

Arts of (dis)placement: City Space and Urban Design in the London of *Breaking and Entering*

Arts du (dé)placement : l'espace et le design urbains dans le Londres de *Breaking and Entering*

Lawrence Bird et Nik Luka

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Résumé de l'article

Le film d'Anthony Minghella *Breaking and Entering* (2006) propose deux visions de Londres, toutes deux centrées sur la gare de King's Cross, l'un des principaux axes du réseau de transport de la ville, mais aussi, comme plusieurs lieux de ce genre, un site complexe de marginalité. Pour le protagoniste principal, l'architecte et designer urbain Will Francis (Jude Law), il s'agit d'un site destiné à être transformé en un modèle (dans plusieurs sens du terme) de ce que Londres — et la pratique du design urbain — peut offrir à la « nouvelle » Europe. La perspective du jeune réfugié kosovar Miro Simic (Rafi Gavron) est fort différente. Le cambrioleur aperçoit la gare depuis les toits, qu'il arpente la nuit afin d'entrer par effraction dans les bureaux du quartier. Il s'y déplace en exécutant des figures de « parkour » (défini par ses adeptes comme « l'art du déplacement »), un aspect important du film. Le jeune Miro évolue dans un espace de déplacement : réfugié et voleur, il se voit tour à tour déplacé de Sarajevo, sa ville natale, et des rues de Londres. Le film oppose ainsi deux points de vue — l'un qui façonne l'espace, l'autre décalé — en mettant en relation des projets de bâtiments londoniens, réels ou imaginés, avec les corps de Will et Miro.

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ABSTRACT

Anthony Minghella's 2006 film *Breaking and Entering* frames two views of London focusing on King's Cross station, one of the city's key transportation hubs and, like many such centres, a complex site of marginality. To its main protagonist, the architect/urban designer Will Francis (Jude Law), it is a site to be transformed into a model (in several senses) of what London—and the practice of urban design—have to offer the “new” Europe. The viewpoint of the young Kosovan refugee Miro Simić (Rafi Gavron) is quite different. He sees King's Cross from the rooftops, which he clammers as a petty burglar by night to break into local offices. His acts of *parkour* (defined by its practitioners as “the art of displacement”) are central to the film. Miro, the teenaged character, exists in a space of displacement: displaced from his native Sarajevo, and from the streets of London by his status as refugee and thief. The film contrasts these two viewpoints—one which forms space, and one displaced—by citing real and imagined city-building projects in London, and placing them in relationship to the bodies of Will and Miro.

Voir le résumé français à la fin de l'article

Anthony Minghella's *Breaking and Entering* (2006) concerns two lives played out in a part of central London undergoing major transformations. The film's architect protagonist Will Francis (Jude Law) is a partner in the firm Green Effect, charged with redesigning the area adjacent to King's Cross Station. One of London's major transportation hubs, this is now in reality among the city's most ambitious and extensive urban redevelopment projects. Will's vision of this London district rejuvenated by all that architecture, landscape and urban design can offer

the city finds a counterpoint in the real experiences of the film's other protagonist, Kosovan refugee Miro Simić (Rafi Gavron), who knows a very different place occupying the same space. Miro's burglary of Will's design office sets off a string of events leading to the collision of two lives common in major metropolitan centres: that of a displaced teenaged refugee and that of a displacing agent who represents the "creative class" of what Neil Smith (1996) has called the urban revanchists—moneyed elites who not only appropriate and thereby gentrify city space previously occupied by those of modest means, but also chase such "undesirables" away quite violently as part of creeping neo-liberalism.

King's Cross, on the boundary of the London boroughs of Camden and Islington, is today one of the city's largest construction sites. Minghella and his filmmaking team harvest that site for much of the film's imagery. Yet King's Cross and central London serve as much more than backdrops for Minghella's narrative. Their appearance in the film, in juxtaposition with the lives of Will and Miro, serves rather as a reflection on the social, political and economic conditions associated with major contemporary transformations of urban form. Minghella's use and depiction of these sites, as well as older examples of London's urban design from the recent past, throw into relief recent changes in thinking about the city and its design—changes which imply specific shifts in the modalities of design's impact on the city, in its intersection with notions of human and citizen rights, and in the ethical stakes engaged by practitioners of urban design. Minghella makes the image of the city integral to his articulation of these issues. As he employs modes of representation typical of architects—representations that blur with growing frequency into those used by filmmakers—he enfold a critique of the designers' tools with his inquiry into the designers' ethics.

As we shall see, Minghella's negotiation of the differing political spaces engaged by this film makes use of differing vantage points on the city. His is of course not the first film to exploit such points of view, or movement between and through them, to inquire into the place of an individual rendered problematic

in contemporary society and understood through the rubric of urban space (Dimendberg 2004). A notable instance that engages with King's Cross specifically is Mike Leigh's *High Hopes* (1988). In the closing moments of that film Leigh exploits a rooftop view over King's Cross station to underline the paradoxical potential of the city (paradoxical in the context of the social divisions depicted in the film). The "high hopes" promised by that view suggested, from the standpoint of the late 1980s, a future in which the British working class might regain the ground it had lost under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government (Brunsdon 2007). Few could have imagined at the time how differently things were to turn out. The fall of the Iron Curtain the following year and the subsequent shifting of global and European political geographies was to turn King's Cross into a new political stage, one as likely to be occupied by foreign-born economic and political refugees as it was by those native to the UK (as had been the case in Leigh's film, in which the principal protagonists and their social relationships are distinctly British and embody British problems). The political framework which formed the backdrop to this new stage was to be erected by a New Labour government whose priorities owed much to the Thatcherism vilified by Leigh. Twenty years on, London (not for the first time characterized by immigration and laissez-faire capitalism) was to become a city in the throes of physical, economic and social restructuring provoked by political shifts on a European and global scale. This is the city depicted in Minghella's *Breaking and Entering*.

