

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE

RUINED SKYLINES

*Aesthetics, Politics and
London's Towering Cityscape*

GÜNTER GASSNER

ROUTLEDGE 

‘Günter Gassner makes a powerful case for complexity rather than clarity in cities. He explores the massing together of tall buildings, arguing for a critical and creative exploration of skylines rather than the privileging of individual structures. Though Gassner’s work is based on architectural craft, it ranges deep into politics, philosophy, economics, and everyday life. *Ruined Skylines* is arousing visually, engaging to read, and never fails to provoke.’

*Richard Sennett, London School of Economics
and Political Science, UK*

‘In this original and compelling study Günter Gassner dispels the idea of skylines as simple linear representations, to be traced or protected, or read for their obvious symbolic load. Through meticulous visual analyses and imaginative engagement with the work of Walter Benjamin and other key critical urban theorists, *Ruined Skylines* grounds London’s “new” skyline within a longer historical trajectory. As an intervention within debates about urban change this timely work goes far beyond the surface controversies and straightforward readings of the tall-building boom and its relationship with power and capital. It offers, instead, a radical, multi-dimensional reconceptualization of the political uses and potentials of the skyline.’

*Ben Campkin, The Bartlett School of Architecture,
University College London, UK*

‘Rich in both historical detail and theoretical insight, this is a particularly timely and significant book. As the hubris of contemporary transnational corporations finds ever more spectacular instantiation in the high-rise glass and steel of metropolitan skyscrapers, Günter Gassner astutely recognizes that the “choice” between neoliberal tower-building boosterists and historical heritage naysayers is merely one between the two sides of the same conservative coin. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s vision of “ruination” as a process of fracturing deceptive facades and disturbing contexts to reveal unheeded possibilities and unrealized potentialities, Gassner’s pioneering “baroque critique” deftly navigates towards a genuinely alternative political aesthetic and urban imaginary. Focusing on the London skyline, this book will inform and inspire those who reject the relentless commodification and financialisation of our cityscapes, and who are determined that our twenty-first-century cities will be neither the preserve of penthouse-dwelling economic elites nor museumified monuments maintained for globe-trotting tourists. Deeply critical and profoundly political, Gassner’s work is not just about architectural horizons and changing urban vistas; rather, it sets out to challenge and change the very processes and architects, the how and the who, the whys and wherefores, of present-day urban transformation. It is an urgent and necessary interrogation of how our future cities are to be (come) both liveable and alive.’

Graeme Gilloch, Lancaster University, UK



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Ruined Skylines

This book examines the skyline as a space for radical urban politics. Focusing on the relationship between aesthetics and politics in London's tall-building boom, it develops a critique of the construction of more and more speculative towers as well as a critique of the claim that these buildings ruin the historic cityscape. Gassner argues that the new London skyline needs to be ruined instead and explores ruination as a political appropriation of the commodified and financialised cityscape. Aimed at academics and students in the fields of architecture, urban design, politics, urban geography, and sociology, *Ruined Skylines* engages with the work of Walter Benjamin and other critical and political theorists. It examines accounts of sometimes rebellious and often conservative groupings, including the City Beautiful movement, the English Townscape movement, and the Royal Fine Art Commission, and discusses tower developments in the City of London – 110 Bishopsgate, the Pinnacle, 22 Bishopsgate, 1 Undershaft, 122 Leadenhall, and 20 Fenchurch – in order to make a case for reanimating urban politics as an art of the possible.

Günter Gassner is Lecturer in Urban Design at the School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, Wales, and an architect. His research and teaching interests lie at the intersection of critical theory and spatial practices. He specialises in questions about relationships between aesthetics and politics, history and power, and urban visions and visualisations.

