical event is not a representative moment of the past but a moment of change. In order to make change in the now possible, the presence must not be conceptualised as a 'former future where its form was prepared' nor as a 'past to come' (351), precisely because these conceptualisations are based on a logic of essences and, in so doing, work against change. In his own genealogical work, Foucault resists this logic by taking a historical moment out 'of any monotonous finality' while being 'sensitive to their recurrence' without, however, tracing 'the gradual curve of their evolution' (2000a, 369).

A political understanding of an event as 'the reversal of a relationship of forces' (381) stands in contrast with professionals' current framing of the Great Fire and the Blitz. To be sure, urban destructions intervene in the make-up of a city, which, in turn, might support the idea that they also intervene in power relations. Yet, 'the same relentlessly capitalistic process' (Wilson 1994, xiii) rebuilt the City after the Great Fire and after the Blitz. It is important, therefore, to explore the complex relationship between visual-spatial change and persistent power relations. One power-maintaining dimension of the Great Fire was landowners' 'ferocious attachment to their property rights' (Rykwert 2000, 49); with regard to the Blitz it was Hitler's decision 'to go to war against the Soviet Union without waiting for victory in the battle with England' (Inwood 2000, 803). If the Great Fire and the Blitz are misinterpreted as events in Foucault's sense, then they foreclose a space for emancipatory politics. The same is the case when they are embedded in a linear causality. This does not mean that the burning of buildings to the ground does not mean something. Yet, developers capitalise on a framing of the Great Fire and the Blitz as historical events; and so does the Church of England. As one of the country's largest landowners, the church owns a substantial amount of land in

the City and is passively making a profit by maintaining historical sites that are adjacent to properties that gain in value.

As mentioned already, Foucault (2002) argues for a 'causal multiplication' (227). His argument is based on an understanding of power as a 'multiplicity of force relations' (1998, 92). If power is exercised from multiple points, then it cannot be reduced to a power over someone or something. Power as force relations implies both 'the ability to affect and to be affected' (Deleuze 2015, 70). This is also why Foucault (1998) emphasises that wherever there is power there is always also at least the possibility of a 'plurality of resistances' (1998, 96). Resistances can 'weaken, sabotage or undermine power relations or have them change their direction' and as '"opponent", resistance can be seen as a […] "freeness" as opposed to power' (Huijer 1999, 66). For John Holloway (2002), this also means that while 'there are a whole host of resistances which are integral to power' in Foucault's work, 'there is no possibility of [collective] emancipation. The only possibility is an endlessly shifting constellation of power' (40). To be sure, the notion of 'emancipation' presupposes the identification of a unity in power relations. In the absence of such a unity, Holloway proposes an understanding of power that encapsulates an antagonism between 'power-to' and 'power-over' (40). Perhaps in the speculative city there is not one particular power relation that must be reversed. But that does not mean that there are not multiple resistances possible. The important question, then, is how resistances can be united in order to overcome a power-over logic. What does a city look like where empowerment does not merely mean new manifestations of power-over?

I introduce these theoretical considerations to suggest that the logic of essences that underpins the current framing of the Great Fire and the Blitz is ultimately based on a limited and solely negative understanding of power and, in so doing, consolidates existing power relations. Shaping the city democratically, then, involves the disruption of a universal narrative of the city and the identification of a 'microphysics of power' (Deleuze 2015, 70). Actual as well as possible acts of resistance need to be uncovered. With regard to the Great Fire, they need to be explored in relation to practices of constructing easily flammable, timber-framed structures with only thin lath and plaster walls and the building of upper floors that projected over already narrow roadways that were common back then. They also need to be explored in relation to householders' resistance to let their houses to be demolished and therefore let the fire spreading, and in relation to a delayed approval to use gun power to create gaps wide enough to stop flames (Inwood 2000, 241ff). With regard to the Blitz, acts of

resistance need to be explored in relation to the procedures of a fire brigade that did not have trained officers and had insufficient technical equipment and water supply to save buildings nearby St Paul's from burning down to the ground, and in relation to Hitler's already mentioned decision to go to war against the Soviet Union.

*Cultural treasures*

The past is not simply connected to the present, as conservatives have it. It rather 'confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference' (Foucault 2000a, 381). Uncovering real and imagining possible events are of political importance. Both Benjamin and Foucault look for history in unfamiliar and unusual places. But it is Benjamin's unique approach to historical materialism that pays particular attention to those selected objects that are abused for making up universal history. Phenomena need to be rescued, he argues, '[n]ot 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"' (Benjamin 2002, 473).

