

NEW ARCHITECTURE LONDON



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# NEW ARCHITECTURE NOW

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There are old cities. There are new cities. London's strange and seemingly eternal attraction lies in its ability to be simultaneously both.

London is a city with Roman foundations and a street plan that emerges as a chaotic hybrid of arrow-straight Roman roads, winding medieval alleys, and marketplaces; but also well-meaning, if often halfhearted, attempts to make it grander, more beautiful—or at least more rational. But it resists all attempts to overlay it with a sense of logic, just as it defies the efforts of successive generations to transform it, despoil it, or iron out the creases.

Through this chaos emerges one of the world's most persistently desirable, expensive, successful, and unpredictable cityscapes, a place that is constantly changing yet somehow always remains fundamentally London. The following intriguing, occasionally oblique photographs capture this chaotic, endlessly fascinating city. These are not the conventional glamour shots of a city of blue skies, grand vistas, and architecture as isolated object, but instead a city glimpsed around corners, of the extraordinary framed through the banal, and of the insistent sensation of restlessness and change.

Each century seems to bring its radical transformations, from the Great Fire in the seventeenth to the elegant city squares of the eighteenth, the explosion of the suburbs of the nineteenth and the scars of war and the neophilia of modernism in the twentieth. But the twenty-first century is arguably already bringing about the most radical shifts in scale and skyline that the city has seen since the medieval era. While the post-Great Fire skyline was defined by the spires of Sir Christopher Wren's churches, culminating in the great dome of St Paul's Cathedral, the new cityscape is marked by supertall towers articulating the city's real estate status as the reserve currency of the global elite. That transformation from a skyline that once combined commercial development with social housing into one that celebrates the victory of private wealth has been radical in its visual impact and eye-watering in its pace. And, as if to reimpose itself on a profile in which height in itself is no longer enough to make a statement, London has supercharged its architecture to make itself seen.

If the towers have been the most visible manifestation of the city's real estate as a safe deposit box for global wealth, what exactly has been happening at street level? Cities with porcupine skylines are almost a cliché; what actually makes a city buzz happens in its streets and squares, its shops and bars, the

chandelier-crowned restaurants and the subterranean dive bars. And that's been a different story, one expressed through a cocktail of the salvaged and the shiny, the particular and the generic. In one interpretation, the city's streets are being homogenized, the plate glass windows and the glazed facades reducing the interface between public and private, interior and exterior to a banal membrane. But in a parallel route, architects and clients are weaving their buildings back into the historic fabric, the city streets becoming intriguing palimpsests in which the high tech gleams next to artfully maintained dilapidation. Walls are being stripped of centuries of plaster and wallpaper and taken back to the bare bones of brick and steel; battered floors and ceilings are revealed as precious surfaces divulge their history through their degradation.

If there is one building that characterizes this crossover between the ravages of history, the changing nature of the center of the city, and the new world of global art and money, it is Tate Modern, perhaps the defining monument of the city's new era, designed by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron, and opened at the turn of the new millennium, seemingly to usher in a new era. Free of charge and defined by what has become London's greatest public space, the Turbine Hall, it rapidly became the world's most visited museum of contemporary art. Its cavernous central space expressed in monumental brick and concrete challenged artists to create work at the scale of the city rather than the gallery. In its blend of industrial language and material, and the visionary space of its Swiss architects in which unprecedented scale, gathering, experience, and event subsume the art, Tate Modern crystallizes the notion that installation and ideas are what the city manufactures now that the production of goods and power has been subcontracted elsewhere, an impression reinforced by a new brick ziggurat rising behind the building, a contemporary Tower of Babel for the museum's mission to educate, archive, and entertain.

The same adoption of the city's industrial infrastructure is visible from King's Cross to Battersea, a seeping valorization of brick, concrete, and steel absorbed as the new language of luxury. Even the late Zaha Hadid with her Serpentine Sackler Gallery, inserted into the shell of an old munitions depot, has found the patina of raw brick irresistible. And, of course, Damien Hirst's Newport Street Gallery in Vauxhall (designed by Caruso St John Architects) sites itself within a former scenery painting workshop. What more perfect metaphor than a place of manufacture for the stage—the industrial infrastructure of artifice—reimagined as a display space for the artist whose auction of his own works on the eve of the financial crisis was itself the symbolic moment of decadent collapse?