In contrast, however, to the images presented in *High Hopes*, which largely focus on ground-level views of a dilapidated urban fabric from which the protagonists rise up only at the end of the film (and even then, ambiguously), Minghella presents us with a city seen and experienced from a multitude of viewpoints and a variety also of media and modes of materiality. The director engages quite intentionally not only with vantage points but also with technically mediated modes of viewing and imagining, and relates these to discourses on publicness, political legitimacy and social divisions, placing these in the context of the political and historical changes that have come about since Leigh's film.

The potency of Minghella's critique attests to the importance of cinema and media studies to professional designers engaged in the remaking of cities in just such conditions. To develop these contentions we will first examine a key sequence depicting Will's own representations of the city. We step from there to a discussion of the works of architecture and urban design to which this and other film sequences refer. These references to major works of architecture help to underline the stakes involved in contemporary transformations of the city and the slower waves of change in representations thereof—all of which tend to serve specific political agendas (albeit with varying degrees of transparency, intentionality and efficacy).

King's Cross: "an area in flux"

The sequence with which we begin comes early in the film. Will's design firm Green Effect has recently won the commission for a major city-building project near King's Cross. In a perhaps benevolent but effectively violent act of direct engagement with the area, Will and his design partner Sandy have elected to set up their design office in a decaying warehouse only a few steps from King's Cross. Almost immediately Green Effect is burgled—not just once but several times. After the second of these incidents, police detective Bruno Fella meets with Will and his design partner Sandy to take a report on the burglary. The three stand around a model of Green Effect's proposal for the redevelopment of King's Cross; it takes up the better part of one room. This is one of several models, real or virtual, the film is to present to us in the next few minutes. A man of the street like so many city film detectives—a regular "feller"—Bruno points out the place in the model corresponding to the corner of King's Cross where he was born. We are immediately made aware of the correspondence and the difference between the built city, the city of life and the designed city (which, we are shown, is the city of Will's imagination), for this model proposes the transformation of the area, in which Bruno himself grew up, into something quite different. As he looks over the immense model and the proposal for the area he asks with exaggerated respect: "You really gonna do all this—I mean, put a

canal right through the middle? . . . It's brilliant." But just as emphatically he underlines a fundamental blindness of both the attempt to redevelop King's Cross and Green Effect's choice to build their office so near to it:

You know what your problem is, Sandy? King's Cross. That's you there. You've got the British Library over there wiv' Eurostar, and bang in the middle you got crack village, wiv' a load of Somalians walking about with machetes. It's an area in flux!

This is an astute co-opting on Bruno's part of a social and design catchphrase applied to many city-building projects today. The expression "an area in flux" seems to promise so much in terms of design and social potential, not to mention increasing property values, but here it comes to mean something like a purgatory of poverty, uncertainty and deprivation. That is arguably an accurate description of the area. King's Cross and its environs to the north and east (including among other neighbourhoods St Pancras, Somers Town and the east side of Regent's Park) ranked at the time this film was made among the most socially deprived urban settings in London (and therefore the United Kingdom).¹ King's Cross is also a border between some of England's most privileged and disadvantaged neighbourhoods; in fact in 2000 Camden itself ranked as the most polarised London borough in terms of income and other disparities.

Consistent with this, as Bruno also astutely puts it, when it comes to the position of the Somalis (or whoever drifts into King's Cross from overseas), there is "one law for us, one for them." Two kinds of people occupy the city in flux; they share much, but on radically different levels. Will and Green Effect's racially—and nationally—mixed design team belong to one of these classes, their work depending on the (constant) reorganisation of the city generated out of the conditions of the new globalised Europe. Miro and his mother Amira belong to the other class. Refugees from Kosovo, they are unable to find a secure place in London despite their attempts to leave behind the social tensions which drove them out of their place of origin. Minghella's film brings together these diverse strata of London society—as, in principle, does urban design.

Making place

Minghella intercuts the separate worlds of King's Cross as the sequence continues. Bruno, Will and Sandy watch a virtual-reality video clip made by Green Effect for the promotion of their winning design proposal—effectively a trailer for the design project. Miro watches the same video in the apartment he shares with his mother, where he has discovered it on a laptop he has stolen from Green Effect. Articulated in this animation are two specific modes of viewing and dwelling in the city, one which is Will's and the other Miro's.

