Introduction to the special issue on Material cultures of reconstruction

Abstract: This introduction the special issue on material cultures of reconstruction highlights the key contributions of the articles included. Together the papers contribute to an everyday history of post-war reconstruction in London. This introduction also highlights the broader relevance of these contributions to the study of urban reconstruction by drawing attention to the importance of material culture in the reshaping of urban life after crisis.

On April 29th 2020 in the midst of the global Coronavirus crisis the *Metro* newspaper led with the headline “Worse death toll than the Blitz”[[1]](#endnote-1). The aerial bombardment of London during The Second World War remains, for better or worse, a lynchpin in the city’s cultural imagination. Putting together the introduction for this special issue amidst the coronavirus pandemic the repeated evocation of the Blitz in government and media communications[[2]](#endnote-2) about the crisis has been cause to consider the timeliness of the articles collected here. The Blitz was a catalyst for the reconstruction of London, not just in response to the physical damage but because of its capacity to discursively gather a broader set of concerns about the capital[[3]](#endnote-3). The power of war-time narratives to mobilise a totalising conceptualisation of London’s ‘problems’ may well find parallels in London and around the world as the ‘wartime’ footing of the pandemic gives way to a post-coronavirus reconstruction.

The transformation of a city through crisis does not only require physical repair, but cultural, economic, social, and even ontological reconstruction. It is also important to recognise that the power of the post-war narratives of recovery conceal a more complex post-war history for London, one way to navigate the pitfalls of such narratives is to attend to the quotidian aspects of urban life. As Ruth Slatter has identified “material approaches offer a range of options that help to overcome the difficulties of gaining insights into mundane experiences that are rarely recorded within the written archive”[[4]](#endnote-4). Where other studies of post-war reconstruction have challenged dominant narratives by attending to the everyday via oral histories[[5]](#endnote-5) this special issue follows Slatter in using material cultures to provide insights into the mundane histories of reconstruction. The papers collected here make the most of this, making use of material culture to form narratives that critique, or deepen dominant discourses by paying attention to forms of historical data not always recognised as part of the archive.

It is easy to conceptualise reconstruction as a process of rebuilding in the narrowest sense. Undoubtedly the aftermath of the bombardment of London[[6]](#endnote-6) set the context for the most significant period of reconfiguration in London since the Great Fire[[7]](#endnote-7). At the centre of this history of reconstruction is the monumental set of plans produced by Patrick Abercrombie[[8]](#endnote-8). This iconic feat of town planning has rightly loomed large in accounts of London’s post-war planning and reconstruction[[9]](#endnote-9). This special issue seeks to bring together different perspectives on the reconstruction of London in this period, moving beyond the built and the planned to encompass a broader set of material cultures of reconstruction. By looking at interiors, fashion, furniture, public art, building sites, and other quotidian aspects of the post-war era this special issue focuses its on everyday aspects of material culture. This constitutes what Ben Highmore has called “the thingly world” commenting on such objects that “we don’t notice them, but we do interact with them”[[10]](#endnote-10).

The destruction of working class neighbourhoods in London was, as Rosamund Lily West shows in her article in this special issue[[11]](#endnote-11), a catalyst for the slum clearance which had begun between the wars. The London County Council recognised that the trauma following the war would not be remedied with buildings alone, but that art would have a role in reconstructing the community both to look to the future and to mourn together. Peter Laslo Peri, a Hungarian artist and the subject of West’s paper, made three sculptures in Lambeth as part of the municipal efforts to transform Lambeth. These sculptures are examples of what West calls the LCC’s “humanizing”[[12]](#endnote-12) efforts, creating representations of the community for the community, neither national heroism or tragedy, these sculptures reveal attentiveness and care and a motivation to reconstruct London at a human and everyday scale of life.

