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Capital and Empire: Geographies of Imperial London

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Abstract

The notion of empire has often been regarded in Europe as a matter of diffusion and expansion; something which happened 'over there' rather than close to home. Yet the form, use and representation of modern European cities have been shaped by the global history of imperialism in ways that continue to matter even in an apparently post-imperial age. The signs of empire were prominently displayed within the built environments of all the major cities of late-nineteenth century Europe, as they came (in different ways) to play the role of regional, national and imperial capitals. In what was evidently a pan-European discourse on the imperial city between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth, national models were defined in relation to other national models, in a spirit of competition as much as emulation. This paper examines the case of London. British architects and planners frequently complained that London lagged behind its rivals in the struggle for imperial primacy, given the absence of state-sponsored projects to parallel Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris or Leopold's grand plans for Brussels. At the intra-urban scale, the imperial city had a geography which mattered: in the case of London, different parts of the city were associated with different aspects of empire. More generally, it is clear that national debates over imperial urbanism were conditioned not simply by understandings of the global reach of European empires, but also by attitudes towards social, cultural and political change within Europe itself.

The modern history of European capital cities is a story of competition and exchange. Competition, because in the era of the modern nation-state, capital cities came to signify the competing aspirations of national governments on an international stage. And exchange, because in the same era, planners and architects repeatedly borrowed models, styles and techniques from their rivals across Europe. These processes are encapsulated in capital cities above all others because they were the sites of governance, not just of nations but also of empires. Europeans capitals played the dual roles of national foci of political rule and seats of imperial power. In this paper, we consider one example of an imperial capital, London, which claimed dominion over the largest empire the world has ever seen. We argue that London's planners and architects operated in the context of a European-wide market in ideas and models, simultaneously borrowing from rival imperial capitals and seeking to define a unique style. However, there was more than a single version of imperial centrality on display: a variety of different aspects of the imperial experience shaped the sites and spaces of the city. An exploration of the cultural geographies of imperial London is also an opportunity to think about the multiple geographies of modern European urbanism (cf. Jacobs, 1996).¹

¹This paper develops the argument put forward in Driver F. and Gilbert D., 1998: Heart of Empire? Landscape, space and performance in imperial London. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 16: 11–28

These multiple geographies are reflected in many of the posters produced to promote the London Underground during the first half of the twentieth century. In 1932, for example, posters by the designer Ernest Dinkel invited Londoners and tourists to take a tour of the 'wealth, romance and beauty of the empire' (Figures 1 and 2). All that was needed was an Underground ticket: Australia could be reached via Temple or Strand stations, India via Aldwych, and much of the rest of empire via South Kensington. To see the fauna of the world simply required a ticket for the Northern line to Camden Town; the equivalent display of the plant kingdom required only a marginally more arduous expedition to the far west at Kew Gardens Station. In this vision of empire, the familiar rounded symbol of the London underground was transformed into a belt around the globe, connecting the imperial capital with the far-flung territories of empire - as if empire, once so distant and alien, had come home, its products and peoples absorbed into the very fabric of the modern city.

Such imagery was far from exceptional in the first half of the twentieth century. Other posters produced for the Underground described visits to London's military, naval and explorers' memorials as 'pilgrimages of empire'. (Figure 3) Passengers were invited to 'span the globe' in the course of a day: one could even see 'the tropics by underground'. In this vision, London was not merely the political and financial capital of a global empire: it was also a central place

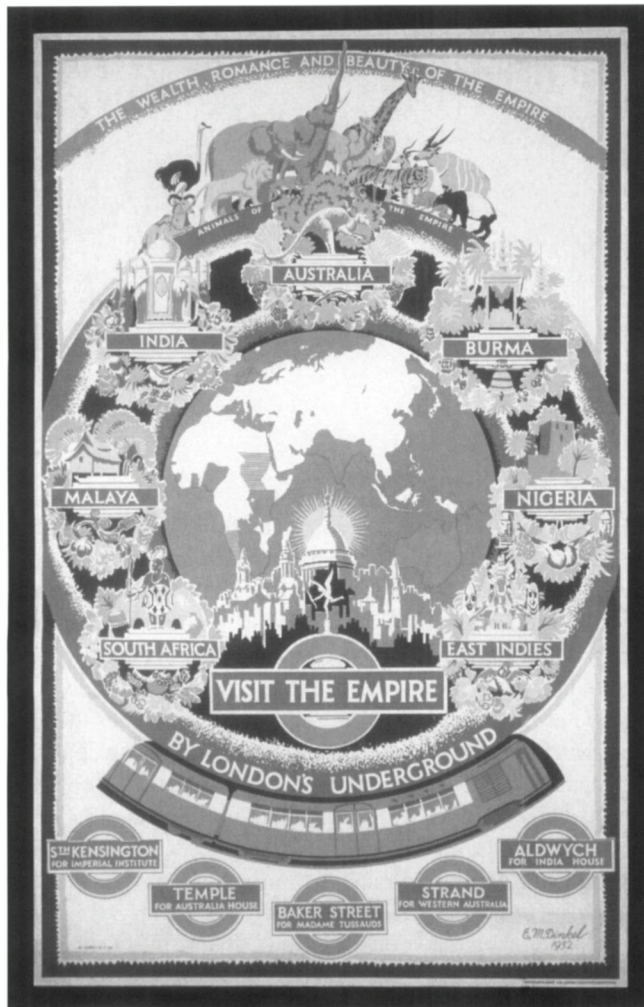


Figure 1. London Underground poster 'Visit the Empire' (Eastern Hemisphere) by Ernest M. Dinkel, 1932. ©London Regional Transport. Reproduced by kind permission of the London Transport Museum.



