



Rowan Moore, *Slow Burn City: London in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Picador, 2016), ISBN: 978-1-4472-7018-8, 532 pages, £20

Reviewed by

Nicolas Tredell
(Freelance, UK)

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In this lively and provocative book, Rowan Moore, a trained architect and architecture critic for the *Observer* and, formerly, the *Evening Standard*, presents a survey of selected London buildings and sites, a fragmentary vision of London's past, present and future and, in his last pages, a manifesto. Moore's title is a metaphor for the kind of metropolitan change he desires: his 'ideal is that cities burn slowly' (476). Change should renew, not ravage, their physical and social constitutions. He acknowledges that this ideal is never fully realized since one cannot, in his own domestic simile, control change like a gas-cooker ring; but 'London, with its adaptability, its variegation and its areas of slackness and redundancy, has long been an outstanding example of a slow-burning city', though sometimes it flares up dangerously (476). London burns slowly 'through the creative interplay of private trade and public action, an interplay that is currently breaking down' (4).

The breakdown of this interplay is the core of Moore's diagnosis of London's present febrile combustion. His overall argument tends to emerge more in brief generalizations from specific instances than direct and sustained exposition, and there is some repetition, but his case is clear enough: since the advent of Thatcherism in the 1980s, the public contribution to architectural endeavour in the capital has diminished and private investment has been allowed to flare in an unbanked way, driving up property prices and thus making it prohibitive for people on low and middle incomes to start to buy houses or flats there.

Slow Burn does not develop its argument in a linear fashion – if it were a building, it would be a zigzag shape made up of irregular blocks – but proceeds through a series

of what might be called, in a more academic book, case studies – although here, and in no way to their discredit, they are more like a succession of visits (hailing a time-machine when required) to a range of key London sites with a guide who is articulate, architecturally astute and acutely aware of the historical, social and economic contexts in which buildings and areas arise. These sites include London Zoo, his starting-point; Canary Wharf; Regent's Park and its environs; Chapel Market, Islington and Percy Circus (memorably evoked in B. S. Johnson's novel *Albert Angelo* (1964), which Moore quotes); Lubetkin's 1938 Finsbury Health Centre, which John Allan, in his biography of Lubetkin, calls 'the architectural birthplace of the British Welfare State' (qtd 140); Hampstead Heath and Hampstead Garden Suburb; the now-raised Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle; the Broadgate development where Broad Street station in the City once stood; the 'More London' complex around the Mayor's City Hall office; Paternoster Square; Tate Modern; the redeveloped King's Cross area; High Street 2012, the rebranded four-mile stretch of road, incorporating Whitechapel High Street and Road, Mile End and Bow Road and Stratford High Street, which led to the site of the Olympic Games; the Olympic zone and Village, with its park and sporting arenas; the ORTUS building in the Maudsley Hospital grounds; the revamped Geological Museum that makes one long for Victorian vitrines; and the Natural History Museum where, controversially, Dippy, a plaster copy of a diplodocus skeleton that had stood in the entrance since 1905, has been replaced by the suspended real skeleton of a genuine blue whale (whom Moore calls Wally, thus coining a nice name for a double act – Dippy and Wally – whose members are estranged).

In addition to these sites – and sights – there is also the new London skyline, or what Moore calls 'an accelerating havoc' (25) of towers, a form of erection that fell out of fashion from 1981, when the 600-foot NatWest tower (now Tower 42) opened, but revived in the 1990s, justified by the idea of 'iconic' buildings: One Canada Square, the HSBC tower and the Citi tower (all at Canary Wharf); the Heron Tower; Number One Poultry; the London Millennium Tower (the Gherkin); the Leadenhall Building (the Cheesegrater) (316); 20 Fenchurch Street (the Walkie-Talkie); Montrevetro [Italian for 'Glass Mountain']; the Vauxhall Tower; and the tallest so far, the Shard (2012). This 'game reserve of nicknamed shapes' (58), their unofficial monikers shrinking them to a domestic scale or a superseded handheld technology, prompts this reviewer to rewrite lines from Wordsworth's 'Upon Westminster Bridge': 'Shard, Gherkin, Cheesegrater, Walkie-Talkie lie / Open unto the streets and to the sky / All bright and glittering in the toxic air'. These towers are of varying architectural merits; but their effect, Moore suggests, is to create what Boris Johnson, in the 2008 electoral campaign for London Mayor, criticized as 'Dubai-on-Thames' but which he himself would encourage when he took office. They call to mind Auden's lines in his *New Year Letter* (US title *The Double Man*) (1941) which were written about New York but might be appropriately amended to apply to present-day London: 'Why are the private buildings so high / How come you don't know? / That's because the spirits of the public are so low'.

