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Aestheticizing the Beautiful City: Democratic Politics and Design Review

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Abstract

This article explores design debates through a radical political lens. Examining ways in which architects, urban historians and townscape consultants view speculative office developments and profit-driven building height in the City of London, I argue for the democratization of the cityscape. I contest the prevalence of the consensual city-image in which towers are framed as structures that visual enhance historic landmarks and buildings of ‘civic importance’ in order to emphasize the importance of critically engaging with consensual pro-market governing processes and the role of tradition therein. Distinguishing between radical aestheticization and conservative beautification, I show how the Royal Fine Art Commission cultivated the latter and prepared the ground for today’s city-image. I suggest that design review can contribute to democratic urbanization processes if a radical conceptualization of aesthetics is being developed.

Key words

Aesthetics, Beauty, Radical Politics, Cityscape, London

The city’s development trajectory

The increasing number of speculative office towers in the City of London (hereafter City), one of London’s financial districts, has attracted a great deal of attention. Scenarios of what the City will look like in five or ten years’ time are widely publicized and criticized on twitter and other social media platforms and they are regularly condemned by architecture critics including Rowan Moore who regularly writes for *The Guardian*.¹ These criticisms tend to target the visual appearance of a proposed development and especially the height of the building and its visual impact on the wider cityscape. Criticisms of London’s tall building boom in which attention is turned to a visual

¹ See articles published on 1 December 2012, 18 January 2015, 27 August 2016, 4 August 2018.

judgment of speculative towers are the order of the day. This begs the question how design-related professionals including architects, townscape consultants and urban historians visually assess and justify the city's development trajectory. How do they order the city?

Given the great number of approved schemes, on the one hand, and widespread criticism of London's towering cityscape on the other, the other important question is how democratic design debates in formalized and institutionalized channels are, respectively, how democratic they could be. In this article, I identify and contest an assumed consensus on the traditional and global city or what I call the 'consensual city-image' in these channels. This city-image refers to an urban order that is based on the idea that there is a consensus amongst the wider public on how the city ought to look like and how it ought to be. This order organizes the visual relationship between speculative towers and structures of "civic importance" (CABE, 2010) whereby the construction of an office tower is not justified as an end in itself but as a means to increase the visibility and appreciability of another structure such as St Paul's Cathedral.

With the help of the consensual city-image, radical thinking and action are being excluded or marginalized. More and more towers are built that accommodate – not exclusively but to a large extent – financial and advanced business service industries. These buildings provide a tremendous opportunity for globally operating investors and private real estate developers to increase profits by maximizing the quantity of rentable office space for high-end businesses in one of the most expensive cities in the world. They are speculative, i.e. they are not built for an existing demand but in expectation of further demand in the future. They are also built in order to create more demand as their visibility is used to demonstrate the City's already existing success as an international business location and to attract additional international actors (Grubbauer, 2014). Tower construction is a prime investment area in the contemporary city, likely to accrue a future economic value that is over and above its value in the present. It is an important terrain for the commodification of the city in which capitalists produce surplus value. How can a variety of individuals and groups have a say in these processes? How can 'we' have greater democratic control over the production as well as the use of the surplus? How can the cityscape be democratized?

A first step towards democratizing the cityscape, I suggest, is an *aesthetic* engagement with the city's development trajectory with the aim not to merely criticize the visual appearance of individual towers but to intervene in the consensual city-image – and hence also in the notion of a 'traditional aesthetic' – more fundamentally. To this end, it is useful to consider some key aspects of a radical understanding of democracy and it is necessary to examine formalized design debates and review processes of proposed schemes in some detail. From 1924 until

2011, design review in England was dominated by a single national agency (Royal Fine Art Commission (RFAC), then Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE)). As a result of an almost withdrawal of funding after 2008, design review has been turned to a typically privately funded activity.

Existing academic literature on design review is rather limited. The question that tends to be posed within the disciplines of architecture, urban design and planning is: How can the city's visual appearance be adequately, sufficiently, and efficiently controlled? This body of work includes John Punter's (1986) important work on *A History of Aesthetic Control*, Matthew Carmona's et al. detailed analyses of the RFAC, CABE and the Design Council (Carmona et al., 2017; Carmona and Renninger, 2017a, 2017b; Carmona, 2018), and Robert Tavernor's (2004) writing on townscapes and skyscrapes. My approach to design review is different. A political problem with the existing body of work, as I see it, is that it sometimes accepts how undemocratic capitalist urbanization processes can be (and focuses on technocratic details instead), and/or that it is based on an assumption of what 'the public' values and desires. As a result, it ends up consolidating existing power relations and fails to understand different ways of how aesthetics and politics are related to each other. In contrast, and responding to the conservatism that prevails in many accounts of design review, the question that I pose is: What does it take for radical politics to intervene in design reviews? In order to consider this question, I unpack the consensual city-image, its anti-political nature from a radical political standpoint, and explore how design review throughout the twentieth century prepared the ground for current attempts of aesthetic control.

In the first section, I introduce 1 Undershaft, which was planned to be the tallest office tower in the City. I present statements that were put forward by design-related professionals about the scheme's contribution to the consensual city-image. My analysis focuses on planning documents including Design Statements, Environmental Statements, reports and planning letters. This section is also informed by several informal discussions that I have had with professionals who were involved in the assessment of office schemes in the City in the last ten years, as well as by a small sample of semi-structured interviews with architects, townscape consultants and representatives of Historic England (formerly English Heritage) (Arch1, TC1, EH1). Interviewees have been selected based on their involvement in the planning processes of the tallest developments to date and the conversations were guided by the theme of 'the London skyline'.

In the second section, I discuss political implications of the consensual city-image. The observation that the contemporary city is governed as if there is a consensus on how it ought to be is key to accounts of the so-called 'post-political city'. Engaging with Jacques Rancière's work

(1994, 1999, 2009, 2014), I discuss a radical political conceptualization of aesthetics in order to speculate about the nature of political interventions in the city-image. To this end I distinguish between aestheticization and beautification: while the former disrupts dominant ways in which the commodified city is sensed and made sense of, the latter consolidates existing social and economic arrangements and opens up additional profit-making terrains in the city.

In the third section, I explore London's beautification and show how the consensual city-image came about. I introduce the work of the recently set up Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission and highlight the conservatism that is encapsulated in professional understandings of beauty, before I show the instrumental role that design review played throughout the twentieth century for such an understanding. Presenting statements that were put forward by the RFAC in relation to three different developments in the City, my discussion draws on an analysis of twelve of the commission's annual reports and several meeting minutes, all of which are available to access at the National Archives. In so doing, I explain how this national agency failed to utilize the aesthetic dimension that is encapsulated in radical politics.

My overall argument is that the cityscape needs to be democratized and that a radical conceptualization of aesthetics can help to do so. Design review can become a forum for democratic urbanization if it does not simply invite some individuals of the public to contribute to a pre-defined way of sensemaking of the city, but if it becomes a forum for seeing the city differently.