Separate but together in the film sequence, the four watch the trailer. It begins with a shot of Will standing behind the model Bruno has just damned with great praise, but quickly shifts to a virtual image: a video image of Will himself, this time standing *within* a model, a virtual model of Green Effect's design proposal. Will steps through the virtual city propounding the benefits of Green Effect's design. In his portrayal of Will's rhetoric here, Minghella is making an observation on the very polemical nature of design discourse. Designers' positions tend to be presented in manifestos, less strident now than in the days of early Modernism, but nevertheless quasi-ideological statements of belief:

Our vision for King's Cross, for the public spaces of King's Cross, starts with the premise that we acknowledge that an *urban* [italics throughout] landscape is a *built* landscape. It starts with an argument with society's phoney love affair with nature.

Whether a designer's position is that grass is not nature—or, conversely, that nature is exclusively grass—odds are he or she will present it in ethical terms as a categorical imperative that grass be seen in this way. Will's claim here resonates with his own difficulty in dealing with things that are out of his control: an urban fox causing a ruckus in his own garden, his desires, his own family's unhappiness. All are manifestations of the rawness that inhabits the city, out of order (to borrow Qviström's [2007] term) and of their proper place(s). Minghella connects Will's attempt to control and clean up the city (by making it more simply articulated) with his own refusal to articulate the truths of his own life.

Will carries on his polemic against society's phoney love affair, referring to an eerily totalising "we" that never gets clearly identified:

We are against the mistaking of grass for nature, of green for nature. King's Cross is an area of north London associated with poverty, crime, vice, urban decay. Our job is to transform the landscape, not decorate it with green—because how we feel about ourselves, how we behave, is directly affected by the space around us. How we design the outdoors of our city is as important as how we design the indoors.

Here Will articulates another faith shared by many architects, urban designers and planners: that the design of space is more than just an aesthetic act. Rather, it is often seen as vital to the fulfilment of human potential. Thus architecture can clean up an area like King's Cross through the creation of a new nature: urban form. This faith in the ethics and efficacy of their profession and its products might be seen as self-deceptive. Architects, city designers and planners stand in an inherent conflict of interest between their role as professionals charged with some kind of social mission and their role as servants of power. History has shown that far too many city-building projects, including those that were predicated on a modernist polemic of social progress, have had on balance demonstrably negative effects on their social contexts. We will return to these two observations further below.

Will goes on to add to his earlier claims a proposition: "We're going to take the canal, and use it like calligraphy, like ink, to write around the development." Much is captured here, for this whole sequence is in one sense about writing, about representing the city visually. In many ways it connects with a robust discourse in urban design that refers to the notions of legibility, cultural intelligibility, and what is known as "placemaking" (Bentley *et al.* 1985, Lynch 1960, 1976 and 1981, Ramadier and Moser 1998, Rapoport 1990, Relph 1987, Sutton and Kemp 2002). If we consider the landscape Green Effect has designed, it very much tries to create a "place" where presumably there is none. It forms in fact something like a bull's-eye, a public space between the two railway stations. Such gestures are

favoured by designers for the ways in which they ostensibly contribute to “legibility” or “imageability”—based on the premise, demonstrated by Lynch (1960, 1976, 1981) and others that “good” urban forms are those for which users can easily construct a mental map. The imageability of urban space relates to the strength of its formal definition as a “place” and the assumption is that this is something good (Lynch 1981, Relph 1976 and 1997). “Place” implies many notions: identity, social cohesion, democratic exchange, a sense of being in the world. The condition of “place” is often described as standing in opposition to the condition of today’s cities as *non*-places caught up in global geopolitical flows and marked by their generic qualities and indefinable edges. This is a position taken by Marc Augé (1992), Tony Hiss (1990) and Edward Casey (1989, 2001), but articulated most compellingly by Manuel Castells (1989, 2000), who is among the most important critical observers of how contemporary cities are defined in fluxes of information, technology and capital. Castells sets up a dichotomy between these flows on the one hand, and on the other the defined public spaces and meeting points which make up the “traditional” (European) city. For Castells the challenge is to resist geopolitical flows through an affirmation of place. Will’s vision seems to support this position: it is all about the creation of a place. But his medium, his means of imagining and presenting the city to his audience, belies his message.

No-place

Digital models and animation—walkthroughs and fly-throughs as they are known—are now a central component of any design proposition at the city scale. Such representations are extremely ambiguous. They can provide a kind of “superaerial” overview of the project, implying abstraction, control and detachment from the real experience of the city. But they also put us *into* urban space; they project our virtual bodies into the imagined city: by moving our eye through it and, in Will’s case, inserting our bodies into it. It is only in recent years that this latter possibility has become reality. The result is an uncanny city populated by paper-thin figures whose three-dimensionality

seems suspiciously weightless, moving through a city built of materials that have no substance, in which we can fly at high speed without risk of collision with others. As though to underline this, in the foreground before Will in the closing moments of Green Effect's polemical animation, two digital figures walk up to and then *through* each other.