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Ruined Skylines

Aesthetics, Politics and London's Towering
Cityscape

Günter Gassner

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
The new London skyline	1
1 Conservative representations	5
<i>A tall-building boom</i>	8
<i>Conservatism</i>	12
<i>Ruination</i>	15
<i>Outline of the book</i>	17
2 Visual and political representativeness	23
<i>The notion of the skyline</i>	24
<i>Form, power, finance, function</i>	31
<i>Political skylines</i>	35
<i>Agency</i>	45
3 Composition	50
<i>Western views</i>	51
<i>Compositional wholeness</i>	57
<i>Townscape</i>	61
<i>Image</i>	70
<i>Wholeness</i>	74
4 Sequence	81
<i>Skyline profiles and sky gaps</i>	82
<i>Linear sequence</i>	96

viii Contents

Occupying the line 102

Optical space 109

5 Aesthetic and speculative value 114

Reframing building height 115

Aestheticising and beautifying 123

The skyline as a monad 126

Open totality 133

6 History 138

Enshrinement as heritage 139

History as a process 142

Inward history 145

Historical progress 153

Ruins 158

The orderly city 160

7 Meaning 166

Linear and painterly 167

Religion as capitalism 173

Allegories and symbols 179

Baroque folding 183

Resistance 186

8 Political images 191

Ruination 191

Conservatism 197

A tall-building boom 199

Index 201

Figures

1.1	Locations and elevations of St Paul's and six speculative towers in London: 110 Bishopsgate, the Pinnacle, 22 Bishopsgate, 1 Undershaft, 122 Leadenhall, and 20 Fenchurch (from left to right)	10
1.2	Building construction in the City between 1980 and 2000 in plan and as seen from Gabriel's Wharf at the South Bank	14
2.1	St Paul's increasingly non-central position on the City skyline before and its regained central position after the Great Fire based on historic paintings; from top to bottom: anonymous painting from the 1560s; Visscher's <i>View of London</i> , 1600; Hollar's <i>Long View of London</i> , 1647; J. Dankerts and C. Allard's <i>The City viewed from Southbank before the Great Fire</i> and <i>The City viewed from Southbank after the Great Fire</i> , circa 1690	27
2.2	Series of distant view categories along a walk from Gabriel's Wharf on the South Bank, crossing the Thames via Waterloo Bridge, towards Somerset House River Terrace (from bottom to top)	29
3.1	The new London skyline as a historic master painting and a compositional whole	58
3.2	Visual zoning in the City in plan and section	62
3.3	Collage based on the 'Save Us Our Ruins' campaign	66
4.1	Planning histories of speculative towers in the City (1)	86
4.2	Planning histories of speculative towers in the City (2)	87
4.3	Construction of the hill-like Eastern Cluster skyline profile (top) and the redefined visual centre of the group of towers (bottom)	88
4.4	Sky gap between St Paul's and the Eastern Cluster as seen from Waterloo Bridge (top), and the non-existing sky gap as seen from Somerset House River Terrace (bottom)	89
4.5	The skyline (top) and the new London skyline as seen from an elevated viewpoint close to one block of the Heygate Estate in 2013 (bottom)	100
4.6	Viewing place of the new London skyline (bottom) and viewing place of the skyline from Heygate Estate (top)	101

4.7 Publicly accessible spaces on different levels along Bishopsgate, Fenchurch Street, Leadenhall Street, Cornhill, and Cheapside in the City	104
4.8 Publicly accessible spaces at the bases and the tops of speculative tower developments	107
6.1 The new London skyline with the existing St Paul's (top) and Wren's warrant design for St Paul's (bottom) on the new London skyline	148
6.2 The Pinnacle ruin in the City from 2012 until 2018	150
6.3 Construction of 22 Bishopsgate as seen from the top floor of the nearby 110 Bishopsgate	155
7.1 The baroque St Peter's in baroque Rome and the baroque St Paul's in un-baroque London, where, with the help of the Millennium pedestrian bridge, a visual axis to the cathedral has been created; a baroque condition that is atypical of the city	171
7.2 A speculative tower in the City that accumulates so much guilt and debt that it grows up right through the sky	178
8.1 The windowless façades of the Bank of England and 110 Bishopsgate	192

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The new London skyline

We look at the city from a distance.¹ We look at it from a low viewpoint, which results in a high horizon. The River Thames is in the foreground. We can recognise the partial contour of a boat with a mast and the outlines of lampposts along the embankment. The river appears to be almost empty. Letters – the title of the book and the name of the author – are among the few elements that animate it. No people and no activities can be directly seen. This is a ghostly city and our attention is drawn to the distance. The middle ground merges with the background into one large formation. This formation appears to be absurdly two-dimensional. This city has no depth. It is flattened between an abstracted river and a partly clouded sky.

