

# The Sightline: Public access to a visual plane

By Ellie Herring



As the capital of the United Kingdom, London represents the seat of centralised power, namely the State. Although various forms of decentralisation have taken place, London remains the centre of decision-making. Yet ultimately, the capital's role is symbolic. In his book, *Representing the State: Capital City Planning in the Early Twentieth Century*, the writer Wolfgang Sonne explains that:

The task of the capital is never limited to merely furnishing a location for government in the practical sense alone; it must also act as the embodiment of state and its fundamental values.<sup>1</sup>

The land the capital occupies, especially in the centre, is built to carry these values. Yet it also carries the nation's narratives and traditions, or at least legitimises those which benefit the glory of the nation. In his book *Seeing Like a State*, the political scientist James C. Scott contends that 'the State's attempts to make a society legible is the central problem of statecraft'.<sup>2</sup> That is, the State's attempts to establish a simplified system to administer, rationalise and process its people's practices – be they social, economic, historical and so forth – amount to its greatest challenge. Scott goes on to explain that:

Certain forms of knowledge and control require a narrowing of vision. The great advantage of such tunnel vision is that it brings into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore once something has been made legible it is controlled. Yet in its simplified state these processes of translation do not represent the full picture. One such example of the State, or rather 'authority', exerting such a narrowness of vision is the planning guidelines on London views promoted by the Greater London Authority.

*The London Plan*, published by the GLA in 2004, is a 'Spatial Development Strategy for Greater London'.<sup>4</sup> In this document, the previous Mayor Ken Livingstone set out the GLA's agenda for the social, economic and spatial regeneration of London. Annexed to *The London Plan* is *The London View Management Framework* (LVMF), which provides draft Supplementary Planning Guidance on the policies in *The London Plan*.<sup>5</sup> It explains how:

Designated views and important landmarks within London are to be



treated; and promotes a method of assessment that will assist with principles of good design, local urban design policies and the management of these views generally.<sup>6</sup>

The LVMF recognises four different categories of views: London Panoramas, River Prospects, Townscape Views and Linear Views.<sup>7</sup> London Linear views have a single defined object, they are medium to long distance and are narrowly defined by virtue of a gap between existing elements of the built or natural environment. These Linear views are sometimes called viewing corridors, visual corridors, or air corridors; however, in this instance they will be known as sightlines.

There are only three Linear sightlines in London, one of which begins at Westminster Pier and ends at the dome of St Paul's Cathedral. This particular sightline allows the viewer to see St Paul's Cathedral between a canyon of middle ground buildings, and is meant to communicate a sense of clarity and permanence against the ever-changing landscape of the capital down below. Yet the language used by the LVMF is revealing – it describes how:

Although the collective character of Lambeth and the City are disparate, the linear viewing experience provides a connective through a fortuitous townscape moment.<sup>8</sup>

The implication that this view has been fortuitously constructed is misleading, for as far back as Christopher Wren's designs for London after the Great Fire in 1666, a conscious decision was made to make St Paul's Cathedral the pivot around which all streets in the City turned, and by extension, the route to Westminster.<sup>9</sup> When and why this became the case is not clear, as there seems to be no charter recording the decision. As such, there would appear to be an element of mythology to the view, as it is now taken as a given that it must be maintained. Or rather, maintaining this myth is

now a legal requirement.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, establishing a distance that would reveal the panoramic perspective of the sightline between St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster seems deliberate. Through it the viewer sees two sides of a nation: the grand and aura-laden symbolism of the capital (the north side) on one hand and the bureaucratic imagery of the welfare state on the other (the south side). The north fulfils its semantic role as the capital by being a parade ground for State imposed order and hierarchy. It has monuments, ceremonial avenues and processional ways, all of which contribute to the sense of a symbolic space. By contrast, the south appears excluded from the capital's symbolic arrangements. It relies instead on representing the public, as much of the relatively recent development on the southern banks coincided with the creation of a municipal government. This development might include County Hall, Waterloo Bridge and the Southbank Centre. These two shorelines, although only physically separated by the Thames, are worlds apart. Therefore naming the districts of Lambeth and the City as 'disparate' is something of an understatement on the part of the LVMF. The latter is the financial heart of London, one of three major financial centres in the world. The former contains some of the most deprived communities of the Capital. Despite the South Bank being swollen with arts, entertainment and cultural centres, beyond this thin shoreline Lambeth plays little or no part in the world city. Thus the sightline between Lambeth and the City visually repairs what is, in a sense, socially fractured.

