Building Site Ontologies: post-war London in the paintings of Auerbach and Kossoff

**Abstract:**

This paper develops an account of post-war London from the building site paintings of Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. It approaches these paintings as a visceral and embodied source of data regarding the post World War Two landscape of bomb damaged London. It contrasts this form of knowledge with the narratives of memorialisation, and order and control, which I argue characterise post-war reconstruction. In this context the paintings are read as an ontological statement about the complexity and ambiguity of the urban landscape, one which contrasts with historical and contemporary narratives of the urban built environment. The paper posits that knowledgeswhich preserve the complexities and materialities of urban space have the potential to provide political interventions into both historical and contemporary narratives of the city.

**Keywords:** Building Site; Frank Auerbach; Leon Kossoff; reconstruction; Painting; Urban Studies; Post-War

Introduction

In this paper the building site paintings made by Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff in the 1950s and early 1960s form the basis for a set of claims regarding the nature of post-war reconstruction, andurban ontology. In their paintings Kossoff and Auerbach produceanaccount of the city which records the ambiguity revealed by both bombsites and building sites. These paintings offer a counter-narrative to post-war discourses of memorialisation[[1]](#endnote-1), and of ordering and control.[[2]](#endnote-2)Instead they document the mess and tenuousness that underpins the city. For Auerbach and Kossoff building sites appear both hopeful and traumatic, an exposure of something of the city usually tidied away or concealed through processes of planning and development. In 1964 Ruth Glass writes that London after nearly 20 years of reconstruction was still “riddled with self-inflicted injuries, which cannot easily be patched up”[[3]](#endnote-3). Reconstruction did not solve London’s urban problems and Auerbach and Kossoff capture the city’s resistance to the imposition of order.

The paper will introduce a set of literatures on wartime and post-war London which establish the messy and ambiguous nature of destruction and reconstruction.Following this the paper will develop an account of two contrasting attempts to deal with this unsettling ambiguity: memorialisation and organisation. The paper thenintroduces the literature on this era of Auerbach and Kossoff’s careers and detailed accounts of some of these paintings. I suggest that the paintingsare a source of data both as a historical account of this era, and a broader ontological counter narrative regarding the city. The paper looks specifically at paintings made by these artists at the Shell Centre building site, positioning them within a longer narrative of this location.This long view of the site supports a set of claims that the material culture of building sites reveals a city which is only ever reluctantly ‘ordered’ through process of reconstruction, and construction. By contrasting these paintings with contemporary logics of calculation and financialisation[[4]](#endnote-4) at the Shell Centre site, which reduce decisions about the urban built environment to a series of commercial decisions, the paper positions Auerbach and Kossoff’s paintings as an urban counter knowledge.One which highlights the incapacity of financialised approaches to account adequately for the reality of the city. This paper positions these paintings as a form of critical urban knowledge, that counters dominant narratives of the urban environment. In this sense this paper emphasises the political value of urban representation in what David Madden has called “the field of contestation over urban space itself”[[5]](#endnote-5).

Methodologically, the paper is influenced by work by human geographers on the value of art as both source material and methodology[[6]](#endnote-6), not taking a purely visual approach[[7]](#endnote-7) but also incorporating an attentiveness to materiality and embodiment. I also draw on anthropological approaches to art objects as more than visual, as holding their own capacity to hold ‘agency’ in the world[[8]](#endnote-8). This focus on the materiality of the paintings discussed is demanded by the sheer heft of paint used by the artists, but also a reflection of material culture’s capacity to offer what Ruth Slatter has referred to as “alternative narratives”[[9]](#endnote-9) for historical geographies.

Ambiguous bombsites.

This section identifies contradictoriness and ambiguity in the bombsitesof London during the Second World War and afterwards. Soon after the end of the period in which Kossoff and Auerbach were painting the reconstruction of London, in 1964, Ruth Glass called London: “too vast, too complex, too contrary and too moody to become entirely familiar”.[[10]](#endnote-10)The uncanny qualities of the building site recorded by Auerbach and Kossoff reflect this ambivalence in the post-conflict city. Bombsites and building sites, linked inexorably in this era, reflect both trauma and possibility, memorial and promised utopia.The complexity and contradictory nature of the city was heightened by aerial bombardment: part of the trauma of urban destruction is derived from the threat to the boundaries[[11]](#endnote-11)which structure the conventions of urban life. Yet in the context of the Glass quote above, perhaps this trauma was also drawing attention to the hard-to-grasp-ness of the city

Both duringand after the Second World War,[[12]](#endnote-12)bombsites were not only sites of danger and melancholy, but also possibility. The Mass Observation archives record responses to bomb damage that range through devastation, resignation, and optimism; and often a mixture of all three[[13]](#endnote-13). One observer in May 1941 records a woman who had been evacuated from London stating:

I sincerely hope that after the war it will be largely rebuilt, and I sincerely hope that it (and other cities) will not just be patched up by speculative builders, but really built on a magnificent ‘plan’ worthy of a great city. In fact we must see that this IS DONE.[[14]](#endnote-14)

With an ironic admixture of melancholy, disinterest and architectural critique one observer reported a remark overheard in King’s Cross station after a bomb had struck the building: “That hole makes it quite nice and light, It was always such a dingy old station”[[15]](#endnote-15). Even as bombs were falling the public were considering how the city might be more than restored – but truly built into something better. There is a sense of playfulness in this at once irreverent and sincere response to bomb-damaged London.

