Town and Crown: Why London never became an imperial capital

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Tonight I want to continue my enquiry into the nature of architecture and power in London. I want to focus on why nineteenth century London, alone amongst the great European cities, did not end up being dominated by great boulevards lined with homogenous classical buildings set out to a master plan glorifying the nation and its rulers. I want to look at attitudes towards building and power in the minds of the political and ruling classes, and to ask why London before the First World War looked so different to its great European cousins?

So what did the other European cities look like? Paris, is perhaps the best known example of a city that recast itself in a new image in the nineteenth century. But the first point to make is that Paris in the 1830s was an infinitely less hygienic, elegant and spacious place to live in than London. Here is a photograph of rue de Colombe showing the higgledy-piggeldy nature of medieval Paris.

But Paris, like London, started to be rebuilt in the early 1800s with developments for the rich not dissimilar to the great estates of London. Like the London estates they were not state sponsored but the products of private enterprise. With one exception. This was the Rue de Rivoli begun on Napoleon Bonaparte'sorders in 1811 and named after his great victory over the Austrians of 1797. The new road was lined with uniform ranges of buildings above shopping arcades. There is no doubt that this was a highly influential development and caused rulers all over Europe to sit up and take notice. But it was an isolated event. Paris remained a medieval city.

But not for long. Between 1852 and 1870 it was transformed. It has to be said that the seeds of this transformation had started under Louis-Phillipe but it was Napoleon III and his town planner and architect Baron Georges-Eugene Haussmann who transformed the city into the one we know today.

This whole programme was designed and organised by the state and funded through state backed loans, it was, however, executed by private entrepreneurs. In essence a series of great boulevards were cut across Paris, up to 100ft wide. These intersected in new squares and circuses. These new streets were lined with uniform buildings in which no individual structure stood out; everything was subordinated to a general overall monumentality. These regimented boulevards were interspersed by new public buildings, an opera house, theatres and each of the twenty new arrondissments were given a large and elegant town hall. Existing monuments, like the cathedral of Notre Dame, were re-set in open squares.

I'm not going to get involved tonight in the debate that surrounds the motivation for all this work. Yes, it was to make Paris less volatile and susceptible to revolution, yes it was to make money, stimulate the economy and provide employment; yes it was to allow new sewers and street lighting to be installed. But overwhelmingly this was about self-image. About creating a magnificent modern capital and reflecting the glory and power of the Napoleonic dynasty.

Another city, Vienna, had much in common with Paris and London: it was the capital of the Holy Roman Empire, a hugely important centre culturally and third only in size to London and Paris. It too, in the 1840s, was a medieval city with narrow streets and unsanitary conditions. But it was also very much an aristocratic city, the centre of the Hapsburg court filled with the palaces of aristocrats and the shops of traders selling them luxury goods.

In December 1857 Emperor Franz Joseph ordered the demolition of the old fortified walls of Vienna and announced a city expansion and beautification plan. The plan had more or less been completed by 1865, an astonishingly fast timescale. The work was again designed and controlled by the state, and much of it

was funded by the government through land sales.

The old city walls were replaced by a vast circular boulevard, the Ringstrasse lined with the palaces of the aristocracy and new public buildings including an opera house, town hall, and several museums and galleries. This was a different aesthetic to Haussmann's, individual great buildings gave character to the Ringstrasse in a way that they don't in Paris. But the overall effect was still monumental. The intention was to outdo, to out-dazzle every other European capital, including Paris.

I could go on and give you examples of how Berlin, Turin, Rome and other great cities enjoyed similar treatment during the late nineteenth century. But I won't. Tonight I'm talking about London, but I first wanted first to illustrate, by showing you just two of the most ambitious schemes, what was happening in mainland Europe. These vast city reconstruction schemes designed and backed by the state, creating wide boulevards lined with neoclassical buildings became the norm. It was what any self respecting capital aspired to. But what about London?