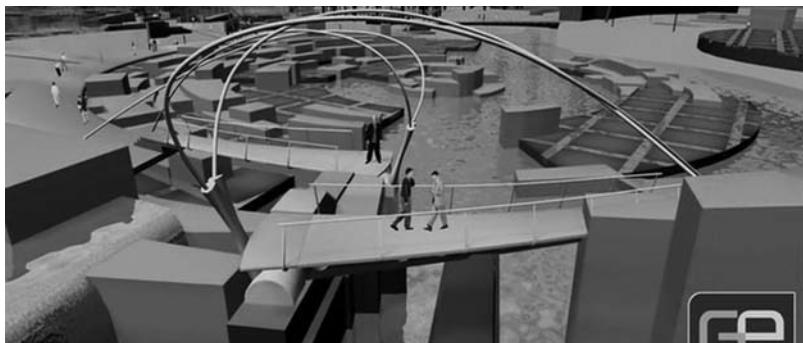


Figure 1. Scene from the Green Effect King's Cross project. © Miramax, 2006.

Like the bodies that inhabit it, the virtual cityscape we see in this clip is rendered with varying degrees of transparency and texture-mapped materiality. These both emphasise the design as a “place”—a body inhabited by bodies—while underlining its immateriality and that of the bodies which inhabit it. This city dissolves into a language of frameworks, envelopes and vectors that implicate not only the imaging technologies that produce such models, but also the flows of technology and capital which produce the “city in flux.” In it, the city is replaced by its image and by its writing in a different sense from Will’s use of the term.²

In the VR sequence from *Breaking and Entering*, Will’s body has also become virtual—but so in some sense are the bodies of the architectural team and construction workers, moving in real space, to which Minghella cuts as the sequence continues. These flesh-and-blood bodies in the real-world King’s Cross are dwarfed and suspended and rendered light as air by this enormous construction project. They form a kind of bridge between the condition of Will’s body and Miro’s, which moves and dwells in the city in its own way.

The displaced body

The Green Effect trailer presents to us the city as seen from Will's viewpoint: a designer peering in from above and then projecting himself into imagined space. Miro's related but distinct viewpoint is suggested by his presentation to us as he watches Will's animation on the stolen laptop. As he watches, Miro plays with a set of architect's scale figures, also lifted from Will's design studio. The tiny plastic dolls do a little mimetic dance along the edge of the laptop, as though it were a building. In this little play Miro mimics his own movement through the city, as we see in several other sequences throughout the film which suggest that Miro spends much of his own time leaping across architecture before projecting himself into it in a manner both like and unlike Will. Thus does Miro take part in the art of *parkour*—for pleasure, to carry out his burglaries, and to flee from the police.



Figure 2. Miro engaged in *parkour* at the Alexandra Road housing complex where he lives with his mother. © Miramax, 2006.

Parkour is both a sport and a physically embodied form of urban activism associated with David Belle and a group of followers in France.³ Through running, climbing, jumping, falling and landing, obstacles in the built environment are seized as opportunities (Laughlin 2008). The body literally takes urban space with efficiency on the one hand and, on the other, beauty and a sense of performance—qualities associated with what

some *parkouristes* prefer to call free-running. In Belle's words, *parkour* is "l'art du déplacement"—which can be defined as the art of movement, travelling and shifting, but also quite literally the art of displacement: the art of going beyond the prescribed bounds of the city. Indeed, in a recent article, Jimena Ortuzar (2009) argues that *parkour* is a subversion of urban space—a form of urban activism challenging the highly controlled environments of the seemingly uninterrupted spaces of power in the contemporary city. The intent of the *parkouriste* is to transgress established rules of behaviour in urban settings and, in fact, to transform the spaces that are navigated.

Like the virtual figures of Green Effect's promotional animation, these running bodies imply a freedom from the materiality and limitations of the city. The images presented in *Breaking and Entering* show the hooded figure of Miro as a blur against the hard concrete surfaces of the cityscapes he traverses. But just as the ethos and aesthetics of *parkour* emphasise the reality of the experience—the potential for running bodies to be broken and hurt—its discourse implies the toughened and supple body's resistance to the hard surfaces of the modern city. Thus Miro's blurred body is more substantial than Will's deceptively crisp virtual body. If Will's body pretends a projection into the city but evades a real engagement, Miro's displaced body hurtles across the city always at the risk of falling into it.

(U)topos

Parkour and free-running, as originally developed, addressed the surfaces and spaces typical of the modern mass-housing *Grands Ensembles* that infamously dominate the suburbs of Paris and other major French cities. Intriguingly, Minghella has displaced that art in *Breaking and Entering* to analogous spaces in one of London's iconic post-war social-housing projects. In Figure 2 (above), Miro flees the police across the roofs of Alexandra Road Housing—a well-known council-housing complex in central London and his own home. It is from his mother's small flat in this complex that Miro watches Will's trailer.

The Alexandra Road Housing complex (Fig. 3) was designed in the late 1960s by the architect Neave Brown of Camden

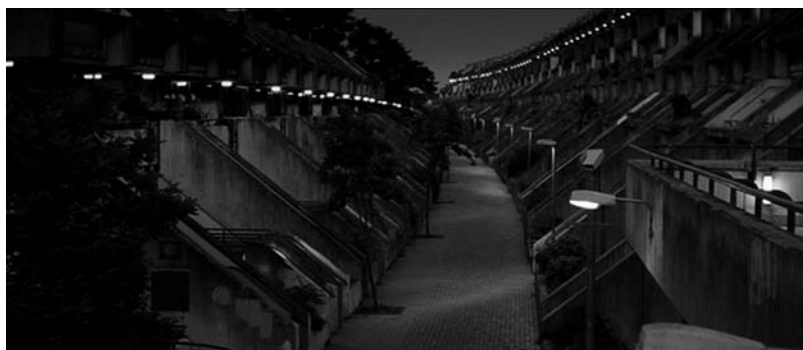


Figure 3. View of the Alexandra Road housing complex (Neave Brown, architect). © Miramax, 2006.