Children, in particular were masters of such play, adapting and re-imagining the London landscape during the Blitz. In their study of a group of children during war time Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham observe children adapting their behaviour to repeat “in play what had been seen or heard”[[16]](#endnote-16) during air raids. It was through play that children worked to make sense of the traumatic experience of aerial bombardment. Gabe Moshenska[[17]](#endnote-17) has detailed the shrapnel[[18]](#endnote-18) collections made by children during the war, describing young children hurrying to get outside and pick up often still hot and often dangerously sharp pieces of torn apart metal for their collection. Unusually shaped or large pieces were prized, and above them were the recognizable pieces of the shells themselves. Moshenska argues that the collection of shrapnel was a widespread practice by both male and female children and that it was a process of “gaining power over the material culture that was killing and injuring so many”.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Moshenska reads the childhood experience of the Blitz as being one of both “powerlessness and perversely a degree of freedom”[[20]](#endnote-20). He links the act of collecting to the psychoanalytical idea of the transitional object[[21]](#endnote-21); a material thing which acts as a means to navigate the gulf between the self and the other. Children were desperately trying to gather together and make sense of a chaotic material environment and to re-establish control over a realm that was hard to gain a grasp of. This desire to establish strict taxonomical order from debris finds parallels in the efforts of adults to create a new narrative for the post-war city.

This relationship between play, and making sense of the trauma of aerial bombardment is epitomised in the image of the bombsite as playground. This phenomena has been discussed by Ben Highmore[[22]](#endnote-22) who sees the ambiguities and anxieties in the recurring image of bombsites with children playing in them that repeat in post-war popular culture. Highmore writes that “The wild-wilderness of the bombsite is also the wild wilderness of the child”,[[23]](#endnote-23)the bombsite as playground reveals the city both as vulnerable and full of possibility. Lucie Glasheen in this journal has described the profound sense in which bombsites “kept open open the possibilities for what that space could be” [[24]](#endnote-24)It was this same ambiguous nature that even during the war created the context from which multiple re-imaginings of the city emerged. As for children, bombsites were places of both trauma and imagination, icons of the injured city, and of a London triumphant. It was not only children who faced this ambivalence in the conflict and post-conflict urban landscape: bombsites as spaces of both chaos and trauma, requiring tidying or ordering and preserving memorialising, these narratives were also central to broader discourses of reconstruction.

Discourses of memorialisation and order.

This section of the paper explores two reconstruction narratives which responded to this ambiguity, each a different attempt to establish some kind of order in the post-war urban landscape. One which focuses on memorialisation, and the other on the production of a city of the future.

Even as the bombs fell on London the ruined parts of the city were documented;not only for practical purposes, as with the LCC bomb damage maps,[[25]](#endnote-25) but also to record the experience for posterity. Among the more famous photographs of London during the war are those taken by Cecil Beaton[[26]](#endnote-26), discussed previously in this Journal by Mark Pohlad[[27]](#endnote-27). Pohlad argues that these photographs and the popular appreciation of ruins during the war were part of what Pohlad names as a discovery of “redeeming beauty”[[28]](#endnote-28) in the bomb damaged city, an appreciation of London’s architecture and history perhaps embodied most clearly in the city’s bomb damaged churches. These photographs parallel the work of John Piper which documented ruined churches, capturing anotherworldly beauty in them. Piper’s church paintings are depopulated and out of time. They are depicted as if they were already monuments, representing a “romantic notion of art and nation”[[29]](#endnote-29) . Sara Wasson has identified a sense of the ‘urban gothic’ in Second World War cultural production[[30]](#endnote-30).

Elsewhere Lynda Nead has recorded the apparently specific capacity of black and white photography to capture an aesthetic of ruins; “a transformation of sudden destruction into reposeful beauty”[[31]](#endnote-31). Ruins drew attention to a certain historic Britishness which represented the enduring value of the nation in the face of destruction. Nead says that ruins were “interpreted through the enduring and traditional aesthetics and values of the Romantic movement”[[32]](#endnote-32). To the point that in 1944 a list of public intellectuals including T.S. Eliot, John Maynard Keynes, and Kenneth Clark[[33]](#endnote-33) wrote a letter to the Times advocating for the retention of a number of ruined churches in London as memorials, in the same year a book was published with a series of plans for such memorialised ruins[[34]](#endnote-34). In this sense ruins both during and after the war fulfilled a certain conservative aspiration for a Britain that rediscovered its past in the production of a ‘golden age’ in the present. Whilst these ideas would have preserved these ruins, they would also have removed their ambiguity by aestheticizing them.

A contrasting aesthetic response to the bombing of London is found in notions of modernity and scientific progress which inform the plans for the reconstruction of London[[35]](#endnote-35). Richard Hornsey[[36]](#endnote-36) discussing these post-war plans, has read them as an attempt to instil order on a troublingly dis-ordered environment. Hornsey neatly uses the popular imagination of the Atom in post-war Britain, disseminated in part through the displays at the Festival of Britain, to allude to a fascination with stability and order which existed both within the epistemic account of matter contained within the popular image of the atom and in the careful attempt to re-create London as a balanced and self-contained system.