From the mid-eighteenth century London had become the largest city in the world and after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 the centre of a world empire controlled by the all powerful Royal Navy. But the irony is that as Britain became more powerful so it became more ramshackle. In particular the architectural presence of royalty and government became more chaotic and unimpressive. In 1698 Whitehall Palace burnt down leaving the monarchy with no decent palace in central London other than St. James's. We have to remember that this was a building put up by Henry VIII for the Prince of Wales; it was never intended to be a major residence. Yet by default it became one in the 1690s. So Georgian Kings, throughout the eighteenth century, were housed in central London - inthis rather sad looking building. Parliament fared no better. The Houses of Parliament were an agglomeration of buildings continually added to but without any architectural coherence or grandeur.

Daniel Defoe wrote 'it is the disaster of London, as to the beauty of its figure, that it is stretched out in buildings, just at the pleasure of every builder...and as the convenience of people directs...and this has spread the face of it in a most straggling, confused manner, out of all shape, uncompact, and unequal: neither long or broad, round or square'.

At the start of George III reign there were signs that there was a greater appreciation of the importance of giving architectural presence to Britain'spower. And perhaps it is no coincidence that this process began by the construction of magnificent offices for the Navy on the site of the old royal palace of Somerset House. The new Somerset House offices were far more elaborate than was strictly necessary for the accommodation of officials. It was a riverside palace far grander and more impressive than the residence of George III himself. But Somerset House, expensive and magnificent as it was, was an individual building not a scheme to re-design central London.

So I suppose the big question is why did London not end up looking like Paris, Rome or Vienna? Well, I'm going to suggest four principal reasons reasons. The first is lack of any effective city-wide government. London, of course, grew around the kernel of The City. First Westminster, and then other outlying places were linked to it by radial roads and bridges, eventually creating a metropolis 36 miles in circumference. But as London grew no coherent city-wide government had developed with it. The City Corporation, with its Lord Mayor and Court of Common Council, had declined to extend its power outside the Square Mile and so government, such as it was, rested in the hands of county magistrates and local vestries. This made London-wide action almost impossible.

Secondly London'sposition in national government was also weak as there was a serious under-representation of London MPs in parliament. Before the Great Reform Act the City had 4 MPs and Southwark and Westminster 2 each. Thus the interests of the capital were hugely underrepresented. Even after the act of 1832 there were no more than 20 London MPs out of a total of 658 and at a period when London had an eighth of Britain'spopulation. It was only after 1885 that London was given an additional 42 members, but by this time the London County Council was on the books and London was on the verge of having an elected representative assembly.

Not only was London underrepresented, but the great mass of members from provincial constituencies were opposed to spending national taxation on London projects. This is my third point illustrated, for example, by the refusal of parliament to contribute to the construction of the Thames embankment. This hostility towards spending money on London was, in many senses, worse than this because many of the great provincial cities were asserting their much stronger sense of civic pride against London. Just take the example of Liverpool'sambition to build St. George'sHall and the determination that it would be larger than

Westminster Hall and St. Paul'sCathedral.

My fourth reason is opposition from commercial interests. This factor, above all, characterises London. London was, and is, par excellence a city that expresses private and individual values, ambitions and achievements rather than public or communal ones. As I have made clear London, other than the Square Mile, was an ungoverned city. Building had taken place where and when private interests dictated only kept in check by the most gentle of regulations in the Building acts of 1707, 1709 and 1774. It was private interests, of course, that stopped any rebuilding of the city after the great fire from being on a radically new plan.

So, lack of London-wide government, poor representation in parliament, hostility amongst MPs towards investing in the capital and the opposition of commercial interests all went against large-scale schemes of reconstruction. These things were also signs of the weakness of the monarchy. Neither Franz Joseph or Napoleon III were autocrats, but both had significantly more power and influence than the Hanoverians. Both wanted to refashion their capitals in such a way to glorify their dynasties. There was no chance of this happening in London.

But this does not mean that nothing was done. In fact it can be argued that other than Napoleon'sRue de Rivoli London triggered the whole movement to urban magnificence with the works undertaken after Waterloo. Between 1812 and 1841Regent'sPark, Regent'sStreet, Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park Corner were all laid out.