Figure 2. London Underground poster 'Visit the Empire' (Western Hemisphere) by Ernest M. Dinkel, 1932. ©London Regional Transport. Reproduced by kind permission of the London Transport Museum.

where the empire could be seen and experienced. Particular dimensions of empire - political, commercial, cosmopolitan, scientific, and popular - became associated with different sites and districts in the city - Westminster, the City, Oxford Street, South Kensington or Wembley. And the Underground itself was represented as the means of rendering these diverse sites accessible, a metropolitan equivalent of the 'All Red Route' across the seas patrolled by the Royal Navy, or the growing network of Imperial Airways. (Figure 4) By means such as these, the rhetoric of empire became fused with that of modernity - of mass leisure and consumption - and was situated in the spaces of the capital.

In this paper, these striking images and the character of London as an imperial centre are situated within the wider context of the history of the European imperial capital city. Many historians have drawn attention to the role of empire in the course of modern European history. What it meant to be European during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth was bound up with the fact of empire. In the British case, the imperial experience clearly helped to shape the British sense of themselves, as a nation and as a people. It is being increasingly recognised that empire did not just happen 'over there', beyond the horizon. It happened

in the minds and practices of people within Europe as well - in what they wrote, read and imagined; in what they ate and drank; in the clothes they wore; in the commodities they bought and sold. The experience of empire also shaped the places they inhabited, nowhere more profoundly than those cities that were simultaneously national and imperial capitals.

A Common European Context?

The relationship between imperialism, nationalism and urban space played out very differently in different European capitals and, as we argue below, there were also different inflections of that relationship in the internal geographies of each of these cities. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the distinctively European dimension to the modern imperial city. In part this was about the self-conscious making of differences between different national forms of urbanism. While much recent 'post-colonial' theory has concentrated on the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized, it can be argued that modern European imperial cultures were defined as much by their competition with Eu-

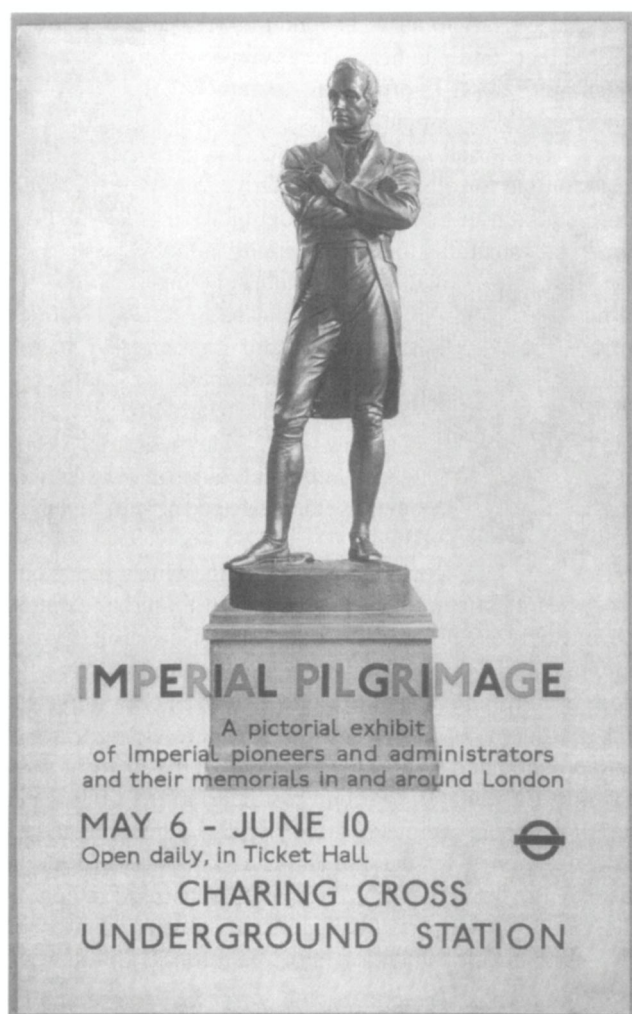


Figure 3. London Underground poster 'Imperial Pilgrimage' 1937 (Anonymous). ©London Regional Transport. Reproduced by kind permission of the London Transport Museum.

ropean 'others'. This was certainly the case in architectural and planning projects designed to make capitals into more fitting centres of empire. The discourse of imperial London was peppered with accounts of developments in other European cities, both ancient and modern. In debates about the appearance and future of London, the significance of the Haussmannisation of Paris, or of Léopold II's monumentalisation of Brussels, was inevitably interpreted within a discourse about the nature of the link between capital city and empire.

Critics of London as a capital city often complained that it *appeared* a poor second to Paris in the imperial stakes, and that the capitals of other lesser powers provided more impressive displays of their reach and authority. For example, Frederic Harrison claimed in 1892 that "London, with the grandest river of any capital in Europe, with a rich and glorious history, with boundless energy, wealth and culture, suffers itself to be put to shame by Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Rome, Chicago and New York, and is content with its narrow lanes and hugger-mugger traditions of street architecture" (Harrison, 1892, p. 414). The absence of state-sponsored projects to parallel the rebuilding of Paris or Brussels, led