Elements in the city are reduced to outlines. This is a city of extensive properties rather than intensities. Like the paper cut-out by a clumsy artist, the majority of elements are hardly recognisable. Many shapes are cut in a rough and careless way. Many shapes we would expect to see have not been cut at all. Some cutting lines merge into one and others seem to be vague and randomly placed. Trees, chimneys, gabled roofs, technical rooms, church steeples, and sky bars are all created out of the same material. The artist's cutting lines bring different elements into line. Irrespective of their differences and distinct qualities, they are defined by their extension in terms of surface area. And with lines being drawn in an, at times, erratic way, elements are being produced.

Among these produced elements are five buildings that the artist has treated with extra care. They have been endowed with an additional level of detail; their surface areas are divided into smaller parts. These seem to be the five tallest buildings in the city: St Paul's Cathedral, 110 Bishopsgate (the Heron Tower), Tower 42, 30 St Mary Axe (the Gherkin), and 122 Leadenhall Street (the Cheesegrater). Nearby buildings including the Broadgate Tower and 20 Fenchurch Street (the Walkie Talkie), which we would have anticipated seeing on the left- and the right-hand side, are omitted. And none of the more than 50 church buildings in the City is included either. This is a constrained city; an enframed city without a frame. But why has the artist not given it a celebratory frame? A carved and gilded frame with pin and ribbon and a repeating acanthus leaf ornament; or a carved and water-gilded architectural cassetta frame, like the one we are accustomed to see surrounding Antonio Canaletto's historical master paintings of London.

2 *The new London skyline*

The Protestant St Paul's is on the left. Of the cathedral, we can see the round drum that is articulated by columns, and we can see a steep and ribbed curve: a large and impressive dome crowning the intersection of the arms of the cathedral that is built in the shape of a cross. We can see the Stone Gallery, which is the first of two galleries that encircle the outside of the dome, and the Golden Gallery, which is the small gallery that runs at the highest point of the outer dome. If we look carefully, we can also see the lantern, the ball, and the cross. From the front façade of the cathedral, the triangular relief that depicts the conservation of the cathedral's patron saint to Christianity is almost unrecognisable. But we can see the outline of a figure that stands above it. This is the figure of St Paul himself, but he appears to be left alone by the apostles and the four evangelists. What we cannot see are the West Towers of the cathedral and the peace, prosperity, and hospitality symbolised by the pineapples that top these towers. The clock on the South-West Tower is out of sight and we cannot hear Great Tom, nor even Great Paul, the largest bell ever cast in the United Kingdom. From the highly visible dome, we cannot see the three-dome structure; neither the inner dome that rises in proportion to the interior of the architecture nor the brick cone between the inner and the outer dome, which provides strength and supports the stone lantern above. There is no way for us to experience the shafts of light that are directed into the church building and the atmosphere that is being created. The experience of an infinite interior space of the church building is denied.

110 Bishopsgate appears as an agglomeration of several independent parts. Some floor plates are recognisable but, more than anything else, we can see the building core that includes all the building services and which is positioned not centrally but at the southern edge of the site. Distinct building parts with distinct heights and distinct levels of resolution. The verticality of shafts for panorama lifts contrasts with the horizontality of floors and is mediated by diagonal lines introduced by a flight of stairs. Hidden from view are the diagonal lines exposed by the bracing on the north side. Hidden is also the rhythm of three-storey units, each of which comprises an open-plan lower level and two upper levels, which are arranged around a three-storey-high glazed atrium that pours daylight deep into the building.

