

4 ELEVATIONS, ICONS AND LINES:  
THE CITY ABSTRACTED THROUGH ITS  
SKYLINES

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## Introduction

This working paper explores the potential and the limitations of understanding certain social and spatial relationships through a study of the city from a distance. In particular, I will analyse the notion of skylines and their relationships to individual tall buildings and the 'whole' city, focussing on the City of London as viewed across the River Thames from the South Bank. This paper is related to my broader PhD research that involves an exploration of the nature, production and significance of skylines with a focus on professional skyline discourses relating to the City of London.

The emphasis on skylines as specific representations of the city involves two interrelated elements. Firstly, it takes up representation in a cognitive sense: understanding the city by 'reading' and 'writing/drawing' it. Secondly, it conceives of representation in terms of expressing social and spatial relationships. At the end of the eighteenth century picturesque theorists challenged the distinction between the act of observing and a representational form). In so doing, they also questioned the differentiation between nature as an object versus a view (Daniels, 1999; Macarthur, 2007). Like panoramas, which were so famous in London in the nineteenth century (Comment, 1999), skylines link a representational form with the presentation of it. In the current London case, they are closely related to geometrically and qualitatively defined 'Protected Vistas', which visually connect well defined viewpoints, for example at the South Bank, with 'Strategically Important Landmarks' (GLA, 2007, 2009; GLC, 1991). In this context, skylines relate tall buildings to low buildings.

The relationship between a high-rise and a low-rise building in the city has various spatial as well as social dimensions. Several studies show that issues such as microclimate, light and shade become more acute as a building becomes taller within a low-rise context. Also, the effects of a temporal 'overpopulation' on public spaces, transport, etc, need to be considered; even more so when high-rise buildings are clustered (LSE, 2002; CABE, 2007; CoL, 2002). In a tragic way, the 9/11 attacks on New York City have additionally highlighted the importance of safety and security issues in tall buildings, which have an impact on the wider city.

In the City of London, for example, a new 'ring of steel' is being considered to protect its tall buildings. According to an article in *thelondonpaper*, the measures may include road closures to stop traffic moving freely, rising bollards, which would allow access only to authorised drivers, security guards at a point of entry twenty-four hours a day, and giving the City of London Police extra powers to stop and search cars in the eastern corner of the City. Although Peter Rees, the City Planning Officer, points out that these arrangements are designed to reduce and monitor the amount of traffic coming into the city (Myall, 2009), their geographical coordination with the emerging 'Eastern cluster' of high-rise buildings in the City suggests a direct connection.

Skyscrapers are expensive to build and can be seen to involve a difficult planning process in London. Hence, tall and low buildings often represent a relationship between the powerful and the powerless. Sharon Zukin makes a distinction between the 'landscape' of the powerful understood in terms of its verticality – for example cathedrals, factories, skyscrapers – and the subordinate, resistant, or expressive vernacular of the powerless – the 'ordinary' urban fabric, village chapels, shantytowns, tenements, and so forth (Zukin, 1991).

Studying the city from a distance facilitates and highlights some socio-spatial aspects at the expense of others. What aspects of the city do we understand when we neglect all its rich details? What forms of abstraction render both the complexity of the city and our need to reduce such complexities to understand the relationship between the physical and social structure of the city? Anselm Strauss points out that the 'psychological satisfaction is to perceive, somehow, the unity and the order that

underlies the apparent hurtling disarray of the city – to grasp it as a whole’ (Strauss, 1976, p. 9). The diffuse view might aim at an aesthetic or an analytical understanding of the city. It is the latter that I will focus on.

After giving a short introduction of two London planning documents - Annex A of the Supplementary Guidance for London on the Protection of Strategic Views (RPG3A) and the London View Management Framework (LVMF) - I will evaluate what aspects of the broader city current notions of skylines are most frequently linked to in these documents. I will then highlight three different ways in which the city is abstracted through its skylines and introduce some historical and theoretical aspects of the relationship between skylines and the city. Finally, I will discuss the different ‘city-abstractions’ in more detail.

The analysis of ‘city-abstractions’ is based on my own graphic material. As an architect my understanding of the city is obtained mostly via drawing it. The purpose of the visual material in this paper is to examine socio-spatial contemporary issues and to use drawings as an analytical tool rather than as illustrations. Having identified different ways in which the city is abstracted, the used method is to visually abstract these city-abstractions even more (to understand a system by exploring its limits). In the process of drawing I excluded aspects such as colours, textures and atmospheric perspectives, which made other aspects – in particular size and height relationships – that I regarded as particular crucial for this analysis more explicit. It is a characteristic of a line that it rules out a gradual transition from one condition to another. The representational form forced me to classify conditions (for example, where does a foreground end and a middle ground start?). The decisions were based on my reading of professional of planning documents and theoretical literature on cities in general and skylines in particular.

### **Tall and low in the City**

Walking along the South Bank of the River Thames is evidently a widely appreciated activity, facilitated in recent years by a number of architectural projects to improve and extend the river walk. Tourists and citizens stroll from City Hall to the Tate Modern, the National Theatre and the South Bank Centre. These cultural institutions, together with multiple tourist shops and food chains, contribute to the character of public spaces that seems to transfigure citizens into tourists in their own city. Yet, the public spaces on the South Bank are as much defined by adjacent programs, seasonal events, street-scapes and user groups as by the distant views, in particular those towards the City of London.