Hornsey argues that the Atom demonstrated “how space, time, and movement sustained a stable natural order”[[37]](#endnote-37) an idea which, he argues, is mirrored in Abercrombie’s fantasy of a city in which time and space fall under “total organisation”[[38]](#endnote-38). For Hornsey the reconstruction of London imagined that through a total management of the lives and work of some imagined ‘average Londoner’ “the traumas of history could be endlessly postponed within a pre-programmed repetition of the same”[[39]](#endnote-39). In this way the city becomes as self-sustaining and full of potential as the atom was in the popular imagination of the time.

These two aesthetic narratives were prominent in the post-war response to the bomb-damaged city. One which fetishized ruins, and the other which strived for order through a scientific model of the city; each a contrasting effort to command the ambiguity of the bombsite. To transform it into something both culturally and socially more acceptable. Each shares contrasting similarities withthe children’s shrapnel collections documented by Moshenska[[40]](#endnote-40): memorialisation and the aestheticization of ruins gather together the shattered fragments of war, the imperative to instil order on the city seeks to taxonomise, order and reformulate matter into something altogether more reliable. In the remainder of this paper I will argue that Auerbach and Kossoff’s paintings of building sites offer a different narrative of post-war London, one which attempts to retain the ambiguity discussed above.

London Building Site paintings

While studying under David Bomberg in his evening class at Borough Polytechnic between 1947 and 1953 near the heavily bomb damaged Elephant & Castle, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff painted building sites across London. They would continue to do so throughout the Fifties, together and separately they would travel through London sketching the upturned city. Unlike the paintings of Piper and Moore, or the photography of Brandt and Beaton, these images capture more of the material ambiguity of the bomb-damaged city. Painted in cheaper pigments, ochres and earth tones, they captured the shifting uncertainty of the city during its reconstruction.

Auerbach described his time drawing post-war London; “My life was very much of the streets. I went around London, I took bus rides. This became one’s physical and mental terrain, which stimulated me to try and paint it, slightly impelled by the feeling that gradually it would be tidied up and disappear.”[[41]](#endnote-41) The two young painters realised that this era offered up a specific opportunity for them to document London in a way not usually possible to this degree. Auerbach recalls the fear he confronted in seeking out vertiginous perspectives on building sites “I remember in those days going to places where I was scared to stand and drawing”[[42]](#endnote-42). These perspectives offered something more than the neo-romantic ruins also explored by David Bomberg their tutor, who painted the city from high vantage points, surveying the newly archaic ruins of the city (figure 1)including the iconic image of theDome ofSt Paul’s Cathedral[[43]](#endnote-43). Whilst their subject matter may have been influenced by Bomberg, their approach to the subject matter was altogether more intimate and visceral, rejecting the iconography of the city lest it distract from the encounter they recorded. Lee Hallman in her unpublished thesis on Kossoff and Auerbach has called their approach to the city iconoclastic, in their images of building sites close to St Paul’s “the artists largely repudiate the form of the cathedral”[[44]](#endnote-44). Pohlad, and particularly Nead have documented the prominence of the image of St Paul’s in the imagery of bomb damaged London as an icon of British resilience and the importance of the capital[[45]](#endnote-45). The artists were actively resisting the mawkish nationalism of the neo-romantic in their documentation of London’s post-war landscape.

Auerbach and Kossoff resist the aestheticisation, and monumentalisation of the landscape of London through a painting practice which centres the complex relationships between the observer and the observed. Elena Crippa has described this sensibility “whereby a constantly changing set of relationships between viewer object and light means that what we are looking at is never static, never the same”[[46]](#endnote-46). In this sense the artists can also be seen to be resisting any notion of a static and discernible ‘order’ to the city; emphasising instead the complexand shifting nature of the landscape. In the following two pages I will argue from a close reading of several paintings by the two artists that their building site paintings should be read not only as repudiations of dominant visual narratives of urban space, but as an ontological account of the city as a bombsite/building site.

*Figure 1 David Bomberg, Evening in the City of London, 1944, Reproduced courtesy of The Museum of London*

Paintings and art objects offer up “spaces in which the body and its senses have been made present for study”[[47]](#endnote-47). It is particularly evident in the material weight of Auerbach and Kossoff’s paint-laden images of London building sites that they were physically and sensually wrestling their experience of the city into their paintings. Hallman has said that Auerbach and Kossoff in their paintings from this era “deliver a haptic sensation of a new landscape coming into being”[[48]](#endnote-48). They offer an embodied and graspable account of the landscape of post-war London. In this section, in a detailed description of two of their paintings I want to approach them not only as image, but also as a record of an embodied encounter with landscape[[49]](#endnote-49).

Two of the building site paintings by Kossoff and Auerbach were displayed in the 2018 Tate Britain Exhibition *All Too Human, Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life[[50]](#endnote-50).* One room of the exhibition, following on from a series of paintings from other students of David Bomberg at the Borough Polytechnic, introduced Auerbach and Kossoff through two of their paintings of building sites. I attempt here to characterise partially the experience that these paintings create for the viewer, focusing in particular on the material qualities that are hard to reproduce in figures. This is particularly important given the sheer weight of paint on board “gradually accrued until it stood out in relief, often an inch or more thick”[[51]](#endnote-51), these paintings are barely contained by two dimensions. These almost sculptural imagesappear to reach out towards the viewer and bring to life something of the artists’ encounters with their subject matter. It should be noted that this account depends on my own encounter with these images from the position of an academic viewer in the 21st century, and can hardly claim to be universal.