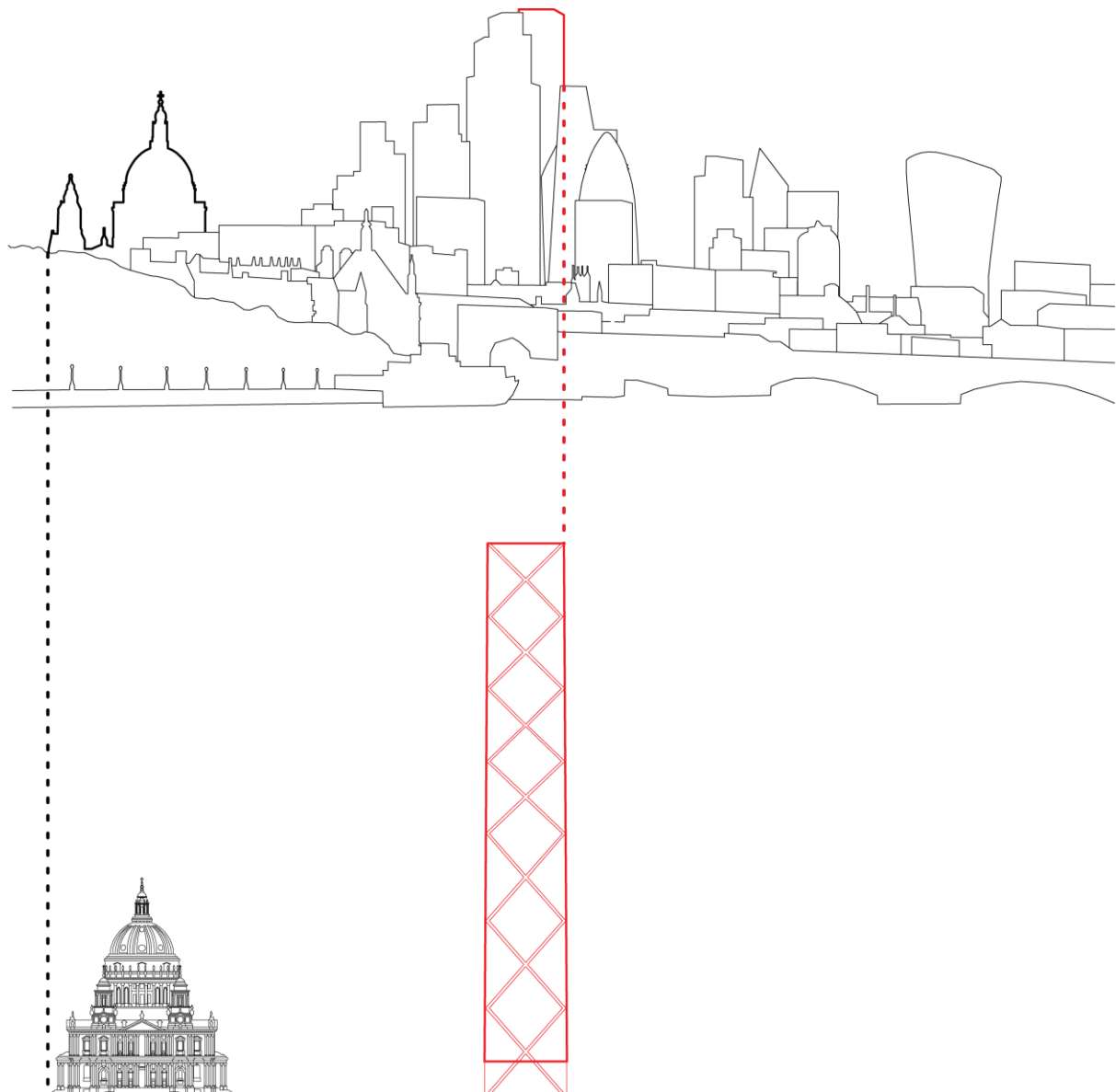
The consensual city-image

1 Undershaft is a 295 meters tall tower that was designed by Eric Parry Architects. Replacing the so-called 'Aviva Tower' – a 118 meters tall building that was designed by GWM in the 1960s and which resembles Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building in New York – it was designed to be the tallest structure in the City and the central element of the Eastern cluster of high-rise buildings. The scheme was given approval in November 2016 but it has not been until November 2019 that consent has been formalized in a letter, giving site owners five years to start work on the project.

According to the former director of design review at CABE, 1 Undershaft is “a good and pleasingly modest proposal for the new peak of the City's Eastern cluster of towers” that stands in contrast to “attention-seeking” towers like the curvy 20 Fenchurch or the angular 122 Leadenhall (Stewart in Waite, 2015). 1 Undershaft is formally less complex but it is not simply an 'American skyscraper', i.e. an extruded polygon. To emphasize its height and to “enhance the perspectival reading, a gentle vertical taper was developed, [which] accentuates the visual perception of the

tallness of the building” (Parry, 2016, p. 15). This gentle vertical taper is supplemented with an external “structural cross bracing of weathering steel” and the “horizontal brise-soleil running between the bracing” that will reduce solar glare (DP9, 2016, p. 7), which give the tower a unique visual appearance.

The scheme also includes retail facilities on a lower level and a viewing gallery at its top. Its reception level is elevated, “allowing an uninterrupted public space access across the site from north to south” (Parry, 2016, p. 17). The architects regard this as a significant design feature because for the first time “a direct sight line between the churches of St Andrew Undershaft and St Helen’s Church will link two of the City of London’s most important and ancient places of worship” (Ibid.). A townscape consultant emphasizes that in close views, the settings of the Grade I listed St Helen’s Church and St Andrew Undershaft are “enhanced, and no heritage assets will be harmed” (Tavernor, 2016a, p. 202). With new links between old church buildings being created in close views, in distant views the tower is designed in relation to St Paul’s Cathedral. 1 Undershaft will “create a new focus to the Eastern Cluster” (Ibid., p. 16). Together with 110 Bishopsgate, Tower 42 and 20 Fenchurch, it will “reinforce the hill-like character” of the group of tall buildings and, as a result, will “enhance and not harm the heritage assets in view” (Ibid., p. 90). Hence, the cluster “will read as a distinctively separate and distant urban form from St Paul’s Cathedral, enhancing its setting” (Ibid.).



Visual and height relationships between 1 Undershaft and St Paul's.

According to a townscape consultant, since the construction of Tower 42 in the 1970s “the City’s tall buildings have become commercial icons for London and are seen in relation to Wren’s great dome of St Paul’s” (ibid., p. 23). Yet, the towers are not merely seen in relation to the cathedral. They are offered as structures that can visually enhance it. The construction of 1 Undershaft is visually justified not only – not even primarily – as a tower in its own right but as a means to an end. It is regarded as an opportunity to increase the visibility and appreciability of the cathedral. The basis of this justification is an assumed common sense that it is not office towers but historic landmarks and church buildings that have civic importance. Hence, so the argument, the latter ought to remain or, rather, they should become again central structures in the cityscape. An important professional focus is on the extent to which a tall office building draws attention to

other buildings and, hence, away from itself: “[t]all and large buildings should not have an unacceptably harmful impact on their surroundings” (GLA, 2016, p. 293).