Town's Department of Architecture, although it was not completed until well into the 1970s. It predates the renovations of King's Cross by some thirty years, and speaks a different urban language. For many architectural critics, it articulates an earlier, implicitly utopian and socialist understanding of the city, from a time when city councils saw it as their responsibility to build and manage housing on behalf of their citizens. By the time this complex of buildings was completed, the principles on which it was founded were already falling from favour in architectural and social-science circles (see for example Coleman 1990, Newman 1973, Roberts 1991). Such examples of modernist architecture have been criticised as inhuman, out-of-scale and inflexible (Bacon 1985, Cooper Marcus and Sarkissian 1986). The models of society on which they are often said to be based have also been criticised by the proponents of an active, agency-based understanding of the citizen (Giddens 1990). The very form of the Alexandra Road complex makes it seem (to some) a dehumanising environment. Critics have commented on its height, the unbroken length of its main block (designed as a buffer against the rail line at its back—part of the machinery of movement which connects ultimately to King's Cross) and the massiveness of its form, if not the scale of the individual units and their organisation along a public thoroughfare. While such architectural criticisms might be more convincingly applied to more deserving targets,⁴ they can well be directed to many examples of modernist mass housing, both in England and

elsewhere. Many critics have asserted that such architecture exacerbates or even creates social problems, rather than solving them as its proponents once professed (see for example Darke 1984). Today the utopian vision on which this architecture is based is diluted and complicated in a number of ways.

Over the past two decades, there has been a broad change from public to private ownership of formerly “social” housing projects in many industrialised countries. In the UK, many council-housing units are now under private ownership in the wake of the “right-to-buy” policy introduced by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government and continued by Tony Blair’s Labour government. One consequence of this has been gentrification stemming from the dramatic increase in the real-estate value of the former council-owned housing units, creating an economic disparity among residents, which had not previously been the case. While a fine-grained mix of income levels reduces the socio-economic “ghetto” effect in council housing, it also generates resentment as lower-income groups are gradually pushed out of state-built complexes through the processes of privatisation.

There are other perceived and real displacements associated with such projects. England is today a more diverse place than it was at the time that Alexandra Road Housing was conceived. Today the residents of such council-housing projects include displaced persons from a variety of origins, who after five years in England have the same right to council housing as British citizens. Despite the fact that the presence of refugees in council housing is statistically no greater than that of native-born Britons (Rutter and Latorre 2009), their presence has generated resentment about “foreigners” taking space built for “native” British citizens. This perception parallels another source of resentment: during the time period this film depicts, growing numbers of entry-level positions in London were occupied by people from ethnic minorities, notably those, like Miro and Amira, from eastern Europe and new Economic Union member-states or candidate-states (Salt and Millar 2006).⁵

The transformations to which we are alerted in *Breaking and Entering* are evidence of England’s shift to neo-liberal policies under the influence of thinkers such as Anthony Giddens

(1990) and political leaders including Tony Blair. The economic ferment (however unsustainable it has proved to be over the long term) resulting from such policies is a major reason for the attraction of England and in particular London to migrant groups in the early 2000s. While their condition as refugees of civil strife makes them a special case, Miro and Amira fall into this pattern: at least initially, London offers a new hope for them. But the legitimacy of their position in London remains tenuous because of the very political and socio-economic shifts which drew them there in the first place.

Place dislocated

The economic development of the late 1990s and early 2000s, often in combination with political changes related to the relative opening up of Europe as a market and a source of cheap labour, also drove the extensive redevelopment of many urban sites in London. These redevelopment projects are one manifestation of that complex of economic, political and urban change we referred to above as “the city in flux.” Appropriately, these transformations often happen in pockets of the city associated with transportation hubs: the machines of movement necessary to the stoking of a superheated economy. One of the most striking instances of this process is in fact the redevelopment project presented to us in *Breaking and Entering*: the immense construction site between and to the north of King’s Cross and St Pancras Stations (Fig. 4).⁶ This project includes the restoration or reconstruction of both stations (the work on St Pancras already having been completed), the addition of significant new railway infrastructure, customs and security facilities for international rail travel (security facilities bearing their own relationship to many of the social and political changes driving the new European economy), as well as new retail, office and residential space, including “a range of affordable housing options.” Altogether the complex introduces 750,000 square metres of new built space into central London, at a cost of over £2 billion.⁷

Contemporary urban projects are often funded by private capital or by public-private partnerships of which investment capital forms a significant component (Beauregard 1991,



Figure 4. View of the King's Cross/St Pancras redevelopment project
© Miramax, 2006.