As the site of the original Roman Settlement, the City is London’s historical core as well as its oldest financial service industry hub. One of the reasons why views of the City from across the Thames are distinctive is the fact that the City’s low-lying and tight urban layout makes it difficult to get an overview and sometimes even an orientation of oneself from within it. After the Great Fire of 1666, all schemes for rebuilding London, and most notably those of Sir Christopher Wren, made use of the rational order of the Roman grid and the ceremonial order of axial routes connecting important public sites (Baron, 1997; Richardson, 2001). However, the design proposals were all rejected by the Corporation of London, primarily on the basis of their interference with the complexity of existing properties and speculative interests (Rykwert, 2000). To a large extent, the City has retained its medieval street pattern. Narrow and crooked streets result in extremely short viewing distances from within the City itself. This leads to a lack of reference points beyond the immediate context of the street which, in turn, hampers a more comprehensive understanding of the City as a single entity.

From the South Bank, the City appears as a dense agglomeration of buildings of different time periods with various shapes, materials and sizes. The river and the sky create a framing which intensifies

the visual impact of the City by reducing the foreground and background (Attoe, 1981). The tallest buildings in this view – St Paul's Cathedral, Tower 42 and 30 St Mary Axe – are unmistakable; in contrast to numerous mid-rises with a rather undistinguished appearance.

In current planning guidelines, such as the London View Management Framework (LVMF), which is a Supplementary Planning Guidance to the London Plan (GLA, 2004), some distant views are given a superior role over others. From specific viewpoints, the visibility of landmark buildings, such as St Paul's Cathedral, is identified as strategically important. These 'Protected Vistas' set limits to the height of the built environment within geometrically defined areas, and so ensure that no new buildings will obstruct the visibility of these landmarks. It is in this context that skylines are frequently debated in London. Thus, the evolving skyline of the City of London is governed by a deference to the city's heritage and specifically by the concern of heritage groups to protect aspects of a historic, low-rise skyline commanded by St Paul's, itself related to a close-grained urban environment and medieval street pattern.

For decades London had a rather conservative approach towards tall buildings within the historical context (in planning documents *tall* is described as everything that is substantially taller than its context). At least from 1934, when the St Paul's Height Code was released, until 2000, when Ken Livingstone was elected as Mayor of London, high-rises and their effects on 'Protected Vistas' were predominantly described as harmful. RPG3A, introduced in 1991, was a crucial document in this context because it continued to support this position by defining ten protected views towards two significant landmarks: eight to St Paul's Cathedral and two to the Palace of Westminster.



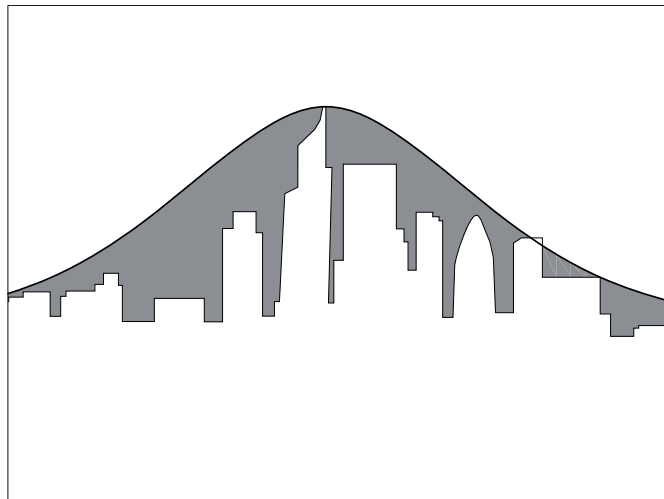
**Figure 1.** Section through Tower 42 and 30 St Mary Axe in the City of London (Gunter Gassner, 2009).

Ken Livingstone altered that approach to a more proactive one towards high-rises. He argued that London needed to become a 'world city' and simultaneously a more 'compact city' as a consequence of predicted increases in jobs and population, and that 'high buildings should be assessed by what they add to the skyline, rather than what they take away' (Livingstone, 2001). The replacement of RPG3A by the LVMF in 2007 is evidence of this new strategy. Lucy Markham compares the two policies and concludes that in terms of the protection of views of St Paul's Cathedral, Livingstone's more liberal approach was reflected at a number of different levels. For example, the viewing corridors in the

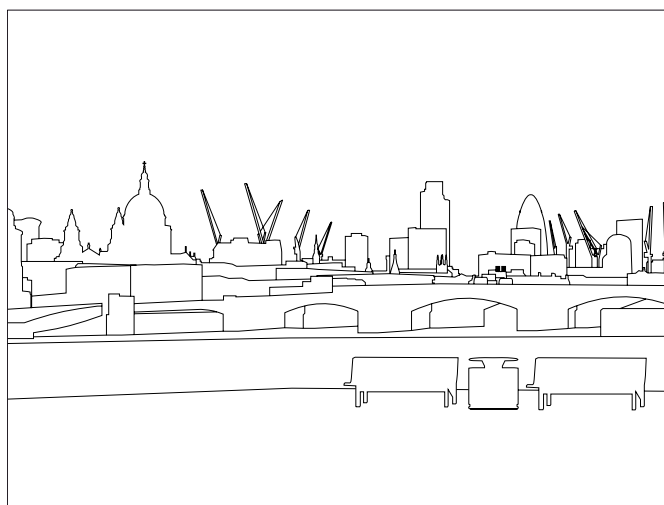
LVMF are narrowed, the setting and the backdrop of views are not geometrically protected anymore, and it is stated that tall buildings can have 'beneficial' impacts on the views to a landmark building (Markham, 2008).

Boris Johnson, the current Mayor of London, has severely criticised Livingstone's approach, going so far as to accuse him of 'wrecking London's skyline' (Building Design, 2007). Johnson's LVMF, which was published on 5 June 2009 for public consultation, updates the guidance from 2007 and increases the protection of ten established 'viewing corridors' between St Paul's Cathedral and the Palace of Westminster. It introduces two new viewing corridors and widens the one from Richmond towards St Paul's (GLA, 2009).