The former Mayor of London Ken Livingstone (2001) claimed that “high buildings should be assessed in terms of what they add to the skyline, rather than what they take away”. As we shall see, it took the RFAC many years of criticism to end up with visual, moral, and conceptual frameworks that allows such a claim to be made. Today, as an interviewed architect emphasizes, the claim that “there is a benefit to certain tall buildings in certain locations: it’s actually enhancement rather than it [the tower] being talked about in a negative way” (Arch1, 32) is commonly accepted. This was also the case in the planning process of 1 Undershaft. The claim was based on two premises: first, as a townscape consultant proposed: “everybody agrees that St Paul’s should be visually protected” (TC1, 18); second, as a historian highlighted, there is also an agreement that London “must respond and adapt to changing [economic] requirements” (EH1, 2). A key question, then, is how these two aesthetic-economic agreements can be brought together in a way that does not stir up the city. To this end, a consensus on London the traditional as well as global city is assumed.

Crucially, the consensual city-image is not a visual representation that imposes one specific urban form. The issue is rather that individual structures and building types are being given pre-defined roles within an urban order: St Paul’s and other church buildings and historic structures occupy a central position in the cityscape; speculative towers are highly visible but occupy a marginal position. The hallmark of this order is that it invites criticism of the visibility of capital accumulation (e.g. the suggestion that a speculative tower should not dominate the cityscape) but renders it useless. This is the case because it is not the construction of tall buildings per se that is under close scrutiny but the ways in which they are beneficial to the visibility of structures that are apparently not-for-profit. As a result, the city’s speculative development trajectory is being promoted with the help of ‘rightly’ shaped towers because without their construction, one would have to conclude, a building like the cathedral can be seen and appreciated less.

To reiterate, the consensual city-image does not implicate that professionals agree on the visual assessment of a proposed development. It does not entail that a scheme such as 1 Undershaft receives the same support or non-support. Rather, it provides a space for criticism as long as the visual order and rightness of a beautiful cityscape is not being questioned. In short, it empowers tall buildings, based on an assumed civic importance of other building types (Gassner, 2020).²

² In contrast to this argument, see McNeill, 2002; Tavernor, 2004.

Embedded in the consensual city-image, how critical is the design of a specific tower? On the one hand, townscape consultants and historians regularly emphasize the importance of high quality design. To this end, well-known architects are often being trusted to make a scheme acceptable and to dismiss arguments and concerns of conservation groups who oppose tall buildings. The ‘public approval’ of 30 St Mary Axe (the Gherkin), which was the first very tall building in the City that was built after Tower 42 and which was designed by Norman Foster Architects, was crucial for “improving the aesthetic qualities of London” which is “a goal that enjoys wide consensus” (Charney, 2007, p. 195). On the other hand, as we shall see, it is most of all the design of a tower’s silhouette that is important in the consensual city-image. 30 St Mary Axe’s dome-like top part was offered as one of its most important design features and was compared to the dome of St Paul’s. It comes as a surprise then that the visual assessment of 1 Undershaft was almost word-by-word the same as that of 22 Bishopsgate, which was previously planned to be the tallest structure in the City and which looks remarkably different: the tower will “create a major new focus to the Eastern Cluster” and 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” (Tavernor, 2016b, p. 83).

Aestheticization

In what ways is the consensual city-image anti-political? Radical geographers who write against the ‘post-political city’ argue that the contemporary city is governed as if there is consensus on how it ought to be. This does, of course, not mean that such a consensus actually exists (Derickson, 2017, p. 46). Pro-market forms of governing work with and through the conceptualization of consensus that implies the need for agreement and, in so doing, marginalizes and excludes radical thinking and action (Davidson and Iveson, 2015). It is the disconnect between urban publics and city government politicians and bureaucrats in an age of neoliberal urban governing that is the political issue here.

Crucially, the notion of the post-political city is not based on the claim that the city is de-politicized understood as the “withering away of politics” (Swyngedouw, 2017, p. 56). Rather, it is based on the argument that nowadays “everything” is politicized but can be discussed only “as a non-conflict” (Ibid., 2009, p. 609). Policy makers and experts seek to prevent social groups from making particular equality issues generalizable, ensuring the demands of certain groups are viewed as particular and not universal. Radical politics intervenes in such a “modality of governance” (Derickson, 2017). It inscribes change in the nature of politics through general political agreements, or agreed upon normative principles of post-politicization (Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017). Radical political acts contest de-politicization processes through statements of equality that seek to disrupt common sense.

This approach to urban politics, which draws on Rancière's political and philosophical writings, has had a strong influence in urban studies. For good reasons, it is being heavily debated as well as criticized. Beveridge and Koch (2017) contest that radical geographers perceive an omnipresence and omnipotence of the current order, which diminishes the possibility of the urban as a political space of resistance and emancipation (p. 32). Through the lens of the post-political, they further argue, political agency becomes reduced to "heroic" acts (Ibid., p. 36). Finally, they allege that a "binary understanding of the real political/politics as police negates the in-betweenness and contingency of actually existing urban politics" (Ibid., p. 31).

These three points of criticism provide interesting starting points for an examination of the consensual city-image. If an urban order is omnipresent, does this necessarily mean that it is omnipotent? Omnipresence equals omnipotence only if we assume that everyone has the same experiences and no capacity for starting anything new (which is a fundamentally anti-political assumption). This does not mean that social and economic conditions do not have an impact on the ways in which individuals and groups can act politically. But to ascribe agency to no one or only to someone – rather than to anyone – depoliticizes any attempt to democratize the cityscape from the outset. In principle, each and every one can intervene in the sensible urban order, i.e. in what Rancière (2014) calls the "distribution of the sensible". The main problem in urban development processes is not necessarily there is an incapacity to intervene in the sensible order but rather that existing structures disincentivize and/or chose to ignore or coopt these interventions.

The sensible order is omnipresent because it is institutionalized as well as normalized as a result of multiple practices. It is not universal but contingent; historically and geographically specific. From a radical political standpoint, then, a political intervention in the city-image is not defined by a specific actor but by its form of action. "What makes an action political", Rancière (1999) writes, "is not its object or the place where it is carried out, but solely its form", i.e. the way in which "equality is inscribed in the setting up of a dispute" (p. 32). Such an act might seem simple (e.g. asking the question where affordable housing is visually enhanced in the city-image) but this does not make it any less radical because it cannot be normal. Individuals who intervene politically, then, are not heroes but irritants. As irritants, they are not defined in terms of a specific social role or class affiliation. Indeed, for Rancière, the political subject does not even exist prior to the political act but is self-constructed in the act of disrupting the sensible order.

The third point regarding the relationship between radical and institutionalized politics that Beveridge and Koch make is also relevant for my discussion. For Rancière (2009), politics is

defined by the “conflict over the existence [of a] common space, over the designation of objects pertaining to the common and of subjects as having the capacity of a common speech” (p. 24). With the term ‘police’, on the other hand, he describes “all the activities that create order by distributing places, names, functions” (Ibid., 1994, p. 173). Defining politics as a contestation of the police order implies that without the police, political actions cannot take place. The important point, as Dikeç and Swyngedouw (2017) suggest, is that “within any given order of governance, there is still the possibility of opening new spaces” (p. 13).