None of these improvements were new ideas in the Regency. As early as the mid-1760s there had been plans for a new street that would have followed approximately the line of Regent Street. So we can't attribute the conception of Regent Street to a burst of patriotism after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. Then we must take the person of the Prince Regent out of the debate. There is absolutely no evidence that the Prince had any personal involvement in any of these plans other than the most passing nod of approval. Quite apart from this neither the public, nor the politicians, were in any mood for the glorification of the Prince of Wales, not only was he in receipt of stern letters from the Prime Minister castigating him for overspending on overblown royal building projects like Brighton Pavilion, he was not popular. His vicious public divorce from Princess Caroline was disliked and had triggered widespread public mockery for his moral state and supposed gluttony. This was not a man to revere by public tribute.

The thing that triggered the whole project was the desire of the government to realise more cash out of the Crown Estate. In 1811 the leases on Marylebone Park fell in and this meant that the government had an opportunity to develop the park with houses for the super-rich and make a killing. The road linking it with the rich parts of Mayfair was to be an essential component; no one would buy a house in what was to become Regent'sPark if they had to get there through the twisting streets of Marylebone. So in 1812 a master plan was developed by the architect John Nash that would exploit the Crown lands in and around the park.

What is now Trafalgar Square was an integral part of this. Nash had suggested a square or crescent at Charing Cross and the integration of St Martin in the Fields into a matrix of east west roads. When the act of parliament for creating Regent'sStreet was passed in 1813 provisions for the creation of the new square were firmly written in. This is not the place to chronicle the twists and turns that gave us the square that we have today, for it was a long journey involving many changes of mind and tack. But the square did come to fruition from 1826 onwards. It was funded by the redevelopment of Crown Land and was effectively completed, and named after the battle of Trafalgar by 1841.

One of the features of these ambitious and successful projects was the fact that the new streets, squares and circuses were built along social fault lines and had the effect of dividing the richer parts of Mayfair and St. James'sfrom the poorer parts of Soho and Covent Garden. This also made it cheaper to achieve as the houses that had to be bought were often humble and so the sites were cheap to acquire. Meanwhile, being on the edge of the smarter residential areas, rents for the new shops would be high. Even the most admired section of the new street, the quadrant leading into Piccadilly Circus, was influenced by pre-existing social patterns, if the road had continued in a straight line it would have involved the demolition of St. James'sSquare, the most fashionable and valuable piece of real estate in the West End.

Hyde Park Corner was another old idea realised at this time. The idea for a set of gates, or even a triumphal arch at Hyde Park corner dated back to the early eighteenth century. But it was given new life after the battle of Waterloo when the idea of a gateway to London began to fuse with a memorial to celebrate the great victory. The project went through a dozen designs and several architects before

Decimus Burton created the screen and arch which, after various reorganisations and reconfigurations, are the ones we see today.

So all in all, with Regent'sPark, Regent'sStreet, Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park Corner London was in receipt of a major series of civic initiatives, ones that still give it a character today. But what was behind this extraordinary burst of civic reorganisation? I have already suggested that the government'sneed to make money was key behind the development of Regent'sPark and Regent Street and that they used private finance to bankroll the building works. The improvements were a commercial proposition which initially offered investors a 7.3% return on their capital. Likewise the construction of Trafalgar Square met wider social and commercial needs. There was an element of social cleansing here. The plan was to eradicate the small scale traders and make it possible for smarter shops to come in. This was gentrification on a massive scale, driving away the poor and lower class to make way for the rich to go shopping.

There was a political angle to this as well; after all it required an act of parliament and political support. One of the big political concerns after 1815 was the effect of demobilisation on employment. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers and sailors were thrust onto the job market after victory at Waterloo and of course a classic way of providing employment is by public works. I would suggest that it is no coincidence that in 1817 there was the Poor Employment Act, and in 1818 the act for building new churches pieces of legislation to encourage jobs in construction.