Tower 42 is partly hidden behind just one large rectangular surface. We can see the slender tower with a central core and two volumes that differ in height. The two volumes are characterised by a verticality that results from close-set vertical steel fins with black glass between them. As seen from above, the tower resembles that of the NatWest logo: three chevrons in a hexagonal arrangement. And even though we cannot adopt this viewpoint, even though we cannot see the complex building plan of a core with three office space 'leaves' wrapped around it, we might guess that this is a slender tower with regularly small floor plates. And only a few might know that even before the Big Bang – that is, even before the deregulation of the financial markets and before the time when large trading floors started to be required – the bank never moved its foreign exchange and money market trading operation into the tower.

The lower half of 30 St Mary Axe's is also hidden behind one large rectangular surface. And while we cannot see that the tower widens in profile as it rises, we can see the upper half where it tapers towards its apex. The building appears to be lower in height but its unusual shape makes it stand out from the rest of the city. We can recognise the building's diagonally braced structure and the fully glazed façade. Looking at the braced structure, we can perhaps imagine the atria between the radiating 'fingers' of each floor that link vertically and form a series of break or meeting rooms that spiral up the building. We have no opportunity to see the only piece of curved glass installed: the lens at the top, which is visible only from the bar on the top floor of the building and which is open only to tenants and their guests. And what we also cannot see, but we might guess at, is that this is Britain's most expensive office building, which was sold one year before the 2008 financial crisis for £630 million and, again, in 2014 for £700 million.

Right next to 30 St Mary Axe is 122 Leadenhall, which looks like the tallest building in view. The tapered glass façade reveals steel bracings along with a structural frame. And, on the left, we can see a part of the north core, which contains all the building's services. Hidden from view are the glass panoramic lifts that animate the north façade as well as the colourful treatment of the north core: its yellow steelwork frame and alternating blocks of red and blue glass. As with the other buildings in this city, we cannot see its base. This is all the more unfortunate because the base of this tower is the highest atrium in the City of London and one that is apparently open to the public.

Over the four office towers stands the Virgin Mary. Treated with particular care, the artist has refused to reduce her to a series of lines. Mary wears a simple red dress and a large blue cloak. She spreads her cloak, enveloping the four office towers. Her distant gaze seems to be of one who now belongs to the celestial sphere. We look at her, but she does not look back at us. Her gaze is lowered onto the towers, not judgementally or dismissively, but protectively. She gives the city comfort, consolation, and hope. An aura surrounds her: an apparition of distance that we cannot overcome no matter how close we were. This Mary has been decontextualized from a multi-panel altarpiece. Selected personalities from an Italian town's elite burgher families and elegant ladies dressed according to the latest Renaissance fashion have been replaced by 110 Bishopsgate, Tower 42, 30 St Mary Axe, and 122 Leadenhall. But where are the other panels of the altarpiece? Where are the saints: St Sebastian, St John the Baptist, St Benedict, and St Francis? And where is the predella, the painting at the bottom of the altarpiece that shows five scenes from Jesus' life? Or is the predella the city?

What kind of city is this artist producing? In this city, orientations are fixed. This city is enframed and looked at from an outside and static viewpoint and it is this specific view that represents the city as a whole. This is a city in which shared values and power relations can be read off the cityscape in an easy and direct way. Each building has its appropriate place. St Paul's is on the left and the speculative towers are on the right. The furthest left of the towers is 110

4 *The new London skyline*

Bishopsgate and the furthest right is 122 Leadenhall, with Tower 42 and 30 St Mary Axe between them. A different arrangement would ruin this city: 110 Bishopsgate has to be left of Tower 42 and 122 Leadenhall has to be right of 30 St Mary Axe. Each building has its appropriate height and the Virgin Mary towers over and protects all towers, which are placed in close visual proximity to each other. Each building has its unique role in and for the city. While St Paul's has civic importance, the towers do not. But, then, the towers visually support the cathedral.

This is a city that can be divided into distinct parts, each of which is defined by an outline. There are the multiple lines of the cathedral and the fewer lines of the speculative towers. With the help of the former, the off-centre cathedral is put into the very centre of the city. With the help of the latter, the speculative towers create one common line. And it is with this common line that the towers, separated clearly from each other, form one unit. In this city of lines and through the power of lines, buildings become parts of a stable whole. Each tower has a particular visual role but all of them can visually improve the historic St Paul's. This is the case because this city is one long causal chain. In this city, the past is not only respected but it is actually enshrined.