Back on the scale of the skyline: London—a traditionally low-rise city—became the surprising epicenter of a revival in the tower as a medium of informed architectural expression. Sure, there are the shimmering desert skylines of Dubai and Doha, and the glassy, selfie-friendly, harbor-reflected cityscapes of Shanghai, Sydney, or Hong Kong, but it was a British architect who reinvented the skyscraper as a thing of beauty. Norman Foster, whose HSBC headquarters in Hong Kong was once the most expensive building in the world, erected his Gherkin in 2003. Sprouting from the ruins of a building bombed by the Irish Republican Army, this was a new, sleek city architecture, an expression of a newly technologized financial center, a bullet emerging from a city that had been bombed three times in a century. The City of London, the city's historic core and its one-time undisputed financial center, had been threatened by the success of Canary Wharf to the east. A North American style development of global towers, Canary Wharf reveled in its newness and its detachment from the

hidebound tradition of historic London. The Gherkin, or 30 St Mary Axe, represented a reassertion of the city's status and a sign that its convoluted Roman and medieval streets could accommodate a streamlined object of originality and architectural elegance. When it was unveiled, the Gherkin completely transformed views of the city. It impinged on views from East London and began to define a new era in which the city was a sophisticated, contemporary space set on a global stage. It became a signifier, its striking presence a blend of the dome of St Paul's and the tower of Big Ben. Now it is barely visible. Its success has been such that it stands almost unseen at the center of a huddle of skyscrapers expressing the success of the city as both a financial hub and a capital of contemporary architecture.

Within the huddle of towers is one particularly intriguing rivalry inscribing itself onto the skyline—that between the two aristocrats of British architecture, Lords Norman Foster and Richard Rogers. Rogers' Lloyd's building became the youngest building to be listed, given statutory protection from change—a supreme irony for the work of an architect who prides himself on the facility of his buildings to adapt with use and time. The building, which blends the aesthetics of the oil rig with an idea of a building as a machine for making money set itself up next to the Victorian Leadenhall Market—an iron-and-steel confection that was perfectly engineered and spatially impressive in its time. Foster + Partners' Gherkin was a smooth riposte, while its Willis Faber & Dumas Headquarters wrapped itself around the ensemble in a big, not entirely friendly, bear hug. But Rogers' comeback in the form of his renamed firm, Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners' Leadenhall Building leans into the cluster and now dominates the center of the city. But even that will soon be eclipsed by Eric Parry Architects' elegantly attenuated 1 Undershaft, destined to be the tallest building on this side of the river. OMA's headquarters for N. M. Rothschild & Sons pokes its head above the dense city fabric, emerging as a glazed box, a city boardroom in which its occupants are exposed, a rare glimpse of the inner workings.

Rafael Viñoly Architects' swell-headed Walkie Talkie stands on its own, away from the cluster, with no one talking to it. It's not only London's skyline that has seen radical changes; its streets and its public spaces are being transformed—even if they retain a memory of routes and lines of desire that have existed since the streets were lined with timber-framed housing. Ateliers Jean Nouvel's One New Change introduced a strange, reflective, and refractive series of surfaces, while Paternoster Square presents another side of the city's view of itself as a classical setting for St Paul's Cathedral.

If the most memorable twentieth-century image of the city was of the cathedral's great dome rising above the flames and smoke of the Blitz, in the twenty-first century the persistent rebuilding and vague sense of dissatisfaction with its surroundings has revealed the city to be a cipher for what contemporary architecture actually is. This commercial heteropolis has yo-yoed between serious modernism, theatrical postmodernism, global starchitecture, and underpowered classicism. There is a restlessness here, a sense that the place is never complete. Tower cranes are as much a component of the profile of the city as are its towers and the restlessness, the impatience that imposes itself as a sense of incessant change. It never seems possible to sum up the state of the city because it is never static, never satisfied. Towers need to be taller, basements need to be deeper, penthouses need to be more expensive.

Not all the action however has been on the north side of the river. The traditional imbalance between north and south has been slowly resolving itself and nowhere is

this more visible than in the piercing glass obelisk of the Shard. Designed by Renzo Piano Building Workshop, the tallest building in Western Europe has radically shifted the perspective. Visible from across the city—and from the most surprising places—its thousand-foot-tall (310 m) crown glows at night and sparkles in the sun. But it remains an object rather than a building. Poorly integrated into the ancient fabric of the Southwark streetscape in which it sits, the Shard seems to have little to do with the everyday life of the city or its citizens. It looms above the streets but never quite connects. It isn't alone. Foster + Partners' City Hall, a building intended to represent the city's administration—its idea of itself—is a lopsided glass ball, an object sitting in a poorly defined morass of generic development not far from the Shard on the south side. What was meant to be a symbol of transparency and accessibility has become a symbol instead of the isolation of the political classes in their glass dome—all set in a privatized pseudo-public landscape in which everything is surveilled.

These buildings also represent a city suddenly enthralled by starchitecture. The Shard and City Hall are attempts to create a place using the brands and global recognition that come from commissioning Pritzker Prize winners. These are buildings that would not have been built were it not for the names behind them. A generation ago, London had barely any buildings by architects of international repute who were not themselves British. Now it has suddenly become a magnet for starchitects, each developer outdoing his or her neighbor. It might make for a more dynamic skyline but it does not create a coherent city.