Fainstein 2001, Frieden and Sagalyn 1989, Hannigan 1998, Milroy 2009). This contrasts quite starkly with the state-driven development of earlier projects like Alexandra Road Housing. The organisation in charge of the King's Cross project is a private development agency called the Argent Group. Its role is to generate and channel private investment capital to the restructuring of the areas between and immediately north of the two train stations. This is typical of the strategies employed by such firms which enable the development of mixed-use commercial, office and residential complexes. In principle, these are sensible and sustainable urban patterns: the different functions support each other and promote round-the-clock use of public space, which makes for safer streets and a healthy urban environment. Concordant with the shift to private development of these projects, rather than just social housing per se, the King's Cross redevelopment offers shared ownership, shared equity and a mix of intermediate-valued homes for sale and/or rent.

Contemporary with the making of *Breaking and Entering*, the King's Cross redevelopment was the target of vocal opposition from local residents, in part because of what was perceived as the paucity of affordable housing.⁸ Community groups argue that in fact the project was being developed as a high-end economic enclave that will drive out the small businesses and non-profit organisations currently present, damaging the local economy and reducing the number of jobs for locals—the classic symptoms of the solipsistic “fantasy city” projects outlined by John Hannigan (1998).⁹ Reinforcing their argument is the fact that, in terms of physical urban form, the new complex does

constitute an enclave. Pathways which historically existed across the site have been closed off by new rail infrastructure supporting the Eurostar trains. Pedestrian connections will be possible along less than half of the project's perimeter, and even these will be severely limited by high-traffic roads. The developers' marketing rhetoric does indeed stress that long-distance, high-speed connections are much more important than local ones. In yet another, their website (like Will's animation, the centrality of websites to the corporate discourse around real estate testifies to the centrality of new media to urban design and development) boasts of "unrivalled transport accessibility"¹⁰—but in particular ways. Direct underground (subway) and passenger rail links to three London airports, the high-speed Eurostar trains will reach Paris in only two hours and 15 minutes, Brussels in one hour 51 minutes and Lille (site of another solipsistic urban megaproject, the Euralille complex; see *Espace croisé* 1996) in just one hour and 20 minutes. In other words, these international nodes of the new European political and economic network can be reached more easily and quickly by train than can the outskirts of London on many days. Indeed, the marketing material emphasises the globalised high-status location: "King's Cross provides the best front door in Central London." Local groups argue that this emphasis on distant high-speed connections over local pedestrian connectivity, lively streets and community networks entails that the new King's Cross can only support its long-distance commuter-fed corporate headquarters by sacrificing the existing mixed urban district.¹¹

Ironically, a key selling point of urban megaprojects such as King's Cross is their perceived (perhaps symbolic) urbanity: they are desirable because they seem to offer the rich array of experience afforded only by city life. Yet the alienation of locals, the segmentation of the city and the privileging of links to distant centres over local connections all produce a condition that can only with hesitation be described as urban. There is a perhaps more fundamental anti-urbanity to such projects: the company offers potential residents all the allure of "urban living" while sparing them the inherent messiness and uncertainty of urban life, which is blithely expunged. As the project website says,

“King’s Cross intends to have the safest and cleanest environment in Central London”.¹² This echoes the film, for it is just what Will promises in his promotional trailer: Green Effect’s transformation of King’s Cross is to transform it from a hell of poverty and deprivation into a model of good, healthy and secure urban space. The real project connects clean with green: like Will’s imaginary project, the new King’s Cross is also touted as a model of ecologically informed urban design for sustainability. Such “greenwashing” rhetoric is typical of most major city-building projects, whether or not the rhetoric is substantiated in real terms. In effect, we see a desire to escape from the pollution (in more than one sense) of cars, carbon and urban life.

Despite the emphasis on safety and cleanliness, the promised city is still a space of desire. It is meant to be intense and exciting, as seen in the film in the promotional narrative by Green Effect. There, desire is articulated in the sinuousness of our movement through the imagined King’s Cross, carried on the gaze of the virtual camera, through Will’s winning words and his own gestures as he draws us into his project. It is a desire for beauty and for an urban environment rendered at once sensual and immaterial, intense and safe.

The seduction inherent in the trailer in fact articulates a desire strangely displaced from Will’s private life. As an individual, he resists acknowledging the unhappiness in his family; this refusal seems concordant with his compulsion to create a “clean” city and, eventually, to embark on an impossible affair with Miro’s mother Amira. This romantic dalliance is illicit on a number of levels. Besides the betrayal of his partner Liv (with whom his marital relations are strained), Will is naïve in his failure to recognise the imbalance in power between himself and Amira, an imbalance that forces her to plan to blackmail him. There is nothing safe in this relationship for either Will or Amira, and it has no future. But it does uncomfortably acknowledge, in the entwinement of their two bodies, parallel with the entanglement of Will’s and Miro’s lives, a shared existence disavowed by the rhetoric of the clean city. In this we see a compelling allegory for the ways in which the displaced persons who cross the new Europe in search of political or economic

refuge are essential to the economy which drives the development of projects like the new King's Cross. They have there as legitimate a place as the designers and real-estate developers who conceive the project. Attempts to deny this create striking contradictions, beginning with the desire for a way of life both intensely urban and safe.

