

From Urban Village to Metropolitan Picturesque. Precincts, Townscape, and the "Cellular" Planning of World War II London

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At the time of the Second World War, British architects and planning officials attempted to envision the specifically 'urban' character of a postwar London, using a cellular model of urban division. This cellular planning occurred in two phases. First, Patrick Abercrombie and John Forshaw, in their influential County of London Plan of 1943, proposed dividing the London metropolis into a series of 'organic' communities and specialized 'precincts,' either built around existing medieval cores or new cores, similar in principle. The Abercrombie Forshaw plan, following the social imagery of an organic regionalism, assumed that London consisted in a hierarchy of nested functions and distinctive communities that could be rendered whole and transparent. In the second phase, a series of more specific urban design schemes sought to architecturally envision particular cells or precincts within the overall plan. In their plans for the precincts of St. Paul's and Westminster, the editors of the *Architectural Review* overlaid medieval London with cosmopolitan, fragmentary urban scenes, with little reference to any idealized 'community.' While superficially employing the forms of the Abercrombie Forshaw plan, they simultaneously undercut the plan's basis in an organic regionalism. This change was, in fact, symptomatic of a wider shift in international urban design, from an organic paradigm of collective urban coherence to a psychological paradigm of individualistic aesthetic pleasure in varied urban scenes.

The *County of London Plan* followed very closely the organic, regionalist principles that Abercrombie had inherited from Patrick Geddes and which was contemporaneously being promoted by the American writer and planning activist, Lewis Mumford. Simultaneously vague and overdetermined, the term organic had both sociological and art historical meanings that frequently overlapped. In art historical terms, organicism referenced an aesthetic totality, in which the plan of the city and all of its material components, down to individual buildings and ornament added up to a unified aesthetic experience. Sociological organicism most often represented the city as a unified civic polity. Lewis Mumford's representation of the medieval town paralleled to an extraordinary degree the discourses of 'neighborhood unit' theory, an urban design model in which the city was to be divided into a series of 'organic' communities, each with its corresponding community center. First codified and popularized by the social reformer Clarence Perry in 1929, the neighborhood unit was to be the microcosm of civic life, an ideal village. The sum of neighborhood units, in turn, was supposed to unify the city as an organic totality.

Abercrombie and Forshaw had developed a series of images of London's own medieval and 18th century past that would serve as guidelines for postwar rebuilding. Unlike their American counterparts, they did not view medieval urbanism merely as a remote model of an ideal, village-like community. Rather they also viewed it as a layer of London's own history to be recovered in the present within a functionalist discourse of 'use zones' and 'cellular planning.' The *County of London Plan*, unlike the MARS plan of the previous year, sought to reassert the centers and boundaries of the older districts and townships from which the metropolis had emerged. As an urban design document, the plan attempted to combine a principle of communal organization with a principle of functional differentiation. The visual centerpiece of this document, serving as leitmotiv for the plan as a whole, was a diagram entitled 'Social & Functional Analysis,' soon nicknamed the 'eggs-in-a-basket' diagram. (Figure 1) The image divided the County of London into a number of amoeboid cells surrounding a red circle and blue oval at the center. The diagram claimed to reveal, behind the haze of chaotic appearances, the social essence of London as composite, discontinuous, and organized into a series of distinct 'communities' nestled around the central core. At the central core,

meanwhile, the diagram revealed a parallel series of 'precincts,' embedded within the ovals of 'City' and 'West End,' similarly discrete and discontinuous.

The strange marriage between modern, 'scientific' planning and the project of restoring medieval and Georgian London emerged symptomatically in the term, precinct. The emergence of the 'precinct' in urban design discourse, owed a great deal to H. Alker Tripp, a traffic engineer and assistant police commissioner of Scotland Yard, who, like Clarence Perry, linked the reorganization of traffic patterns to a broader urban reform, based on insulating small sections of the city from the larger city beyond. 'Precinct' could signify on a number of levels simultaneously. In traffic planning terms, it referred to a super-block, surrounded by arterial ring roads. In administrative terms, it referred to a jurisdiction with boundaries and proper name. In historical terms, it referred to the medieval, urban enclosures to which different occupational groups were assigned, as in the trade quarters or the monasteries. In architectural terms, it referred both to the medieval cloister and to the 18th century squares, notably of the Bloomsbury district. Discussions of pre-Victorian London in the 1940s tended to collapse all four meanings, imagining a rationally redesigned London in which the social functions of these older precincts were to be 'restored.'