Enshrining a building as heritage turns it into a 'cultural treasure' (Benjamin 2006, 391). A cultural treasure is not merely a valued object but, moreover, one that is embedded in a linear and continuous historical narrative. In the City, this narrative currently includes St Paul's and other church buildings that are framed as 'valued components of the historic environment' (GLA 2016, 414). As such, they are included in the 'triumphal procession' (Benjamin 2006, 391) of those who practice power over others. Benjamin makes a decisive step towards emancipatory politics by looking for history not only in unfamiliar and unusual places but also within objects that are enshrined as heritage. As cultural treasures, these objects encapsulate their own horrors because '[t]here is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (392). His argument is that a historical phenomenon must be freed from an oppressive universal historical narrative through recognising and redeeming its uniqueness. It must be 'snatched from the false context of the historical continuum in which it is embedded and placed in our present' (Frisby 2013, 216). In so doing, it is being recognised as 'a distinctive whole riddled with its own tensions' (216).

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's (2014) developed the notion of 'monad', which describes a simple substance that mirrors the whole world (25). Drawing on this notion, Benjamin argues that history is

encapsulated in the object; the object is not embedded in history or, better, the object needs to be freed from a history in which it is embedded in. Arguably, such an understanding contests the continuing celebration of historic objects – i.e. the reduction of heritage to valued objects – and makes objects useful for political change in the present. To reiterate, my argument is not that we should forget St Paul's and other historical buildings; that they have no value or that they should be destroyed. In contrast, I argue that they need to be rescued from their enshrinement as heritage in order to become useful for disruptive and radical politics.

Rescuing St Paul's by recovering its inward history involves a presentation of its structure as a relationship between victorious and defeated histories, all of which shape the building and result in the cathedral, as we know it today. Defeated histories include the failed restoration of Old St Paul's, which started in the 1620s but was halted during the English Civil War. They include an unsuccessful resistance to a new tax on coal, which was introduced to pay for much of the cathedral. They include the Pope's failure to keep the Church of England under his jurisdiction followed by the Crown's taking over of control of the life of the church (Inwood 2000). And they also include not Wren's victorious design but alternative design proposals that had been rejected. After all, neither the Stuart monarchy, which favoured classical architecture for its royal buildings in London, nor the Anglican Church, which preferred the Gothic style for church buildings, managed to prevent Wren from classicising the cathedral and copying St Peter's in Rome (PDi, 8). That none of these defeated histories surfaces in debates about the protection of St Paul's just indicates the extent to which the notion of 'heritage' is under-utilised for political imaginations today.

## Speculative urban development and emancipatory politics

There is no conflict between densification and the protection of selected historical buildings in the City. I argue for a democratic understanding of history in order to mobilise politics in – and against – the City of speculative office towers where the exchange value of urban space dominates its use values. A property might be bought in order to be sold and to make a profit. More often, it is being bought in order to be 'developed': to create additional demand for office space and to build vacant space in order to raise the value of the property as a whole. I suggest that inherited urban attributes such as site boundaries and historical buildings consolidate as well as resist this speculative logic. Exploring the violence of a universal historical narrative as well as un- and re-covering histories that

are absent from urbanisation debates are crucial interventions in a discourse that revolves around a highly exclusive understanding of which historical 'resources […] people value for reasons beyond utility' (Historic England 2008, 71). These interventions are relevant not merely because they showcase the limitations of an authorised heritage discourse but also because they can become instrumental for the city's emancipation from a speculative logic.

I introduced several aspects that I regard as crucial for emancipatory politics and which have in common that they utilise concrete and 'small' histories against an abstract and universal account. Uncovering and uniting multiple acts of resistance that had or potentially could have had an impact on existing power relations is one of them. Another one is the presentation of relationships between defeated and victorious histories within a historical object. I suggest that these aspects should inform considerations of what 'democratic city-making' and 'social justice' in the city can mean. They need to be seen in relation to each other because a critique of the privately owned, self-competing and socially homogeneous City also involves a critique of an essentialist reading of the City, a critique of claims that towers visually enhance historical buildings, and a critique of the idea that publicly accessible spaces should have visual connections to historic buildings.

I put forward interpretations of the Great Fire, the Blitz and St Paul's that subvert a linear and continuous historical narrative. To be sure, critical historiographical approaches usually focus on discontinuities and histories that are absent from official accounts. My discussion, however, introduced two additional aspects: first, the importance of exploring persistent power relations within visual-spatial destructions in the city: after the Great Fire, the City was soon rebuilt and 'all the same problems […] repeated as it became by one and the same relentlessly capitalistic process both grossly richer and miserably poorer, and ever larger' (Wilson 1994, xiii); arguably the same applies to the Blitz. Second, I draw attention to those built structures that are in the very centre of authorised heritage debates and argue for the significance of revealing their inward history in order to do justice to them and, in so doing, make them useful for political action in the present.