In contrast to Beveridge and Koch, I do not suggest that making a distinction between politics and the police necessarily negates the in-betweenness of existing urban politics. However, I do argue that more work needs to be done to understand different forums in which politics and the police interact or potentially could interact. Conceptualizations of disruptive politics often do not account for the genesis, enactment and afterlife of an intervention. And they often have difficulties in distinguishing between different types of ruptures and in exploring long-time implications of different disruptive acts. As Barnett (2017) argues, disruptive politics “does not allow that democratic rights, once established, need to be implemented, exercised, and possibly defended too” (p. 131). In order to democratize the cityscape, we surely need to understand many politics – disruptive politics, municipal politics, associations and lobby groups, and so forth – and various different relationships between them. With regard to speculative urbanization, design review is one forum that is critical to focus on.

What does a radical political intervention in the consensual city-image involve? I suggested that consensus does not mean unanimous support of a proposed tower development. It rather implies an agreed upon urban order. Rancière (2014) defines consensus as a specific “regime of the sensible” (p. 87), which, in our case, implies a way of sensing and making sense of the city that incorporates not only supporting but also seemingly critical assessments of individual developments. Intervening in London’s consensual city-image means that “a wrong enters into conflict with the established police order” (Rockhill, 2014, p. 88) targeting the intersection of tradition and aesthetics.

Davidson and Iveson (2015) identified consensus in urban governance in relation to “projects [that] make the city competitive, global, secure, and sustainable” (p. 544). The first two characteristics also apply to the consensual city-image. The need for the city to become more and more competitive is represented as a matter of fact and “[a]ctions taken on behalf of urban competitiveness are represented as actions taken on behalf of the city as a whole” (Ibid., pp. 544–545). London’s “role in the global economy” and its “status as a world city” (GLA, 2016, pp. 40 & 41) are major policy concerns. Of critical importance is also the role of tradition in the post-

political city. Tradition does not mean ‘the past’. It rather means a past that has been transmitted and that has authority. The notion of tradition refers to a specific representation of history or, rather, to a specific account of the city’s past that has authority. This is why an intervention in the consensual city-image cannot do without contesting the central role of historic landmarks in the cityscape or, better, it must intervene in historical narratives of the city in which singled out old buildings have a central role. A political intervention cannot do without questioning the common sense that St Paul’s is one of the most “valued components of the historic environment (Ibid., p. 414).³

The role of tradition is crucial for consensus because, as comments on various social media platforms also indicate, certain representations of the city’s past are particularly useful to get the wider public on board. Tradition, I argue, is an elemental dimension for restricting potential dissensus and, hence, for reducing politics to the police. For the City of London’s ‘traditional aesthetic’, arguments that affordable housing should occupy a central position or that mosques and synagogues should visually dominate the City have no place. The specificity, here, is that the traditional appearance of the City is opposed to fundamental socio-economic change but not to visual change. Put differently, visual change is de-coupled from socio-economic change. The former is encapsulated in the authority of tradition and works against the latter (enabling the continuity of capitalist development).

One fundamental problem with current debates about cityscapes is the way in which the term ‘aesthetics’ is being used. For a democratization of the cityscape, I suggest, it is inevitable that aesthetics is not limited to style or taste but understood as structures of experience (*aesthesis*, i.e. perception by the senses). This is one of Rancière’s key points, who alleges that both aesthetics and democratic politics are linked to an intervention in the distribution of the sensible. Politics, then, is an act of aesthetic redistribution; an act of reframing “material and symbolic space” (Rancière, 2014, p. 24). As we have seen, in the consensual city-image objects are distributed in a specific way: some (like St Paul’s) are in the center; some (like office towers) are in the periphery; and others (like affordable housing) are excluded. A political act inscribes equality into this order. It includes what is excluded or puts into the center what is in the periphery. Hence, equality, for Rancière, is the universal political axiom and it is not something that policy can ever achieve, which does not mean that policy cannot and should not work towards a just city.

³ For the importance that the visibility of St Paul’s is being given in the planning of London, see also GLA, 2012.

For such a radical conceptualization of aesthetics, two aspects are particularly important. First, aesthetics cannot be imposed on others and it cannot be controlled. There is an aesthetic dimension that is inherent in radical politics. As soon as the visual appearance of the city is being controlled by an institution and as long as this control remains unchallenged, it is police practice. Second, radical aesthetics is not defined by moral, religious or social criteria, judged in terms of their “intrinsic truth and of their impact on the ways of being of individuals and of the collectivity” (Rancière, 2009, p. 28). It is also not defined by its adequacy as a representation, i.e. in terms of “proper ways of doing and making as well as means of accessing limitations” (Ibid., 2014, p. 7). Instead, aesthetics is a “sensible mode of being” (Ibid., p. 18) that is specific to artistic production. And individuals who act politically are, according to Rancière, artists.

If democratizing the cityscape requires political interventions in the consensual city-image, then these interventions can be activated by a radical conceptualization of aesthetics. In so doing, they contest the City’s ‘traditional aesthetic’, which is a pro-market framing of material and symbolic space that consolidates existing social and economic arrangements. The aim of intervening in the consensual city-image is to open spaces for different ways of sensing and making sense of the city or, to put this differently, the aim is to aestheticize the beautiful city.

Beautification

In the context of speculative urban development, I distinguish between aestheticization and beautification. The former is linked to radical the latter to conservative politics. To put this differently, beautification refers to ways of sensing and making sense of the contemporary city that benefits central decision makers. Aestheticization, on the other hand, opens up a space for marginalized and excluded voices including critics of the capitalist city.⁴ Beautification and aestheticization are two politically different impetuses. If the former opens up a space in the contemporary city, then primarily for profit rather than for people.

Concerns with ‘urban beauty’ have recently gained or, better, re-gained particular attention. In 2018, the UK government set up the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission (hereafter, BBBBC) as an independent body to advise on how to promote health, well-being, and sustainable growth. In its final report, the commission alleges that beauty needs to become a “policy objective” and that “[b]eautiful placemaking should be a legally enshrined aim of the planning system” (BBBBC, 2020, pp. 9 & 2). Crucially, the report also suggests that in place of “quick

⁴ I do not use the term ‘aestheticization’ in the way in which Benjamin (2006) described the aestheticization of politics in German fascism, which is much closer to what I refer to as ‘beautification’. See also Gassner, 2020.

profit at the cost of beauty and community, we aim for long-term investment in which the values that matter to people – beauty, community, history, landscape – are safeguarded” and that “[m]ore democracy should take place at the local plan phase, expanding from the current focus on consultation in the development control process to one of co-design” (Ibid., p. 3).