So the motivations for the redesign of Regent Street, I would suggest, are rather English. This was not about the glorification of the Prince Regent or William IV, it wasn't really even about the glorification of London, it was a brilliantly conceived economic and social project, a pragmatic response to post war problems and opportunities.

But let'snot completely dismiss the beneficial effects to London, for this was undoubtedly the single most important and effective town planning scheme that central London has ever seen. Nothing else that I will be talking about tonight comes close to this for ambition and sheer visual effect. And this is a point that I want to return to at the end of my talk.

The burst of activity in the early 1820s came to a juddering halt in 1825 with a banking crisis and an intense credit crunch. During the 1830s there were a series of parliamentary select Committees looking into metropolitan improvements, especially the provision of new, improved, roads. Reading their reports is strangely modern, traders complaining that their business will be ruined unless traffic management is improved and various branches of central government saying that these improvements were either not their responsibility or could not be afforded. In 1841, fed up with all the talk, a new Conservative administration set up a professional Royal Commission to look into the issue of improvement in London.

This Committee made an important acknowledgement, and made it publicly. They argued that although London had reached its extent entirely by private investment and action it was impossible to improve the centre, which was by definition the most ancient part , without the intervention of the state and without public money being expended. This they justified by stating unequivocally that London was 'the central point of commerce in the world' and that it had come to contain municipal, professional and commercial interests, 'the magnitude and weight of which is without example in any other great city'.

So they looked at the back catalogue of proposals for new roads and schemes amassed since the early 1830s and decided that of all these the most important was the idea of an embankment along the Thames. This they said would have a triple benefit: improving connections between the city and Westminster; improving the navigation on the river which was still crucially important) and dealing with the filth and stench of the river at low tide which they recognised as a health risk.

In 1855 the Metropolitan Board of Works was created, a new London-wide body with the power to raise money from Londoners to effect improvements, but still requiring an act of parliament for any major works. It was not directly elected but made up of representatives from the vestries. Despite the huge pressure for roads their first priority was dealing with sewage. Most people in this theatre this evening know about the great stink of 1858, and the effect it had on MP'sdetermination to solve the problem of London'ssewers; so I won't dwell on it. The point is that MPs horror of a sewage clogged river led to a scheme for new sewers in 1860 and an act of parliament enabling it in 1862.

This was a project very different to those of the 1820s and 30s. Despite early ideas of funding it by the construction of commercial wharfs it was recognised that a work such as this would have to be paid for with public funds. And so it was. The method used was tried and tested - a duty of coal and wine: a mode of funding public works familiar from the rebuilding of St. Paul'sCathedral after the great fire over 150 years

before. As you all know the project, led by Sir Joseph Bazalgette, was not just about sewers. There were gas and water mains and eventually an underground railway. The road on top was designed to relieve traffic on the Strand and Fleet Street; it was opened in July 1870.

But the interesting thing is that of the 37 acres reclaimed from the Thames foreshore for the embankment ten were used for public gardens. This was a major change of policy. Gladstone had proposed that this land should be used for the construction of commercial offices, and even claimed that the profits from these would be so large that income tax could be abolished. But in the end the gardens triumphed. They were laid out by one of London'smost influential park designers Alexander McKenzie assisted by the architect Joseph Meston. McKenzie believed in grass, not flower beds, in informality and in winding picturesque paths. His designs were met with quite a lot of criticism at the time, although the skeleton of them survives today.

These were not ridged urban gardens, architecturally conceived such as might be found in the Tuilleries in Paris, but almost suburban and local in feel. Thus while the great plane trees of the embankment, and its broad proportions, its granite walls and its handsome street furniture gave a grandeur and monumentality to London that it had not had before, the gardens, arguably its largest visual component, provided a strongly contrasting aesthetic.

The greatest achievement of the MBW was the embankment. It was also responsible for a number of other road schemes, including Charing Cross Road, but none of these could be described as being monumental additions to an imperial capital. Each improved the flow of traffic through the dense streets, linking established routes, but none were architectural embellishments in themselves.