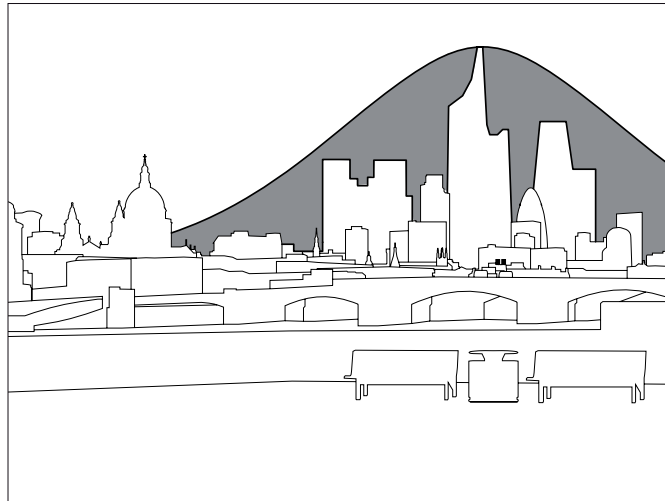
Livingstone's vision for the future built environment of the City of London resulted in what may be termed a 'topographical skyline' with a gradual rise from the predominantly low-rise structures to a pinnacle between Tower 42 and 30 St Mary Axe seen from the South Bank. The combination of Johnson's proposed revisions and the impacts of the global financial crisis on urban development will inevitably have a variety of short to long term impacts on the morphology of London's skylines.



**Figure 2.** The future economic skyline of the City of London viewed from the South Bank (Gunter Gassner, 2009).



**Figure 3.** Protected View towards the City of London from the South Bank close to Gabriel's Wharf (Gunter Gassner, 2009).



**Figure 4.** Predicted View towards the City of London from the South Bank close to Gabriel's Wharf (Gunter Gassner, 2009).

Tall buildings, and in particular ones for office use, are mostly financial speculations. They are directly dependent on real estate cycles and often designed at a time when the need for office space is predicted but has not arrived yet (Willis, 1995). Following the rather pessimistic predictions for London's economy in the near future, one would expect delays to the start of construction or reductions in the height of tall buildings. This might be the case for some of the buildings that received planning permission before the 'credit crunch'. Yet, two crucial projects in the City, the Heron Tower – which was the first office high-rise in the City of London that got planning approval under Ken Livingstone – and the Pinnacle – which will be the tallest tower in the City of London – have already started construction and are due to proceed without substantial reduction of their total floor areas.

### Skylines in planning documents

Opponents of tall buildings in London argue that major transformations of the built environment and London's skylines will interfere with the appreciation of historical and strategically important landmark buildings. Some of them even suggest reverting back to the RPG3A viewing corridors (Markham, 2008) because they protected London's skylines to a greater extent. Conversely, supporters argue that the City of London's need for additional office space is a good reason to change London's 'image of historicity' by means of a more 'modern' skyline. They emphasise that a 'variety of interesting and beautiful tall buildings will enhance the whole of London's skyline' (Livingstone, 2001). Both groups refer most commonly to RPG3A, the LVMF and the London Plan by pointing out the crucial role of 'Protected Vistas' to either 'conserve' or 'transform' London's skylines. However, in none of these documents is the term skyline actually defined, nor is the relationship between skylines and tall buildings or between skylines and the form of the city as a whole. In a range of earlier professional documents – such as *London's Skylines and High Buildings*, a report by the London Research Centre and Greater London Consultants from 1989, and *London Skylines: Study of High Buildings and Views*, also by the London Research Centre from 1987 – the notion of skylines is frequently used without definition.

Neither RPG3A nor the LVMF are intended to directly control London's skylines, and therefore it may be seen as somewhat ironic that many arguments for and against London's new skyline are based on these documents. Right at the beginning of the LVMF it is stated that 'the SPG [Supplementary Planning Guidance] is not intended to act as a mechanism to sculpt the London skyline' (GLA, 2007, p. 4). In

the RPG3A document the term skyline is only used once and that in the context of 'Wider Setting Consultation Areas' (WSCAs), which are protected areas that go beyond the viewing corridors. 'In the case of St. Paul's Cathedral the WSCAs increase the width of protection given to the skyline profile at the dome by 70 m each side of the Viewing Corridor [...] Due to existing development, the width of protection at the Palace of Westminster remains at 300 m' (GLC, 1991, p. 80052).

In the London Plan the term is used four times, either in the context of the location of tall buildings or the design and impact of large-scale buildings (see Policy 4B.8 and Policy 4B.9 in GLA, 2004). In the LFMV it is used thirty-three times (a full list of passages that include the term skyline is attached at the end of the paper). From my analysis of the document, three main conceptions of skylines emerge: the understanding of a skyline as a singular entity which may be appraised from different viewpoints; skylines as something that can be understood in relation to a single building; and the idea that skylines may not only be created but also be broken up by certain elements of the built environment.

In various passages skylines are described as if they are clearly defined objects and are contrasted to views: for example in one that argues that the 'views of London and its skyline across the riverscape and from bridge to bridge are evocative of the capital' (cit. 3), or when a specific distant view is described as being 'characterised by a panorama of the London skyline' (cit. 12; cit. 6,8). The fact that the term is used in singular form throughout the document further indicates an understanding of London's skylines as a defined object. This object, then, is described as being formed by one or more buildings or by natural elements. We read that in some views the City cluster forms the skyline (cit. 21), while in others only elements of buildings, such as Westminster Abbey's pinnacles, which are 'echoed in the gables, turrets and chimneys [...] create a distinctive and vibrant skyline' (cit. 22; cit. 10,32). The last two citations indicate an understanding of skylines as built environment, broadly speaking, seen from afar. Within this understanding, natural elements are also seen to contribute to the skyline. It is noted that 'the trees and shrubs [...] form the skyline along the edges of the lake' (cit.30) in a particular view. However, in two other paragraphs skylines are opposed to the notion of the background townscape (cit. 7, 28). Are skylines objects or views of objects?