These propositions are based on a definition of beauty that is not merely about how buildings look but involves “the wider ‘spirit of the place’, our overall settlement patterns and their interaction with nature” (Ibid., p. 10). In practice, this definition closes a space for democratic politics. The conservative philosopher Roger Scruton was one of the co-chairs of a commission that enthusiastically presents a historical account of architecture and town planning, clearly promoting a ‘traditional aesthetic’. “What is it that stops us from building as beautiful as the Georgians and the Victorians, despite being so much richer than they were?” (Ibid., p. 13) the commission asks before expressing its concerns about the loss of identity, ugliness, unpleasantness and alleging for the re-discovery of civic pride in architecture. At times, the role of beauty for social and economic values is being mentioned in the report with a particular focus on the “happiness and well-being of human communities” (Ibid., p. 22). Here, valued is the beauty of the past and ways in which it can contribute to a seemingly better life within existing social and economic arrangements. Arguably, a radical conceptualization of aesthetics has no place in this account.

And yet the BBBBC requests that beauty should be “subjected to a democratic or co-design process” (Ibid., p. v). “What people want is buildings that reflect the history, character and identity of their community and that belong in their surroundings” (Ibid., p. 22) or “people are attached to local materials and to vernacular ways of building” (Ibid., p. 33): these are assumptions by a group of conservative professionals. The commission’s call for democratization operates within a traditionalist and pro-market understanding of beauty. One forum in which this apparent democratization is meant to take place is design review. The commission suggests that more public involvement should be included in design review, which the Design Council (2013) still describes as an “independent and impartial evaluation process in which a panel of experts on the built environment assess the design of a proposal” (p. 6).

The distinction between aestheticization and beautification that I propose is informed by the BBBBC’s approach to beauty and its relationship to the nineteenth-century City Beautiful movement in the US. There are direct links between the two. The City Beautiful movement resulted in institutions that would “pronounce upon the merits or demerits of any work of art or architecture to be commissioned or purchased by the [US] Government” (Youngson, 1990, pp.

22–23). These institutions, in turn, became the role model for design review in England, which, arguably, has an important impact on the BBBBC's account.

Nineteenth-century City Beautiful advocates alleged that the city's visual appearance is crucial for creating moral and civic virtue among urban populations. Urban vistas, civic centers, parks, boulevard systems and public buildings were used to promote a harmonious social order and to defend the socio-economic status quo. Visual and spatial interventions, often borrowing from the Beaux-Arts and neoclassical architecture, were traditional in style. At times, these interventions were used to promote a social reform but always in order to avert from an urban revolution. City Beautiful, to be sure, was a "political movement" and it was certainly a conservative one: "it demanded a reorientation of public thought and action toward urban beauty" and, in the end, was a "middle- and upper-middle class attempt to refashion cities" with the ultimate purpose to "enhance worker productivity and urban economics" (Wilson, 1989, p. 1). It was committed to a "liberal-capitalist, commercial-industrial society and to the concept of private property" (Ibid., p. 78). It was "class-conscious" but accepted "the reality of classes" (Ibid., p. 84). It is such a pro-capitalist and value conservative understanding of beauty that informed the RFAC when it was set up in 1924.

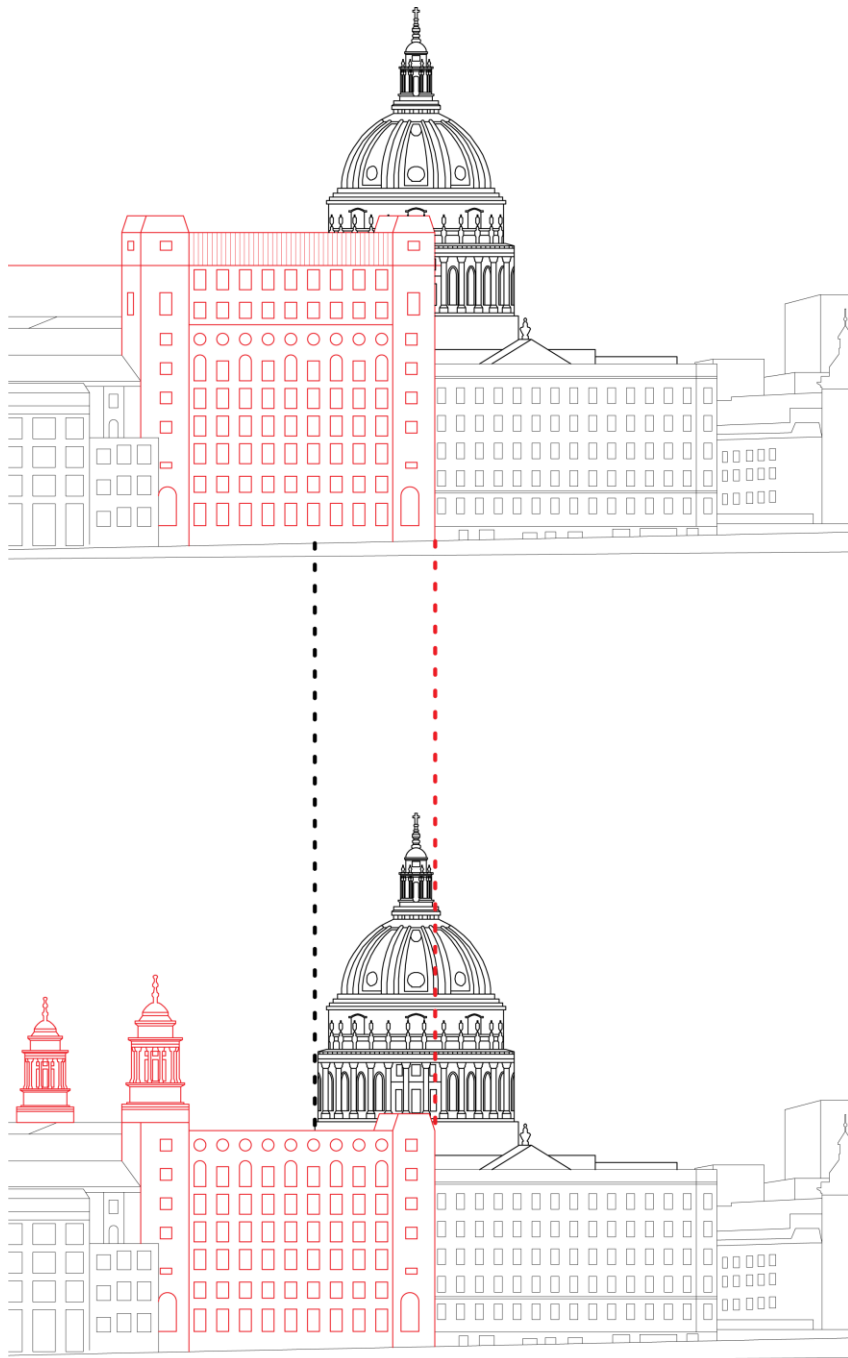
The RFAC was active until 1999, when it was succeeded by CABE, which, in 2011, merged into the Design Council. It was introduced to advise the government "on the artistic merits of new developments" (Carmona & Renninger, 2017a, p. 2). The RFAC was a quasi-autonomous non-governmental body that was "funded by government but answerable to its own commission made up of the great and the good from the design/built environment" (Carmona et al., 2017, p. 2). It originally included eight male established figures: four architects, one planner, one artist and two 'non-professionals'. None of them got paid for their work as commissioners and they could "neither insist that projects were referred to it, nor demand that its recommendations were followed, or even that its deliberations were given due consideration" (Carmona & Renninger, 2017a, p. 3). The RFAC had no judiciary power and was not directly involved in policy making.