In 1889 the MBW was wound up and the London County Council came into being. They inherited many of the ambitions of the Board including a long standing ambition to build a road from Holborn to the Strand. The area that lay between the two roads was one of the oldest and most densely packed in London. As it had escaped the Great Fire it contained many hundreds of timber-framed Tudor and Jacobean houses. By the nineteenth century this had long since ceased to be a fashionable area. In fact while it might have been one of the most interesting parts of London historically it was effectively a slum. Charles Booth'spoverty map characterised the area as comfort mixed with poverty, reflecting the mix of bookshops, pubs (there were 51) and tenements. In one street there were 54 one-roomed tenements of which 18 were occupied by 4 or more people to a room. One three roomed tenement was home to 34 people.

So this 100ft wide new street was not just about communication, it was about slum clearance. But the LCC had to work out how to fund it and then get parliamentary backing to start. Despite the LCC being hugely in debt they decided to pay for part of the work through rates, the rest would be funded through the profits of what they called recoupment. This was essentially buying more land than they needed and developing it at a profit. The development land was purchased at the south end of the new street in a great crescent. The development of this and a special rate levied on local property owners (reflecting the anticipated increase in value of their sites) released £4m. £2m came from ratepayers making up the total of £6m needed.

Demolition work was a massive project in its own right. Almost 7,000 people needed to be re-housed.

So this street was being built to facilitate communication, to clear slums and to pay for itself. Was there any suggestion that it was making a contribution to the beautification of an imperial capital? Interestingly there was a feeling about this street that it did celebrate in some way the empire. It was suggested that it should be called Empire Avenue, or Imperial Avenue, but in the end, as we know, they settled on the much less jingoistic name: Kingsway. Yet the names of the buildings on the new road proclaimed the mood of the times: Victory House, Princes House, Crown House, Africa House, Imperial House, Regent House and Windsor House to name the largest.

Like Baron Haussmann'splan for Paris the street was originally meant to be lined with buildings with uniform facades. But the LCC could not afford to wait to find developers who would build them. They also felt they could not impose regularity on the crescent where they needed to make a great deal of money. Yet many developers, and their individual architects, did rise to the occasion. There is definitely a French feel to the buildings on the crescent, which of course we now know as Aldwich. The Waldorf Hotel and several of the other major buildings were built in Parisian style.

The LCC were certainly looking for imperial grandeur. The design for the Gaiety Theatre, occupying a position on the crescent, was judged not to be grand enough and so the LCC offered to pay for columns on its front themselves. It was money well spent, as when eventually Aldwich was completed in the 1930s with Bush House and India House, it did have an imperial feel and was perhaps the only scheme so far that

came close to what had been achieved in the continental capitals but, of course, in a very limited area.

But before we leave the subject there is one more scheme, that came closer than any to giving London and Imperial heart. The idea for a memorial to the reign of Victoria and a great processional road was first mooted in 1896 but it was only after the death of the Queen when a Committee was appointed to put together a plan. What they agreed upon had no precedent in London'shistory. A new road, purely for ceremonial use, with a great triumphal arch at one end and at the other a colossal statue of Victoria in a semi-circular enclosure. This was all to be designed by Sir Aston Webb. Webb'sscheme for the front of the palace was small scale and over busy, and as you can see was not executed as first designed. But the monumental statue of the queen by Thomas Brock was a huge success, although not finally completed till 1924.

Admiralty arch was a cunning solution to the memorial'snorth end at Trafalgar Square. As the Admiralty needed more office space the building is essentially an office block with some residential accommodation for high ranking government officials. It rather brilliantly turned the corner using complex geometry.

But the cost of the road alternations at the north end caused a huge public row. Westminster City Council and the London County Council could not see why they should be required to pay for street improvements that would not improve traffic circulation and that were purely ceremonial. Eventually a petition signed by half the MPs in the House and letters from every national newspaper editor brought people to their senses and the cost was split between the government and the LCC.