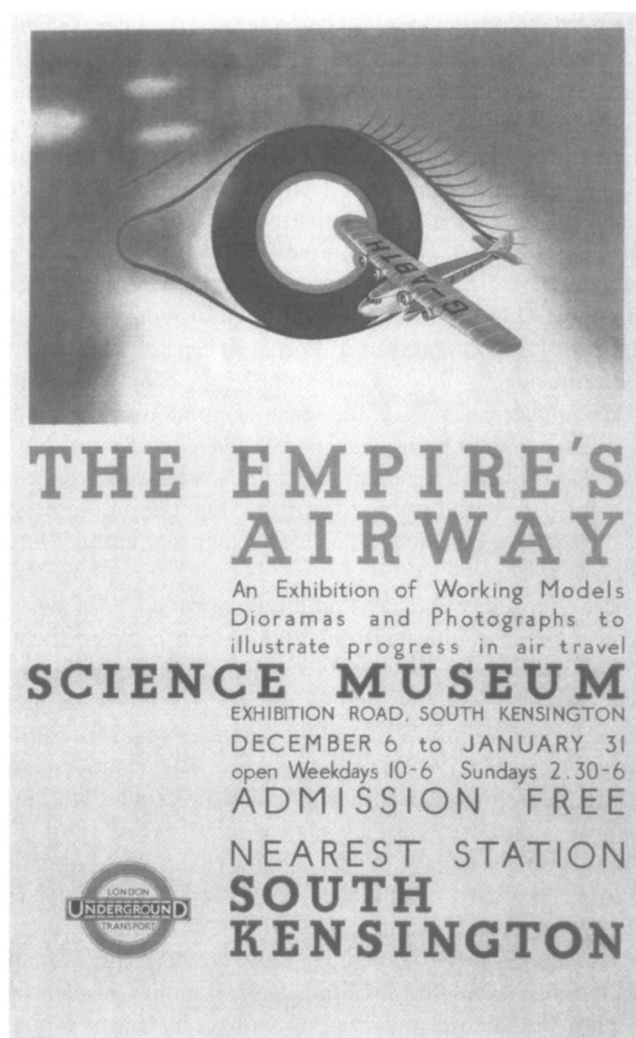


Figure 4. London Underground poster 'The Empire's Airway' 1935 (Anonymous). ©London Regional Transport. Reproduced by kind permission of the London Transport Museum.

some to cast London as a failed imperial city. In an essay written in the year of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, one architect complained that "the shortcoming of London, as a capital city, is that it is almost entirely devoid of the qualities of spaciousness and stateliness. It is not so much like a capital city as like a very large and overgrown provincial town" (Statham, 1897, p. 595).

But the face of the city could also be understood as a public expression of the particular character of different national imperialisms. A counter-discourse offered an interpretation of London's relative lack of a monumental cityscape as the manifestation of a distinctively British imperialism of liberalism and free-trade. In this rhetoric the Parisian cityscape became the product of bureaucracy and autocracy, while the new architecture and great avenues of Brussels were tainted by exposure of the horrors of Léopold's rule in the Congo (see Porter, 1968). The very difficulty of representing London as a single coherent and monumental imperial centre could be a positive marker of the particular character of British imperialism. In contrast to other European capitals Victorian London could be interpreted as "a statement

against absolutism, a proud expression of the energies and values of a free people" (Olsen, 1976, p. 329). One particular element of this view was a sense of London as a central space in constant motion, a site of restless commerce and frenetic activity. It was this movement, rather than static monuments and architecture, which was the prime public indicator of London's world centrality. The Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, when informed of a scheme to expedite the flows of traffic at Hyde Park Corner in 1878 replied that to remove the congestion "would be destroying one of the sights of London" (quoted in Port, 1995, p. 21). Similarly, in the travelogues of Indian visitors to London at the end of the nineteenth century, the sense of London's position at the centre of the Empire was more often associated with its 'whirlpool of activity' than fine public buildings; congestions of people and traffic as at Bank Junction in the heart of the City were picked out as tourist sights (Burton, 1996; Gilbert, 1999).

However, this emphasis on the distinctiveness of European imperial capitals and the competition between them, should not obscure the extent to which architects and planners operated within a common European context. In part this reflected the importance of the classical legacy for European imperialism. While the examples of Rome and Athens provided the theorists of empire with precedents and allusions (Betts, 1971), they also formed the basis of an established vocabulary for the urban expression of imperialism. The bombast of the Beaux-Arts style of architecture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (often referred to simply as 'imperial'), was a direct fusion of modern building technology and the classical motifs of imperial display. But this was only part of a longer history of capital planning and construction, in which the key elements of the imperial Roman landscape – ceremonial grand avenues, triumphal archways, heroic statues, columns and monuments – became a common language for the urban expression of national and imperial power (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 11).

As well as a shared reference to classical models, the common European context was also reflected in contemporary patterns of influence and exchange. It is clear, for example, that planners, architects and engineers in Britain were increasingly aware of developments elsewhere in Europe. Through publications, conferences, exhibitions, personal contacts, and travel writing of all kinds, a network – or rather a series of networks – were put in place, creating a kind of market in urban ideas, strategies and models. In the wake of the Paris International Exhibition of 1855, for example, the prize-winning designs in the competition for new Foreign and War Offices in Whitehall bore a close resemblance to Parisian models, including the new Louvre and the redesigned Hôtel de Ville (Port, 1995, p. 169). Half a century later, we find the young Patrick Abercrombie writing in the *Architectural Review* (1912) on the rebuilding of central Brussels.

Mapping 'Imperial London'

In order to develop a fuller understanding of the relationships between imperialism and the modern European city, it

is also necessary to move beyond the debates and networks of architects and planners. The imperial experience shaped much more than the official and ceremonial spaces of capital cities. Our example here is London, and this of course is a particular and special example, but parallel arguments can be made for other cities (see Driver and Gilbert, 1999). Our approach to the cultural geographies of imperial London owes something to recent work by cultural historians on the intertwining of the 'domestic' and 'imperial' histories of modern Britain (Hall, 1991; McClintock, 1995; Samuel, 1998). However, we are concerned in this paper not merely with texts or images but with landscapes, and we need to consider a variety of types of space – architectural, spectacular, representational and lived. Many of the spaces of the imperial capital, from ceremonial routeways to suburban gardens, were spaces in movement, shaped at least in part by those who inhabited them.

If we are to consider the ways in which the global processes of imperialism re-appeared in the urban context, we must take a broader perspective than has usually been adopted on the relationships between empire and urban design. In conventional architectural histories, for example, the imperial theme is often treated rather narrowly, in terms of both location and style. Thus for London the focus of work on 'imperial London' is often restricted to the official and ceremonial core around Westminster and Whitehall, and restricted to state architecture (Port, 1995). In British urban history, the term 'imperial' has often been used simply as shorthand for the period of high imperialism around 1900, with little detailed attention being paid to the diverse ways in which imperialism permeated the urban fabric (though see Schmeer (1999) for another perspective). In this paper, we question the assumption that London 'became' imperial in a circumscribed area and only for a limited period.