In their paper[[13]](#endnote-13) Reimer and Pinch foreground the moral geographies that emerged as part of the Utility furniture scheme’s reworking of household provisioning, and of the networks through which material objects of the home were supplied. The immediate need for a pragmatic approach to the crisis of aerial bombardment was shaped by longer-standing moral concerns about furniture production, distribution and consumption grounded in specific discourses surrounding the character of the London furniture trade. Wartime furniture is neglected in narratives that emphasise the built form on a city scale: Reimer and Pinch’s focus on the Utility scheme draws attention the remaking of wartime and post-war cities through the networks that brought material goods to the space of the home.

In Bethan Bide’s contribution to the special issue[[14]](#endnote-14) she describes the post-war reconfiguration of fashion consumption moving from the centre into the suburbs. It is at the Bentall’s centre in Kingston that a form of shopping more recognisable today begins to emerge as the shopping centre specifically targets a teenage demographic in their Junior Miss department. This article reveals not only the spatial reconfiguration of the retail world post-war by arguing that the suburbs grew in importance; but also that the material culture of fashion was central to the cultural reconstruction of the lives of young people. Bide demonstrates that the material culture of clothing and retail played a significant role in the social reconstruction, and reconfiguration, of London society. The broader implications of this argument are to draw our attention to the suburbs, though not heavily damaged by the Blitz, they were a key site of the city’s post-war reconstruction.

In Alistair Cartwright’s[[15]](#endnote-15) article he examines images of fire safety displays from the ideal home exhibition during the post-war era. Displays designed to demonstrate the risk of fire in houses of multiple occupancy are placed in the context of both the bombsite and the privately rented home. In this way Cartwright traces the development of the ‘un-ideal home’ and argues that these displays reveal the power of the bombsite like mental image of domestic danger in producing and communicating to the ‘regulatory subject’ of post-war London. A visual-cultural history of the LCC displays demonstrates their contradictory testimony to a neglected history of housing inequalities. That history, Cartwright argues, was inseparable from the Conservative government’s so-called "property owning democracy".

In my[[16]](#endnote-16) own paper in this issue I discuss the paintings of building sites made by Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff as London was reconstructed. I argue that these paintings, with their attentive approach to the muddy and messy qualities of building sites, capture something of the underlying mess and complexity of the landscape that underpins the built environment. In this way they offer a rich, visceral, and affective account of post-war reconstruction that counters narratives of monumentalization and modernisation that dominate the record. In this sense these paintings capture a kind of data otherwise absent from the historical record, one of an everyday and embodied experience of a city in flux.

All together the articles in this special issue cast new light on the post-war reconstruction of London by detailing the ways in which the material culture of daily life in bomb-damaged London was reconfigured through domestic and embodied encounters with everyday culture. The contribution that this makes to both the literature on post-war London and the historical study of London and urban life more broadly, is to draw attention to material culture and the quotidian. Not only as a form of archaeology but as an arena through which, counter to overt discourses of reconstruction, the city was reconfigured through social practice. Each of these articles, in differing ways, offer a counter narrative to notions of trauma, heritage, memorialisation, and municipal transformation. This special issues functions as a reminder that whilst strategies of reconstruction which come from above are recorded in documents and plans, the tactics of negotiating a recovery in daily life are observable in the material culture of furniture, building sites, clothes, homes, and public art and other such banal registers.

As was the case during the blitz, planning for post-pandemic recovery is underway even as the crisis in cities caused by the current pandemic prevails. In contrast to the ambitious swathe of master planning which characterised post-war reconstruction the current government have proposed a substantial de-regulation of the planning system. The Boris Johnson government’s plan for urban recovery post-covid was launched with the slogan “build, build, build”[[17]](#endnote-17) quite in contrast to the post-war era municipal interventions, this effort will rely on encouraging the private sector to invest in the built environment through de-regulation. What remains to be seen is how the material culture of post-coronavirus cities will alter as everyday social practice reconfigures in the wake of such disruption. Perhaps these papers can act as a prompt in this regard too.