This is a city that is not only driven by money and greed. In this city, history and religion put the financial sector and advanced business service industries in their appropriate places. This is a well-arranged city, an orderly city. There are good reasons why certain elements are included and others are excluded; why certain elements are in the centre, while others are on the periphery. This is an enframed city but not a framed museum piece. While this city constantly changes, it manages to hold on to an agreed visual order and rightness. Moreover, this city is continuously improving. Yes, there are a few small setbacks. But these setbacks do not stop the artist in pursuing what he sets out to do: to construct a city that has meaning.

Note

- 1 See front cover of this book.

1 Conservative representations

This book is the result of a twofold critique: first, a critique of the construction of more and more commercial towers in London; and second, a critique of the idea that these towers ruin London's historic cityscape. One of the key problems with the current tall-building boom, as I see it, is that both professionals who argue for and those who argue against the construction of towers in the City of London (hereafter the City) reduce the city to an easily marketable visual representation. This reduction is not always immediately apparent; especially not in the criticism that some historians put forward when a new tower is being proposed. Yet, the concepts that are developed and the instruments that are used do exactly that: they further commodify the city and turn the city into an 'image' that has the main aim of attracting global investment and revenue-generating tourists. The basic premise of visual commodification, as we will see, is the idea of a well-arranged city. The widespread idea that the construction of additional skyscrapers ruins the historic cityscape is based on the same premise of an orderly city. It assumes, I will argue, an element of integrity that is ideological and which itself must be ruined in order to open up a space for politics.

We need radical interventions in urbanisation processes under financialised capitalism – perhaps more now than ever before. Attempts to visually protect the cityscape or individual historical buildings in the city do not open up a space for radical politics that can bring about social change. They foreclose or, at the very least, narrow such a space, which, in turn, expedites London's tall-building boom. They draw attention away from the fact that contemporary London is largely built by globally operating investors and private real estate developers with a state that acts as a hands-off manager. However, whose city is a city where the primary aim is to attract more and more investors and developers? Whose city is a city in which planning processes, which are negotiations between developers and planning authorities, are developer-driven? Whose city is a city in which, in these processes, almost nothing seems to be non-negotiable, that is, everything seems to be measurable and reducible to aspects of profitability and economic viability? Whose city is a city in which investment flows to urban areas and industries where the rate of return is highest and not to the least advantaged areas? Whose city is a city in which the production and utilisation of surplus capital are left in the hands of a few?¹

6 *Conservative representations*

In this book I suggest that, in order to politically intervene in today's urbanisation processes and London's development trajectory, we need political images. Put differently, we need images that engage with and counter those conservative representations that have occupied city-making for decades. The old slogan that 'There is No Alternative' to a market-driven society has never been innocently based on the idea that one might not like a ruling free market but one has to simply accept it. The market economy has rarely been seen merely as one of many aspects of society that works in itself and, therefore, requires no intervention from outside. Rather, and more fundamentally, as we can see in Margaret Thatcher's case, political freedom was equated with economic freedom. And even though the old neoliberal ideology that one must not govern *despite* the market but *for* the market – the idea that we need a slightly freer society with fewer restrictions in order not to redistribute wealth but to create more and more wealth – has, as many argue, clearly been proven wrong, this has not produced political images.² We need, I argue in this book, images that are political because they intervene in a traditional and nowadays market-serving sense of visual order and rightness of the city. We need images that precisely do not equate political freedom with economic freedom.

When I refer to images I do not mean visual representations of what the city looks like. I also do not mean mental images or normative representations of what the city ought to look like. The point of political images is not to depict a visual alternative, and, in so doing, to provide another representation for the visual commodification of the city. Rather, the point is to develop images that are political because of their visibility. These images are political because they disrupt or destabilise the way in which the city is sensed and made sense of. They are political because they inaugurate something new. They are political not because they represent an action but because they *act*.

