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LONDON RISING

ILLICIT PHOTOS FROM THE CITY'S HEIGHTS

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FOREWORD

MCKENZIE WARK

Climbing as imposing a structure as the famous Battersea Power Station is a kind of poetry. I'm reminded of the 'Pylon Poets', a group active in the 1930s – when that great structure first came to be. They did no climbing, as far as I know, but they wrote of a British landscape in which modern forms of steel and concrete and electricity were imposing themselves on a world of stone and wood. W. H. Auden's 'A Summer Night' of 1933 talks of 'churches and power stations' laid out as if a photograph before the eye of the moon.

Auden writes too of the selfless love of a few close comrades trying to hold fast to each other before a gathering storm. The danger then was fascism. For today's pyloning poets, these merry bands of delvers and climbers, it could be the melancholy prospect that the great city of London that they sing into life could be under water in a hundred years' time.

It was the Situationists, in Paris in the 1950s, who spoke of a poetry written in the passing faces of the street, and who took to those streets to create

another kind of mapping of its possibilities. They found there the fragments of another city, for another life. Theirs was a horizontal city. They disliked the tower blocks. The pylon-climber poets of *London Rising* found a vertical, quite other city, for a quite other life. *Live without dead time!* – this was the Situationist's slogan. The slogan of these London place-hackers might read: *Make dead space live!*

This London is no longer the modern city of the 1930s or '50s. Battersea Power Station has lain idle since the 1980s and is now just part of another redevelopment scheme, its stately off-white chimneys to be replaced by replicas. This is a city where public space and social housing are in retreat. A new kind of corporate city is rising over the ashes of a social democratic one, colonizing the sky.

As a New Yorker, for me the city of London, like Paris, seems very horizontal. There were no skyscrapers here before the rather marvellously Brutalist Centre Point of 1966. The building was a prototype of today's 'global capitalist voidspace', standing empty

for years, awaiting that one big, lavish tenant. *London Rising* documents not only the takeover of the sky but also a kind of reclaiming of it without permission – what the Situationists called *détournement*. Making the city over as a space of possibility for people other than its landlords is, after all, what a certain modern poetry has long been about.

Sometimes *London Rising* shows the new shards of corporate vainglory from the point of view of another, more democratic (if rather compromised) attempt at aerial living: the old social housing stock, now either privatized or neglected. From there we see the new skyline, a London for billionaire tourists and their retinues. The vertical situationists who have scaled and documented these buildings have brought back for us an ‘illicit horizon’, one that reveals half a century of conflict over the right to the city.

London Rising is also a story about the infrastructure that makes any city possible. Some of its most beautiful pictures are of ageing gas facilities, whose soaring symmetries cannot help but recall a certain forward-slating modernism – one the Pylon Poets of old would have discerned. But look around the rooftops and you can see a newer kind of infrastructure too: of air conditioning units, aerials, microwave links and mobile phone towers. The new London is about data; electricity as manicured noise.

From the roof we see archaeological layers in the air. A crust of earlier stone and brick buildings studded by soaring glass sheaths. There isn’t a lot of green space in view. We see a city for information-pedlars and gawkers: ‘Look, there’s the London Eye!’ You can catalogue London’s spaces by the price of its light fixtures: orange sodium lights for the public thoroughfares, slightly more expensive blue-green fluoros for the offices, and an extravagantly warm yellow incandescent hue in a few privileged quarters.

And of course, everywhere, the cranes. The Pylon Poets would have welcomed them, as a sort of constructivist will to build for the people a shining ‘city of labour’. The Situationists would have hated them, since they did not like the high-rise towers, and found only in the old city the poetic play-potential

for their New Babylon. Neither the Pylon nor the Situationist future city quite came to pass. London today is better captured by William Gibson’s *The Peripheral*, where it is inhabited only by a class of people he cheekily calls the ‘klept’ and where actual working people are disturbingly absent. The skyline pictured in *London Rising* seems to me one of a city of both sullen defeat and deluded mania.

But I don’t think the photographers of *London Rising* want to leave the reader of this book on such a pessimistic note. So let me end by paying tribute to their extraordinary courage. As a middle-aged and disabled body, I find it hard enough now to engage in old-fashioned horizontal *dérive* (drift) through the city, as practised by many an observant and sure-footed Londoner, from Thomas De Quincey to Laura Oldfield Ford to Stewart Home. Taking the game to the depths and to the heights adds a new step, a new cadence, and lifts the spirits.

