

COLONIZE THE CITY: ADDRESSING BUSINESS SEGREGATION IN LONDON

The graduation project focuses on the City of London: being also known as 'the Square Mile', it is the financial district of London, as well as its historical nucleus. The City, both in its contemporary and historical condition, can be thought of as a citadel that has set itself apart from the rest of London with one big duty to accomplish: making money.

As everybody that has ever took a walk around the deserted streets around Norman Foster's famous Gherkin on a Saturday morning knows, the City's densely built fabric is made up almost entirely by office space. The 300,000-strong workforce commuting there every day equals the population of Leicester (tenth largest city in UK), and outnumbers the City's permanent residents by thirty times. Adding to this, and little known even to Londoners, the City enjoys a status—unusual even considering British tradition of decentralised administration—of high political autonomy. It is not one of the 32 London Boroughs and therefore is not under the direct authority of the Mayor of London; instead, it is considered a County in itself, and features its own mayor (named the Lord Mayor of the City of London) and administrative body (called City of London Corporation) which has authority on issues including, but not limited to, policing and urban planning. Its members are appointed by residents as well as representatives of City-based companies (the latter clearly outnumbering the former), which makes the Square Mile the only example of business 'democracy' in the world.

It comes at no surprise that practically all political discussion within the City is aimed at favouring and improving business activity; and most of the physical urban structure has the same function: abundance of transport connections (for instance London City Airport, at just 11 km from the City core), over-dimensioned utilities, countless sandwich shops and pubs, luxury restaurants and shops, privatised 'public' space, reinforced security measures. And right next to it stands London's East End, which comprises some of the most deprived areas of United Kingdom.

The City seems therefore to be the most evident embodiment of the changes investing contemporary European and world cities, such as increasing inequality and insignificance of public actors. If it is true that London is at the forefront for all sorts of urban trends and transformations, studying its core may well provide an important insight on the future of our cities.

STORY OF A CLOSED CITY

After their conquer of Britain, the Romans founded the settlement of *Londinium* at a strategic crossroads between the Thames and the main roads through England. The Roman-built bridge and defence wall oriented the urban development for many centuries to come, their influence being still very strong today.

With the fall of the Empire, the Anglo-Saxons took over and replaced the Roman grid system with an organic and irregular layout (its utility at the time was mainly to provide additional protection from invasions). This shape has survived with few changes up to the present day, and the fact that contemporary office blocks and skyscrapers have to deal with a Medieval labyrinth proves to be one of the most compelling spatial features of the City.

It was during Anglo-Saxon reign that the City gained many of its privileges, obtaining a political autonomy which was guaranteed by its successful position as a centre for trade, and recognised officially by William the Conqueror after the Norman takeover.

Owing to this, King William settled the Royal Court not in London, but in Westminster, three miles outside the wall. As a matter of fact, London as we know it today is the combination of two cities (and several villages): the City of Westminster as the seat of political and religious power, and the City of London as the economical hub. This distinction triggered the huge growth of the City as a business centre ante-litteram, rigidly controlled by its Trade Guilds. This is turn granted its quasi-absolute autonomy for the centuries to come, as the City became the

main provider of money to the English Kingdom (this was particularly relevant in times of war). It is to be noted that there is no formal act stating the birth of the Corporation; reputed to exist since 'time immemorial', the City is still today afforded a political status of quasi-independence from the Monarchy, the Parliament, and the Church.

After a century of uninterrupted growth under Queen Elizabeth I—that led the City to an all time peak in population and density—the Great Fire of 1666 (ignited in a bakery) destroyed 80% of buildings. Many reconstruction plans were quickly designed, including the well-known French-inspired one by Christopher Wren; however, the complex system of land ownership which made it difficult to redistribute land, and the need for re-starting business as fast as possible, meant that all plans were rejected and the City was simply rebuilt on the existing pattern. Nonetheless Wren managed to design and build, in the following years, 51 churches within the walls, thus accomplishing one of the few large-scale urban projects that the City has ever seen. This new skyline would be an outstanding visual feature, marking London's identity for many centuries to come.