One way doing this is by extending the conventional chronology of London's history as an imperial capital. Joseph Addison, writing in *The Spectator* in 1711, described London as "a kind of Emporium for the whole Earth" (quoted in Porter, 1994, p. 131). Addison's description referred to the central city of a mercantile empire. Eighteenth-century London was simultaneously the political capital of a nation-state that increasingly defined its interests through overseas expansion, and the emergent hub of developing global system of trade, finance and exploitation. By the nineteenth century this conception of London's position and role in the world was almost ubiquitous, and was woven into popular understandings of the nature of the city. *Routledge's Popular Guide to London and its Suburbs* (1862, p. 1) an early tourist guide to the city described London "as the true centre of the world. . . . Its merchants are princes; the resolves of its financiers make and unmake empires and influence the destiny of nations."

Similarly, empire remained a significant influence on the geography of London long after the end of the late nineteenth century, a period often considered to be the zenith of British imperial power. Indeed, there is something of a mismatch between the political history of empire and its cultural manifestations. In the 1920s and 1930s, at a time

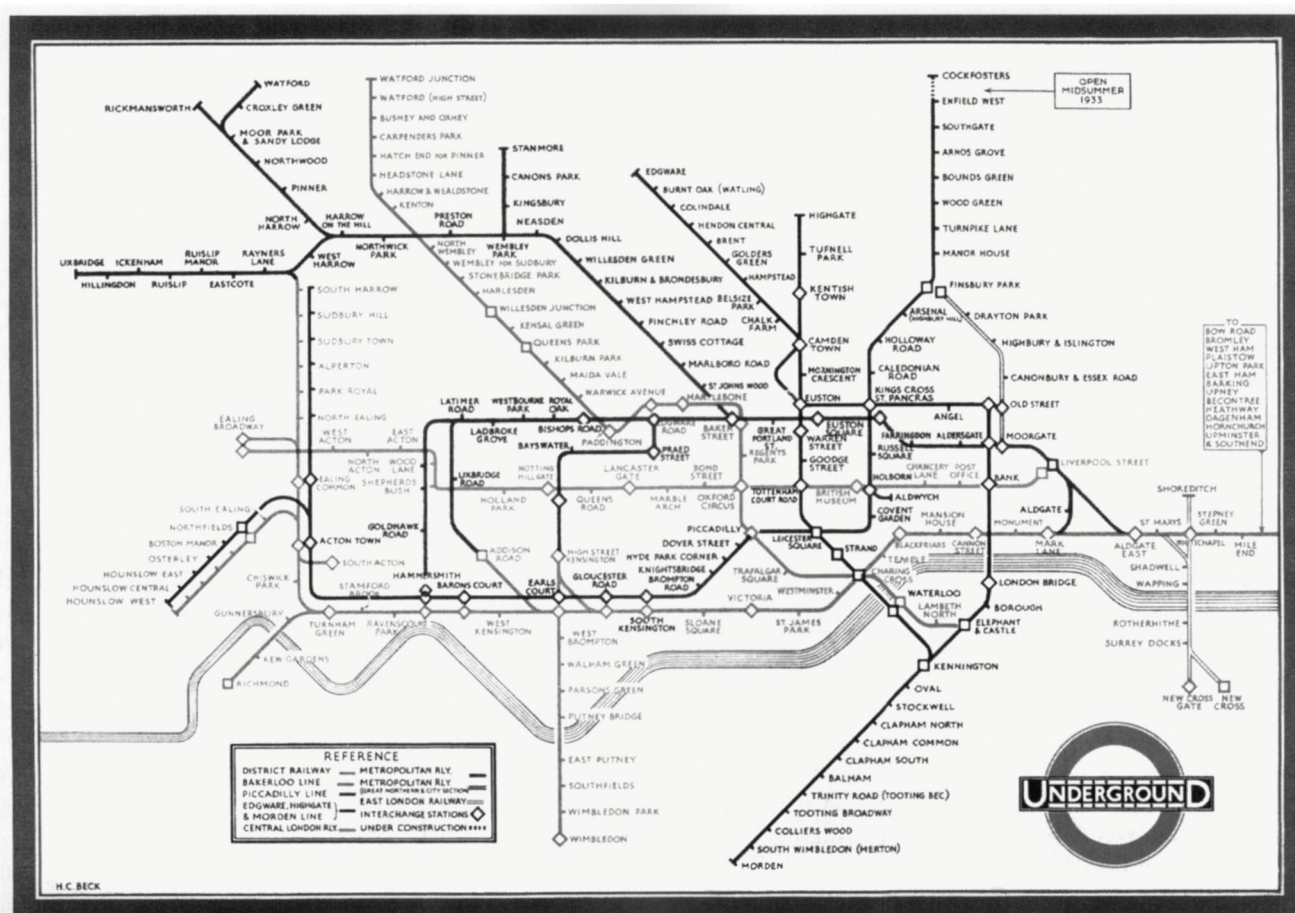


Figure 5. Harry Beck's 1932 new topological map of the London Underground. ©London Regional Transport. Reproduced by kind permission of the London Transport Museum.

when new capitals and 'a fresh syncretic imperial architecture' were being forged throughout the colonial world, the imperial states were 'reassuring themselves of their continuing power and influence by a late flowering of imperial forms' (MacKenzie, 1999, p. xi). It was also a time when the imperial influence was also perhaps most pronounced in everyday life within London. It is possible to identify a shift towards a more *domestic* sense of the imperial capital, less as a crucible of power and authority, than as a safe and familiar space uniting what British imperial propaganda increasingly portrayed as the family of Empire. For example in 1921 the Earl of Meath, creator of Empire Day and a host of other schemes for imperial education, proposed changes to the city which were designed to make its population more healthy, and 'a real home for the children of the empire' (Meath, 1921, p. 260, emphasis in the original; see also Aalen, 1989). Instead of bombastic architectural schemes for the ceremonial core, this view of the city sought to create 'rings of beauty' in the form of parks and gardens around its suburbs.