Last, *London Rising* is a document not only of courage but of generosity. Here, for the price of a rather nicely turned out mass-produced book is a ringside seat to the views from which most of us are excluded, views of a city we are rather insistently told we might as well leave. Well, don’t you worry. The urban adventurers and wanderers and poets have not given up singing the songs of its forms and possibilities just yet. The great poem of our time is the imagining of the city both as it is and as it could yet become.

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INTRODUCTION

BRADLEY L. GARRETT AND ALEXANDER MOSS

‘I don’t think you can talk about progress in art – movement, but not progress. You can speak of a point on a line for the purpose of locating things, but it’s a horizontal line, not a vertical one.’

DONALD BARTHELME

It is tempting to pin the rise of cities to a specific event: the construction of the world’s first ‘skyscraper’ in 1885, the ten-storey Home Insurance Building in Chicago. It’s also tempting to chuckle as we, in the aerial age, imagine the Windy City populace marvelling over a ten-storey building. The construction of that building marked more than a significant architectural feat, however; it was also a moment of convergence, when the modern concept of verticality that has since come to dominate urban life sparked into being. Over 130 years later, as the foundations are laid for the 1-kilometre-tall Kingdom Tower in Jeddah, set for completion in 2019, we have emerged from the throes of growth and are now, without a doubt, aerial beings. This book takes seriously what it means to live in an aerial age, tracing a photographic history of urban heights in London that pushes right into the present.

London Rising is not the converse of our previous book, *Subterranean London: Cracking the Capital*, but rather can be viewed as its counterpart in a total synthetic study of an epoch, linking the

past, the present and the future. This book tenders a further exploration of the city’s orthogonal constitution, this time projecting upwards into the furthest vertical limits of London’s inhabitable space and out onto an elevated perspective that for those unprotected by the privilege of wealth remains an illicit horizon. However, as we will make clear, this was not always the case in London.

Consider infrastructures. London’s lavishly ornamented and embellished infrastructural heights were once the pride of the city and a potent symbol of its industrial prowess. Nowadays the iconic old gas holders are being dismantled, made obsolete by subterranean storage of natural gas; these relics of the coal gas age have outlived their utility and, undervalued for their extraordinary architectural splendour and global significance as industrial heritage assets, are being disassembled apace. The new infrastructures that are taking their place occupy no less pompous a space, as both advertisements for and engines of political and economic power. These new projects, uniformly impersonal in their steely

corporate sheen, are immediately recognizable as part of the globalized lingua franca of contemporary design, enshrining unquestioned positive value in the notion of the 'iconic'. The resulting architectures often fail to observe basic principles of relational dynamics and seem outlandish in their postmodern absurdity. The Greenwich cable car, to take a somewhat extreme example, is a ludicrous and unreal development, out of keeping and still currently out of time with its environment.

Public heights have also undergone dramatic changes. In a similar way to New York, where viewing platforms used to crown every skyscraper, London used also to take great pride in its social heights – places such as The Monument, St Paul's Cathedral, the Barbican Estate and the hundreds of housing blocks that provided scenic metropolitan vistas to those lacking profligate wages. Those blocks are now being torn asunder or re-clad for a narrow urban elite.

This third set of peaks, now rimmed with spires and dome cameras rather than pirate radio masts or television antennae, forms another crux. A new city is rising by means of economic fractional distillation that now resembles, without a hint of irony, J. G. Ballard's dystopian novel *High Rise*, and it is, we state also un-ironically, beautiful.

These three architectural refrains of verticality – Victorian ornament, modernist utopianism and stratified late capitalism – are our compositional threads for *London Rising*.

Although this book stands alone, when paired with *Subterranean London*, the two volumes provide the most ambitious and comprehensive coverage so far achieved in a work of this kind, encompassing the entire sweep of London, from bedrock to rooftop. And, as with *Subterranean London*, this book is not based on distal speculation. We have carved ourselves, our bodies, our desires, into the vertical narrative of the city. We do not want, seek or need permission to do so; we simply assert that our city is free space. There is nothing malicious in this stance, nor should it be moralized; it is simply how we

experience place – as an invitation to participation. Those who seek to demonize, suppress or discount the value of this practice we hope might widen their optics as a result of burrowing between these covers.

Inasmuch as there is a 'we' involved in the construction of this volume, *London Rising* is not about 'rooftopper culture' as much as it is about the deregulation of planning; the speculative property bonanza; the information age and its paradigms as it upturns the expectations of the age of manufacturing; the move from the body operating the machine to the machine in the body, and the city as body *and* machine; the gutting of the social housing project under neoliberalism; and the allure of 'iconicity' and of monuments to dead political space that make moves to close down innovation, interaction and political action. Most importantly, though, *London Rising* is about how none of these things precludes us from forging the city we desire, for the only thing that incontestably outstrips the reach of the modern vertical city is the ever more flexible human imagination.