1. D. Yeatman. ‘Worst Death Toll Than The Blitz’ Metro Newspaper. April 29th. (2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Work published by the University of Reading researchers as part of their ‘Viral Discourse’ project has suggested that there is a particular prevalence of war language surrounding the media reporting of the pandemic in the United Kingdom. S. Jaworska, “Is the war rhetoric around Covid-19 an Anglo-American thing?” Viral Discourse, (April 13th, 2020) <https://viraldiscourse.com/2020/04/13/is-the-war-rhetoric-around-covid-19-an-anglo-american-thing/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Amy Bell has made this point, stating: “Concerns over wartime morale and productivity were superimposed onto older nineteenth-century desires to control the dangerous and potentially weakening elements in the metropolis.” A. Bell,. ‘Landscapes of Fear: Wartime London, 1939–1945’, *The Journal of British Studies*, 48,1 (2009) 153–175. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. R. Slatter, ‘Materialities and historical geographies: an introduction’, *Area* 51 (2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. P Hubbard, L Faire & K Lilley  ‘Contesting the modern city: reconstruction and everyday life in post-war coventry’, Planning Perspectives, 18, 4, (2003) 377-397, D Adams ‘Everyday experiences of the modern city: remembering the post‐war reconstruction of Birmingham’, *Planning Perspectives*, 26, 2, (2011) 237-260, [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. There is some excellent literature on the built reconstruction of post Second World War London and beyond for instance: M. Clapson, and P. Larkham, eds. *The blitz and its legacy: Wartime destruction to post-war reconstruction*. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Adams, David, and Peter Larkham. *The Everyday Experiences of Reconstruction and Regeneration: From Vision to Reality in Birmingham and Coventry*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Notably Abercrombie wrote about Wren’s plan in 1923. P. Abercrombie, "WREN'S PLAN FOR LONDON AFTER THE GREAT FIRE: Illustrated." *Town Planning Review* 10, 2 (1923) 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. P. Abercrombie, *Greater London Plan*. HM Stationery Office, 1944. And E.J. Carter, E. Goldfinger, J.H. Forshaw, and P. Abercrombie. *The county of London plan*. Penguin Books, 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. E.g. P. Hall. "Bringing Abercrombie back from the shades: A look forward and back." *Town Planning Review* 66, no. 3 (1995): 227, P.J. Larkham. M. Amati, and R. Freestone. “All of London's a Stage: the 1943 County of London Plan Exhibition.” *Urban History* 43, 4 (2016) 539–56. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. B Highmore, *Ordinary Lives*, (Oxford, Routledge, 2011) 21 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. R.L. West “‘I Am Convinced I Shall Achieve Something Valuable If I Can Brighten the Lives of the People Here’: Bombsites, Housing and Art in Lambeth,” *The London Journal* 46:1 (2021), DOI: 10.1080/03058034.2019.1706952 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. R.L. West “I am Convinced I Shall Achieve Something Valuable…” 18 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. S. Reimer & P. Pinch “Refurnishing Homes in a Bombed City: Moral Geographies of the Utility Furniture Scheme in London”. *The London Journal* 46:1(2021), DOI: 10.1080/03058034.2020.1753350 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. B. Bide “The Fashion City and the Suburb: How Bentalls of Kingston Upon Thames Helped Rebuild Cultures of Fashionable Consumption in London after the Second World War”, *The London Journal* 46:1(2021), DOI: 10.1080/03058034.2020.1772446 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. A. Cartwright, “The Un-ideal Home: Fire Safety, Visual Culture and the LCC (1958-63)” *in The London Journal* 46:1 (2021) DOI XXXX [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. S. Johnson-Schlee “Building Site Ontologies: post-war London in the paintings of Auerbach and Kossoff” *The London Journal 46:1 (2021) DOI XXXX* [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. B. Johnson *PM Economy Speech*, 2020, June 30th, Dudley. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-economy-speech-30-june-2020>

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to all of the contributors to this special issue for the discussions and intellectual generosity which have made this project so enjoyable. These thanks should also be extended to all of those who took part in the original Symposium held at London South Bank University in May 2018. The peer reviewers as well as the editorial board of the London Journal have been invaluable in getting these papers and the special issue ready for publication. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)