One of its main tasks was the publication of annual reports, which were Command Papers that were presented to the parliament. Although the commission did not produce a report each year, the ones that were published had the chance to influence politicians' approach to cityscapes in a direct way. Professionals were vulnerable to party politics and they also had their own individual professional interests. Crucial, however, is also that design review was (and is) not mandatory. It has no formal status. Local planning authorities may or may not seek advice on the scheme. Developers "are not obliged to submit their projects to its scrutiny" and planning authorities are not obliged "to take design advice on board" or even to "seek it in the first place, although they

are encouraged to do so in national policy” (Carmona, 2018, p. 4). Design review panel members often have a detailed understanding of policy objectives and procedures without being immersed in policy making. Both design review’s informal status and its policy knowledge opens potentially fruitful avenues for radical politics in this forum. This does not mean that disruptive politics can be institutionalized. However, design review’s advice can be disruptive if at least some individuals find ways to enter a wrong into conflict with the established urban order.

As we will see, the RFAC started with a more critical approach to the commodified cityscape but, over time, reframed profit-driven building height in ways that became particularly useful for speculative urbanization. Yet, still in the 1990s commissioners criticized developers who concentrate “solely on new opportunities for investment and profit, minimizing the risk over the lengthy period of construction and high interest payments on borrowed capital by obtaining the maximum amount of usable space” (RFAC, 1990, p. 22). But this criticism was always linked to a conservative understanding of beauty, which can be seen in relation to three different developments in the City.

The first time the RFAC explored the “problem of high buildings” (Ibid., 1934, p. 3) in some detail was in response to the completion of the Faraday Building, which is located on Queen Victoria Street. A lower block of the building for a post office sorting office was built in 1890 and converted into a telephone exchange in 1905. In the 1930s, a taller block was added to house the world’s first international telephone exchange. Designed by A. R. Myers, it was this 37 meters tall block that became widely criticized for blocking views of St Paul’s from the Thames. While “height in a building may not per se be objectionable”, commissioners argued, “from an aesthetic point of view, every increase in heights is a concession of which the money value is often great” (Ibid., p. 4).



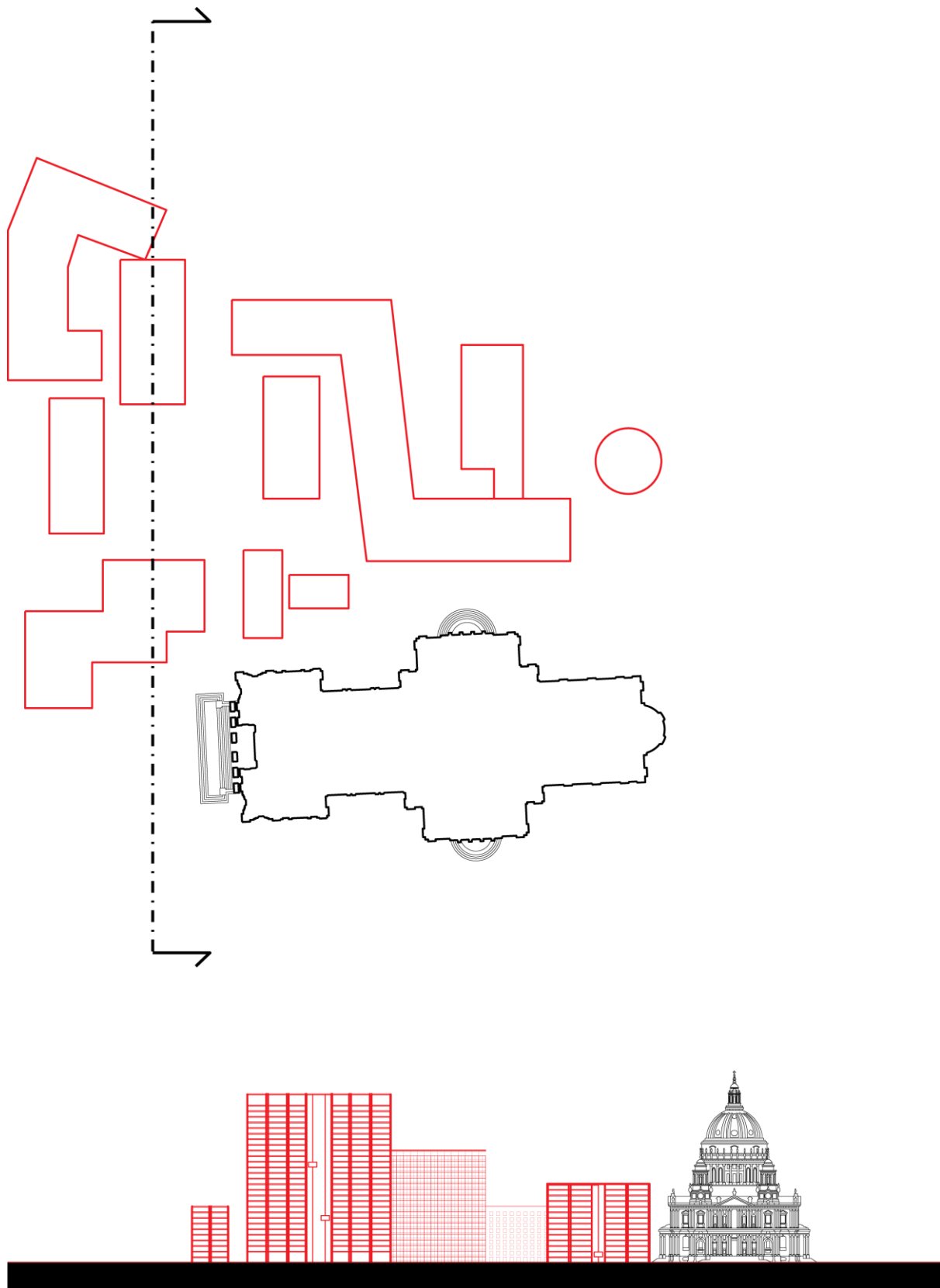
Visual relationship between Faraday Building and St Paul's after completion of the former (top) and as proposed after criticism (bottom).