The now-complete real-life renovation of St Pancras station, by Lord Norman Foster, perhaps unwittingly articulates another contradiction. It sets up a pristine glass wall between the passport-control space of the international rail platforms and the public spaces of St Pancras. That gesture underlines the simultaneous transparency and impassability of this border and makes it a symbol of both the free flow of population, capital and technology on which the new European economy is based, and its jealously guarded economic enclaves. Those arriving in a city like London as political or economic refugees find themselves abandoned (in the sense articulated by Giorgio Agamben [1998]) in such spaces, which are so characteristic of the city in flux. These contradictions echo those manifested in Will's displaced desire: the city for him becomes a substitute for the coldness of his own floundering relationship with his partner Liv and her daughter. Perhaps for this reason he is the ideal architect of a city that has been fetishised and rendered up, through and with its images, as just another commodity.

Final place

A final instance underlines these characteristics of contemporary urban design and its role in the marketing of the city. In 2008, two years after *Breaking and Entering* was completed, an international design competition was announced for the public space directly in front of King's Cross Station. As it currently exists, this space would be described by many urban designers as ill-defined and in poor physical condition. In contrast to Argent's marketing pitch, it could well be considered the *worst* front door in London. Social scientists would note it as a locus of criminality and marginality. Here and nearby pickpockets, drug dealers and sex workers intercept commuters and tourists arriving in the city. The agency in charge of this design competition is a private

firm, Malcolm Reading Consultants. In principle it is distinct from the Argent Group, but its mission is to create a showpiece public space that will be the threshold to King's Cross Station. In tone and content, it impeccably reinforces both the rhetoric of the (real) Argent Group and that of the (cinematic) Green Effect vision of King's Cross presented by Will:

King's Cross Square will be one of London's most high-profile public realm projects—as significant to its setting as Trafalgar Square and Marble Arch are to theirs. . . . The Square will also be at the heart of a broader programme of urban regeneration. King's Cross has historically been one of London's poorest districts—the nearby slum of St Giles was the setting for the Charles Dickens novel, *Oliver Twist*. Today, however, the whole area is being transformed by two massive urban regeneration schemes at Regent Quarter and King's Cross Central. Along with the recent modernisation of the historically significant St Pancras station, they're combining to inject new energy and activity into the area. The successful design of King's Cross Square is of critical importance. . . . It must create a distinct sense of public space and leave a legacy of world-class design. . . .¹³

Perhaps the most telling element of the real competition design brief is its emphasis on “world-class design.” The purpose of such an international design competition is often to attract designers of global stature—so-called “starchitects.”¹⁴ Such designers are responsible for public spaces as well as buildings around the world, and their signature styles are easily recognisable; as argued by Zukin (1995, 2009) and others, they can be considered a “brand” which, when mimicked and reproduced around the world, contribute to the sense of “placelessness” in contemporary cities. Their signature buildings become elements in the international branding and marketing of a given city in a global marketplace in which metropolitan centres compete for tourism and investment (*cf.* Rantisi and Lesley 2006). In London's case its prominent architects and buildings have been important in the branding of contemporary England as “cool Britannia.” In a further irony, *parkour* has itself become co-opted into this marketing; an instance is the use of Sébastien Foucan and a small team of free-runners crossing central London from one public landmark to another in the film *Jump*

London (Mike Christie, 2003).¹⁵

Architects, despite their well-meaning manifestos, contribute as a matter of course to fetishising urban life, urban space and urban design: they seduce, are seduced, and serve as tools of seduction. For all their talk of placemaking, with all that it suggests of participatory democracy and community cohesion, much of their work is absorbed into the flows which make cities in effect non-places (in the sense articulated by Augé [1992] and Relph [1976]). Even architects who recognise this condition in their own discourse—often couched in an ironic take on their relationship to power—are not beyond reproach for their involvement in the star system.¹⁶ *Breaking and Entering* implies a criticism of these conditions, as it plays with a parallel critique of the representations employed by designers. Citing the quasi-cinematic and mediated techniques and modes of discourse co-opted by the design professions, the film underlines the exploitation of these modes of representation in the packaging and selling of the restructured city. Belying the developers' comforting rhetoric, these representations speak instead of placelessness, of cities dissolved into the flows of international capital, of global populations displaced from their places of origin while simultaneously denied a legitimate place in their new "homes" and of bodies at once dematerialized and rendered profoundly vulnerable, breakable. The film thus foregrounds the often overlooked political and ethical quandaries inherent in such representations, quandaries also reflected in the problematic fit between new public spaces and classically modern notions of publicness, citizenship and public space.

While we argue here for an understanding of these circumstances in terms of an accelerated contemporary condition of political and economic globalization, we do not insist that they mark a break from all earlier contexts. Indeed, as already noted, similar tensions can be identified in many "city films" (Dimendberg 2004). One might well draw parallels between today's condition and those social, economic and cultural conditions out of which were originally created the immense levers of technology and global power which are the train stations of London: technological and economic vectors of an earlier cast,

and not unrelated to the history of cinema. But this film does spotlight a particular inflection of these circumstances, one specific to its historical situation on the cusp between two Londons, two Europes and two worlds. There are implications here for design professionals today, and perhaps also for filmmakers.

University of Manitoba and McGill University

NOTES

1. Measured in terms of the United Kingdom's Multiple Deprivation Indices (a compilation of thirty-seven social-science indicators of deprivation based on areas of population of 1,000 to 3,000), King's Cross and neighbourhoods to the north and east ranked in the bottom quintile of Camden neighbourhoods in 2004, and in the most-afflicted 5-20% in rates of "crime and disorder." Camden itself ranked in the bottom 20% nationally (London Borough of Camden, 2008).