The year that saw the appearance of Dinkel's 'Visit the empire' posters also saw the production of the first modern version of the London Underground map, as famously re-designed by Harry Beck (Figure 5, see Garland, 1994). At first sight, the Underground map betrays little direct trace of the imperial city so evident in the Dinkel posters. Beck's

design, with its economy of form and sans-serif lettering is a masterpiece of modernist design, representing a distinctively modern form of urban transport. Unlike many of the street names of London, the station names on the Underground map make reference not to the geography of British imperialism, but to an older landscape of districts and villages incorporated into the metropolis. More indirectly, however, even the tube map speaks of the distinctiveness of London and its role as a national and imperial capital. The early development of the underground in London, and (unlike the Parisian Metro) its integration into a vast network of suburban lines, were indicative of the sheer scale of the city. By 1863 when the first underground line was opened, London had a population in excess of 3 million, and had far outgrown its European rivals. As distinctive was the sheer physical extent of the city, which by the early decades of the twentieth century stretched thirty kilometres from east to west and twenty from north to south. This phenomenon, the creation of the first 'world city', reflected and reinforced London's central position within networks of trade, influence, production and consumption that were increasingly global in extent.

Re-visiting the Empire by Underground

In what follows, we propose to re-visit London's imperial sites, taking our initial cue from Dinkel's 1932 posters

themselves. Most of the places named in these posters were either sites of imperial display (the museums and Imperial Institute at South Kensington, the Zoological and Botanical Gardens, and the British Museum at Holborn) or else were the sites of the offices of dominions and colonies, clustered for the most part in and around the Strand: two kinds of imperial centrality inscribed in the landscapes of the capital. In the first case, the process of imperial collection and display, so characteristic of nineteenth-century European imperial projects (Greenhalgh, 1988; Coombes, 1994; Anderson, 1995; Richards, 1993) itself exhibited a distinctive intra-urban geography in London. South Kensington's 'Albertopolis' (the museum complex built with the proceeds from the Great Exhibition) emerged as a highly distinctive and symbolic imperial landscape, linking science, art, technology, music and design (Barringer and Flynn, 1998). In the Imperial Institute at South Kensington the connection between empire and the collection of knowledge was at its most explicit; here the Empire was to be found 'under one roof' (Figure 6). In the second case, a kind of home space for colonial citizens in the imperial city was constructed: it was here that the 'dominions built their houses' - Canada and South Africa in Trafalgar Square, Australia and New Zealand in the Strand itself, India in the Aldwych beyond, with a host of smaller agencies and offices nearby, fostering a peculiarly imperial kind of cosmopolitanism.

But such sites of imperial centrality can be re-visited in other ways. Take, for example, Trafalgar Square station on the Bakerloo line (opened in 1906, but since 1979 incorporated into Charing Cross Station: Rose, 1988). Climbing the stairs into the Square, visitors find themselves in a place conventionally described as the 'heart of empire'. The nineteenth century saw a great deal of building in this area, with new government offices in Whitehall, the Thames Embankment scheme, the widening of the Mall, and the construction of the Victoria Memorial and the Admiralty Arch. The iconography and style of these buildings and monuments reflected various aspects of the culture of empire: to take a small example, the face of George Gilbert Scott's new Foreign and Colonial Offices in Whitehall, completed in 1874, included busts of the explorers Cook and Franklin, alongside that of the recently martyred David Livingstone: quite literally, the human face of empire-building.

Yet the results were not always as intended. Aston Webb's work on the triumphal axis running from Trafalgar Square, through the giant neo-classical Admiralty Arch, down the widened Mall to the Victoria Memorial and the refaced Buckingham Palace (completed in 1913) was the single most significant and self-consciously imperial reworking of urban space in London's history. However, even with this project, there were distinct limits to what could be achieved or sustained in London. A couple of years after the opening of the Admiralty Arch, the *Langham Hotel Guide* (1913, p. 178) lamented the changes that were already taking place around it: "Trafalgar Square has been described as the finest site in the Empire, and now that the new road has been opened under the Admiralty Arch to the Mall . . . something has been added to its amenities, though with characteristic

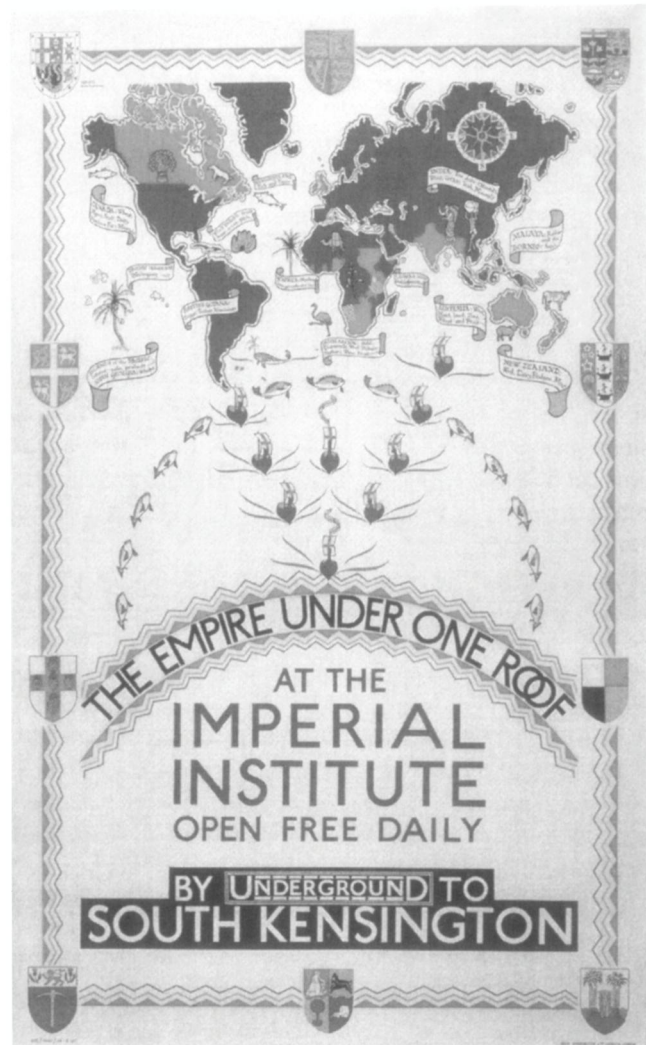


Figure 6. London Underground poster 'The Empire under one roof at the Imperial Institute' by Herry Perry, 1927. ©London Regional Transport. Reproduced by kind permission of the London Transport Museum.

failure to carry any civic improvement to its logical conclusion, new commercial buildings are to be erected so that the new arch will only be seen imperfectly."