Throughout its existence, the RFAC did “not desire to formulate [...] any detailed [policy] suggestions” (Ibid., 1934, p. 5) because it saw it as the duty of planning authorities to be “critical in respect of aesthetic considerations” (Ibid., 1937, p. 7). Until the 1990s, the commission emphasized that “if design matters are left entirely to market forces then the result is that unrestrained greed determines all” (Ibid., 1991, p. 9). But even if the RFAC highlighted that it did not “criticise high buildings as such” (Ibid., 1937., p. 4), after the Faraday Building appeared in the city – and next to the dome of St Paul’s in what they regarded as key views – commissioners

became particularly concerned about a tall building's "effect upon other buildings of national and historic interest, amongst of which are monuments of the greatest importance" (Ibid., 1934, p. 3). Not unlike today, commissioners distinguished between different building types and allocated different roles in the urban order to them: if tall and visually dominant buildings are not "accompanied by some advantage to the public" and "destroy [...] noteworthy architectural schemes" and "balanced sky-lines" (Ibid., 1937, pp. 4 & 5), then they do not belong in the city.

Such an approach to the problem of high buildings is related to City Beautiful advocates' claim that "dominating height" should be reserved "for the public" (Wilson, 1989, p. 47). The difference is, however, that while the nineteenth-century city was beautified in order to make it more productive for industrial capitalism, the RFAC's conservatism was motivated by the attempt to 'enshrine' an endangered beauty. Based on the suggestion that London "has always been [a city] of comparatively low structures" (RFAC, 1937, p. 5) and that this ought not to change, in the 1930s the RFAC aimed to conserve the visual status quo. In order to make profit-driven building height productive for a traditional cityscape, as it is the case in the consensual city-image, a reframing of material and symbolic space – but surely not one that is motivated by wronged equality – was needed. To this end, aesthetic and economic values could not simply be seen in an antithetical relationship. Profit-maximization needed to become useful for a 'traditional aesthetic' or, put differently, for urban beauty.

A first important re-framing of building height took place in response to rebuilding schemes for the City after World War II destruction. One of the first schemes was a masterplan by William Holford for Paternoster Square, which is a site that is located right next to St Paul's and where current buildings accommodate the London Stock Exchange and several investment banks. The RFAC pointed out that it was in agreement with the post-war scheme. It also suggested, however, that there is a "paramount need of restricting heights of new buildings round the Cathedral" (Ibid., 1946, p. 14). This suggestion was taken up by policy makers who introduced St Paul's Heights as a planning tool that controls the height of buildings in proximity to the cathedral to this day.

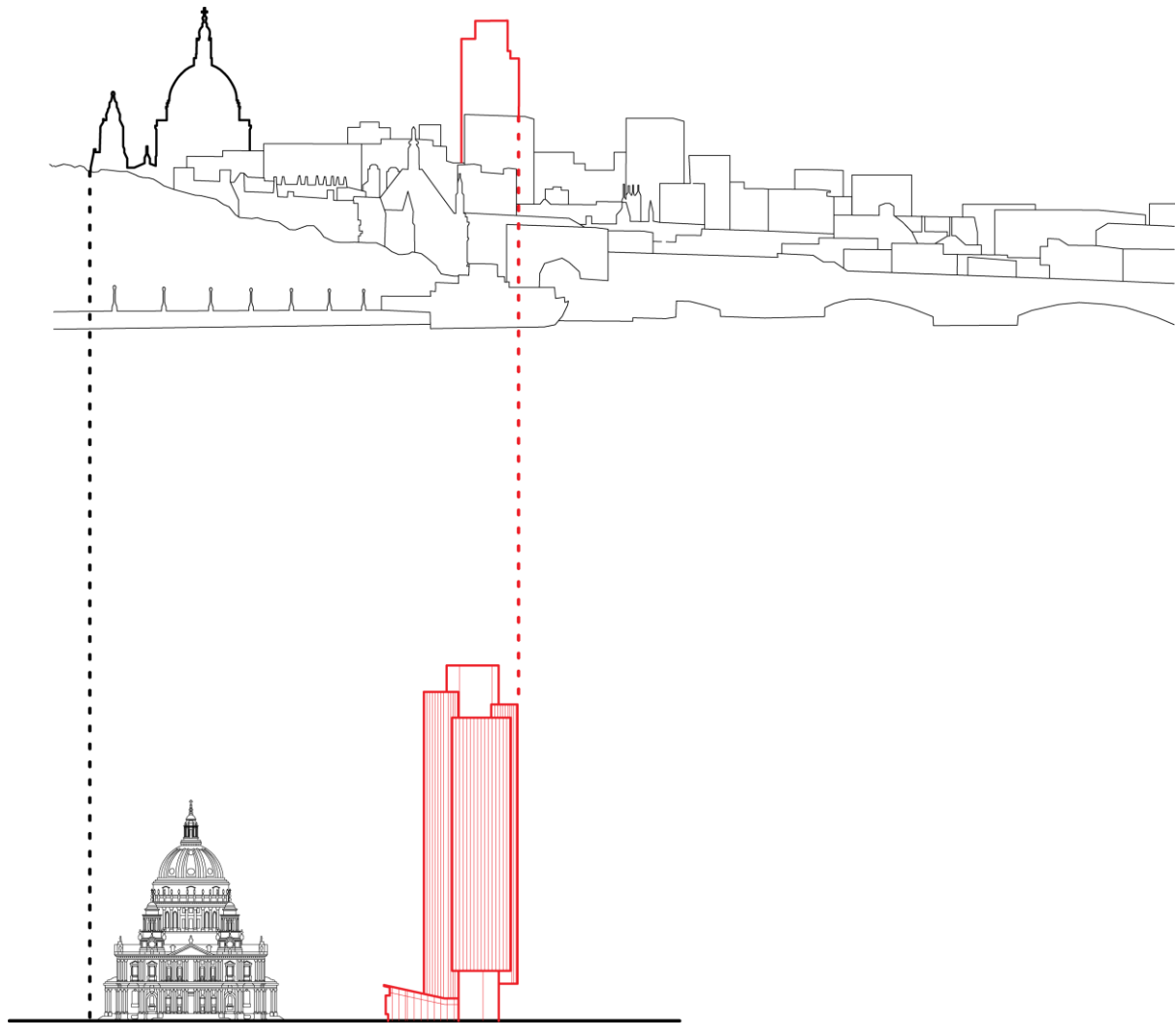


Height relationship between Holford's masterplan for Paternoster Square and St Paul's.

Six years after having been in agreement with Holden's masterplan, commissioners made the general statement that the "increase in the volume of buildings may well be necessary" (Ibid.,

1952, p. 6). They kept emphasizing that an office building's main problem is that its "colossal size suggests a monumentality traditionally reserved for buildings of religious and other civic purposes" (Ibid., 1953, p. 4). Towards the end of the decade, however, commissioners alleged for the first time that while a tower may "destroy a famous skyline", in certain locations "it may have positive aesthetic advantages provided it is well designed" (Ibid., 1957, p. 5). Crucially, this positive framing of profit-driven building height for urban beauty required a new tool: the visual abstraction of the cityscape to an outline as seen against the sky – the skyline – which implied the reduction of design to form and buildings to skyline profiles. A building's "general silhouette", commissioners alleged, "must be carefully considered" (Ibid., p. 6); the "treatment of the tops of buildings is of great importance"; and, indeed, the "architectural success or failure of a scheme will be judged largely by the final silhouette" (Ibid., 1958, p. 6).