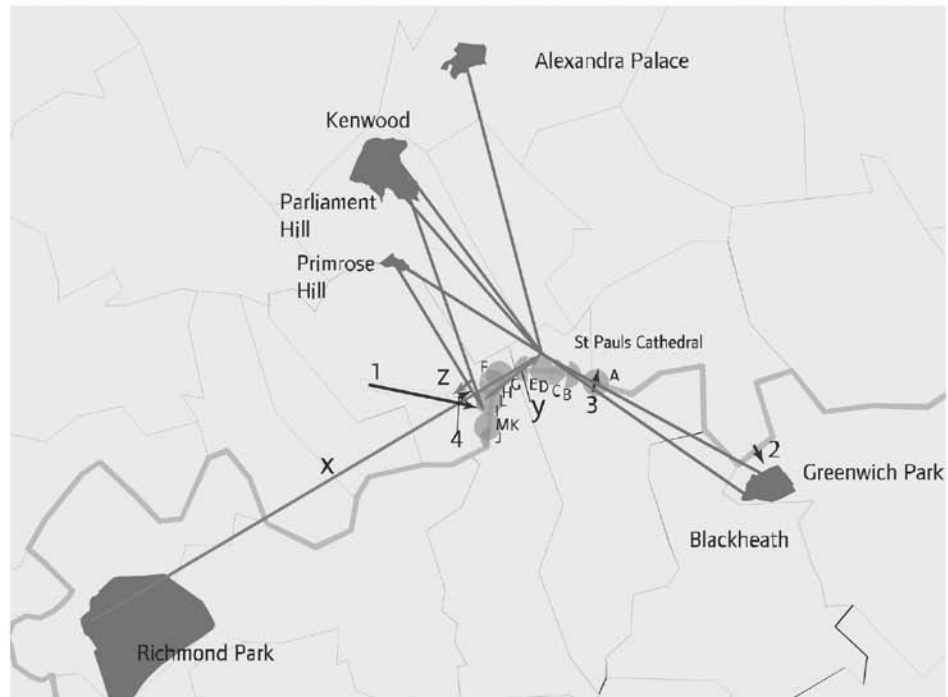


Another peculiarity is that the GLA only endorse the sightline as a 'Landmark Viewing Corridor' one-way, which therefore implies that from St Paul's Cathedral, the canyon effect of the view is entirely lost. Clearly Westminster Pier is not valued in the same way as the Cathedral, for the sky behind it has not been safeguarded. It may be that the sight of Wren's dome and peristyle are granted favour as they represent a feat of engineering, especially one of such an enormous scale. Yet



**map 4B.1 View Protection Framework**

source GLA



- London River Prospects
  - A Tower Bridge, City Hall
  - B London Bridge
  - C Southwark Bridge
  - D Millennium Bridge
  - E Blackfriars Bridge
  - F Waterloo Bridge
  - G South Bank
  - H Hungerford Bridge
  - I Westminster Bridge
  - J Lambeth Bridge
  - K Victoria Embankment
  - L Jubilee Gardens
  - M Albert Embankment
- London Panoramas
  - Sightline to Landmark Building
  - Public Place
  - ← Townscape Views
    - 1 Palace of Westminster from Hyde Park
    - 2 Royal Naval College from Isle of Dogs
    - 3 City Hall to Tower of London
    - 4 St James's Park to Whitehall and Horse Guards
  - ← Linear Views
    - x St Pauls from Richmond Park
    - y St Pauls from Westminster Pier
    - z Buckingham Palace from the Mall