So the Mall, Admiralty Arch and the Round point in front of Buckingham palace, that was also refronted by Webb in 1913 created a real imperial memorial to an empress. All except the north end road improvements had been achieved rapidly and because most of the land was crown property and most of the money was charitable. Yes this was imperial London, but the government had sure not wanted to pay for it.

Now, there are many different ways of looking at all this. One point of view might highlight the vacillation, the lack of commitment, the parochialism, the self interest and the narrow mindedness that essentially kept most of London as it was. Another would point to the determination to improve, the big ambitions, the search for grandeur and nobility and the huge sums of money eventually raised. You could argue both of these positions characterise attempts to re-plan London from what I have said tonight. Or alternatively you could argue a third point of view which is that the effects of private investment made a bigger effect than any of this. This is a plan of the great private estates developed, from the eighteenth century, that give London so much of its character. Not a penny of government cash went into this, nor an ounce of imperial pretension.

The Gentlemen'sClubs in Pall Mall and St. James'swere monumental structures built by private enterprise that arguably made the biggest impact in the West End. The banks, offices and commercial buildings in the City which developed after 1850 were constructed in assertive and original styles with a real sense of monumentality. Seen in big groups they gave the city a presence that vied with the state sponsored boulevards of Europe. But they of course lacked their unity, they were individualistic and vied with each other to stand out from the mass.

But perhaps most of all was the impact of the railways. London had fifteen mainline stations by 1899. In funding these the government played a very small role. 800 acres of central London were demolished for the building of the railways, the stations, their sidings and workshops. Thousands of houses demolished and as many as 120,000 people displaced. The railways gave London some of its greatest architectural monuments, the Euston Arch, the stations at King'sCross and St. Pancras, the sheds at Paddington and Charing Cross, the Camden Roundhouse, bridges over the River Thames.

It was all these privately conceived and funded works more than any state sponsored initiative that gave London its character.

The fact is that London'ssense of identity as a city is relatively weak. The east end and the west end, north and south of the river have their distinct characters and strong allegiances and loyalties, and few of those are to the London alone. I believe it is hard to capture a sense of London as you can in Paris or Vienna. You can't bottle its sense of civic pride and sell it, let alone express it in bricks and mortar in the central district.

But something else even more significant sets London apart, which is an aesthetic issue: London is a picturesque city unlike the classical roman model cities of the continent. I argued earlier that much of the design of Regent Street was a product of practical and pragmatic considerations. But I don't want to

diminish the role of John Nash. Nash modelled the aesthetic of Regent Street on Oxford High Street, at the time and since admired as a perfect picturesque urban composition. The Picturesque aesthetic relies on quirks, on surprise and variety to achieve its effect. This is very different to the sublime effects of the great boulevards of continental Europe which impress through scale, monotony and repetition. London was a picturesque city

Its effect lies in unexpected juxtapositions, changes in angle, domes, spires and towers jostling for position on the skyline. This aesthetic was reinforced by the depth and strength of the gothic revival. Although most of the new public buildings of the 19C were neoclassical, some of the most important were not. Obviously the Houses of Parliament and the Law Courts but consider the buildings along the embankment: the National Liberal Club and Whitehall Court both built in a Francois premier style. The City of London School, Sion College, the Astor Estate Office, New Scotland Yard all are in flamboyant styles that create lively and eclectic skylines. It is these that create the most famous picturesque view in Britain, the view from the bridge over the serpentine lake in St. James'sPark, itself a seminal example of picturesque landscaping.

So I would argue London has a different aesthetic to the other great capitals of Europe, one less oppressive, more inventive and more expressive of a constitutional monarchy than other more monolithic and authoritarian regimes. But was it any the less grand? Regent Street did make a big difference to the West End, but much of the monumentality of London comes from privately commissioned architecture. Unlike the state sponsored neoclassical monoliths of Europe these eclectic and individualistic buildings express the individualism of the men and women who built London.