Some of the citations above indicate that skylines refer to a specific aspect of the built environment, the silhouette of the city, rather than more generally to buildings in the distance. However, in other passages a skyline is directly conceived in relation to one or more buildings. For example, it is stated that a specific skyline should be maintained for St Paul's Cathedral (cit.19), or that the Palace of Westminster should be seen against the skyline (cit.27; cit.15, 20, 26, 31, 33). Furthermore, it is argued that buildings can enhance the skyline. At the very beginning of the document it states that 'all new development should contribute to enhancing the skyline of London and be of high quality and execution' (cit.2; cit.4, 5, 6, 24). If a skyline reduces the built environment to one aspect of it, then a building that is evaluated against it might have to be reduced to that particular aspect as well. Yet, as we can read in various parts of the document, in order to enhance the skyline any tall building should be of exceptional design quality, which also includes, following the LVMF, colours and materials. How can a 'whole' building be evaluated against the silhouette of the city?

A third group of passages in the LVMF explains that skylines are not only created by elements of the built environment, but can also be broken by them. One specific view is described from which 'St Paul's Cathedral [...] is seen in front of the London Bridge cluster, with the Guy's Hospital tower [...] breaking the skyline' (cit. 13). In another view 'development at the top of the ridge [...] would break the skyline and inhibit views of the panorama beyond and so should be discouraged' (cit. 14). And also 'background development which breaches the skyline of the Palace of Westminster and affects its silhouette should not normally be considered acceptable' (cit. 29; 16, 23). What does a specific skyline include and exclude?



To summarise: in the LVMF skylines, and their relationships to tall buildings and the 'whole' city, are described in different and sometimes contradictory ways. Skylines are described as objects that are formed by one or more buildings or by natural elements. They are sometimes characterised as the built environment, broadly speaking, seen from afar, yet opposed to the background townscape. They include some buildings while they exclude others. These definitions point to three different ways in which the city is reduced through its skylines. As a result of the mostly low and distant viewpoint and the inclusion of artificial and natural objects, the city tends to be reduced to an elevation, a two-dimensional composition. The emphasis on landmark buildings and the idea that a skyline can be broken by, and directly understood in relation to, a single building suggests a reduction of the city to a few icons. Their description as one aspect of the built environment, rather than the built environment per se, and moreover as the city's outline, reduces the city to a line. Before I will discuss these different ways in which the city is reduced in more detail, I want to introduce some historical and theoretical considerations related to the relationship between skylines and the city.

### Skylines and the city

The Oxford English Dictionary and Princeton's Online Dictionary define the term skyline twofold: firstly, as the line where the earth and sky appear to meet, the horizon; also, the representation of this in painting or another art; secondly, as the outline or the silhouette of a building or a number of buildings or other objects seen against the sky.

*'Some boy's daubing, I suppose... Eh! What..is this?.. Who can this be?.. Do but see the sky-line – why, this is.. an exquisite little bit'* (Walter Scott in his novel *St. Ronan's well*, from 1824).

*'Seeing only the roof of that palace boldly breaking the sky-line, how serene your contemplations'* (Edward Bulwer-Lytton in his chronicle *The Caxtons*, a family picture, from 1849).

*'A tall and beautiful figure, rising like a delicate spire above a skyline of city chimney-pots'* (George Bernhard Shaw for the *Saturday Review* in 1896).

*'A traveller returning to the metropolis after some years' absence has difficulty in recognising some of our famous streets; the sky-line is different, salients have disappeared'* (George Bernhard Shaw for the *Daily Mail Year Book* in 1928).

Selected literary sources, such as the ones from the Oxford English Dictionary above, suggest that the term sky-line (with a hyphen) came into use in the first half of the nineteenth century, where it was often viewed as analogous to the horizon and referred to the natural landscape rather than to the city. In the second half of the nineteenth century sky-lines were regularly placed in the context of buildings, which, however, were not viewed as having the power to create them but to break them. From the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, the term is viewed most commonly as analogous to 'the silhouette' of the city and is regularly used in the context of a changing metropolis and more specifically in the context of orientation and recognition.

Wayne Attoe argues that, in the American context, the term in its most common present day meaning came into use a decade after the invention of the term skyscraper in Chicago in the 1850s. There, it appeared for the first time in travel fiction, describing a distant view of a city from street level (Attoe, 1981). In so doing, Attoe adds an additional aspect that is relevant to the current London context: the viewpoint of skylines is publicly accessible. This goes along with the definition of 'Protected Vistas' in the LVMF, which are always defined from a public spaces as viewing places, such as the South Bank.



In the English context the notion of skylines is often referred to Townscape, which itself derived from the picturesque as developed in late Georgian Britain. The picturesque can be described as looking at the world as if it were a picture. It was a visual experience of nature as well as a genre of painting predefined by its subject matter (Daniels, 1999; Macarthur, 2007). At the end of the eighteenth century picturesque theorists challenged the distinction between the act of observing and a representational form. In so doing, they additionally questioned the differentiation between nature as an object versus a view. Additionally, the definitions mentioned above highlight that the horizon (as the line where the earth and the sky *appear* to meet) and the silhouette of the city are appearances. The distinction between an object and a representation of the object is obsolete, precisely because a skyline (viewed as analogous to the horizon or to the silhouette of the city) as an actual object does not exist. A skyline is a specific way of observing and representing the city, namely one that points out the heights of the built environment, which is emphasised most from a low and distant viewpoint.