Attempts were made to achieve urban verticality prior to the nineteenth century. The Romans made attempts at heaping architecture, as did Native Americans at Wupatki in the American Southwest, where a 1,500-year-old two-storey Ancestral Puebloan 'tall house' still stands. These buildings were undoubtedly constructed with function in mind, offering the ability to stack the population, providing defensive advantage and heightened vantage points as well as an escape from human and vermin effluvium at street level. Still prior to the first skyscrapers, much constructed infrastructure raised above ground, including bridges, power line pylons and television masts, were also elevated with function in frame. Invisible until they break – just imagine a power line you never paid attention to snaking around on the ground and setting off sparks – we tend to forget how vital such infrastructure is. *London Rising* is an attempt to enshrine a level of appreciation beyond functionality, for the aesthetics of infrastructure are the aesthetics of the very fabric

of our existence and are, we contend, worthy of worship. The capacity to build tall at all is in itself an infrastructural concern relating to water pressure, lift cable loads and the ability to excavate and elevate materials. All skyscrapers start with excavation: vertical steel must be driven deep into the ground, embedded in the bedrock, before these holds become the footing, the shoulders of Atlas, upon which thousands of souls can stack. The first section of this book pays respect to infrastructural heights with this remit in mind.

No such function was planned into the construction of the 146-metre Giza pyramid, however; its erection was nothing more than an exercise in vanity and power. The same can be said for many other historic heights. What happened in the nineteenth century that made the Chicago moment significant is clear: these motivations – functionality and power – melded, facilitated by technology. America was quick to harness new construction technologies and after the Home Insurance Building was complete, a vertical arms race broke out between Chicago and New York until, tellingly, in the late 1990s both cities were edged out by vertical investment in Asia. London builders, in the meantime, have been on the back foot, hobbled by a complaint from Queen Victoria, who demanded an unobstructed view of the Houses of Parliament from her back garden. The London Building Act of 1894, which imposed a 25-metre height limit on construction, meant that Sir Christopher Wren could still rest in peace: his St Paul's Cathedral would continue to dominate the London skyline, as it had for some two hundred years.

It was not until 1963 that London would start stacking again. Leapfrogging the arms race across the pond, London was primed to take the lead on a new concept that inverted the logic of power: stacking the poor in social heights. Taking Le Corbusier's notion of the dwelling as a 'machine for living', the idea was that if an ideal form could be found for a single building that included room for thousands of people, shops, laundry facilities and transport links, they could be rubber-stamped up and down the city (and country) at minimal cost. This was

a utopian vision that may never have materialized were it not for the catastrophic irruption of the Blitz. Post-war Britain, much of it reduced to rubble, had to rebuild quickly and efficiently. The rise of tower blocks in Britain was like no other event in history. We pay homage to that legacy, and the legacy of the more iconic public structures, in the second section of the book.

The gradual effect of the transfer from public to private could not come quickly enough for London council planning hawks. Inaugurated by the 1980s Right to Buy scheme on original social housing like Ernő Goldfinger's Trellick Tower in the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the process has continued into the present, such as in Southwark, where the council issued a series of Compulsory Purchase Orders against the remaining tenants of the Heygate Estate, expediting the demolition of this once desirable housing – much admired in its day for the Corbusian élan of its innovative highwalks – for replacement with aspirational blocks of residential apartments targeted at upwardly mobile, higher-income-bracket upper-middle-class tenants.

Elsewhere, large parts of the capital fell under the lengthening shadow of the relentless investment in the construction of excessive supertalls, which now proliferates along the length of the Thames from Chelsea to Greenwich. As beacons of international wealth and prestige, these buildings' apparent power appears somewhat stunted when we repeatedly see their developers go under, with projects often changing hands halfway through. Many London streets are still haunted by the ghosts of abandoned work sites for half-constructed buildings, forlorn embodiments of the managementese slogan to 'Fail Better'. Increasingly, vertical London is not built for function, as the Victorians envisioned, or for residency, as the modernists expected, but for speculative investment, as global capitalism demands. Flat-flipping is the new blue-chipping – and we venture atop some of these corporate megastructures in the third section of this book.