Likewise, a 1946 article published in the *Architectural Review*, by Norman Brett-James, presented medieval and Elizabethan London as the historical precedents for the type of cellular planning represented by the Abercrombie Forshaw Plan. Entitled 'Precincts and Trade Quarters: A History of Use-Zones in the City of London,' it gave a geographic history of the cloisters and trade quarters that used to divide the city's inhabitants according to distinct types of use and class of user. Here, protection and enclosure were the necessary ingredients for maintaining the balance of urban life. The vitality and wealth of London, seemingly, had depended on the enclaves and preserves that defended, for example, monastic knowledge, the safety of foreign merchants, and the concentration of particular trades. Openness amounted to intrusion and permeability to destruction. Unlike Mumford's communitarian view of the medieval town as a civic and social unity, Brett-James' description of London's precincts acknowledged, and even celebrated, a city divided. This London had never been a 'town' in Mumford's sense, but always a complex mosaic of local and international forces, embodied in its various precincts.

The organic metaphor of the city, however, was more directly challenged in a series of articles published in 1941 and 1942 by J.M. Richards, an editor of *The Architectural Review*. In these articles, Richards attempted to develop a metropolitan theory of urban design that would counteract the dominant regionalist discourses of Mumford and Geddes. In an article entitled, 'Regionalism Re-examined,' Richards criticized the idea put forth by Mumford in *The Culture of Cities* that the metropolis could be broken up into a series of modern equivalents to medieval towns. A city like London, Richards wrote, cannot be understood as a local or regional phenomenon: 'No region, however large, nor even a whole country could sustain a city like London, which subsists on international trade, international finance and international processes of distribution.'¹ Thus, cosmopolitan culture had to be understood in terms of an international network of cities, such that those caught up in such a network had more in common with their peers in other metropolitan centers than with locals in the nearby countryside.² Nevertheless, Richards asserted that the urban spaces of a cosmopolitan culture should be cloistered: 'Its ideal shape is the sequence of squares and courts in which social life has always fallen.' Precincts, such as the Inns of Court, had long been professional enclaves for what might be considered a cosmopolitan class, and the centers of international finance and distribution might similarly recede into urban enclaves in order to reproduce their activities and facilitate their specialized communications.

While Richards repudiated the sociological assumptions of an organic regionalism, others at *The Architectural Review* began to introduce a theory of the urban picturesque that would replace organic hierarchies with palimpsestic juxtapositions. The special

¹ Richards, J.M., 'Regionalism Re-examined,' in *Architectural Review*, vol. 40, July 1941, p. 89.

² In the later articles, Richards divided the urban population, not into local groups, but according to the economic activities of production, consumption and distribution.

1945 issue of the *Architectural Review*, entitled 'A Programme for the City of London,' argued that the English tradition of the picturesque, not only conformed to the democratic, 'informal' character of the English people, but also corresponded to a true functionalism of design rather than to a mere appearance of functionalism, given by regularity and straight lines. The Haussmanizing scheme of the Royal Academy was clearly being rejected, but so too was a schematic modernism that simply imposed regularity for its own sake or else demanded an urban *tabula rasa*, as in the 1942 MARS plan. The nature of London, they claimed, was not neat and regular; its functions were divergent and contrasted. London was, in this sense, like a volcano:

Planning must be a creative act in sympathy with the nature of things acted upon – the aim: to work out the volcano's own purpose after its own pattern and no other.³

The term that was coined for this aesthetic ideology was Townscape, an ideology of complexity and difference over clarity and organic coherence.⁴ It would become, in fact, the visual medium through which Richards' metropolitanism was to be imagined. Not only did the picturesque have the advantage of dealing with the city as it was, a patchwork of different building styles and historical periods, it also allowed room for a multiplicity of aesthetic responses and distinct social groups. *Architectural Review* editor, Hugh de Cronin Hastings wrote that the picturesque 'can give satisfaction to all tastes.'⁵ First, the picturesque would allow for an individualistic pluralism of aesthetic perceptions, the very opposite of modernist 'organic' coherence. Second, it could also allow fragments of the metropolis to harmoniously coexist, without these fragments becoming either functionally or socially transparent. In other words, the metropolis could be read or appreciated on multiple levels. It was to be both subjectively and functionally pluralistic.