a more straightforward explanation is that the Cathedral occupies higher ground than the Pier, and as such, the viewer effectively looks down to Westminster, which appears to be lost in a tangle of buildings. In their *History of St Paul's Cathedral*, W.R. Matthews and W. Matkins assert that the Cathedral, which they liken to an English Parthenon, holds a unique position in that it has 'intimate connection with the essential life of London'.<sup>11</sup> According to Lord Simonds, formerly Lord Chancellor:

I do not think that any one of us will forget what St Paul's with its dome and cross meant in the darkest days of the

war ... ever the cross shone – a beacon which seemed to be the emblem of the undying spirit of this scarred and battered city – this ever resurgent city – a symbol of endurance to a nation so valiant in action, so steadfast in adversity.<sup>12</sup>

That St Paul's Cathedral has been a symbol of London's resilience ever since the Great Fire of London in 1666 is widely known. Yet more recently, the British Press appropriated it during World War Two as something of a home-front propaganda tool.<sup>13</sup> This perhaps goes some way to explain St Paul's Cathedral's enduring

longevity as a national symbol.

Yet according to *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*, written by M. Christine Boyer, there is a tension inherent in national symbols.<sup>14</sup> Boyer argues that this tension exists between the official history of those in positions of authority, and the unofficial memories of the user. She goes on to state that, 'our collective memory of public places seems undermined by historical reconstructions'.<sup>15</sup> Thus the sightline to St Paul's Cathedral can, in a sense, be regarded as a historical reconstruction, which has been restaged and re-appropriated as an official version of the past. There can be only a limited number of objects within the view which contribute to the main narrative, and as the LVMF acknowledges, other sightlines within London are purposely undermined:

Local views may recognise other buildings that are important to the contribution of a view but those buildings will not have strategic significance.<sup>16</sup>

What is meant by 'strategic significance' is not explained by the LVMF. However, the phrase reflects the nature of *The London Plan*, which is an overarching plan for the success of the entire capital dependent, to some extent, upon how London is represented and experienced. Views then, are extremely significant.

Boyer blames sentiment, such as nostalgia, for driving these fragmented reconstructions of the past over what she terms 'collective memory'. She adds that in the place of memory:

History banished

subjective storytelling, eliminated the dangers of otherness ... so that it could substitute instead a fictional order of time progressing towards the future, ever improving upon the past.<sup>17</sup>

The user of the sightline is encouraged to

appreciate history for its enduring timelessness, as if the significance of this view were eternal. Yet the history the sightline represents is in a sense, a fictional order. It represents a 'sense' of history rather than history itself. By focusing on the traditions represented by St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster, the sightline jumps over southern banks of the Thames, hoping to drive its 'difference' out of the composition. Yet as Boyer claims:

When juxtaposed against the contemporary city of disruption and disarray, the detached appearance of these historically detailed compositions becomes even more exaggerated and attenuated.<sup>18</sup>

Thus in comparison with the plurality of narratives within London, the official singular narrative represented by the sightline erases difference. It reflects the dominant coding of the city by those in positions of authority, such as the GLA, CABE, and English Heritage. Yet perhaps there is another explanation why these historical reconstructions are desirable for a city, such as the economic factor.

