Sanitising the Thames: from the spectacle of infrastructure to the infrastructure of spectacle
A history of London is a history of a settlement’s relationship to water. London, as a Roman settlement, existed because of the Thames; it was navigable by ship, its topography provided a defensible space, and served by numerous springs and tributaries that provided clean drinking water. Through the medieval, early modern and modern periods, London’s connection to the river and surrounding landscape changed, but it remained a key axis and resource at the heart of the city. Through probing the relationship of London’s water - both fresh and waste - and the political dynamics of urban space, we might seek to interrogate key infrastructural developments of the 19th and 20th centuries in relation to spectacle.

Spectacle is understood here as a complex and changing term. Through the Victorian era, spectacle, derived from the Old French ‘to look’ contains within it notions of the public. It might describe something set before a public gaze as an object of admiration or derision. Later in the 20th century we might begin to associate the spectacle with Guy Debord as a diagnosis of society under capitalism. Similarly infrastructure, a word that emerged in the 1870s in relation to railway construction, is inextricably linked to the technical provision of systems that support and shape urban life. Our understanding of infrastructure, is not just as physical things, but more abstract concepts, flows or structures that underpin a system. As Gandy puts it: “As the emphasis shifted from façade to function, the ornate hydrological paraphernalia of the early industrial cities were superseded by a new technological calculus.” This essay suggests that this calculus has been distorted to help provide the infrastructure of contemporary spectacle.

On the spectacle of infrastructure

By the middle of the 19th century, the Thames – its status as the city’s sewer long-established by a combination of topography and rudimentary approaches to the disposal of waster water – had begun to emit a terrible odour. An 1853 letter to The Builder, quoted in Stephen Halliday’s The Great Stink of London, details the state of the Thames as follows:

“The flood… is now, below London Bridge, bad as poetical descriptions of the Stygian Lake, while the London Dock is black as Acheron… where are ye, ye civil engineers? Ye can remove mountains, bridge seas and fill rivers… can ye not purify the Thames, and so render your own city inhabitable?”

Although Halliday finds evidence of this condition as early as 1853, it took another five years and one long, hot summer, to summon the political will to do something about it. During “the summer of 1858 the ‘Great Stink’ was on the point of driving Parliament from London”. So bad was the stench, that the windows of the Houses of Parliament were hung with “drapes soaked in chloride of lime” to cleanse the atmosphere.

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Of course, that it took the miasma to reach parliament before anything was done about it should come as no surprise. Within the entrenched class dynamics of London's geography, it was the poorer areas that were subject to bouts of the waterborne disease, cholera. The pervasive belief that cholera spread through the air – through the miasma of an infected stench – meant little to a political elite that banked on London's prevailing westerly. When the miasma finally overwhelmed parliament, the perception that it carried an increased risk of contagious disease meant it was time to act. Although, as Moore notes, there existed a “Balkanised” set of institutions that derived powers from no fewer than “three hundred different bodies” and “two hundred and fifty local Acts”, Disraeli was able to pass a bill that led, in 1855, to the creation of the Metropolitan Board of Works.6

Joseph Bazalgette was appointed to the role of Chief Engineer of Metropolitan Board of Works. While the remit of the Board covered the development of a city-wide solution to London's waste water, the scope of the works that were undertaken would eventually include rehousing 40,000 from slum conditions, as well as the creation of new roads, public spaces and river crossings.7 Our focus though, is the Thames, and its relationship to the hydro-infrastructure that brackets it. To deal with the problem of sewage, Bazalgette proposed a scheme that, at its core, involved the creation of two large intercepting sewers. These two sewers – the Northern Outfall Sewer and the Southern Outfall Sewer – would run alongside the Thames, preventing sewage from reaching its waters in central London and dumping the sewage far enough down river in Barking that it wouldn't be able to wash back up during tidal flows.8

While it’s true that what we might loosely term ‘water infrastructure’ had existed in London prior to the intervention of the Metropolitan Board of Works, it had primarily been concerned with the provision of water, rather than its removal.9 It was, in other words, concerned with water as a commodity – as a saleable product – but not with the negative externalities produced by the sale and consumption of that product: sewage. Water provision as an entrepreneurial field existed as early as 1600: Sir Hugh Myddleton spotted that through the stress of an increasing population, and the scarcity of increasingly polluted supplies through wells, springs and smaller Thames tributaries, there existed a market for fresh water.10 With the financial backing of King James I, Myddleton, between 1609 and 1613 created the New River: a man-made canal that brought spring water from Hertfordshire, to Spa Green in London.11