Those global stars are being brought in to replace existing buildings, often barely a generation old themselves. The pace of development is itself a problem. It precludes an intelligent analysis of the outcome—it is left to individual buildings to make their mark with astonishingly little idea of how each structure might affect the city surrounding it. But that speed of replacement has also led to the loss of almost an entire layer of history—the now surprisingly fleeting and fragile flowering of British modernism itself. The fruits of postwar redevelopment have been flattened beneath these new towers. Social housing, commercial office slabs, and elevated pedways have been demolished, and now even postmodernism, once the populist darling of the architecture scene, is under threat. Can a city be too successful? How much of its immediate past should we try to save?

Most remarkable of all has been the wholesale rebuilding of entire districts of the city center. No other major city in the Western world has so completely rebuilt itself over the last two decades. The results are varied—and many of the effects are still to be seen—but they are certainly unmissable. The 2012 Olympics cleared a huge swath of industrial East London and, although its sporting legacy is questionable, Zaha Hadid Architects' London Aquatics Centre has become perhaps the most eye-opening municipal pool in the world, a seductively sculptural and fluid structure that begins to compensate for almost all of her best buildings being abroad. Then there's King's Cross, the former railway lands that have been rebuilt as a landscape of leisure and luxury accommodation—a cocktail of salvaged industrial shells and shiny new towers. And at its heart the reimagining of the city's two great stations of the railway age, St Pancras, revived as an elegant transcontinental hub, and King's Cross, a high-tech hub. To the south is Vauxhall, an area that once accommodated the city's pleasure gardens, a picturesque park of dubious morality that is now being rebuilt as a suburb of towers in which the M16 Building mingles on the skyline with poorly designed penthouses, visually illiterate skyscrapers, and ultimately the new United States Embassy, a piece of seemingly generic commercial architecture surrounded by, of all

things, a moat. The vista terminates in the upended table of Battersea Power Station, its four chimneys poking into the sky. This late industrial behemoth that once powered the city is being smothered by bland blocks master planned by Rafael Viñoly Architects, and glass-fronted global superblocks designed by Gehry Partners, Foster + Partners, and others, which are slowly blotting out the great brick building.

You might argue that the incoherence of the siting of the city's new towers, the lack of connectivity between its emerging districts, and the generic nature of so much of its architecture points toward an underpowered, failed planning system in which corporate money always has the upper hand. Or you might also argue that this is the destiny of a city that has always resisted master planning and big ideas. London is driven by wealth and private interest rather than state-sponsored dogma or social thinking. The blip of postwar modernism and the architecture of the welfare state was, it turns out, a momentary aberration. And in the midst of the current orgy of development and change, there is, surprisingly and almost counterintuitively, the sense of a London architecture emerging. Expressed austerely, occasionally even severely, in the extruded minerals of the earth—brick, stone, ceramic, iron—it seems to take its cue from the power stations as much as the modernist blocks and the terraces its architects admire. In bits of King's Cross, Hackney, Victoria—indeed scattered all across the city—there is a slowly emerging, stripped-back sensibility that nods to the essence of a city of self-effacing row houses and Brutalist blocks.

Many of the best new works in the city appear not as monuments or towers, as museums, or malls, but as pieces of infill—considered, modest, occasional glimpses of a coherent, characterful architecture that has somehow emerged from this polyphony of voices, styles, and forms. Eric Parry Architects' faience facade at 50 New Bond Street and 6a Architects' cast-iron shop front for Paul Smith's store in nearby Albemarle Street seem to represent a new, but also rather traditional, idea of ornament as inherent to structure, a willingness to merge experiment and art with the historic texture and the subtle but intriguing decorative character of the city. Adjaye Associates' Rivington Place, meanwhile, introduces what appears to be a memory of soot-stained industrial architecture scaled at the level of the street, while Herzog & de Meuron adopt the cheap, polycarbonate, and concrete language of industrial construction for their shimmering Laban Building.

The complexity of London's streetscape, the incoherence—perhaps even absence—of an overarching plan, the layering of historic strata, and the way in which modern megastructures are allowed to burst through the filigree lace of medieval scale and grain, mean that buildings are never experienced in a straightforward way. Instead they are glimpsed poking above streets or reflected through shopwindows or rain puddles. The winding of the Thames means that towers appear in vistas where you least expect them as the city seems to wrap around itself and warp through time and space. It is this aspect of urbanity you will find here, architecture as background for the everyday life of the city, impinging rather than imposing. London is not a city of monuments but a metropolis of glances and slightly hidden surfaces. Once obscured by the fog, it now fades into the drizzle or creates the backdrop for the ebbs and flows of the crowd absorbed more in their phones than the streets they are walking through. The photographs here capture precisely—or perhaps impressionistically—that realm of glimpses and impressions, unexpected details and sudden surprises, a cityscape of infinite variety and constantly evolving aesthetics, which, no matter how well we think we know it, folds, collapses, and elides into new views and vistas even as we walk its endlessly intriguing streets.



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