According to the sociologist Richard Sennett, cities are becoming increasingly entrepreneurial, and as such they have become economic competitors with one another.<sup>19</sup> According to the previous Mayor:

For London to remain a competitive world city, it must respond to the drivers of growth and continue to develop in a dynamic, organic manner without inappropriate restraints. At the same time, London is valued because of its first class heritage and historic

landmarks, which are cherished by Londoners and visitors to this great city.<sup>20</sup>

This spirit has led to London's self-promotion through the identification and thus isolation of certain advantageous features. Whether architectural, cultural, geographical, or historical,



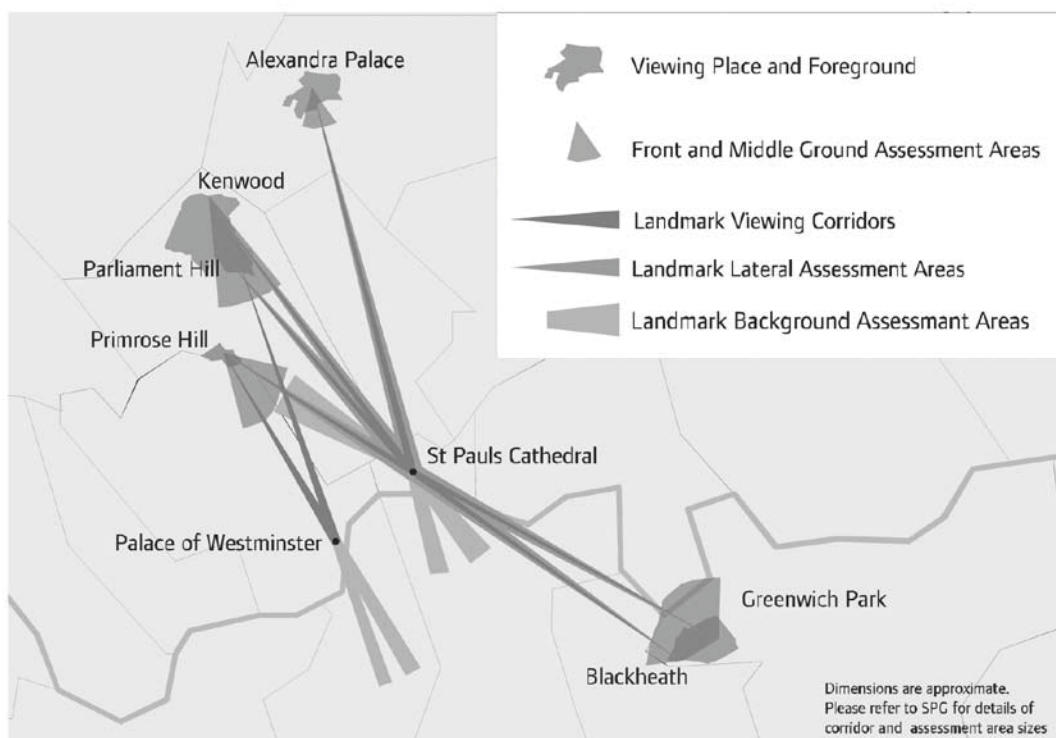
these features are advertised as one would any other product. The Monarchy in Buckingham Palace, the time piece of Big Ben, the hustle and bustle of Piccadilly Circus, but more particularly the sightline, have all contributed to what both visitors and residents alike would recognise as the imagery of London. A city's marketability depends upon its image. The writer Patrick Wright's book *On Living in an Old Country*, explains this as an example of fetishisation:

It is not possible to lay claim to institutions like the Houses of Parliament unless one is prepared to accept on the recoil their overwhelmingly powerful definition of one's own cause – their physical presence in Westminster is encrusted

with a powerful national symbolism which establishes them as fetish objects rather than institutions of political change.<sup>21</sup>

The fetishisation of history is clearly linked to the commoditisation of buildings, spaces and now it would appear, perspectives. Although the LVMF claims that 'it is not intended to act as a mechanism to sculpt the London skyline', by classifying this panorama, London effectively becomes a sterile city package.<sup>22</sup> Thus the sightline represents an uncritical and easily consumed version of London's heritage. As an isolated one-way perspective the sightline implies that London is just a series of views with a distinctive beginning and end. As such, it is not necessary to understand the multitude