If London rises and no one is there to see it, what does it matter? Our central premise, that we explore

London's heights out of respect and appreciation, in a populist spirit, is based around direct involvement. Despite attempts by architects and developers to build non-human heights, machines for living or corporate castles, we still are all bones and blood and flesh. Architecture is part of us and we are part of it. What we wish to reinstate in this aerial age, as we have in subterranea over the past seven years, is the human body, the human subject, as an active agent. As long as we've been sub-lurkers, we've also been aerial agents, and both directions of travel on the z-axis have taught us that no building is an island, even if it floats in the sky alone like our own dear Shard of Glass.

If power is about legacy, perhaps the contemporary belief is that the largest building, whether or not anyone ever cared for it as more than a spectacle, will be the thing that remains in a future age, sticking out of the sands of Jeddah or the murky waters of the broken-banked Thames like a shattered standard for a failed system. We hope that more life can be squeezed from these spaces before their demise. We hope that stories of adventure, passion and participation might play out among the glass-and-steel spires, brutal blocks and latticed ironwork of our city and that those stories might be valued as part of its intricate palimpsest, rich in varieties of material and style.

In that spirit, *London Rising* is not a book about conquering peaks of glass rather than ice in the style of colonial explorers, nor is it about demonstrating bravado by doing pull-ups on construction cranes. The photographs contained between these covers are neither a nostalgic look back at another time nor an attempt to still the city. Assembling the photos, taken by almost twenty cameras, with different optics, on different media, by different people at different times, as a collection is our way of paying homage to a city that is in a constant state of transmutation through simultaneous accretion and entropy. The title of the book, *London Rising*, suggests a process in progress, and that is our intention. We find stories about when and why cities started rising fascinating, but are more interested in making stories than reading them. This is a book

about the vertical constitution of the city in all its forms and about our attempts over the past seven years to make sense of London as it arrays itself into new forms of verticality. We also feel, as do many urban explorers around the globe, that a particular era of rooftopping may be coming to a close. Janus-faced, the book occupies the threshold of a city that will be radically and irrevocably transformed in the next decade.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari instruct us on the creation of 'holey space': 'Transpierce the mountains instead of scaling them, excavate the land instead of striating it, bore holes in space instead of keeping it smooth, turn the earth into Swiss cheese.' We took this call seriously in our last book, as we bored our way into the depths of the city and tunnelled London's imagination into subterranean realms new and old. But we were also actively interested in the ways we might transpierce mountains in order to transmute isolated elements into threaded filaments, turning those islands of concrete and glass into playful plateaux. What if, we wondered, the sky-stretching topography of the city was connected in the same way as the subterranean arteries of the metropolis?

Each photo here is for us, in that light, a wormhole that bores through assumedly proprietary airspace to connect a series of events over many years that is woven through hundreds of individuals and their embodied, emotional relationships with verticality; multiplied into a contagion spun like a web through the sodium-seared sky. Our images of London's infrastructural, social and corporate heights do not resonate because they are spectacular but because they are intimate – they are about loving relationships with place.

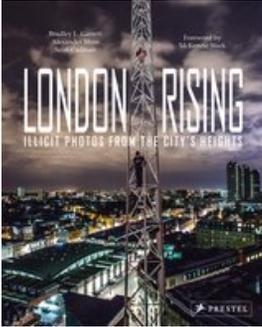


INFRASTRUCTURAL

FREESTANDING MASTS, PYLONS, CHIMNEYS AND GAS HOLDERS

HEIGHTS

Alexander Moss



Bradley Garrett

London Rising

Illicit Photos from the City's Heights

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Prestel

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Verbotene und gefährliche Orte zu erforschen, ist die Spezialität von Bradley Garrett. Zusammen mit gleichgesinnten Abenteurern von der London Consolidation Crew (LCC) präsentiert er in London Rising einmalig schöne Stadtansichten aber auch haarsträubende Aufnahmen seiner Crewmitglieder beim waghalsigen und natürlich illegalen Besteigen von Wolkenkratzern wie dem Shard, Gherkin oder Walkie-Talkie und anderer ikonischer Bauwerke darunter das British Museum oder die St. Pauls Kathedrale. In den einzelnen Kapiteln werden verschiedene Orte vorgestellt: Industrie-, Firmen- und öffentliche Gebäude, daneben verlassene, zerstörte oder noch nicht fertiggestellte Hochhäuser. Gezeigt werden beängstigende und gleichzeitig atemberaubende, nie zuvor gesehene Aufnahmen aus Perspektiven, die nur ganz Wenige freiwillig wagen würden. Der Nervenkitzel ist bei diesem Buch garantiert!

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