The organizing principle of the consensual city-image is based on the argument that a tower can visually enhance an important structure like St Paul's. In order to be able to make this argument, the RFAC's general concern with the silhouette of a building needed to be refined as well as applied to the wider cityscape. The basic idea, as we have seen in relation to 1 Undershaft, is that a scheme that is part of a group of towers with an 'appropriate' overall skyline profile helps drawing attention to the cathedral. This idea started to be developed in the RFAC's response to the first very tall office building in the City: Tower 42. This 183 meters tall development, which is located at 25 Old Broad Street, was built to house Nat West's international headquarters. Richard Seifert designed it in the 1970s and it was formally opened in 1981. From the 1960s onwards, the RFAC (1961) lamented that tall buildings were "dotted about all over London" and claimed that "a better result would be achieved if high buildings were to be kept in groups or clusters" (p. 7). Soon after, commissioners alleged that it is now "generally accepted that exceptionally high buildings look better in the form of towers rather than slabs and that a carefully arranged cluster of towers [...] may be preferable to a number of isolated ones" (Ibid., 1963, p. 9). This visual preference supported arguments for clustering tall buildings in London ever since.



Visual and height relationships between Tower 42 and St Paul's.

The RFAC (1969) argued that Tower 42 “would form an acceptable dominating element in an existing cluster of tower blocks” (p. 83). While commissioners also emphasized that this “did not imply acceptance of any other building approaching this height in this or any other part of the City” (Ibid.) only four years later they believed a nearby office development “to be acceptable and found that the addition of this third tower improved the relationship between the new National Westminster Bank [Tower 42], the Stock Exchange and the old Royal Exchange building” (Ibid., 1973, p. 160). This assessment followed an argument that was made two years earlier that edges should be “softened” in order to “avoid sharp lines of demarcation” (Ibid., 1971, p. 12) between high-built and low-rise urban areas.

The argument against sharp lines of demarcation led to today's definition of the Eastern high-rise cluster with currently 1 Undershaft at its center and other towers “gradually falling away in

height” (CoL, 2002, p. 146).⁵ As explained above, “reinforc[ing] the hill-like character” (Tavernor, 2016a, p. 16) of the cluster is supposed to enhance St Paul’s in long views of the city. The visibility and appreciability of the cathedral is improved when a tower contributes to and co-defines an overall shape of the high-rise cluster that softens the visual contrast between religion and financialized capitalism in the City. Such a claim is the result of far-reaching shifts in the 1930s (when the relationship between economic aesthetic values was seen as an antithetical one), in the 1950s (when economic values were detached from aesthetic values by means of abstracting different building types and functions to building outlines), and, finally, in the neoliberal era, when economic values have become useful for the beautiful cityscape.

Democratizing review

Design review during the twentieth century never posed a serious challenge to speculative urbanization and, moreover, provided visual, moral, and conceptual frameworks for the consensual city-image. The RFAC’s criticism of the ways in which the state is “bent on the primacy of the free-market” (Carmona and Renninger, 2017b, p. 597) was always based on a conservative pro-market approach to the visual appearance of the city. It set out to “beautify England” (1924, p 2), which is what it indeed achieved. Its “aesthetic considerations” (Ibid., 1937, p. 7) were, more than anything else, beautification strategies.

How can radical politics intervene in design review? Design review works in many ways differently today than it did in the days of the RFAC. CABE, which succeeded the RFAC, was an experiment of the New Labour government that saw an “extension of public policy in an area that British Governments previously had made strenuous efforts to avoid becoming embroiled with” (Carmona et al., 2017, p. 6). While the RFAC operated mostly behind closed doors, CABE was more publicly oriented, less centralized but also more pragmatic. But it has also been criticized for turning design review into a “neoliberal pro-development tool” and a “poodle of the state” (Ibid., p. 17). As the result of an almost withdrawal of funding on national, regional, and local scales after the financial crisis of 2008, design review today has been turned to a “typically privately funded activity that a diverse group of market providers compete to deliver” (Carmona, 2018, p. 1). The marketization of design review has led to a more widespread use of reviews and to a variety in its practices (Ibid., p. 28). However, it has also become coopted by market pressures more than ever before.

⁵ For the conceptualization of a ‘hill-like’ skyline profile, see also CABE and English Heritage, 2007, p. 5.

Current calls for “a democratic or co-design process” (BBBC, 2020, p. v) and for ensuring that the make-up of a panel should reflect “the diversity of the community” (Design Council, 2013, p. 17) make a strong argument for more public involvement in design review. However, these calls are based on a conservative and pro-market understanding of urban beauty that is fundamentally undemocratic from a radical political standpoint. Even though suggestions have been put forward that it is “perfectly legitimate for the panel to question the client’s original brief” as “[f]undamental criticism is sometimes necessary” (Ibid., pp. 18, 21), without a radical conceptualization of aesthetics public involvement becomes a tool of power for justifying the city’s development trajectory. Design review that is publicly funded and that aims to be part of a democratic process must not invite some individuals and local groups to contribute to a conversation that is, from the outset, constrained and framed in a specific way. Instead, it can only be a forum in which anyone can force their entry in and participate even if or, rather, especially when this done in a disruptive way. Design review’s main audience, then, is not the government, as it was the case with both the RFAC and CABE, but everyone and anyone. Rather than publishing annual reports that are being presented to the parliament, rather than promoting a common sense about the beautiful city, it opens spaces for different ways of sensing and making sense of the city, precisely in order not to become just another neoliberal pro-development tool.

Urban beauty, as conceptualized by professionals since the City Beautiful movement, needs to be aestheticized. Intervening in the consensual city-image is a question of political epistemology. If political interventions aim to bring about a more just city, then the question is how to know what is just. How is injustice seen? In order to address this question, anyone needs to intervene in a common sense that puts historic landmarks and buildings of ‘civic importance’ into central positions and marginalizes and excludes other building types. In my view, there is a need for exploring multiple different ways in which aesthetic values are linked to economic values, with the aim to disclose the commodification of both history and religion in the City.

Engaging with speculative urbanization through the lens of radical politics opens important avenues for democratic urban politics. Multiple and often complex relationships between disruptive and institutionalized politics need to be explored. How are different ways of rupturing London the traditional and global city linked to other types of politics? Furthermore, a radical political approach that draws on Rancière and which is based on the disconnection between a self-reflective, self-aware subject and objects that constitute what is experienced in the city must not refrain from working through its own constraints and limitations. It must critically engage with its framing of ‘criticality’ and ‘radicalism’ and face its own oppressive logic and colonial heritage (Jackson, 2016), opening up a space for multiple ways of encountering the city.

Unlike beauty, aesthetics cannot be imposed and it cannot be controlled. Furthermore, the political standard for debates about the visual appearance of the city cannot be based on the idea of an “independent and impartial evaluation” (Design Council, 2013, p. 6). ‘Independence’ and ‘impartiality’ are hallmarks of the post-political city. Democratizing the cityscape is about multiplying dependencies and about understanding that each and every account of the city is equal in its partiality and, hence, has the same right to become universalized.

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