During Eighteenth Century, while Medieval walls were being torn down and a new conception of public realm was marking the birth of the modern city across Europe, the City of London lost a large part of its population in favour of the most appealing West End. Furthermore, the public sphere in the City never really developed in full: the thriving culture of coffee houses was, perhaps predictably, dominated by business and trade issues. Both Lloyd's insurance market and the Stock Exchange were born in a coffee house around 1750.

This lack of a proper public realm, coupled with the longstanding minimal-state attitude of the Corporation (no political discussion has ever existed within the City Council and parties have never been admitted, as this would have harmed the possibility of conducting successful business) have meant that the transition between medieval and modern city never took place in the Square Mile, investing instead the other areas of London which, during 18th century, expanded significantly: it is in this period that, together with the beginning of British Empire, garden squares, royal parks and Georgian housing estates transformed the face of West London, while the City just remained similar to itself.

It was with the industrial revolution that the City turned into the fully-commercial enclave that we know today. The vast majority of the residents fled during the Victorian era to most favourable (or cheaper) parts of London, as railways and the underground marked the birth of commuting. With industrialisation, the spaces of production moved from city centres to factory towns scattered across England; the City's role became that of driving and directing the immense economical growth and the affairs and trades of British Empire.

In the same period numerous democratic reforms to local governance were approved in England, but they never spoiled the City's status which became increasingly anomalous.

The German Blitz of 1941 left London in a status of devastation comparable only to that following the Great Fire; but once again reconstruction plans, and later Patrick Abercrombie's plan for London, all but ignored the Square Mile. Post-war welfare managed to somehow scratch the edges of the City, which was looking for a way to have some inhabitants return on its premises: after many years of fierce anti-Modernism (deemed to be either 'too socialistic' or 'too american'), the Golden Lane and Barbican Housing Estates were built. At the same time, planning limitations and structural doubts were overcome and the first towers appeared in the City, with a bold impact on the medieval urban fabric.

As England was the first country to industrialise, it also happened to be the first to go through the process of deindustrialisation which, from the late Seventies onwards, left London with large swathes of deprivation and brown fields. But this was time for a new boost in the City activities, triggered by the deregulation financial markets decided by Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal government. All of a sudden (the day rules changed, 27 October 1986, is remembered as 'Big Bang') the City started to be open to foreign investments and electronic trading, after centuries of proud self-reliance. In a twenty-year time span the proportion of manufacture and services within British economy was inverted; today the latter account for 77% of the total GDP, and the City of London is the driving force of paper-based economy.

The fear of terrorism in late Twentieth Century led to the re-building of a defence wall around the Square Mile, albeit in a new, virtual incarnation: the so-called 'ring of steel' was implemented in the wake of Irish terrorist bombings of 1993 and improved after 9/11; it is a network of cameras and barriers that limits and controls vehicular access in real time.

GLOBAL ISLANDS

With the beginning of the 21st century London appears determined to enforce its status of global city; many a commentator has argued that it will soon overtake New York as the world's leading economical centre and the place the most attractive to new capital from growing countries (Russia, Arab region, India, Brazil).

The City of London's role in this process is fundamental, and a new, aggressive marketing and planning strategy is being carried on, also in the light of an strong domestic (with Canary Wharf) and international competition between financial centres. This renovation is driven primarily by large-scale office developments, including four skyscrapers completed since 2003 (of which Norman Foster's 30 St Mary Axe is the most iconic) and four more in the pipeline by 2015. After decades of grey and generic constructions, today architectural quality and individual character are most valued by corporate developers: precious materials, natural light, carefully designed plans, sustainability are of paramount importance in determining the value of office real estate. Nevertheless, the high-rise typology as well as the new trend of 'groundscrapers' (buildings with limited height but very large floor plates, built by unifying several adjoining plots) are destroying the complex Medieval pattern of the City, and prove to be a risky investment in the face of possible crises.