Although both the New River and the Metropolitan Board of Works infrastructural interventions share similarities – the motives of financial and political elites – they might be distinguished in relation to capital. One, born of profit-motive to satisfy a public need, the other, a state-led initiative to deal with a public problem. What unites them, as Gandy notes in The Fabric of Space, is that “water is inextricably linked with the idea of

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7 Ibid, pp. 103-130.
8 It should be noted that the sewage still entered the Thames, but, at least it wasn't stinking out Parliament anymore.
9 It should be noted, as Matthew Gandy discusses in the first chapter of The Fabric of Space, that ‘infrastructure’ as a term originates in France in 1870s. While we might refer to historicise projects as ‘infrastructure’ we should be careful to explore whether they contain the same kind of public connotations that the use of ‘infrastructure’ in this context might convey.
infrastructure as a technical and organisational domain that underpins the functional dynamics of urban space.”

In Bazalgette’s historical moment, the infrastructural outcomes of a hydro-politics that delivered sanitation, are intimately tied to the development of the state within a framework of 19th century nation building.

Of particular interest in Bazalgette’s scheme is the relationship that exists between the aesthetics of its surface and sub-surface implementation. Here, we might draw a distinction between the framework that at points carries the sewers, and the technical infrastructure of the sewers themselves. The distinction say, between the Thames embankment, and the sewers that it was built to house. To look at the sewers specifically, is to see a network that presents itself as spectacle when it breaks the surface. As Gandy states, water infrastructure consists of “a largely unnoticed skein of technological systems”; it’s notable that when Bazalgette’s works present themselves to the gaze, they do so as an image that obfuscates their function. The Abbey Mills Pumping Station, known, as the ‘Cathedral of Sewage’, and the Crossness Pumping Station are built in “Byzanto-Moorish” and “neo-Romanesque” styles respectively. There’s none of the austere Victorian functionalism of the Lea Valley’s Markfield Beam Engine. Instead, both exist as an elaborate architectural confection that seems to distract from what’s contained within. Below ground, the sewers take the form of circular pipes. Nothing more than their function demands, and notably different, as Gandy shows, to the ornate vaulted structures of the sewers of Paris. A difference of temperament: Parisians valorise their waste, Londoners don’t.


Of course, we should note that the Victorians were no strangers to the generation of spectacle. Paxton’s Crystal Palace, built for the 1851 Great Exhibition, is clearly evidence of that. What distinguishes Bazalgette’s above surface works, are their manifestation of a spectacle of infrastructure: the Crystal Palace was essentially a grand folly, a comprehensive London sewage regime, was not.


The Victoria Embankment, houses the central London section of the Northern Outfall Sewer. It is, according to Moore “what 1960s architectural dreamers would call a megastructure, an extruded multilayered construction that performed technical and social purposes simultaneously. But it was achieved and real. It was a platform for modernity, albeit framed with conservative masonry and ornamental cast-iron.” Reclaimed from marshland that bordered the Thames, the Victoria Embankment houses the infrastructural framework of the sewer, along with the underground railway that’s now known as the District Line. Above the surface it’s hard to imagine the north bank – choked as it is currently by motor traffic – as a Victorian parade. Nonetheless, it contained a number of public gardens reclaimed from the river, was the first street in London to be lit at night by street lighting, and for Moore it represented a democratisation of space: “embanked river terraces had previously been properties of privileged places such as Somerset House and the Adelphi development, but now they belonged to everybody.”

This nascent riverside spectacle, the result of Bazalgette’s programme of works, “changed London’s relation to the river in ways that are still being interpreted and explored.” The 1870 opening of the Thames embankment made London’s relationship with the river “less intimate, ending the small interactions of wharves, steps and yards that had taken place along a tide-blurred boundary of land and water.” Gone, were the nooks and crannies, dead-ends, and liminal spaces that existed between tidal flows, in their place Bazalgette created a rationalised granite canyon, shuttering the banks of the Thames and making its waters “flow faster and more precisely.” It’s tempting to read this transformation of the river’s flow as an allegory for industrial capitalism: it reads as an exercise in alienation. The Thames, once engaged with through the quotidian lived experience of the city at all its messy, ill-formed edges, becomes accelerated as a result of a centralised, paternal, development. In

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19 Ibid, p. 115.
20 Ibid, p. 115.
21 Ibid, p. 115.
22 Ibid, p. 115.
restructuring this lived experience, the functional dynamics of urban space are altered. For Moore, from 1870, if the Thames “remained a working river, it also became something more to be looked at than experienced.”