With regard to Attoe's remark on the publicly accessible viewpoint, I would suggest the broader working definition of *skylines as representations of the city from distant, low and publicly accessible viewpoints*. This definition highlights two fundamental ideas: the collective and the competitive. As a result of the distant viewpoint, skylines facilitate an understanding of the city as a collective form. Furthermore, skylines are an experience and knowledge all citizens and tourists have access to, because the viewing place is publicly accessible. Yet, due to the low viewpoint, elements (artificial and natural ones) compete in terms of their height and position. The distance between the observer and the observed will offer an overview of the city, even though most of the city is hidden. Skylines link, they bring elements together, but in a very vying way.

James Donald (1992) defines the city as a representation of spatial, social and cultural conditions, and by calling something so diverse 'the city' we ascribe to it a coherence or integrity that it may lack in empirical reality. In London, some tall and mostly old buildings are regularly taken to represent its spatial, social and cultural characteristics, which is why various views to them are protected. In particular, St. Paul's Cathedral's status as a strategically important landmark is often highlighted, for example in current planning documents such as the LVMF.

St. Paul's Cathedral evidently symbolises London. Is a skyline, for example one of the City of London as seen from the South Bank, also a symbol of the city? Wayne Attoe describes skylines as key symbols of an urban collective which testify that a 'group of people share a place and time, as well as operate in close proximity and with a good deal of interdependence' (Attoe, 1981, p. 1). He goes on by explaining that skylines provide information about an urban collective by indicating what is valued in a community and who is powerful there. Anselm Strauss, instead, points out that a distant view, an aerial view for example, is for some purpose too large and too various to symbolise the city. Yet, he describes a specific skyline of New York, the one from the Battery, as symbolising and standing for that city (Strauss, 1976, p. 9).

A city has an infinite number of different skylines, depending on the viewpoint and the viewing direction. Some of them might be conceived as representing a city's spatial, social and cultural characteristics, all of them abstract the city. Whilst a symbol is a thing that represents or stands for something, abstraction designates the act of removing something, and something that exists only as an idea. What information of the city is drawn away in the notion of skylines? As described above, the definitions in the LVMF point at three different ways in which the city is abstracted through its skylines: to an elevation, to icons, and to a line. A historical survey suggests that all three abstractions are not new approaches towards the city. Corresponding visual representations (although from different viewpoints) can be found already in the medieval period.

## City-elevations

An early representation that portrays London as a city-elevation is an anonymous sketch from 1510, shown in Richard Pynson's *Chronicle of England*. In this sketch, the City of London is viewed from the west, in the vicinity of Blackfriars and shows the Thames, St. Paul's, the Tower of London, small churches and vernacular buildings, Ludgate at the west end of the City of London and people in boats on the river (Baron, 1997). The viewpoint is slightly elevated and following the medieval artistic tradition, the single elements are drawn in elevation.



**Figure 5.** Sketch based on the anonymous representation in the *Chronicle of England* from 1510; courtesy of The British Library Board, Shelfmark: C.55.h.9 (Gunter Gassner, 2009).

In the LVMF, the definition of the City of London's skyline from a low and distant viewpoint and the inclusion of artificial and natural objects, suggests a similar abstraction of the city to an elevation. In approaching skylines as city-elevations, the significance of the view is the outcome of an overall impression, where not only large and tall elements but also small and low ones in the foreground contribute to it. In the LVMF buildings are sometimes described as forming a skyline and sometimes as breaking it. These ambiguous descriptions are an outcome of the vague zoning of a foreground, middle ground, and background. While buildings afar tend to be described as forming the skyline, it is not clear how close to the observer the building has to be, in order to be conceived as breaking the skyline.

Although city-elevations have a foreground and a background and the built environment is understood in respect of shapes, colours, materials and sizes, they still flatten the urban environment, and so blur and distort an understanding of the city as a full spatial entity (Attoe, 1981). They blot out what lies behind or disregard this in favour of the interpretation of the city as a two-dimensional façade. As a result of the low and distant viewing place and the resulting flatness, city-elevations appear to be parallel projections.

In city-elevations tall buildings are positioned against each other, against low buildings in the foreground, and against natural features. Of the three ways in which the city is abstracted, they describe more comprehensive the relationship between tall and low buildings in the City of London. By 1300, three-storey houses were common in the City and by 1650 houses of six storeys were a feature

of central London. This did not change significantly until after 1860, largely because fire-conscious building regulations restricted building heights. The London Building Act of 1888 limited building heights to 80 feet or to the width of the street on which the building stood. The only exceptions were church steeples. However, at that time factory chimneys also appeared in the views towards the City. These symbols of industrialisation not only exceeded the vernacular fabric in height but also introduced a new geometry. Until then vertical structures gradually decreased in size and so faded into the sky. Chimneys, instead, seemed to be chopped off at any desired height. Before the Great Fire of 1666, St Paul's Cathedral, 303 feet tall, was already substantially higher than the surrounding vernacular fabric. Wren's St Paul's, although smaller than its predecessor (Richardson, 2001; Keene, 2008) was the tallest building in London until the 1960s, when the Post Office Tower was completed (Markham, 2008). From the 1950s to the 1980s the low built environment of the City grew higher. There were a wide range of different building heights, which hampered a binary distinction between tall and low. Three substantially taller developments since then (Tower 42, 30 St Mary Axe and the recently finished Broadgate Tower) have introduced a new height benchmark, so that buildings previously perceived as mid-rise structures appear now as low-rise.