Such incremental 'hugger-muggery' as contemporaries described it reflected the material realities of London's urban landscapes: the national capital was primarily a commercial city, where the market value of prime sites was always likely to encourage speculative developments even in the most auspicious of imperial spaces. There were repeated proposals for schemes to make London more fittingly 'imperial' during the nineteenth and early 20th centuries. The power of private capital, and particularly of the aristocratic estates that controlled much of the London's West End, often prevented schemes from leaving the drawing board. Those projects that were put into practice usually saw the rapid encroachment of commercial buildings and their associated clutter into urban settings that were supposed to demonstrate coherence and monumentality. At one level this was a general expression of the strength of laissez-faire liberalism in Britain, for governments of all parties were relatively unwilling to make major interventions in the urban land markets of London. The specific legal arrangements surrounding the

compulsory purchase of land and buildings for government schemes were relatively generous towards existing private owners of land and property. Compared with the situation in many other European capitals, the power of the state to alter the cityscape was severely limited.

This situation was exacerbated by London's system of government, in which localism consistently undermined metropolitan-wide projects of urban improvement. London had no real city government until the formation of the London County Council in 1888, and even then its powers were counterbalanced by a strong tier of local boroughs (local units of around 150,000 population). Before this the structure of London's government was a chaotic jumble of small units reaching back ultimately to the medieval systems of religious parishes and civic wards, each with an intensely local agenda. After 1855, a central Metropolitan Board of Works was introduced to co-ordinate city-wide improvements to infrastructure. However it had only limited powers to override local interests, and while it did have some substantial achievements, its role and ethos were reflected in its title – this was a body created to make utilitarian changes to the city, not to aggrandise it for the glory of nation and empire. London's experience was in marked contrast to the emerging industrial metropolises of northern England and Scotland, where strong centralised civic institutions led to the construction of important pieces of public architecture (see Port, 1995, p. 17). National governments, meanwhile, were usually hostile to expensive monumental schemes, and the majority of non-London MPs consistently voted against schemes to improve the city at the national taxpayers' expense. This was in part a reflection of the strength of economic liberalism in the British political establishment, and its hostility to massive public-financed projects. But it also reflected ambivalences about the urban and about grand architectural projects that extended deep into English culture.

Trafalgar Square itself needs to be understood as a contradictory imperial space. As one of the sites routinely described as 'the heart of the empire', it is tempting to read the iconography of the Square in terms of a display of British imperial prestige. However from the mid-nineteenth century onwards the Square became as much a site for political protest as for imperial display, a place of contested meanings. In periods of mass political unrest, spaces which had been consciously designed to symbolise imperial power could also become sites of challenge and resistance. Mace (1976) provides a particularly compelling account of the ways in which Trafalgar Square, designed as an imperial space during the nineteenth century, simultaneously became established as a site of political demonstration and protest. These two dimensions to the Square's history were of course related: the Square's officially monumentalised status as an 'emblem of Empire' provided the rationale for its use by those who challenged the nature of the imperial order. While Mace emphasises socialist and anti-fascist protest, the Square also provided the location for explicitly anti-colonial protests, such as those of the India League and Indian Freedom Campaign in the decade before Indian inde-

pendence. More recent demonstrations outside South Africa House during the apartheid era provide a further instance of the ways in which imperial politics continued to haunt the landscape of central London.

Re-visiting imperial London by underground takes us to a range of other sites in the capital. A few stops north of Trafalgar Square lies Bond Street in London's West End, another different kind of imperial space within the nineteenth and twentieth-century imperial capital. While the empire was being fed images of London's greatness as the capital city of the largest empire the world had ever known, London's population was quite literally consuming the empire. Empire, and its icons – from heroic explorers to the monarchy itself – were being commodified as never before (Richards, 1987). However, this explicit commodification of the symbols of the British Empire was only one of the ways in which Britain's imperial role was implicated in the transformation of shopping in the capital. While the modern department store appeared rather later in London than in Paris or New York, there was a long tradition in the retail trade of spectacular displays of goods from around the world. A direct lineage can be traced from the silks and other fineries sold in Georgian Regent Street through Liberty's position as 'the commercial wing of the entire Orient-influenced avant-garde' in the late nineteenth century, to Selfridges' explicit celebrations of its 'cosmopolitanism' (MacKenzie, 1995, p. 128; Nava, 1996). London's Victorian department stores, founded in an overtly imperial age, traded upon Britain's increasingly aggressive imperial self-image by positioning themselves at the centre of a world of trade and consumption. William Whiteley, the founder of London's first modern department store in 1863 famously styled himself 'The Universal Provider', a title which was designed to celebrate both the scope of his market and the range of his stock. Other stores, such as Harrods in Knightsbridge, were more ambivalent about the growing middle-class market; but Harrods' telegraphic address ('Everything, London') was if anything still more imperial in scope. Smaller chain stores, such as Lipton's, provided further material links between the farthest corners of the empire and the everyday spaces of London's population.