Figure 2: The paint made into sticky London clay is applied with a palette knife like geological layers and simultaneously scraped away, becoming a surface which leaves no possibility of board beneath the paint – just more paint, more earth. Red iron girders stretch across the painting promising a future structure yet to be assembled, a crane seems ready to swing across the scene and lower another piece of a huge building into position. But the earth is threatening; how could such heavy ground not simply swallow up these structures and leave the earth empty again? The sheer dis-order of the painting seems to undermine the possibility of a building ever standing there. This is an image of a building site as a struggle between the earth and the building.

*Figure 2. Frank Auerbach Rebuilding the Empire Cinema Leicester Square. 1962. Reproduced courtesy of the Courtauld Gallery. CopyrightThe Marlborough Gallery.*

Figure 3: The deep gouges are being made into the ground of the city, following up the bombs with other earth movers. Kossoff’s paint whilst heavy like Auerbach’s is more viscous, more mobile, and his image offers no possibility of redemption through steel. It is a horseshoe shape which seems so certain and significant, more like a product of millennia of erosion than bombs and spades. Viewed somehow from above, the painting shows where the sides of the hole have been scraped clean. Where vertical and horizontal lines cross on the periphery perhaps we can entertain the idea that there will be a building, but for now it is a city-wound where the earth is held back with desperate effort whilst the surgeons work on the patient.

*Figure 3. Leon Kossoff Building Site, Victoria Street. 1961. Art Council Collection, reproduced courtesy of the Southbank Centre. Copyright the Leon Kossoff Estate.*

The paintings are antithetical to discourses of memorialisation or modernisation, and instead reveal something ‘true’ about London on the level of ontology. They recognise, as Ruth Glass did,[[52]](#endnote-52) that post-war London was rich with contradiction, complexity and ambiguity. Here we may see Auerbach and Kossoff’s work as what Hawkins calls “critical creative spatialities, highlighting the way in which art offers the potential to think (and practice [sic]) space differently”[[53]](#endnote-53). These paintings record the chaotic underpinnings of urban life embodied in the oft-ignored space of the building site.

Rather than attempting to tidy or explain away the trauma of London’s bomb-damage and reconstruction, these paintings recognise that the matter of the city is resisting the imposition of human dominion. Like children playing on bombsites Auerbach and Kossoff see both danger and possibility in shrapnel and rubble. Their practice offers up a methodological model for urban scholars, that of making yourself vulnerable to the matter of the city around you rather than seeking to dominate it through analysis. At this point in this paper the analysis of these paintings appears firmly stuck within abstract notions of ontology. However this is, I hope, more than musing. When Auerbach and Kossoff see building sites they present a city which resists being contained by human effort.

The case of the Shell Centre.

This section focusses on the site now occupied by the Shell Centre on the South Bank of the Thames near Hungerford Bridge. The site was painted and drawn by Auerbach and Kossoff numerous times during the late 1950s[[54]](#endnote-54). In this section the site rather than the paintings forms the frame for the discussion. By taking a somewhat longer view of the site in London’s history it becomes a case study in the post-war reconstruction of London. The sense of tenuousness, mess, and profound material ambiguity that I have suggested is documented in Auerbach and Kossoff’s paintings is epitomised here by a locationthat has faced repeated cycles of construction and reconstruction.

Until the industrial revolution much of the land in this part of Lambeth was marshy pasture with a number of raised roads above the insecure earth. Notably the road marked as “Narrow Wall” in figure 4 shows that by the 1768 there were wharves and warehouses along the foreshore. There was a slow accretion of industrial buildings including Coade’s Artificial Stone Works which opened in 1769 and was run by Eleanor Coade from 1769 until her death in 1821[[55]](#endnote-55).During the 19th century the marshy land was gradually reclaimed by drainage ditches, and tree planting. By the 1820s[[56]](#endnote-56) streets and buildings begun to fill out this landscape and the scaffolding of today’s Lambeth was laid out.

Figure 4. Detail from *A Plan of Streets, Roads, &c, Between Black Fryers Bridge, London Bridge, Westminster Bridge, Lambeth, Newington Butts, & St. Margarets Hill.* 1768. Reproduced courtesy of the British Library.

The Victorian Era brought the construction of Waterloo Station (1848) and Hungerford Bridge (built in 1845 and rebuilt in 1864) encouraged the continued emergence of the Victorian cityscape almost literally from the mud. By the time the Ordnance Survey map of the area was revised in 1914-15, figure 5, the bustling industrial landscape of the southern bank of the Thames is fully established. The embankment previously called ‘Narrow Wall’ has now been renamed more grandly as ‘Belvedere Road’. The long history of the river’s role in London’s life is literally uncovered where the discovery of a Roman boat in the building site of City Hall is noted in figure 5 in the large white section north of Westminster Bridge.

*Figure 5. Detail from “London Sheet K (includes: Bethnal Green; City Of Westminster; Finsbury; Holborn; Islington; London; Shoreditch; Southwark; St Pancras; Stepney.)” Revised: 1913 to 1914. From OS six inch England and Wales 1842-1852. Reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.*

The economic and infrastructural importance of this area of London is tragically reflected in its targeting by bombs during the Second World War. The massive damage to the Victorian streets in the area is documented in the most severe bruise colours of blacks and purples in the Bomb Damage maps made during the war, figure 6. Barely any building in the area was undamaged in this northern part of Lambeth. North and South of Hungerford Bridge, and East and West of Belvedere Road was seen as irredeemably damaged; in the years immediately after the war the site was cleared and it became home to the Festival of Britain.