Until the 1980s the tallest buildings in the City were churches, nowadays they are office high-rises, hosting primarily FIRE (financial, insurance and real estate) programmes. Future tall buildings, such as the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle, are already under construction. The City has concentrated financial services for centuries (Baron, 1997). However, in distant views, they were hardly visible until the 1980s. Reading the City of London's skylines, a shift in values from religious, to industrial to economic values is legible. The future economic skyline, which is supposed to have taken shape latest by 2012, will represent economic values even more, because all new tall buildings appearing in the view from the South Bank towards the City of London will host programs that are related to the globally operating financial services industry.



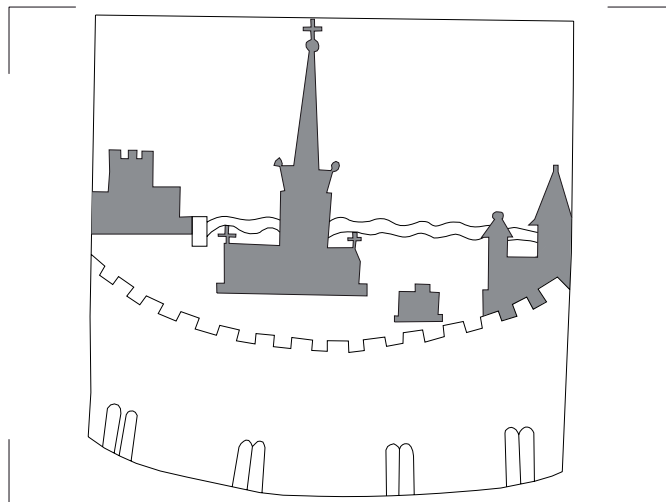
**Figure 6.** The City of London abstracted to an elevation as seen from the South Bank (Gunter Gassner, 2009).



**Figure 7.** The future City of London abstracted to an elevation as seen from the South Bank (Gunter Gassner, 2009).

### City-icons

An early abstraction of London to its city-icons is Matthew Paris' *View of London from the North* from 1250. It is a highly stylized sketch from a distant and slightly elevated viewpoint displaying the Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral, the Tower of London, the London Wall, London Bridge, all drawn in elevation, and the Thames that is drawn in plan. Other existing buildings in the city, people and natural elements are now shown (Baron, 1997; Keene, 2008).



**Figure 8.** Sketch based on Matthew Paris' representation from 1250; courtesy of The British Library Board, Shelfmark: 14 C VII f2 (detail) (Gunter Gassner, 2009).

The emphasis on landmarks in the LVMF and the idea that a skyline can be broken by and directly understood in relation to a building suggests a reduction of the city to icons. The city reduced to icons gives a superior role to some elements while disregarding others and – as a result of the low viewpoint – it is the tallest structures that are often emphasised in this way. In the LVMF, buildings are classified into 'Strategically Important Landmarks' (St Paul's Cathedral, the Tower of London and the Palace of Westminster), 'Other Landmarks' (such as the Monument in the City and the Royal National Theatre or the Tate Modern on the South Bank), and buildings that are not mentioned (for example the three tallest buildings in the City of London).

Using city-icons to understand the city means selecting certain buildings and making them into representatives for the city. According to Leslie Sklair, certain buildings become icons because of a unique combination of architectural fame with urban symbolism and aesthetic quality (Sklair, 2006). However, depending on the observer's interests and knowledge different buildings might symbolise the city. Helene Lipstadt differentiates between the canonic, defined in terms of what the well-educated architect would value most highly, and iconic status conferred by communities of non-architects (Lipstadt, 2001). Yet Sklair adds that icons valued by architects can also become valued by a broader public without losing their iconicity for the architect (Sklair, 2006). A distinction between architects and non-architects suggests that icons are highly socially defined. While the spatial form of the building does not change, the social formation of the observers does.

Reducing the city to icons means that they are evaluated against each other; by design and planning professionals mostly in terms of their spatial and historic value. In the City of London office high-rises, such as 30 St Mary Axe and Tower 42, have common features. They are slender in relation to their height because of the high land value and the resulting small and often irregularly-shaped plots. They are iconic because of their proximity to historical buildings and their architectural quality, partly as a consequence of a planning process that requires that bodies often critical of high-rises (such as English Heritage) be persuaded of their merit.

The tallest buildings in the City inscribe a range from religious to economic power, from opaqueness to transparency, from light to dark appearances and from curved to angular outlines. Yet, three of the currently four tallest buildings (St Paul's Cathedral, Tower 42 and 30 St Mary Axe) refer to each other and to places outside of London, but arguably less to the low-built structure within London. St Paul's dome, a wide-span structure with a broad curved outline, rather than a narrow pointed spire typical of London's churches, is unique in the city's skyline and refers to the continent, in particular to Italy, and one might suggest to Catholicism. 30 St Mary Axe has almost exactly the same 'unusual' profile as Torre Agbar, a high-rise building in Barcelona, which was built at the same time. Tower 42 and 30 St. Mary Axe are almost exactly the same height, while the outline of the latter refers to the curved outline of the dome of St. Paul's. Although the relationship between individual high-rise buildings of the future economic skyline might be less direct, the 'topographical skyline' will create a sense of unity and oppose this unity to the existing low-rise structure.

## City-lines

Wynkyn de Worde's visual representation *The Chronicle of Englonde* from 1497 includes few forms of abstraction of the city. It shows a clearly expressed silhouette in the background together with a dense and nested city in the foreground. In his representation the London we know is hardly recognizable, the city is represented primarily as walled and full of turrets (Baron, 1997). The display of



**Figure 9.** The City of London abstracted to icons as seen from the South Bank (Gunter Gassner, 2009).



**Figure 10.** The future City of London abstracted to icons as seen from the South Bank (Gunter Gassner, 2009).

an overcrowded city as well as the many spires (emphasised by the regular display of an oversized bird between two spires) highlights the city's silhouette. Worde's representation emphasises the religious nature of the city and is a complex abstraction that contrasts the formal rhythm of its skyline with the more irregular rhythm of the foreground.