2. Numerous software products support the creation of such virtual spaces, and in many of these the image supplants the physical object as the generator of space and form. One example is Photosynth (<http://photosynth.net>). This program generates three-dimensional virtual models based only on photographic images, without reference to the conventional strategies of such generation (physically entering, touching, measuring and constructing an urban landscape).

3. See e.g. <http://www.wmaker.net/parkour/>.

4. In fact, Minghella observed in his director's commentary that he ironically had to go out of his way to recreate, through set dressing, the decay and dysfunction of less well-maintained housing estates. Some residents of the Alexandra Road complex have in fact been vocal in their support of their building (http://www.archiplanet.org/wiki/Alexandra_Road_Housing). Other council-housing complexes that have been major targets of criticism include Robin Hood Gardens (a deck-access complex designed by Alison and Peter Smithson in the early 1970s), 75% of whose residents were in favour of its demolition during a 2008 attempt to have it listed as a heritage building (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/london/7281156.stm), Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes (see http://www.metropolismag.com/html/content_0102/ob/ob02.html), and Toronto's Regent Park complex (see Murdie 1994), now being rebuilt from scratch. Bacon (1985) undertook a detailed study of the UK's disastrous experiments with deck-access housing, but the most infamous illustration of what many see as the failure of modernist social housing was the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis, Missouri (designed by Minoru Yamasaki, 1954-55), demolished in 1972 only a few years after its construction because of its perceived aggravation of social problems; the myths and realities surrounding its demise have been discussed by Katherine Bristol (1991).

5. About 80 % of the 195,000 migrants from new EU member states recorded in the UK's Worker Registration Scheme in 2005 were employed in relatively low-skilled occupations (Salt and Millar 2006). Similar findings have been observed by Green, Owen and Wilson (2005), who noted that ethnic minorities in London are over-represented in low-skill occupation categories such as transportation operators, personal service, and low-wage sales or customer-service occupations.

6. Another instance of this is the extensive redevelopment of another of London's transportation hubs: Paddington Station. The development of a large disused site

behind the station as part of the high-end residential complex in Paddington Basin resulted in the displacement of a transient community which had resided in trailers on the site for a number of years.

7. <http://www.argentkingscross.com/>.

8. Concerns have been raised that the lower-income households will be squeezed out by high-income counterparts, and that families will have to yield to wealthier, smaller households: “only 40% [of the units] will be affordable; 37-42% would be one bedroom and studio units with only 27-33% three bed or over, compared with targets in the joint planning brief of up to 20% one bed/studio and 45-55% three bed or over. . . .” (Gilbert 2009).

9. These arguments are put forward by the King’s Cross Railway Lands Group (KCRLG), a community group that has been monitoring plans for the area for the past 20 years; see <http://www.kxrlg.org.uk/>.

10. <http://www.argentkingscross.com/>.

11. http://www.kingscrossenvironment.com/2007/04/kings_cross_acc_2.html.

12. <http://www.argentkingscross.com/>.

13. <http://www.malcolmreading.co.uk/kingsxsquare/kingsx2.html>.

14. Ironically, one of the finalists in the design competition, the late Martha Schwartz (considered by some a “starchitect”), had been consulted a few years earlier by the filmmakers about how to develop the fictitious design scheme for King’s Cross as presented by Will in the film (see Director’s Commentary on the DVD of *Breaking and Entering*).

15. See also http://www.channel4.com/entertainment/tv/microsites/J/jump_london/.

16. See for instance the work coordinated by Rem Koolhaas, another designer often labelled as a “starchitect,” in the *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (Chung *et al.* 2001).

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RÉSUMÉ

Arts du (dé)placement : l'espace et le design urbains dans le Londres de *Breaking and Entering*

Lawrence Bird and Nik Luka

Le film d'Anthony Minghella *Breaking and Entering* (2006) propose deux visions de Londres, toutes deux centrées sur la gare de King's Cross, l'un des principaux axes du réseau de transport de la ville, mais aussi, comme plusieurs lieux de ce genre, un site complexe de marginalité. Pour le protagoniste principal, l'architecte et designer urbain Will Francis (Jude Law), il s'agit d'un site destiné à être transformé en un modèle (dans plusieurs sens du terme) de ce que Londres — et la pratique du design urbain — peut offrir à la « nouvelle » Europe. La perspective du jeune réfugié kosovar Miro Simic (Rafi Gavron) est fort différente. Le cambrioleur aperçoit la gare depuis les toits, qu'il arpente la nuit afin d'entrer par effraction dans les bureaux du quartier. Il s'y déplace en exécutant des figures de « parkour » (défini par ses adeptes comme « l'art du déplacement »), un aspect important du film. Le jeune Miro évolue dans un espace de déplacement : réfugié et voleur, il se voit tour à tour déplacé de Sarajevo, sa ville natale, et des rues de Londres. Le film oppose ainsi deux points de vue — l'un qui façonne l'espace, l'autre décalé — en mettant en relation des projets de bâtiments londoniens, réels ou imaginés, avec les corps de Will et Miro.