With its abundance of inherited buildings and sites and due to its economically powerful position, the City is arguably an extreme case. But my key argument that a democratic shaping of the City cannot be decoupled from a democratisation of history relates to cities more generally. If cities are indeed governed as if there was a consensus on what they ought to be, as radical geographers suggest, then

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one way to intervene in this consensus is by means of historical research. Radical politics involves opening up a space for history because the historical realm has always political potential; also and perhaps especially in the contemporary city.

## Acknowledgements

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PDa: Richard Rogers Partnership. 2004. *122 Leadenhall Street, Design Statement*.

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**20 Fenchurch**

Before submission

Planning submission 2006

Planning submission 2011

Opening 2014

33,443 sqm

77,556 sqm

83,791 sqm

83,791 sqm

**122 Leadenhall**

Before submission

Planning submission 2004

Opening 2014

21,206 sqm

82,722 sqm

82,722 sqm

**Bishopsgate Tower**

Before submission

Planning submission 2005

Built 2012

Planning submission 2016

Planning submission 2016

Opening 2019

36,154 sqm

85,313 sqm

124,243 sqm

124,714 sqm

124,714 sqm

**1 Undershaft**

Before submission

Planning submission 2016

Opening 2019

51,460 sqm
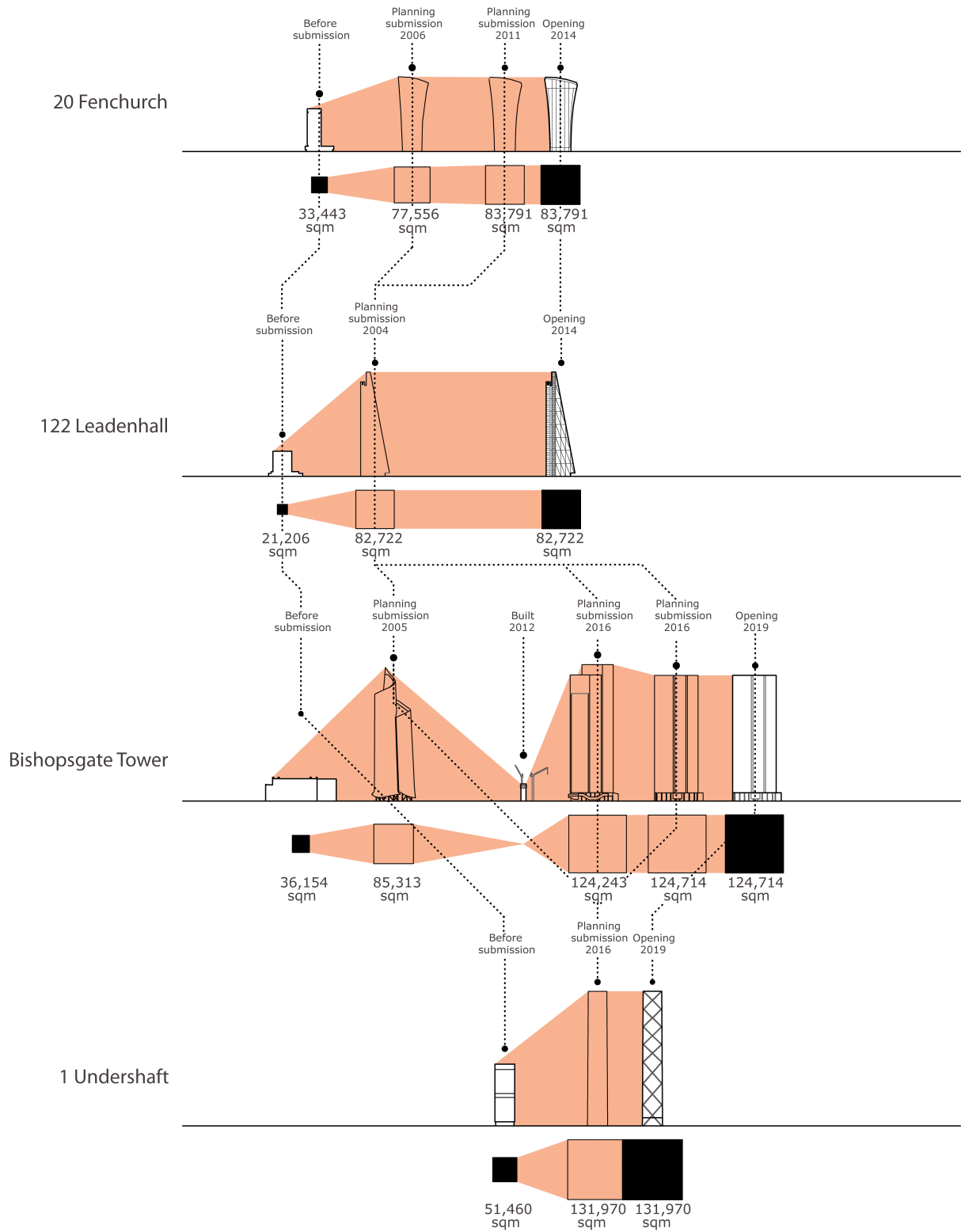
131,970 sqm

131,970 sqm

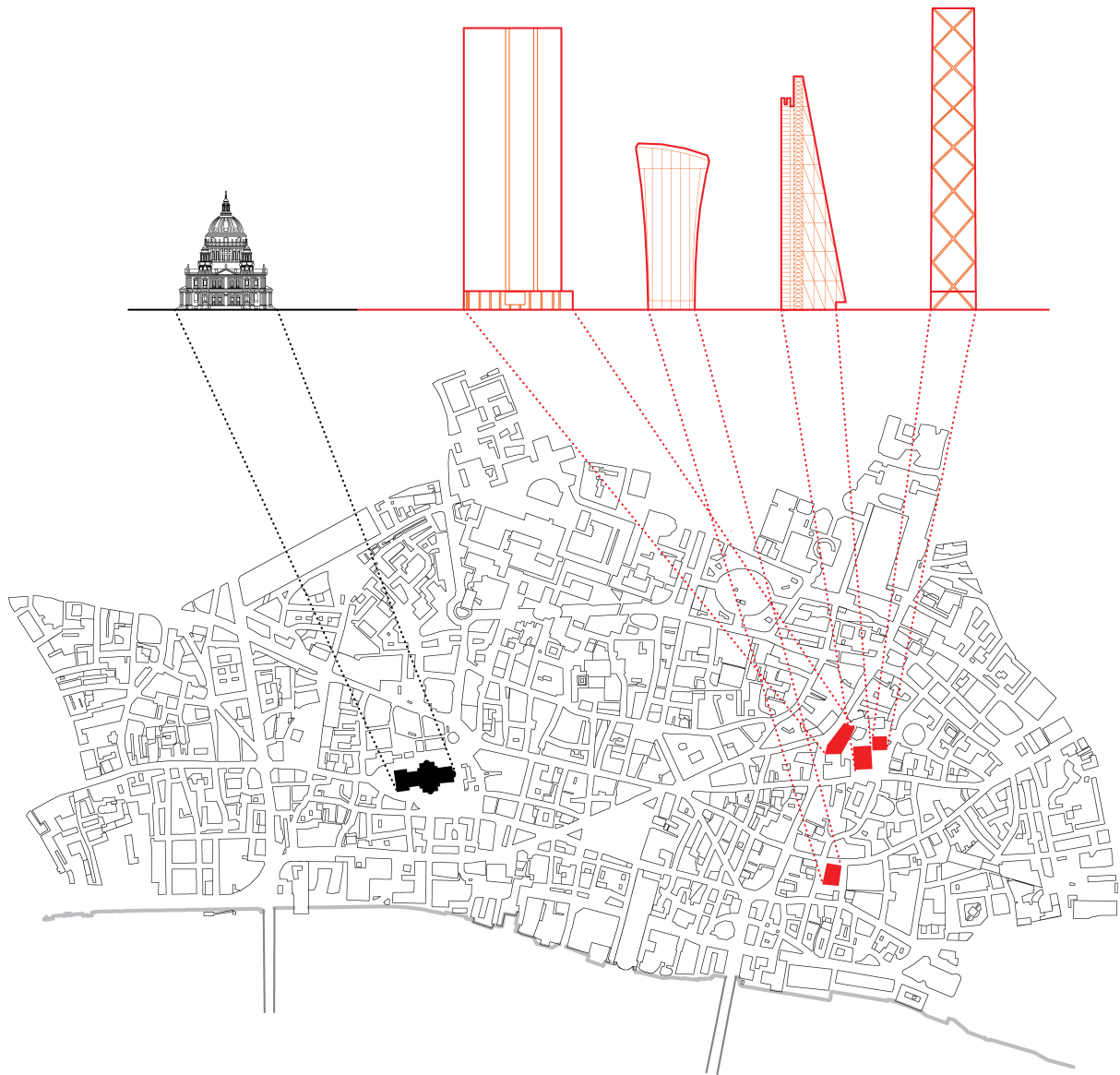Figure 1: Planning processes of four office towers in the City.

Figure 2: The City's historic street pattern and the locations of St Paul's and four office towers.