**Figure 11.** Sketch based on Wynkyn de Worde's representation from 1497; courtesy of the Museum of London (Gunter Gassner, 2009).

In the LVMF, the description of skylines as one aspect of the built environment, rather than the built environment per se, reduces the city to a line. City-lines are an abstraction expressive of the boundary between the city and the sky. The inclusion of artificial and natural objects implies that they are continuous. They are suggestive of graphs, rather than graphics. Like every line they do not indicate a materiality because they have neither width nor depth. Also as lines they do not exist in reality. There is no boundary as a separate entity. A city's silhouette is a pure invention, the result of the human capacity for abstraction. Gordon Cullen, one of the masterminds behind *Townscape*, describes an irregular silhouette as one that is intertwining 'the skyline and the sky' (Cullen, 1961, p. 40). The juxtaposition of the terms skyline and sky indicate that the skyline itself is understood as everything that is below the 'line'.

Following skyline definitions mentioned above, city-lines are city-wide features that are formed by the outlines of all elements (natural and artificial ones) that can be seen against the sky. Neither low buildings in the foreground nor the ones further back, when they are hidden behind the taller structures, contribute to the silhouette of the city. Hence, city-lines are reduced to the tallest appearing elements in a specific view. An evaluation of the impact of a tall building on a city-line means reducing that building to its profile, because its colours and materials can hardly be evaluated against an abstract and invented line. As a result, the architecture of high-rises in the City of London often compromises an unusual profile as seen from a distance. Almost all of the future (and many existing) tall buildings emphasise this aspect, which is reflected in many of their nicknames: the 'Gherkin', the 'Shard of Glass', the 'Walkie-Talkie', and so forth. The outline of the building comes to represent the materiality and use of the building. The building, reduced to its profile, is then understood in terms of its impact on abstract characteristics – including rhythm, repetitiveness and smoothness – of a city-line.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I have analysed the notion of skylines and its relationship to individual tall buildings and the 'whole' city, focussing on the City of London. Examining the use of the term skyline in current planning guidelines I have identified three different aspects: firstly, the understanding of a skyline as





**Figure 12.** The City of London abstracted to a line as seen from the South Bank (Gunter Gassner, 2009).



**Figure 13.** The future City of London abstracted to a line as seen from the South Bank (Gunter Gassner, 2009).

a singular entity which may be appraised from different viewpoints; secondly, skylines as something that can be conceived in relation to a single building; and thirdly, the idea that skylines may not only be created but also broken by certain elements of the built environment.

I have discussed aspects of a skyline's bonds to the city and introduced a working definition of skylines as distant city representations from low and publicly accessible viewpoints. I emphasised that this definition highlights collective and competitive aspects as well as a skyline's nature as a symbol and an abstraction of the city.

Finally, based on my analysis of the use of skylines in the LVMF, I have discussed three different ways in which the city is abstracted through its skylines. City-elevations flatten the city. They include the whole built environment that can be seen in a particular view and establish comparisons between tall and low buildings (particularly those shown in the foreground). City-icons single a few buildings out of the city; the selection of these icons is highly socially defined. They neglect the broader city but often represent the whole city, for example as idealised skyline representations in advertising. City-lines reduce the city to one of its silhouettes. They are pure invention, an effect of the human capacity for abstraction. Whereas in principle they link all artificial and natural elements in the city, from a low and distant viewpoint they include only the tallest structures. They reduce the evaluation of a building to its profile and introduce characteristics such as rhythm, repetitiveness or smoothness in the context of representing the city.

'Protected Vistas' are carefully defined in current planning documents by means of a geometrically precise description of the viewpoint, the viewing cone, the landmark background assessment area, the lateral assessment area, and so forth. In that context, it is somewhat ironic that in these planning documents skylines are regularly referred to, but in very different and sometimes contradictory ways.

When Anselm Strauss (1976) points out the psychological satisfaction of grasping the city as 'whole' – a notion that refers to the idea that each element has a specific function with respect to the 'whole' – he is well aware of the fact that this can never mean to see the 'whole' city. Indeed, he mentions the qualities that emerge as a result of a reduction of the city to a single entity. In a study of the city from a distance its image can be and is reduced in different ways. Thereby, relationships between different elements in the city, between tall and low, between the powerful and the powerless, and so forth, are represented according to the inner logic of the specific representational form. The question is not which one is the most appropriate abstraction, but rather what cognitive space it opens up and how this knowledge can be used to improve the city. It is likely that no single abstraction, but only a range of different modes will render both the complexity of the city and our need to reduce such complexities to encompassing a singular expression. The focus, then, moves away from a mere understanding of different abstractions to an understanding of relationships between different abstractions, between different ways in which the city is reduced through its skylines.