On the infrastructure of spectacle

Guy Debord – chief orchestrator of the Situationist International from its founding in 1957 to its dissolution in 1972 – writing in 1967, identified the movement from experience to image as the central (broadly American-European) condition of modernity under capitalism. Following Marx, and particularly, Lukacs’ insights into the nature of alienation, Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* describes the dominance of the commodity form in everyday life. The spectacle describes an ontology in which the relationship between commodities comes to dominate the social relationships between the workers that produce them: for Debord, “the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.” While the basis for this critical formulation developed from the rise of mass media, advertising, public relations and so on, through the early 20th century, Debord extended the impact of the spectacle to all forms of life.

While in 1967 Debord would draw a distinction between two forms of the spectacle – the diffuse, in broadly capitalist states; and the concentrated, in countries dominated by fascism or dictatorships – he would, in 1988, revise his distinction to include a third type of arrangement, that of the ‘integrated spectacle’. The integrated spectacle brings together elements of both the diffuse and concentrated forms, but in societies in which the diffuse has shown itself to be stronger. It’s this form, in which the role of the leader in the concentrated spectacle is replaced by an other, that of terrorism, difference, or fear of an unidentified collective that might threaten a shared way of life, that has come to dominate. The integrated spectacle “integrates itself into reality to the same extent that it speaks of it”, in short, it restructures reality within its bounds. In London, this means that broader frame of Western (neo)liberal democracy is simply viewed as the only game in town: the spectacle possesses an unquestioned realism, subsuming and mitigating revolutionary activity within it.

We might conceive of architecture as a history of image making. As a discipline it is – in its speculative proposals and materialised projects – concerned with representation: how do things look. A simple incorporation of Debord’s critique might be to draw parallels between architecture’s reliance on representation, with the oft-quoted statement that “in societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.” To make architectural propositions is often to deal in spectacles. This is though, a rather simplistic undervaluing of Debord’s critical insight, and it’s through the fuller understanding of the spectacle, detailed above, that the term should be employed. Through this reading of spectacle – an etymological movement that chimes with the development of industrial capitalism through the 19th and 20th centuries – we might hope to interrogate the most recent infrastructural proposals that surround the Thames.

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Since the turn of the 21st century we might identify three key pieces of infrastructure that relate to the Thames. Firstly, the desalination plant at Beckton, owned by Thames Water, secondly, the Emirates Air Line that runs between the Royal Docks and Greenwich Peninsula, and thirdly the proposals for the Garden Bridge. These three projects, two built, one proposed, relate to the Thames in different ways. The desalination plant at Beckton treats the Thames – which is “effectively a tidal canal” – as an unlimited resource. The Emirates Air Line – a folly masquerading as a piece of infrastructure – initially treated the Thames as an obstacle to be crossed, but now markets itself as a mode of “enjoying great views”. The Garden Bridge, similarly, treats the Thames as an untapped site of leisure, while wearing the mask of a ‘much-needed’ river crossing. What these projects share, is that the “intersecting flows of water and capital” that have shaped them, “reveal the wider political dynamics of the urban arena.” They act as part infrastructure of spectacle, that is, of a maintenance of status-quo politics, and business-as-usual attitudes to the wider environment they shape.

The success of Bazalgette’s Board of Metropolitan Works also ushered in the creation of the Metropolitan Water Board in 1903. This publicly run body, was put in charge of London’s water supply. It was privatised in 1989, creating Thames Water. The creation the for-profit commercial entity Thames Water thus involved the transfer of huge amounts of land, technical apparatus, and sub-surface infrastructure away from public ownership. Privatisation as a neoliberal ideological project births commercial enterprises that subscribe to the Cartesian capitalism and nature formulation that Jason Moore describes in the Capital in the Web of Life. The response to short-term issues of supply – and thus, short-term reductions in profit that dissatisfy shareholders – is then a technocratic response to the solving of a particular problem: at the turn of the 21st century, Thames Water noticed that summer droughts were hampering its ability to supply water to customers. Rather than suggesting that – within the frame of the Anthropocene – the answer might be to use less water, or to fix the leaks that resulted in around a 25% loss of its total supply, Thames Water proposed building an energy-intensive desalination plant. What we’re left with is a response to droughts (a result of climate change) that presents itself as a zero-sum game: in drought conditions, burn huge amounts of fuel to clean sea-water, thus providing a short-term fix to the water supply, and exacerbating long-term conditions that choke that very water supply.