map 4B.2 Proposed London panoramas



source GLA

#### References

- 1 Secured by Design, Association of Chief Police Officers Project and Design Group, 1994
- 2 Designing out Crime, RVG Clarke and P Mayhew, HMSO, 1980
- 3 Housing for a Compact City, GLA, February 2003
- 4 ODPM Planning and Access for Disabled People A Good Practice Guide 2003
- 5 Inclusive Projects: A guide to best practice on preparing and delivering project briefs to secure access. DPTAC 2003
- 6 Planning Policy Guidance Note 16: Archaeology and Planning
- 7 RPG3a, as amended by Annex 2 of Circular 1/2000



of meanings contained within the components of the sightline, or even to identify with them. Rather, the user is allocated a passive role of mere observer and by implication, is encouraged to agree with, and relate to, what the sightline reveals.

The GLA appear to be repackaging London into a space into which the user is required to fit. Yet by creating a history for London the GLA deny Londoners the chance to construct their own history. National symbols are by their very nature artificial, both in their appropriated origins and their dissemination, which makes them intrinsically susceptible to misuse. Furthermore, the national past can be thought of as a controlling attribute of citizenship, or national identity. 'We' as the public are expected to identify with, and be included, in the 'pastness' of the sightline. Yet in a country which holds four official independent states in union, 'we' tends to stand above the complexity of the country's make-up in an abstract realm of its own. According to Patrick Wright, the impulse to preserve:

... enables the state to project an idealised image of its own order against a geographical and historical background of its own selection.<sup>23</sup>

Arguably, what survives is usually what was intended to survive: the stone edifices and cultural symbols of the powerful, of which Westminster and St Paul's Cathedral fit the mould. For it is the winner who erects the monuments, not the loser. History is never neutral and should not be read as such; indeed according to Guy Debord, 'to reflect upon history is also, inextricably, to reflect upon power'.<sup>24</sup>

In Joe Kerr's essay, *The Uncompleted Monument: London, War and the Architecture of Remembrance*, he asserts that 'for a memory to be adequately invested with visible public meaning it is necessary for some tangible connection to be suggested



and enforced.<sup>25</sup> Yet unlike an object, such as a monument which can evoke and preserve a memory, the preservation of belief within a view is more complex. Investing an abstract space with a specific belief requires some tangible object to communicate a message to the user. The sightline between Westminster Pier and St Paul's Cathedral is officially recognised by a 'viewpoint plaque' located on the Victoria Embankment. The plaque fundamentally articulates the existence of the view, which implies a certain user, and one who will use the sightline as those in positions of authority would want it to be used. As an observer, the user of this view is not burdened with the obligation of actually going to St Paul's Cathedral, for looking is sufficient. Neither is the user required to look behind to Westminster, all that is necessary is to reflect, to care and to be educated in an appropriate reverence in the process. Thus the sightline is three-dimensional in the sense that space is construed by the view, but it is also two-dimensional, in that it is a destination for the eye and not for the body. For the majority of those who gaze at St Paul's Cathedral, it is a structure seldom entered.

London is a city much represented, and re-represented in many different images, so much so that the Londoner might feel no more close to the actual city than he/she would to a two-dimensional representation of it. Drawing a comparison with urban centres in the USA, Jean Baudrillard has written of the feeling produced:

When you step out of an Italian or a Dutch gallery into a city that seems the very reflection of the paintings that you have just seen, it as if the city had come out of the paintings and not the other way about.<sup>26</sup>

Existing on postcards, on television screens, in tourism brochures, the city is primarily experienced through imagery, and its appreciation in person is but secondary to fantasy. This is, at least, the stance taken by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*. In this book, Debord argues that



when the representation of a nation's history is reduced to no more than an image, it becomes autonomous.<sup>27</sup> As such, the presentation of history cannot be neutral if it is exclusively mediated through imagery. While history has the potential to express a social relationship between people which cannot be reduced to an image, Debord contends that this social relationship has been destroyed to make way for the autonomy of the image.