Between 1945 and 1947 the editors of the *Architectural Review* published a set of unsolicited designs for two of the most symbolically charged of the London precincts, the Precinct of St. Paul's at the center of London and for the Precinct of Westminster around the Houses of Parliament. In their proposal, the precinct of Westminster had become an artful ensemble of courtyards and plazas, providing secluded places for officials to have lunch and cinematic views for tourists to admire. The design for the Precinct of St. Paul's, by contrast, involved a more aesthetically radical assemblage of traditional monuments and contemporary architecture, in which light steel structures were juxtaposed with ancient masonry monuments. The scheme showed a complex sequence of open squares, level changes and narrow passages, with older buildings, particularly St. Paul's itself, being used as visual foils for modernist structures. Rather than merely being insulated from surrounding traffic, the St. Paul's precinct acquired the qualities of a palimpsest and labyrinth, in which several functions and urban layers co-existed. The perspective drawings by Hugh Casson showed individually isolated views into the complex architectural scenes, in which small groups of pedestrians are visible from behind or at a distance. (Figure 2)

Here spatial intimacy and enclosure seemed to bear no analogy with civic unity. Rather than squares and piazzas embracing scenes of face-to-face, social transparency, they evoked the opacity of the metropolis, divided into pathways and pockets of half-hidden functional complexity, full of the unknown directions and private conversations of its various occupants. The social logic of intimacy and enclosure had clearly moved far beyond the communitarianism of neighborhood unit theory or Abercrombie's organic theory of social cells. What seems to be left to the 'man in the street' is a series of abstract views in and around such spaces, whose complex functions would express themselves abstractly as incident, variety and colorful juxtaposition. The opacity of social and functional relations in an international metropolis of the scale and complexity of London

³ 'The English Planning Tradition and the City,' in *Architectural Review*, vol. 97, June 1945, p. 175.

⁴ This movement was not without controversy. For a history of the debates from a critic of the picturesque revival, see Banham, Reyner, 'Revenge of the Picturesque: English Architectural Polemics, 1945-1965,' in *Essays on Architectural Writing Presented to Nikolaus Pevsner*, London, 1968.

⁵ Hastings, Hugh de Cronin, 'Exterior Furnishing, or Sharawadgi: the Art of Making Urban Landscape,' *Architectural Review*, v. 95, January 1944, p. 7.

would be softened and transmuted by a series of aesthetic pleasures and entertainments for the individual pedestrian to enjoy as a work of nature, the 'volcano' of London cultivated as spectacle. Such ideas would soon be extended and modified in the works of urban planners, such as Kevin Lynch and Christopher Tunnard as the modernist idea of the 'organic' would gradually be eclipsed.



Fig. 1: Patrick Abercrombie's "eggs-in-a-basket" diagram, from John Forshaw and Patrick Abercrombie, County of London Plan. London: MacMillan & Co., 1943, p.20.

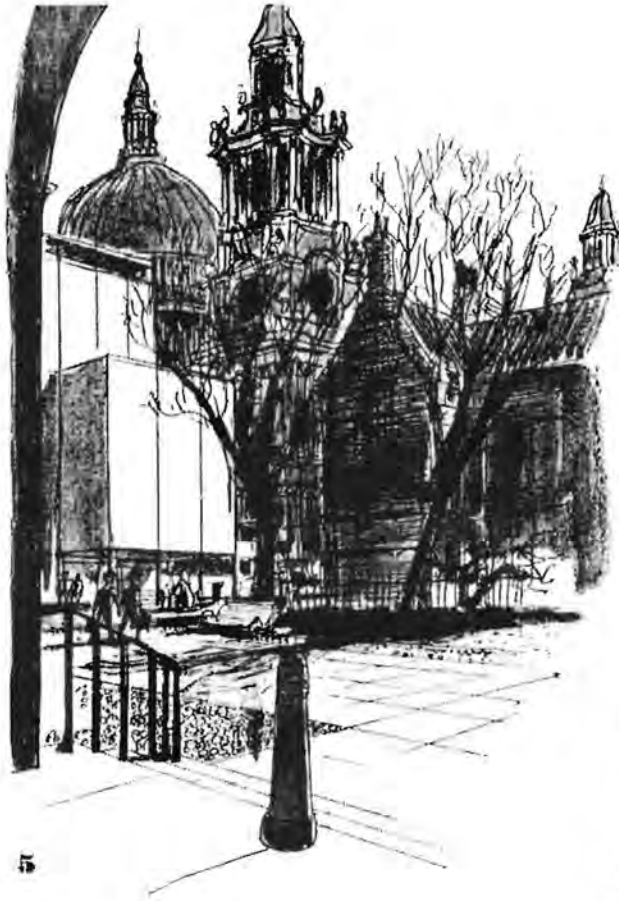


Fig. 2: "Precinct of St. Paul's," Hugh Casson drawings, from "A Test Case - The Precinct of St. Paul's" *The Architectural Review*, 97 (1945), p.190.

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