It was not just that the origins and range of goods testified to London's global reach; within many stores the displays and even performances involved in the selling of goods invested the act of purchase with a range of cultural meanings. As Mica Nava (1996, p. 49) has suggested, spectacular and exoticised oriental 'extravaganzas', including live tableaux of Hindu temples, Cairo markets and Turkish harems in the larger department stores, "were a major source of popular knowledge about empire, other cultures and other aesthetic formations". Stores also played their part in official performances of imperial ceremony. The large shopping streets of the West End were often on the routes for coronations and other state occasions. At these times the interests of commerce and state converged, temporarily transforming the landscape into a coherent celebratory space. For example, for the coronation of George VI in 1937, Selfridges transformed itself into a giant imperial monument complete with

allegorical figures representing the different colonies and dominions.

A third stop on this alternative tour of imperial London finds the visitor at Bank station, 3 km east of Bond Street. Immediately above the station is Bank junction, which in the 1840s ‘began to acquire the characteristics of an imperial Roman forum’ when the Royal Exchange was rebuilt with a massive temple portico (Black, 1999). The northern side of the junction is enclosed by John Soane’s neo-classical windowless wall to the Bank of England. Above Soane’s wall towers Herbert Baker’s massive 1930s rebuilding of the Bank, one of the most distinctive examples of what is perhaps best described as late-imperial architecture in London. The junction was at the centre of the financial district of the City, and was yet another space that was sometimes identified as ‘the heart of Empire’. In addition to its functional role in the financing of empire, the City was also a key site for imperial ceremony and performance, especially after the re-invention of the monarchy in the late 19th century. In the Diamond Jubilee procession of 1897, Bank Junction was transformed by giant allegorical paintings, bunting and imported evergreen trees. The City was also the site of more spontaneous demonstrations of patriotic and imperial sentiment. In 1901, the *Financial Times* reported that the Stock Exchange provided the gathering place “for some 5 000 City men who had gone crazy over the news of the relief of Mafeking... [T]he whole of the markets had been lavishly decorated with flags” (Quoted in Kynaston, 1995, p. 208). It was surely no coincidence that 82 years later Margaret Thatcher chose to review the Falklands War ‘victory parade’ outside the Mansion House; there was presumably no better location in which to resuscitate distant memories of empire.

The Mafeking celebrations prompted anxiety and concern among some commentators about the consequences of imperialism – and more particularly of *popular* imperialism – for the future of the city. In his book *From the Abyss* (1902), the liberal progressive Charles Masterman characterised the Mafeking celebrations as a kind of alien invasion, bringing uncontrollable forces to the surface, threatening to engulf the very moral and physical fabric of society. A year earlier in an essay on ‘Realities at Home’, Masterman had commented on what he perceived as a new imperial mass, of ‘grey streets, grey people, a drab monotony’ (Masterman, 1901, p. 16). In these demoralised regions, Masterman argued, a new ‘city type’ had come into being: “stunted, narrow-chested and easily wearied; yet voluble, excitable, with little ballast, stamina or endurance – seeking stimulus in drink, in betting, in any unaccustomed conflicts at home or abroad” (Masterman, 1901, pp. 7–8). While Masterman was fearful of popular imperialism, others sought to harness concern over the health and welfare of London’s population to imperial ends: indeed, there was a long tradition of portraying the social condition of London (and especially its East End, a few stops to the East of Bank Junction) in the imperial context, as offering an implicit contrast – or even a rebuke – to the glamour of British enterprise overseas. The founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, put it this way in 1890: “As there is a darkest Africa is there not also

a darkest England?” (Booth, 1890, p. 1). For Booth, the city was a problem and the empire was part of the solution; the ‘way out’ of decay in the metropolis lay ultimately in colonial emigration (Driver, 2001).

The East End of London lay adjacent to the docks, itself a distinctive imperial landscape. Early editions of Baedeker’s guide to London promoted the docks as an unmissable spectacle, ‘the centre from which the commerce of England radiates all over the globe’ (1889, p. 118). The ebb and flow of goods at the docks determined the fortunes of hundreds of thousands of working-class people; there was in this sense no more significant site in the landscape of empire. For many immigrants, the first sight of London was of a strange dockland landscape, from a ship sailing up the Thames estuary. A combination of location, available accommodation, and job opportunities in the casual labour markets of the docks and the sweated trades meant that by the end of the nineteenth century, the docklands and the surrounding East End were the most culturally and ethnically diverse part of the city. In addition to substantial immigration from rural England and Wales, the main migrations were from Ireland, and (in the 1880s and 1890s) Jewish migration from eastern Europe. The docks also had much smaller communities from India, China, Malaysia, West Africa, Somalia and the Yemen. (Merriman and Visram, 1993, p. 11).

The ‘nexus of attitudes and values’ associated with the imperial functions of the docks did not just look outwards to an overseas empire, but also influenced the nature of politics and violence within London. (Schneer, 1994, 1999) During the twentieth century, racist organizations like the Oswald Moseley’s British Union of Fascists targetted the East End not only because of the presence of a large Jewish community, but also because of the particular imperial history of east London. The docks were a point of departure for many imperial military expeditions; in 1900, for example, troops left from the Royal Albert Dock and the East India Dock to quell both the Boers and the Boxers. As social historians have long pointed out, the docks and their hinterland in the East End were renowned for industrial and political militancy, but it must be acknowledged that they also provided the setting for some of the largest demonstrations of popular imperialism ever seen.

Beyond the docks, to the south, the east and the west lay the new and rapidly extending landscapes of suburbia. The expansion of London’s urban space during the period between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries was stimulated by the growth of salaried work, and the expansion of the public transport system to places like Willesden Green, Clapham Common, and Shepherd’s Bush at the turn of the century, and then on to places like Hendon, Wood Green, Balham and Boston Manor in the inter-war period. Suburbia is a cultural landscape usually interpreted in terms of the coming of ‘modernity’, as represented in the mass-production of little homes and the mass-consumption of domestic commodities, rather than ‘empire’. Yet the imperial theme was not entirely absent here too: many suburban dwellers had a familiar and domesticated relationship to the Empire, seeing it as much as an extension of ‘home’ as an

exotic 'other'. While some women were attempting to make an 'English home' in India or on the South African veldt, others were returning to the London suburbs and Home Counties influenced by their experience of Empire (Samuel, 1998, p. 94).