To be sure, visual images of the city are always political in the sense that they are inscribed in power relations. They are political because they are controlled by the state or an elite. But the images that the city needs, I suggest, are images that are fundamentally linked to change. Hence, if vision can be understood as an act of perception and as an act of imagination, then we need to add the act of making changes to the status quo.³ Political images are about perception, imagination, and change. And these are three dimensions and not three aspects that are linked in a causal chain. Seeing the city, imagining a city, changing the city: this is not simply a linear process according to which seeing the city and imagining a different city lead to changes to the city; such a process can be – and is currently – easily co-opted by market interests. The images that I have in mind are political because they change what we perceive in the city and how we imagine the city. They are political because they allow us to imagine multiple perceptions and different changes. They are political because with and through them we are capable of perceiving imaginations and changes.

These political images have in common with Cornelius Castoriadis' account of 'creative imaginary' that they are in tension with the 'tightening grip of the capitalist imaginary'.⁴ As Ben Campkin shows in *Remaking London*, the

creative imaginary refers to ‘the tools of autonomous individuals in achieving change and resistance to capitalist domination’.⁵ With regard to a tall-building boom, however, what is the political relevance of individual resistance? City-making is a collective undertaking with a collective that is defined by different perceptions and different imaginations of the city. The most useful images, then, are images that bring differences together or, more precisely, that relate differences to each other. And perhaps these are images that do not resist but that result from capitalist urbanisation, while at the same time or, better, as a result of which they work against capitalist domination. What interests me in particular is to see how these political images that operate from within are linked to a tall-building boom.

In this book I want to discuss how the relationship between the visual and the political is related to socio-economic change or, to put this differently, how visual change links to a fundamental urban transformation. Hence, my key focus is less on a detailed analysis of what might be called the politics of aesthetics, by which I refer to the multiple different ways in which a certain appearance results from and consolidates existing power relations. I am specifically interested in the aesthetic dimension that is inherent in radical politics. Theorists, such as Hannah Arendt, Jacques Rancière, and Walter Benjamin, identified and described this dimension and, as we will see, their accounts differ in terms of their understanding of both politics and aesthetics. Still, for none of them could politics be reduced to institutional politics, and for none of them could aesthetics be reduced to matters of art and beauty. In their distinct ways, they explored questions of perception, imagination, and change, and they emphasised that making sense of the world and acting in the world require aesthetic forms; that aesthetic forms and aesthetic judgements introduce something new into the world and that they are, therefore, linked to radical politics. Hence, if we read the city as a ‘work of art’ in the sense that cityscapes can be understood as ‘legible documents that can tell us something about the values and aspirations of their rulers, designers, buildings, owners and inhabitants’, then we need to be careful not to deprive aesthetics and, above all, the visual of its political agency.⁶ Precisely because cities respond ‘to the aspirations of its dominant classes with institutions and built environments to serve their interests and reinforce their values’, as Donald J. Olsen proposes, it is important to explore not only the ways in which the city changes visually but also the ways in which the visual can bring about an urban transformation. This is not a question about politicising the visual; it is about nothing more than drawing out the visual dimension of politics.

If the cityscape is political in that it is the result of existing power relations and ways of sensing and make sense of the city, how, then, is it political in the sense that it disrupts the status quo and brings about change? In this book I explore this question through the lens of a city’s skylines and, in particular, in relation to what I call the *new London skyline*: the ways in which proposed office towers in the City are being framed, explored, and explained in urbanisation processes and in planning debates especially.

A tall-building boom

Has London's tall-building boom introduced a new visual order in the city? In this book I will show that it has not. And, yet, there are more than 400 skyscrapers currently in the pipeline (that is, they are either proposed, approved, or already under construction).⁷ Eighty per cent of them are residential towers – a number that is particularly important given the shortage of affordable housing in London. Yet, the large majority of these residential towers accommodate luxury apartments that offer great views across the city. The additional supply of housing that London will see in the years ahead will not make living in London more affordable.