*Figure 6. Detail from Bomb Damage Maps 1945. Reproduced courtesy of The London Metropolitan Archives.[[57]](#endnote-57)*

According to a contemporary guide the site for the South Bank Exhibition, the centrepiece of the Festival of Britain in 1951, was built was built on a site “newly won from the river”[[58]](#endnote-58). The clearing of this murky hinterland of wharves and warehouses was presented by the guide as an opportunity to finally secure this piece of land from the threat of the river. New walkways and embankmentswere built to hem in the unruly and organic space that had previously grown between the ‘Narrow Wall’ and the river. The Festival of Britain was a demonstration of British dominance over nature, and “no part of life was outside its scope”[[59]](#endnote-59). Hornsey has argued that this dominating logic is an articulation of a London imagined as a total system in plans by Abercrombie and Forshaw. Elsewhere Harriet Atkinson has called the site of the Festival of Britain “The first modern townscape”[[60]](#endnote-60). This site may be seen as a place where the logic of social control attempts to claim an advantage over the previously ambiguous landscape of the riverbank.

*Figure 7. 2 sketches of the Shell Building made by its Architect Ralph Maynard Smith, Left: 1950s, Right: 1954, reproduced courtesy of the RMS Trust. Copyright the RMS Trust.[[61]](#endnote-61)*

Even as the Festival of Britain began the Royal Dutch Shell Company envisaged the South Bank as the site for their new London headquarters, they would be one of the first large companies to base themselves on the South Bank.They set out to make a statement by commissioning what would be the largest tall building in London at 27 storeys when it was completed in 1963. Either appropriately or ironically, it would be constructed where the “Minerals of the island pavilion”, “The natural scene and the country pavilion” and the “Land of Britain pavilion” had stood. Ralph Maynard Smith, an architect who was painted surrealist landscapes, in the vein of Paul Nash, was commissioned to provide designs. The two sketches in figure 7 illustrate the building emerging from mystical fog floating above the river, recalling the language from the Festival of Britain guide above, of winning the land from the Thames.

The monolithic ShellCentre was completed in 1963, its modernity tempered by a façade of traditional Portland stone. It made a strong claim to this part of the river bank. The construction of this building is part of a long history, which continues into the present day, of a repeated efforts to bring the unruly South Bank “into line”[[62]](#endnote-62), overlapping regeneration efforts from the beginning of the 20th Century, starting with the construction of City Hall, the cleared site for which is so prominent in its blankness in the map in figure 4. Auerbach and Kossoff’s paintings highlight the stickiness, and muddiness of this riverside landscape; and highlight that perhaps the geography of the site, between marsh and river, is part of what has made it so resistant to development. Landscape is rarely accounted for in narratives of urban change, Auerbach and Kossoff’s paintings pay more attention to these aspects of the building site than they do to the building work itself.

In the cases of the Festival of Britain and the Shell Centre the site has hosted a sequence of buildings which demonstrate a dominating logic of London over landscape. The imposition of order upon the bombed landscape of post-war London, is part of a longer history of instilling order upon a place. The account made of the site in this sectioncontextualises the paintings that Auerbach and Kossoff produced of the building site of the Shell Centre beyond the immediate history of aerial bombardment and reconstruction. Auerbach and Kossoff focus on aspects of the building site which highlight the tenuousness, ambiguity, and vulnerability underpinning the city, rather than replicating a narrative of the built environment as victor over the landscape. When Auerbach and Kossoff paint the building site they produce a record of the city which captures a sense of ambiguity and even agency in the landscape

Beneath the streets, the bombsite!

*Fantastic! It was superb! It was a vast building site and it looked absolutely superb. It was like the Grand Canyon I remember going there … it was almost a gift, the thing was so superb in itself that you could have taken it and put it in a museum being what it is, such a marvellous thing.[[63]](#endnote-63)*

Here Auerbach speaks of the excitement he felt at first observing the Shell Centre construction site. His initial sketches, capture, as always, a sense of immediacy in his encounter with this place. He records vastness, and the heft, of the building site as well as the agitated and energetic sense of activity within it. He would clamber up to gain the best views of the sites he painted and make multiple sketches which he would then work from in the studio. This site, Wright suggests, “was the culmination of his search for the most dramatic and awe-inspiring of London’s building sites”[[64]](#endnote-64). Both Wright, and Hallman have positioned this work in the context of the sublime, but in this paper I wish to emphasise a potentially more active and hopeful quality to these images.

*Figure 8. Frank Auerbach, Shell Building from the Thames, 1959, Reproduced courtesy of Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. Copyright the Marlborough Gallery.*

In this painting, figure 8, the building site glows, as if the light is coming from under the earth. It is the chiaroscuro play of dark and light written in earth, or a sci-fi Spielberg still, or a devotional image of a crucifix. Dry grey earth walls seem to be held back, or held apart by stiff black struts, ochres striate the painting, the colours of grey-red London clay and Thames silt offer a sharply dull contrast. The scratchy marks which depict workmen, dwarfed by the scale of this Grand Canyon of a building site give a sense of the near futility of attempting to intervene so drastically into London’s landscape.