New, luxury retail complexes have been realised recently, with the aim of providing a proper shopping experience to busier-than-ever City workers; and significant parts of the public space are being redeveloped by private actors and put under strict control.

The pedestrian space keeps being improved, a sign that the walkable scale of the City has always been of key importance to successful business ("The City thrives on gossip", according to planning official Peter Rees); at the other side of the spectrum, new infrastructure (particularly the high-speed CrossRail underground, that will connect the City with Heathrow Airport from 2016) will further reinforce the City's role in the global network of financial centres.

The recent financial crisis has had some impact on the Square Mile workforce (around 10% of employees lost their job after 2008), but the substantial bailout granted by British government—something that could be defined 'financial socialism'—has avoided the worst, and market trends are positive again as of 2011. With the Financial Services Authority doing very little to contrast illegal business practices (i.e. insider trading), and a near-infinite availability of capital, the City is today more than ever an unaccountable citadel. Politics have, since long, lost their power to control it: all proposed reforms to the City status, from 1880 to 2002, have been rejected due to strong lobbyist actions in Parliament. It comes at no surprise that even 'Red' Ken Livingstone (former socialist Mayor of London) has been a strong supporter of London's recent changes; neither that 50% of the Tory funding in 2010 came from City firms.

MATERIALISING THE LATENT

What this research has pointed out is that the City's voluntary segregation is nothing new. It is as much the consequence of recent capitalistic influence on the city, as that of complex relationships between politics, economy and urban form spanning the last millennium.

Two historical models are useful when trying to understand the spatial definition of the City in relation with the rest of London. In the first place, its status is comparable to that of a Medieval citadel: protected by a wall, self-sufficient, independent, non-transparent, devoid of a true public realm, street life taking place only as an extension to business. In the second place, the City is a contemporary form of factory town: when physical production was relocated to the other side of the planet, financial services became the new industry. Skyscrapers have taken the role that was of factories; there exists a new élite (those who detain the capital, and whose influencing power seems so large as to shield them from any responsibility—that not a single City manager has been investigated after the crisis is a sign of this) which is loosing connections to the physical spaces of work in favour of a globalised, super-national network; as well as a new working class, made up by the hundreds of thousands commuting every day to their workplace, and living either in London or in the suburbs.

Yet there is a considerable difference: both in citadels and in factory towns there was a tight connection between working and living space. In the Middle Ages this usually happened at the scale of the block, if not of the same building: artisans' workshops would be located at the ground floor, with the living quarters on upper storeys. Whereas in the industrial city masses of workers coming from the countryside were housed in vast expands of identical cottages and terrace houses built on purpose—either at the periphery of historical cities or in new settlements, but always close to the factory.

The City therefore is only HALF of a citadel, or HALF of an industrial town.

The business district needs a whole new layer of living space in order to make explicit its latent condition, to show the world its true face.

Architecture may have to surrender in front of the power of capitalism. But it still has the power of imagining new, unthought-of scenarios. As Geoff Manaugh puts it, "*I have never believed that speculative work or writing—fiction, broadly speaking, whether it's architecture fiction or literary fiction—exists in an either/or relationship with social and political activism. [...] urban speculation is not some politically dangerous variant on 'the opium of the people', cruelly hypnotising people with intellectual spectacle so that they no longer seek to transform their everyday spatial circumstances; speculation, in fact, is often the very reason they seek out—and physically embark upon—urban change in the first place*".

The City of London is a successful financial centre, but it can go one step further. If mass-housing for the new working class is provided within its boundaries—without harming business activity—a true business citadel will come into existence, so much so that it could become completely independent from the rest of London. And London will in many ways benefit from this.

PROGRAM

Despite its high built density (current floor area ratio is around 6:1 on average), even in its official planning the City is set for a vast increase of floor space in the coming years. The project is therefore a statement on the possibility of a new model for densification: how much can it be fit within the City without impacting the ground and the existing urban structure?

What will be the possible size—in terms of square metres and new population—of the intervention?