A group of mostly architects and artists who have organised against the tall-building boom under the so-called Skyline Campaign – a campaign that aims to stop the devastation of London by badly designed and poorly placed tall buildings – claims that many of these luxury flats are nothing other than investment opportunities for wealthy people from all over the world to 'park' their money in London and that many of them will simply be left unoccupied before they are resold. Residential towers are also an opportunity for the Mayor of London, campaigners suggest, to show that he can attract investment and tackle the housing shortage – even though the problem of unaffordable housing is not being addressed – and for local councils to gain extra revenue in order to fill the holes left by the economic recession after the 2008 financial crisis. These are important points to consider. It is for good reason that David Madden and Peter Marcuse argue for 'the creation of an alternative residential logic' and for a model that constructs dwellings for cooperative and social housing.⁸ But does this mean that, in order to tackle the current housing crisis, 'vertical social housing must rise again', as Stephen Graham suggests?⁹ After all, many studies of the relationship between density and urban form, including those of the Urban Task Force – a research group led by Richard Rogers – have shown that high residential densities can be achieved with medium-rise buildings.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Graham's point that, as the architecture critic Owen Hatherley has remarked, social housing projects from the 1930s up to the 1970s 'continue to be *useful*: a potential index of ideas, successful or failed, tired, untried or broken on the wheel of the market or the state' is, of course, important.¹¹ 'Even in their ruinous state', Hatherley suggests – and I would also argue *because* of their ruinous state – 'they can still offer a sense of possibility which decades of being told that "There is No Alternative" has almost beaten out of us'.¹²

London's residential tower boom exemplifies significant processes that define urbanisation nowadays. The first is commodification. While commodification describes 'the general process by which the economic value of a thing comes to dominate its other uses', with regard to housing, it means that 'a structure's function as real estate takes precedence over its usefulness as a place to live'.¹³ The other process is financialisation, which is a term describing 'the increasing power and prominence of actors and firms that engage in profit accumulation through the servicing and exchanging of money and financial instruments'.¹⁴

With regard to housing, this means that managers, bankers, and rentiers all ‘produce profits from real estate through buying, selling, financing, owning, and speculating’.¹⁵ Working against these processes involves the clear commitment that a housing project is, first of all, not a piece of real estate but a home for people.

I will explore commodification and financialisation processes, not in relation to housing but in relation to the construction of office towers in the City. Compared to residential developments, the number of proposed office towers is relatively small. I do not suggest that the same political and ethical questions arise when it comes to questions about homes and workplaces. Nevertheless, office towers in the City are also structures whose function as real estate takes precedence over their use value as a place to work. And, of course, managers, bankers, and rentiers produce profits with them through buying, selling, financing, owning, and speculating. These towers in the City accommodate – not exclusively but to a large extent – financial and advanced business service industries. They provide a great opportunity for developers to maximise profits by increasing the quantity of rentable office space for high-end businesses in one of the most expensive cities in the world and to make profit through buying and selling. Tower 42, for example, which was opened in 1981 and was the first very tall office tower in the City of London – and the tallest building in the UK until the construction of One Canada Square in 1990, as well as the tallest building in the City until the construction of 110 Bishopsgate in 2009 – was built to house NatWest’s international headquarters. In 1998, the tower was purchased by Hermes Real Estate and Black Rock’s UK property fund for £226 million. Thirteen years later in 2011, it was sold to a South African businessman for £282.5 million. Tenants today include the European Banking Authority, law firms, financial service companies, software providers, and so forth. This is only one example and a fairly modest one compared to 30 St Mary Axe, which the Swiss Reinsurance Company sold for £630 million to IVG Immobilien and a UK investment firm in 2007 (making a £300 million gain from the sale), and which, in 2014, was purchased by the Safra Group – a banking, financial, industrial, real estate, and agribusiness concern – for £700 million.

These towers and the ones that I will focus on in greater detail – 110 Bishopsgate (the Heron Tower), 20 Fenchurch (the Walkie Talkie), 122 Leadenhall (the Cheesegrater), 22 Bishopsgate (including its first scheme called the Pinnacle), and 1 Undershaft (Figure 1.1) – occupy a central role in visual representations of the city, which indicates just how economically powerful real estate has become. They draw our attention to those industries that are at the very centre of contemporary capitalism: financial and advanced business service industries. Developing a critique of the visual dominance of these towers in the cityscape links, therefore, to a wider critique of a growing and expanding financial and business service sector and, thus, to a critique of the commodification and financialisation of urban space and the city – including housing – more generally.