Debord presents a passage from Feuerbach's Preface to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *The Essence of Christianity*, which articulates the representation's power:

But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence ... illusion only is sacred, truth profane.<sup>28</sup>

Like the sightline, Debord's concept of the spectacle becomes the opposite of dialogue. Indeed it quells dialogue and makes mute spectators of participants. Participation, beyond looking, is denied by the sightline, and the citizen is condemned to the role of spectator. Within this space, the relationship between sight and reality has been transformed, so that what is seen is precisely what must be believed. According to Debord:

For one to whom the real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings. Since the spectacle's job is to cause a world that is no longer perceptible to be seen via different specialised mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of the senses and the most easily deceived, sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present day society's generalised abstraction.<sup>29</sup>

Yet is the sightline a space which requires no engagement beyond the passivity of looking? If this were the case then the sightline has the effect of controlling and restricting the activity within the space, through the user's reliance on vision to experience it. Might Debord have overlooked the viewer's, or user's, sense of agency, which try as they might, those in positions of authority cannot suppress?

Sight is not the only sense the user possesses.

The city is experienced through all of the senses, as the French theorist Michel De Certeau explains in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau acknowledges there might be a 'voluptuous pleasure in viewing from a height', for it is an opportunity to see 'the whole'.<sup>30</sup> To be lifted to the summit is to be lifted out of a city's grasp, one's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to the city's idiosyncrasies. Yet there is a false and wishful clarity in distance, an order that even in the grandest urban plan rarely exists on the ground. Perhaps the immensity of the city spread out before one's eyes is nothing more than an optical trick. This is in a sense, panoramic architecture, where an extensive scene is continuously unrolled into a conceptual townscape.

The user might imagine that from up high, it is possible to possess the city in imagination rather than being possessed by it. Yet the city that is seen from up high is a fantasy, one where the noise of the traffic, the dirt and people down below are kept separate from its rational tranquillity. It is nothing more than a projection of a far order. Echoing De Certeau in his book *The Urban Experience*, David Harvey asks:

Must one finally fall back into the dark space where crowds move back and forth; crowds that, though visible from on high, are themselves unable to see down below?<sup>31</sup>

In a sense, this panorama is a theory, or a visual simulacrum, for successful communication that overcomes obstacles and conflicts is not encountered in life – it is legendary territory. The sightline is a trajectory implying movement and can be appreciated for its sculptural qualities and visual order, yet it is also a projection, a flattening out which the eye can master, but which is denied the body. By virtue of this distance, the aerial view resolves what might have seemed like ground level confusion. So while the sightline may represent order and symmetry, it has no obvious relationship to the order of life as experienced by the user of the city. Only movement can engage a space and equally engage a user, for every real practitioner of the city must live down below the threshold of the sightline.

De Certeau claims that those who actually use the city are relegated down to the ground. They unconsciously follow a hidden map of the city which eludes legibility from up high. Or, or as he described:



The ordinary practitioners of the city live down below, below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk. Their bodies follow the thick and thins of the urban text, they write without being able to read it, making use of spaces that cannot be seen, their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each others arms.<sup>32</sup>

While users are commonly assumed to be passive and guided by the rules established by a preordained plan, De Certeau suggests that in fact they retain their own logic which does not fit neatly into the systems imposed from the authors above. As such, Britain's national imagination cannot only be institutionally carried, despite the homogenising effect of policies such as *The London Plan* and the LVMF. Although it supposedly speaks on behalf of the nation, the sightline represents the only discourse which its official author, the GLA, allows itself to hear. Yet the pluralism of the everyday, which this official sightline seeks to exclude and marginalise, is not necessarily reduced. This self-portrait of authority may ruminate endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise, nevertheless, the agency of the user is retained. For the sightline is not only an imaginary viewpoint, it is also a profoundly 'public' one. Though it may not be open to gatherings – one cannot protest in the sightline – it is public in the sense that it excludes no one, along as the user is capable, and prepared only to look.