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## Appendix: Full list of citations from the London View Management Framework

- cit.1: 'This SPG is particularly relevant to the range of considerations that must be taken into account when evaluating the effect of development proposals for tall buildings and their effect on designated view, in terms of both potential impact and potential enhancement. However, the SPG is not intended to act as a mechanism to sculpt the London skyline. While tall buildings can make very important contribution to London, they are unlikely to be acceptable in all areas of London.' (p. 4)
- cit.2: 'All new development should contribute to enhancing the skyline of London and be of high quality and execution.' (p. 17)
- cit.3: 'Views of the River Thames and its associated landmarks often provide key images of London and reinforce the city's identity. The views of London and its skyline across riverscape and from bridge to bridge are evocative of the capital and include some iconic buildings.' (p. 17)
- cit.4: 'All new development should contribute to enhancing the skyline of London and be of high quality and execution.' (p. 18)
- cit.5: 'In areas where historic townscape of high quality exists, new development should, where appropriate, respect and enhance the skyline.' (p. 18)
- cit.6: 'The background of these views [townscape views], however, is susceptible to change and development pressure. For this reason, careful consideration should be given to any new developments that might affect these views to ensure that the skyline is, where possible, enhanced.' (p. 18f)
- cit.7: 'Any significant visual impact on the designated view with reference to the profile of London's townscape, landscape and skyline should be explained and carefully evaluated.' (p. 23)
- cit.8: 'The description of the features of a view should refer to the relevant Management Plan guidance when establishing the following baseline information: - A description of the existing view, describing the skyline, the composition of the view and the elements which both contribute to and detract from it, providing confirmation of what is distinctive or characteristic of the view as a whole and its benefit to London.' (p. 28)
- cit.9: 'The assessment of effects on designated views should also refer to the following factors relating to the proposal: [...] – The effects on the skyline;' (p. 30)
- cit.10: 'Where river frontage buildings have different characteristics, such as delicate skyline elements, new developments in the background should respond appropriately in terms of design.' (p. 34)
- cit.11: 'The traditional Parliament Hill Viewing Place, set at a high point on the Heath, provides important glimpsed views across a wide span of London. The topography of London, particularly the hills, acts to frame the skyline.' (p. 77)

cit.12: 'The view [from Parliament Hill] is characterised by a panorama of the London skyline and collections of tall buildings.' (p. 83)

cit.13: 'Within the City, 30 St Mary Axe is prominent in the dense cluster of more rectilinear towers around Tower 42. Many of these towers break the line of hills in the background. St Paul's Cathedral, to the west of this main cluster, is seen in front of the London Bridge cluster, with the Guy's Hospital tower again breaking the skyline.' (p. 88)

cit.14: 'Development at the top of the ridge to the east would break the skyline and inhibit views of the panorama beyond and so should be discouraged.' (p. 89)

cit.15: 'In the event of further development in the Protected Vista to the Palace of Westminster, the Mayor will assess each referred application against the requirement to preserve or enhance the current ability to recognise and appreciate the landmark. This is partly defined by the silhouette of the towers against the skyline and the airspace between the towers that should be respected.' (p. 102)

cit.16: 'On the skyline many tall buildings stand in isolation.' (p. 113)

cit.17: 'Building heights west of this [River Prospect: Southwark Bridge] are limited by St Paul's Height Limitations, that give a somewhat horizontal character to development around the Cathedral, and accounts for the absence of a secondary skyline.' (p. 143)

cit.18: 'Buildings on the skyline indicate the presence of Westminster and Camden and provide important orientation points in the background.' (p. 144)

cit.19: 'Maintaining a skyline for the Cathedral between the developing cluster of tall buildings at London Bridge is important and those seeking to develop in the view should refer to visual management guidance paragraph 3.53 Clustering of high buildings.' (p. 147)

cit.20: 'The view [from Waterloo Bridge] culminates in the Palace of Westminster World Heritage Site that is in the background but remains prominent in the skyline.' (p. 160)

cit.21: 'At its widest extent the prospect [from the South Bank close to Gabriel's Wharf] is almost 180° wide from bridge to bridge, with Somerset House a significant but not prominent feature in the west, St Paul's Cathedral at the centre of the view, and the City cluster forming the skyline in the east.' (p. 171)

cit.22: 'The World Heritage Site of the Palace of Westminster terminates the view beyond the Westminster bank on the riverfront, with the towers of Westminster Abbey rising behind. Its pinnacles are echoed in the gables, turrets and chimneys of adjoining buildings, which together create a distinctive and vibrant skyline.' (p. 174f)

cit.23: 'The view from the Viewing Place [Hungerford Footbridge] is characterised by the Palace of Westminster as the single most prominent building punctuating the skyline and rising above the trees on Embankment.' (p. 175)

cit.24: 'The setting of other landmark buildings and structures that contribute to the skyline along the riverbank should be considered with reference to visual management guidance paragraphs 3.50-3.51 Consideration of other landmarks in designated views.' (p. 175)

cit.25: 'The western towers, the dome, drum and peristyle of the Cathedral rise above the general townscape, unaffected by a number of tall, bold buildings on the skyline.' (p. 178)

cit.26: 'In contrast, the spire of St Bridge and the dome of the Old Bailey are distinctive vertical elements seen against the skyline.' (p. 178)

cit.27: 'In views of the World Heritage Site of the Palace of Westminster, its pinnacles and towers and those of Westminster Abbey behind are seen against the skyline.' (p. 182)

cit.28: 'The background townscape and skyline to Lambeth Bridge could be significantly improved.' (p. 182)

cit.29: 'Background development which breaches the skyline of the Palace of Westminster and affects its silhouette should not normally be considered acceptable [...]' (p. 200)

cit.30: 'The trees and shrubs enclose the view towards a large block of vegetation at the end of the lake, and form the skyline along the edges of the lake.' (p. 229)

cit.31: 'Within the groups of buildings towards the end of the view, no single building commands a focus; rather, the group works together as a layering of architectural detailing against the skyline.' (p. 230)

cit.32: 'If further development is proposed in the distant skyline background of this view, it should be of appropriate scale and geometry not to overpower the existing built form or detract from the night-time views.' (p. 230)

cit.33: 'Front and Middle Ground Assessment Areas: Areas in the foreground of designated views and in the area between the foreground and a specified landmark (or the general skyline) are to be considered under the Qualitative Visual Assessment of all London Views.' (p. A79)