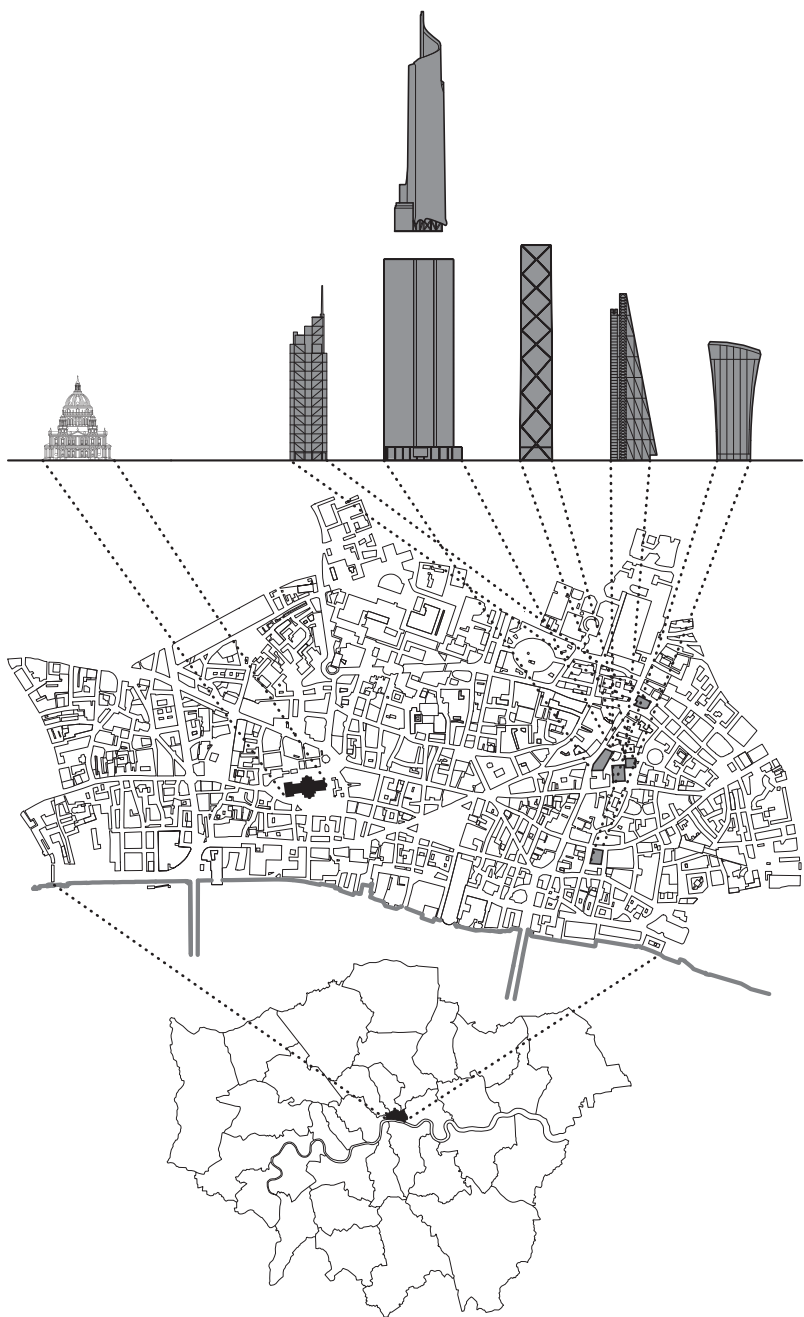


Figure 1.1 Locations and elevations of St Paul's and six speculative towers in London: 110 Bishopsgate, the Pinnacle, 22 Bishopsgate, 1 Undershaft, 122 Leadenhall, and 20 Fenchurch (from left to right)