The sightline is a useful channel through which to explore public space – what it should be and what its responsibilities to the user are – but also its relationship between those who appear to be in positions of authority with those who appear to be powerless. While the GLA may have officially sanctioned the sightline, ultimately it is the users of this space who decide whether to look in its direction and identify with the view. In this sense, the sightline is a democratic space. On the other hand however, it may be possible for the user to be mentally absorbed in the sightline, but their involvement in the space depicted can never be physically realised. For although the sightline conveys movement, it also inhibits it. In this sense, the sightline is this government's ideal national space, for in being allocated a passive role, the user is unable to participate beyond mute appreciation. A city ought to be a place of confrontations, of desires and needs, satisfactions and dissatisfactions, none of which can be achieved merely through the act of looking.

Excerpt from *Framing Spaces: Three Perspectives on London's South Bank Centre*, 2007.

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## Postscript

Since the new Mayor, Boris Johnson, was appointed on 2 May 2008, the GLA's strategy for preserving London's views has subtly altered. In *Planning for a better London* – the Johnson administration's July 2008 report on strategic planning policies for London – the Mayor pledged to revise a number of areas within the London Plan, one of which concerns London's skyline:

We have already started work with Government to take early steps to enhance viewing corridors and to strengthen the protection of London's designated World Heritage Sites. We will alter the London Plan to increase the weight that should be given to local context and character in considering proposals for tall buildings.<sup>33</sup>

This pledge reflects much of the rhetoric deployed throughout the Mayoral campaign, during which both Johnson, and his Lib-Dem rival Brian Paddick, accused Ken Livingstone of regularly 'jumping into bed' with property developers. The remains of this 'affair', his detractors said, were visible in the wreckage of London's skyline, which Livingstone destroyed by going against the wishes of local communities, and simultaneously encouraging developers to build tall. Arguably, this document amounts to very little beyond superficial posturing and political rhetoric, as it barely differs from the document – *The London Plan* – which preceded it. However, what it does do is publicly announce that the new administration is drawing a line in the sand.



Yet, the economic climate in which *Planning for a better London* was prepared now seems very different from today's economy. Fears that the global economic crisis will influence urban development in London have already been realised, effectively wiping out any massive building programme for some time. The effects of this crisis on Boris Johnson's planning policies are not yet clear, however it seems possible that the Mayor's newly enhanced planning powers – which, if his detractors were correct, Ken Livingstone would have used to build high-rises – will now almost certainly be used to the opposite effect. London's skyline looks to be preserved in its current state, and the sightline frozen with it.

#### (Endnotes)

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- 2 James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*, (Yale USA: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 11.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Greater London Authority, *The London Plan: Spatial Development Strategy for Greater London*, (London: GLA, February 2004).
- 5 *London View Management Framework. Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance*. GLA February 2007 draft (published March 2007).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid. pp. 189.
- 9 Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), pp. 116.
- 10 Unfortunately the GLA were unable to produce any historical records to explain why this particular Linear View came to be made official by the *London View Management Framework*.
- 11 W.R. Matthews, W. Matkins (Eds), *A History of St Paul's Cathedral* (London: Phoenix House Ltd, 1957).
- 12 Ibid. pp. 325.
- 13 Herbert Mason's doctored photograph of St Paul's for the *Daily Mail*, in Iain Borden; Joe Kerr; Jane Rendell; Alicia Pivaro, *The Unknown City. Contesting Architecture and Social Space*, (Massachusetts USA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 76/77.
- 14 M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996).
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- 23 Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 49.
- 24 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), pp. 98.
- 25 Iain Borden; Joe Kerr; Jane Rendell; Alicia Pivaro, *The Unknown City. Contesting Architecture and Social Space*, (Massachusetts USA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 70.
- 26 Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. by Chris Turner (Verso: London, 1988) page 56.
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- 28 Ibid. pp. 11.
- 29 Ibid. pp. 17.
- 30 Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 92.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid. pp. 93.
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