DESIGN STATEMENTS

1. VERTICAL DENSIFICATION

By adding the housing program as a new layer on top of the existing fabric, the spatial complexity, quality and density of the City will be preserved and enhanced. This strategy for urban expansion is an alternative to both modernistic mega-structures and skyscrapers, that need instead a *tabula rasa* condition in order to be implemented. Furthermore, highly desirable living spaces will be created, in line with contemporary trends of 'living in the sky' (rooftop terraces, penthouses, etc).

2. INSIDE THE WALL

The growth needs to be accommodated within the City core, where business thrives at its most. The 'ring of steel', and not the administrative boundary, has the same role that was of the Roman wall; as such, the project will be configured inside its perimeter.

3. TYPOLOGY

During Industrial Revolution, hundreds of thousands of workers' dwellings were built, using one simple typology: the terraced house. Far from being limited to the working class, the terrace is the quintessential English residential type: Georgian and Victorian townhouses had been built in West London estates since 18th century, and today they remain among the most desirable dwellings in the capital. The most lavish London mansion had the very same configuration of the humblest of cottages—only dimensions changed. Adding to this, row houses (narrow and deep plots sharing the longest sides) first appeared in the Middle Ages, as a way to densify cities within their walls. The terraced house appears therefore a relevant choice not only because of its capability of materialising the City's contemporary condition in relation to its historical models; but also, being based on repetition, as an efficient construction system suitable for a new mass-housing development.

4. QUALITY OF LIVING SPACES

The new working class is wealthy, cultivated, and demanding: terraced housing will need to be completely rethought, in order to guarantee a satisfactory quality of living spaces. It will be fundamental to preserve expressions of individuality within a serialised framework, and to provide a variety of living solutions to meet the needs of the different kinds of City workers.

It is obvious that living above rooftops presents some disadvantages—that will be need to be minimised by accurate design—when compared to existing solutions, such as a lack of direct street access, less convenient circulation, noise and smell from the existing technical facilities. On the other hand, this solution presents a potential quality which is unparalleled elsewhere in London: each unit will feature its own vast outdoor space (garden, roof terrace, patio), abundant natural lightning, panoramic views, distance from street-level noises, individual privacy.

5. ABSTRACTION

Due to its scale, the project represents a radical alteration to the City landscape; a whole new horizon will be created on London's rooftops. As a reaction to, and an enhancement of the chaos of the existing urban landscape, the project will adopt an autonomous, abstract formal order. New volumes will be lifted from rooftops, with only structure and utilities plugged to them; terraced houses will be implemented in their purest form, linear aggregations, with a reaction to the current City's form limited to the need of not impairing the functioning and lightning of existing office blocks.

6. PARASITISM

One of the errors of Modernism was to attempt to recreate urban life at an elevated level, detached from the streets. This project will resist the temptation, and will comprise nothing but dwellings. All other urban functions will be deemed to the existing City spaces and its already intense street life. The existing will be exploited as much as possible (from structure to elevators to exhaust heat) with a variety of design solutions: only in this connections will the project reveal all its specificity and complexity. In spite of this, the challenge will be to maintain business life running normally, so that the essence of the City will not be impaired, but improved by the intertwining of working and living.

7. NEW LIFE

A totally new program for the City will be required. Whereas today its facilities and infrastructures are used only during business hours, the addition of a permanent resident population will bring life around the clock. Shops, restaurants and pubs will benefit from much longer working hours, and streets will not be a desert on Sundays anymore. The needs of residential space will complement those of offices.

THE AFTERMATH

With this new program enforcing its condition, and counting on its huge economical leverage, the City could easily fulfil its autonomist aspirations and become a completely independent business enclave within London, joining the geography of European city-states (Monaco, Vatican City).

At the same time, London would be able to take a deep breath: less commuters will mean less pressure on its congested transport system and less pollution; the creation of new floor space—without reducing the existing—will deflate the exorbitant housing market, as the demand for luxury real estate will be significantly reduced.