Wright cites Rembrandt’s crucifixion scene *The Lamentations over the Dead Christ[[65]](#endnote-65)* as a reference for Auerbach, a frequent visitor to the National Gallery where it hangs. The geometry of the crane references the composition of ladders leant against the cross in Rembrandt’s image of Christ being taken down from the cross. The light seeming to emanate from Christ’s body is repeated in the light seeming to come from the earth in Auerbach’s painting, in Wright’s words “imbuing the work with themes of death and resurrection”[[66]](#endnote-66).

*Figure 9: Leon Kossoff, 1962, Shell Building, Private Collection. Copyright the Leon Kossoff Estate*

In Kossoff’s image of the site again we see his altogether stickier and more viscous style of painting. Whilst the sense of the sublime, and of awe are not here in the same way as in Auerbach’s painting – their shared sense of weight, of material obstinacy, of complexity remains central to this account of the Shell Centre building site. Contrary to the ordering tendencies of the Festival of Britain, and the plans for the Shell Centre, the landscape here speaks more to the mud of the marshes, and the Thames struggling to impose itself on the foreshore. Here, the complex environment which is commoditised and compromised through processes of urban development under capitalism is recorded in all of its messiness. These paintings are a radical and challenging form of urban knowledge which record the ways in which the ambiguity and dis-order of the bombsite and the building site challenge dominating logics of urban control.

Today the Shell Centre is being crowded out by a huge development of tall towers in a project jointly funded by Canary Wharf and Qatari Diar. Raco, Street, and Freire Trago have documented the complex efforts made by developers, planning consultants, and the local authority to bring the community into line behind this dramatic intervention into the area[[67]](#endnote-67). It is an example of the financialisation of land and the built environment in London and around the world. The complex process of securing permission for this development is framed by Raco, Street & Freire Trago as a form of “aggressive managerialism that sought to turn complex places into profitable development spaces”[[68]](#endnote-68). They argue that the decision making process leading to the granting of permissions for the redevelopment was “compartmentalized, separated-out, and detached from local sources of knowledge”[[69]](#endnote-69).Developers and investors see the city through a lens of financialisation[[70]](#endnote-70):in other words, in order to produce a ‘development space’, the complexity and ambiguity of urban space needs to be overcome. Auerbach and Kossoff present the ambiguous and complex qualities of urban matter that development processes literally and figuratively grapple with.

Auerbach and Kossoff offer a model of how scholars might engage with and record the sensuous and complex nature of the urban landscape. For developers, policy makers, and other stakeholders in the urban environment there is a tendency to present urban change as a smooth and inevitable process. The narratives of reconstruction discussed above, those of memorialisation and order, are a means of drawing a false narrative back through the muddy history of urban change in the city. Despite an apparent fantasy of luxury and modernity the new buildings now clustered around the Shell Centre draw links back to the reconstruction of London with a cluster of buildings around a small open space called ‘Casson Square’. Hugh Casson was both the architect of the Festival of Britain, and the joint author of the book cited above that proposed the preservation of bombed churches as memorials[[71]](#endnote-71). In order to counter this false narrative of smooth urban progress, forms of knowledge such as those generated by the paintings of Auerbach and Kossoffmust feature in academic and policy discussions.

*Figure 10: two photographs of scaffolding around the Shell Centre, the author, 2017.*

Conclusion

This paper has used the building site paintings of Auerbach and Kossoff as a source for exploring the post-war reconstruction of London. The paper establishes the ambiguity of the bomb damaged city both during and after world war two through exploring contemporary everyday practices of dealing with this complex and contradictory landscape. This led to an account of two linked but separate narratives in response to bomb damage, one of memorialisation, and one of ordering and progress. In this context Auerbach and Kossoff’s paintings were introduced as a counter-narrative to this discourse, actively turning away from the iconic ruins of London, and challenging narratives of order by documenting the wilderness of the building site. A case study of the Shell Centrepositioned paintings by these two artists in a longer history of London’s development, their paintings a recognition of a deeper ontological ambiguity underpinning the development of the city. These paintingsare a model of how we might record counter-knowledges versus a city too readily conceptualised as a financial space.

These paintings support the claim that the city is not easy to turn into a commodity, they belie overly financialised conceptions of urban landscape. The brute work of demolition and building, construction and reconstruction, resurface the ambiguity and trauma of bomb damaged London. The significant efforts of development processes that seeks to “turn complex places into profitable development spaces”[[72]](#endnote-72) or to create “total organisation”[[73]](#endnote-73) in the city are targeted at overcoming the more ambiguous and complex realities of urban landscape and material culture which are documented viscerally in Auerbach and Kossoff’s paintings. The memorialising and ordering narratives of reconstruction reflect an urgent desire to patch up London that meant the opportunity to re-imagine urban life, in the way that young children did when they played in bombsites[[74]](#endnote-74), was lost.

Beyond merely documenting the city these paintings are a provocation to recognise the bombsite ontology of the building site, and perhaps the city more widely.The complexity, ambiguity, and agency of urban space revealed in the building site present an opportunity to re-imagine the urban landscape. There is a lesson here for scholars: tidy narratives of urban space may exclude the opportunity for ‘playful’ re-imaginings of how the city can be.There is a politics to the production of urban knowledge and we must attend carefully to the forms of knowledge which are privileged in academic research and policy making. Auerbach and Kossoff emphasise the more difficult to represent aspects of London during post-war reconstruction and capture a missed opportunity to resist the commodification of the city. These paintings are an intervention, which forwards the complex, the messy, the hard to commercialise aspects of a city.Acritical scholarship, which seeks to engage politically with the historical or contemporary city ought to consider ways in which they can accommodate ambiguity in their knowledge production.