The influence of imperialism was inscribed on suburban landscapes. There are six streets named after Mafeking in the standard A-Z Atlas of London, along with eight Ladysmiths and no less than eighteen Kimberleys. Popular imperial culture also played its part in the design of homes. The bungalow, derived from India, was exported throughout the world, and had a particular appeal to retired civil servants and officers living in suburban Britain (King, 1997). In a different way, the derided Tudorbethan semi-detached house, one of the stock styles of the massive inter-war growth of London's suburbia, might also be read as a comforting sign of a glorious imperial past (Ryan, 1995). On a grander scale, there was London's Empire Way, a route which led not to some royal palace, but to the twin towers of Wembley Stadium, in suburban North-West London, originally constructed for the British Empire Exhibition of 1924. The guide to the Exhibition invited visitors 'to inspect the Empire from end to end' (Quoted in MacKenzie, 1984, p. 108).

The final stop of this tour of imperial London takes us south east to Greenwich and its Royal Observatory. Here tourists and visiting schoolchildren are invited stand astride the Prime Meridian and experience the whole world divided into two between their feet. Greenwich was the site of the most universal claims for London's world centrality, as it became the point of origin for the measurement of both space and time (Cosgrove and Martins, 2000). This sense of centrality was reinforced in many other ways during the 19th and 20th centuries: the Millennium Dome is only the latest attempt (and in many ways the least successful) to project London's image as the capital of the world. In 1911, for example, a giant 'Pageant of London' took place at the Festival of Empire at the Crystal Palace in Sydenham. Thousands of amateur performers acted out scenes from both Britain's imperial history and the story of London, in an amphitheatre surrounded by huge (though rather flimsy) models of London landmarks. The pageant culminated in an allegorical masque where figures representing parts of the Empire paid tribute to the 'mother city' (Ryan, 1999). This sense of London's centrality also extended beyond spectacular pageants. From 1904 onwards, Empire Day was celebrated every year in hundreds of schools throughout suburban London as well as in thousands more around the Empire.

Post-Imperial reflections

From the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park, there is a fine view of London, famously painted by J.M.W. Turner in 1809. The main elements of Turner's landscape can still be seen today – in the foreground, Wren's Royal Naval Hospital building, then beyond, looking north-west, the Greenwich and Limehouse reaches of the Thames, and in the distance the dome of St. Paul's rising above the city. But there are many newer sights too, most obviously the obtrusive bulk of the Canary Wharf development in Docklands, and also

a vast number of other buildings – the towers of the City, the housing blocks of north and East London, and at either extreme of the vista, the Millennium Wheel ('the London Eye') and the Dome. The contrast with the equivalent view from, say, the balcony of the Sacré Coeur is striking. This is not an ordered and planned landscape, a rational expression of centralised power, but a seemingly incoherent mish-mash of styles and influences.

Looking out from Greenwich, we should reflect on what has been learned from this tour of the imperial capital. The age of great imperial cities, we have argued, was simultaneously an age of great anxiety. If the imperial city was often represented in the language of grandeur and order, it was also marked by tension and ambivalence. Allusions to the past glories of Rome in nineteenth-century writings on the British empire had an unsettling edge. The sense that London's pre-eminence might pass, indeed that it - like ancient Rome - might sink into corruption and decay, was never far from the surface. Gustave Doré's well-known image of the New Zealander gazing from the South Bank towards a ruined city in *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872), provides one example. Joseph Conrad was more direct in his pointed remarks about the history and fate of London in *Heart of Darkness*, while his story *The Secret Agent* tells the tale of an attempt to blow up the Royal Observatory itself. Looking out over London from Greenwich today it is tempting to conclude that the culture of empire in Britain was in the end too hesitating and too contradictory to have left a lasting mark on the face of the city. The illegibility of imperial London today is not at all equivalent to the apocalyptic vision of imperial London's demise anticipated by Doré: yet it seems just as clearly to mark a break with the city's imperial past.

Nonetheless, this conclusion would be too simplistic. The argument in this paper suggests that contemporary London might properly be conceived as a *post-imperial* space, not simply in the sense that the city once was, and is no longer, an imperial capital. For there were many different kinds of imperial city; and even within a single city, such as London, the imperial experience was registered in very different ways in different places. For each of the stops on our tour of imperial London it is possible to trace the complex and often contradictory ways in which the imperial past has shaped the post-imperial present. There is much to suggest that the fundamental dimensions of imperial history have an after-life in the present city, shaping contemporary economic realities, racial politics, and cultural forms (Jacobs, 1996, p. 24). Looking back at imperial London through post-imperial eyes helps put this into perspective, and also to shift our focus.

It is important to recognise that London was a dominant centre of political power, trade, and finance, and to take seriously official and popular cultures that promoted and understood the metropolis as the centre of the world. But there were others for whom the geography of empire was not a simple pattern of centre and margins, and for whom London was a route to another place rather than the ultimate destination. If we think about London's position in the geographies of *anti-imperialism* and resistance, this

becomes clearer. Paul Gilroy's account of the development of a 'Black Atlantic' culture through the historical experience of slavery and forced migration forces us to question London's unquestioned centrality in the familiar hegemonic geographies of imperialism (Gilroy, 1993). Gilroy's readings of the culture of dissent within the Black Atlantic locate the city as another port of call on a long maritime voyage. Atlantic journeys of resistance, he argues, were characteristic of the lives of C.L.R. James, George Padmore, Marcus Garvey, Harold Moody and many others. A similar geography can be constructed for the campaigns for Indian national independence, in which London was a stop on a journey undertaken by many, Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah included. As seen from perspective of the Foreign Office, or the City of London, the geography of empire looked like the street map of an idealised imperial Rome or Haussmanised Paris, with great avenues of power radiating out from a single central Piazza or Place. For others the street map of empire was more like the London A-Z, a less coherent, more complex geography of central spaces and major thoroughfares, but also of cross-cutting back-streets, lanes and alleys.

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