It should come as no surprise that planning permission for the desalination plant was granted under the Mayoral tenure of Boris Johnson: a one-man embodiment of the relationship between the concentrated and diffuse spectacle. Johnson was also responsible for the second and third of our infrastructural examples, ones that reveal the network of vested interests and flows of capital that exist between City Hall and a web of celebrities, private developers, and urban elites. The first of these, the Emirates Air Line, might be viewed as a Garden Bridge test run. Devised by Johnson, the cable car that spans the Thames from Greenwich to the Royal Docks opened in

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2012. Its planning was contingent on a private finance model that locks in corporate sponsorship, with a promised ‘no obligation’ to the tax payer. Of course, with budget overruns, this promised no obligation developed into £24 million taken from Transport For London’s budget.31 Touted as an important commuter link and addition to the public transport network, the cable car managed, in 2013, to garner an impressive total of four regular commuters.32

This type of tourist-attraction-cum-public-asset, a proposition that expresses an infrastructure-without-infrastructure as we might understand it in the non-spectacular sense, is also evident in the proposal for the Garden Bridge. Johnson, "keen to find an iconic piece of green infrastructure that can symbolise London as a high quality of life place to live” backed Joanna Lumley’s campaign for a new piece of ‘green infrastructure’: a bridge with some trees on it wedged between Waterloo Bridge and Blackfriars Bridge.33 Proposed as £60 million, the estimated cost of the project ballooned to £200 million, this time with a revised pledge from Johnson, that Transport For London would cover the operating costs when the Garden Bridge Trust couldn’t raise the funds. On 28 April 2017, Mayor Sadiq Khan, following Margaret Hodge’s report into value for the taxpayer, scrapped the project citing a huge funding gap and the alarming spend of £37.4 million of public funds without anything having been built.34

The Garden Bridge might be regarded as exemplary of the infrastructure of spectacle. If we forget for a moment the politics of its murky procurement (the fact that Joanna Lumley sat on Heatherwick Studio’s board; the unclear pre-existing relationships between Johnson, Lumley and Heatherwick), forget too the claims of green infrastructure, and instead see the reformist greening dissected by Ross Adams, what we’re left with is architecture-as-image.35 This spectacular image: hazy morning light, blue skies and sun-dappled trees sat over still water, marks “different star-commodities simultaneously support contradictory projects for provisioning society”.36 The spectacle of the construction industry meets the spectacle of greening. The backdrop, the spectacle of the city made safe against the Anthropocene, “is falsified immediately since the actual consumer can

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32 Four commuters used River Thames cable car, figures show, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-25022640, accessed 27/04/2017
directly touch only a succession of fragments”, the bridge, a piece of spectacular green infrastructure, becomes one of those fragments in which “the quality attributed to the whole is obviously missing every time.”

“Let's stop carping and build the Garden Bridge”

One thing we might legitimately praise the Garden Bridge for is that it served (in the Press) as an entry point for the critical unpicking of the contemporary politics and infrastructure of spectacle that surrounds the Thames. If, as Gandy states, “the transformation of human interaction with water has been an organisational and technological telos for the rationalisation of urban space” we might read these sanitising infrastructural interventions – now as infrastructure-without-infrastructure – as emblematic of the state of contemporary London and society as a whole. It's representative of a movement from the industrial capitalism of Victorian paternalism – with its early forms of state-led infrastructure and restructuring of urban space – to the short-term thinking and hyper-capitalised spaces of today.

So what of the failed Garden Bridge? Well, the response to the Hodge report by the Garden Bridge Trust was simply to say ‘let's stop carping’, put any critical concerns about the divestment of money from the public purse

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to one side and just build the thing. Of course, basing your planning propositions on a Nike slogan doesn’t stand up to scrutiny. But what should be remembered is that these spectacular architectural proposals are only one method deployed by the assemblage of councils, developers, real-estate speculators, construction professionals, and town hall employees that make up contemporary London’s property-based class war machine: for every stopped Garden Bridge there exist dozens of euphemistic estate ‘regenerations’ and disposessions. The challenge might be to keep on carping on: to try and unpick these non-spectacular elements of the spectacle with the same forensic precision that was brought to bear on the Garden Bridge.
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Images

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