1. For instance: H. Casson, *Bombed Churches as War Memorials* (Cheam: Architectural Press, 1945) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. R. Hornsey, ‘“Everything is made of atoms”: the reprogramming of space and time in post-war London”., *Journal of Historical Geography* 34 (2008) 94-117 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. R. Glass, *London Aspects of* Change, (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1964) xiii. For an extended analysis of this essay see S. Johnson-Schlee, “What Would Ruth Glass Do: London: Aspects of Change as a critique of urban epistemologies” *City,* 23:1, (2019) 97-106 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See for instance: M. Raco, N. Livingstone & D. Durrant “Seeing like an investor: urban development planning, financialisation, and investors’ perceptions of London as an investment space”, *European Planning Studies,* 27:6,(2019) 1064-1082, [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. D. Madden There is a politics of urban knowledge because urban knowledge is political: A rejoinder to ‘Debating urban studies in 23 steps’, City 19:2-3 (2015) 297-302. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. H. Hawkins, ‘Geography and art. An expanding field: Site, the body and practice’ *Progress in Human Geography* 37.1 (2008) 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. G. Rose, *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. (London: Sage Publications, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. A. Gell *Art and Agency*, (Oxford:OUP, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. R. Slatter, ‘Materialities and historical geographies: an introduction’, *Area* 51 (2019) 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Glass, *London Aspects of Change*, xiii [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Writing on the topic of the Abject Kristeva writes: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon Samuel Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The War lasted between 1939 and 1945. The Aerial bombardment of London was most intense during ‘The Blitz’ which lasted for 8 months between September 1940 and May 1941. Aerial bombardment continued until the end of the War particularly from V1 and V2 rockets but not with the same intensity in London,. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. An extended account of the Mass Observation Archive’s documentation of wartime Britain, and in particular aerial bombardment, is made by T. Harrison, *Living Through the Blitz*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Mass Observation Archive, ‘M-O Bulletin for May 1941’, *TC23 Air Raids 1938-45*, SxMOA1/2/23 (1941) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Mass Observation Archive, ‘Bomb damage reports 12.5.41’, *TC23 Air Raids 1938-45*, SxMOA1/2/23 (1941) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. A. Freud and D. Burlingham,*Young Children in War-Time: A Year’s Work in a Residential War Nursery*,(London: George Allen and Unwin, 1943,p.68) [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. G. Moshenska, "A hard rain: children's shrapnel collections in the Second World War." *Journal of material culture* 13, no. 1 (2008), 107-125. See also, Gabriel Moshenska, *Material Cultures of Childhood in Second World War Britain* (London: Routledge, 2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. During the Blitz as bombers flew overhead British guns fired thousands of anti-aircraft shells in response. They would explode at a pre-ordained height and create clouds of molten metal which were intended to tear through enemy aircraft, though more often than not they would fall back to the surface as shrapnel. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Moshenska, ‘A hard rain…’, 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Moshenska,‘A hard rain…’, 113 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Moshenska, ‘A hard rain…’, 112. Moshenska is drawing on Donald Winnicott. *The Child, the Family and the Outside World*. (London: Penguin Books 1964) [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. B. Highmore, ‘Playgrounds and Bombsites’ in *Cultural Politics*9.3 (2013) 323-336 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Highmore, ‘Playgrounds and Bombsites’, 332 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. L. Glasheen. ‘Bombsites, Adventure Playgrounds and the Reconstruction of London: Playing with Urban Space in Hue andCry’, *The London Journal*, 44:1 (2019) 54-74 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. L. Ward, *The London County Council Bomb Damage Maps 1939-45,*(London*:* Thames & Hudson, 2015) [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. These photographs were published in James Pope-Hennessy, *History under Fire: 52 Photographs of Air Raid Damage to London Buildings*, (London: B.T. Batsford, 1941). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. M. Pohlad, ‘The Appreciation of Ruins in Blitz-Era London’, *The London Journal*, 30.2 (2005), 1-24 see also N. Matheson, ‘National identity and the melancholy of ruins: Cecil Beaton’s photographs of the London Blitz’. *Journal of War & Cultural Studies*. 1.3(2008) 261-274. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Pohlad, ‘The appreciation of Ruins…’,20. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. L. Nead, “How John Piper Found Beauty in Bombed Buildings” *Art UK.*(2017). <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/how-john-piper-found-beauty-in-bombed-buildings> (accessed January 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. S. Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War,* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. L. Nead, *The Tiger in the Smoke: Visual Culture in Britain c.1945-1960.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017)p.63 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Nead, *The Tiger in the Smoke,* 63 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Clark in his role in the War Artists Advisory Comittee had been commissioned Piper and Moore among other war artists to document the bomb damage to Britain’s built environment during the war. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. H. Casson, *Bombed Churches as War Memorials*(Cheam: Architectural Press, 1945) [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. P. Abercrombie and J.H Forshaw, *The County of London Plan*, (London, 1943); P. Abercrombie, *The Greater London Plan*, (London, 1945). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. R. Hornsey, ‘“Everything is made of atoms”: the reprogramming of space and time in post-war London”., *Journal of Historical Geography* 34 (2008) 94-117 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Hornsey, ‘Everything is made of atoms’, 97 [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Hornsey, ‘Everything is made of atoms’, 101 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Hornsey, ‘Everything is made of atoms’, 116 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Moshenska, ‘A hard rain…’ [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. C. Lampert, *Frank Auerbach Speaking and Painting*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015) p.55 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. B. Wright, *Frank Auerbach London Building Sites 1952-62,* (London: Courtauld Gallery, 2009). p.15 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. D. Bomberg: Evening in the City of London, 1944. Museum of London. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. L. Hallman, *On London Ground The Landscape Paintings of Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff,* (Unpublished thesis. New York: CUNY, 2017) p.84 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Nead,*The Tiger in the Smoke*; Pohlad, ‘The appreciation of Ruins…’ [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. E. Crippa, ‘Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff’*All too Human,* ed. Elena Crippa. (London: Tate, 2018)p.131. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. H. Hawkins, ‘Geography and art. An expanding field: Site, the body and practice’, *Progress in Human Geography* 37.1 (2008) p.60. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Hallman,*On London Ground,* 28 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. See Gell, 1998. For an account of the way in which art objects have agency in the world, and the value of ethnographic research methods in engaging with this sense of agency. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Tate Britain, *All Too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life*. 28 February – 27 August 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Wright,*Frank Auerbach London Building Sites,* 19 [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. See Johnson-Schlee, “What Would Ruth Glass Do…” 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. H. Hawkins, ‘Dialogues and Doings: Sketching the Relationships Between Geography and Art’*, Geography Compass*, 5 (7) (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Including: L. Kossoff, *Shell Building Site,* 1962. Private Collection; F. Auerbach, c.1958-61 *Shell Building Site: Workmen under Hungerford Bridge;* Frank Auerbach, 1959, *Shell Building Site from the Festival Hall,* 1959. Gray Art Gallery and Museum, Hartlepool; Frank Auerbach, *Shell Building Site from the Thames,* 1959. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. N. Cochrane ‘Eleanor Coade, John Soane, and the Coade Caryatid’in *Women and the Art and Science of Collecting in Eighteenth-Century Europe* ed. A. Leis and K Wills. (Oxford: Routledge, 2020). There seems to be some disagreement about Eleanor Coade’s career: the 1951 published Survey of London stating that first Eleanor Coade senior, and then her daughter ran the factory. Today the consensus appears to be that Coade junior was the Eleanor at the helm of the factory from 1769 until 1821. 'Coade's Artificial Stone Works', in Survey of London: Volume 23, Lambeth: South Bank and Vauxhall, ed. Howard Roberts and Walter H Godfrey (London: 1951), 58-61. This entry in the London Survey also reproduces a diagram from 1804 of the wharves and other businesses owned by Jesus College Oxford along this part of the river bank. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Visible in the 1828 map by C. and J. Greenwood *Map of London, from an actual survey made in the years 1824, 1825 & 1826,*(British Library, 1828). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Collected in Ward, 2015*.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. I. Cox, *The South Bank Exhibition: A Guide to the Story it Tells,* London, 1951 p.8 cited in Hornsey 2008,103. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Hornsey 2008, 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. H. Atkinson, ‘ “The first modern townscape”? The Festival of Britain, townscape and the Picturesque’ in *Alternate Visions of Post-War Reconstruction, creating the modern,* eds. Pendlebury, Erten, & Larkham, (London: Routledge, 2014) [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. L: “Tower by a Waterfront. Drawing by RMS. Early 1950s. Recording his first thoughts on the shell product.” *RMS TRUST.* R: “Drawing by RMS, 1954, assessing the Shell Centre as it would be seen from the north bank of the Thames in relation to County Hall (as it then was)” RMS Trust. Both made available online by the Ralph Maynard Smith Trust: <http://www.rmstrust.org.uk/ancillary_archive_architecture.php> (Accessed January 2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. M. Raco, E. Street & S. Freire Trigo, ‘The New Localism Anti-political Development Machines, and the Role of Planning Consultants: Lessons from London’s South Bank’ *Territory, Politics, Governance,* 4.2 (2015) 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Wright, *Frank Auerbach London Building Sites ,* 94 [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Wright, *Frank Auerbach London Building Sites,* 94 [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Wright, *Frank Auerbach London Building Sites,* 100. citing Rembrandt, *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* c. 1635. The National Gallery, London. Auerbach also painted a study in oil after this painting: Frank Auerbach, Study after The Deposition by Rembrandt II, 1961, Private Collection. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Wright,*Frank Auerbach London Building Sites*, 102 [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Wright,*Frank Auerbach London Building Sites*, 102 [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Raco, Street & Freire Trigo, ‘The New Localism…’, 20 [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Raco, Street & Freire Trigo, ‘The New Localism…’, 20 [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Raco, Livingston & Durant, ‘Seeing like an investor…’ [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Casson,*Bombed Churches as War Memorials* [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Raco, Street & Freire Trigo, ‘The New Localism…’, 20 [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Hornsey, ‘Everything is Made of Atoms…’, 101 [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Glasheen, ‘Bombsites, Adventure Playgrounds and the Reconstruction of London’ and Highmore, ‘Playgrounds and Bombsites’. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)