Of course, on one level, the spirits of the twenty-first-century London public are, or should not be, low: London has never been so well supplied with spirit-raising diversions. The frantic question of T. S. Eliot's modern Cleopatra at the dressing table in *The Waste Land* (1922) – "'What shall I do now? What shall I do?'" (line 131) – could

indeed be answered, today, by rushing out into the street or, more generally, into urban spaces that would soon yield multiple diversions. Clive Bell's elitist complaint in *Civilization: An Essay* (1928), the lament of a jaded bon viveur, that 'there are now but two or three restaurants in London where it is an unqualified pleasure to dine' (73) lacks resonance in a twenty-first-century capital that can provide a gamut of gastronomic gratifications from Le Gavroche to Gaby's. When the Clash sang 'London's Burning' in 1977, the cause of the combustion was boredom, but this aetiology might not spring so readily to mind today. As Moore puts it:

In London, as in other major cities, the arts of distraction have reached an unprecedented level of sophistication. If a cataclysm were to hit now, future generations would marvel – as we might over Petronius' descriptions of Roman excess – at our own time's range and ingenuity of food, drink, art, design and performance, of spas, bars, shops and clubs. (77)

It is, of course, possible to point to the distress on the edges of this distraction, the marks of weakness and woe revealed when the pleasure-mask slips, epitomized by the financial high-flyers who, when the black sun of speculation melts their wingwax, voluntarily embrace the fate of Icarus by leaping off the top of Number One Poultry, or by the fate-battered folk who, on the ground, haunt the margins of public space, like the figure on the Waterloo Station steps, in John Cowper Powys' novel *Wolf Solent* (1929), whose face of 'inert despair' brings home to the eponymous hero, as he flees the city, 'the appalling misery of so many of his fellow Londoners' (Powys (1978), 15).

Moore acknowledges that many forms of London distraction cost money and it would be easy – as with an earlier text Moore cites, Jonathan Raban's *Soft City* (1974) – to criticize the vision of London as a vast pleasure dome, an emporium of excitations, as the limited perspective of an affluent professional, like Moore himself. But not all these diversions demand much dosh, and an assiduous, street-savvy modern flaneuse/flaneur can get quite a lot from London for nothing or relatively little. Baudelaire would have a field day.

In the architecture from the 1990s onwards, Moore sees both a revival of modernism and the influence of what he calls 'Mipism', a noun coined from *Le Marché international des professionnels de l'immobilier*, which Moore sums up as 'an annual property trade fair where chunks of city are traded much like other products that have their days in Cannes, such as swimwear and luxury travel' (300). He offers an amusing account of meeting Ken Livingstone there, fresh from the jacuzzi. But modernism and Mipism leave a large lacuna in Moore's architectural history: postmodernism. This hardly gets a mention and is seen as a passé if reusable style, as when he includes, in a chapter itemizing 'good places to live in London' (223), the 2002 Blue House in Hackney which 'sets out to break as many architectural taboos as possible, for example by reviving the officially dead style of postmodernism' (257).

It is, however, surely necessary to discuss postmodernism more fully, even if one rejects the concept and (as Moore seems to) regards the architectural innovations of 1990s London as a continuation of modernism by other, high-tech means. Architecture was one of the key areas in which postmodernist notions developed and were put into practice – see, as a notable example, Robert Venturi's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972)

– and Fredric Jameson’s account, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991, 38-45), of the sublime delights and disorientations of postmodern architectural space in John Portman’s Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, remains a *locus classicus* that certainly maps on to some of the buildings and sites Moore discusses. Postmodernism does offer ways of accounting for the visible and experiential differences between the spectacular sites of 1990s London architecture and their old-modernist predecessors. Moore has written about postmodernism in London architecture elsewhere – for example in ‘Are these PoMo palaces really worth saving?’ (*Observer*, 20 December 2015) – and it seems odd to omit any sustained explicit reference to the topic in this book.

Mipimist or new-modernist London can seem to contrast with the grim old-modernist planner’s London that supposedly prevailed, especially for the poor, prior to the 1980s. But Moore is concerned to challenge the notion, popular in that decade, that supposedly bad architecture, especially that of modernist-influenced council estates allegedly built to an abstract, utopian plan, necessarily produces anomie and crime. As he points out: ‘When riots took place on the Victorian streets of Brixton, nobody blamed the architecture, but when on the Broadwater Farm Estate in Tottenham, they did’ (199-200). The Heygate Estate at the Elephant and Castle was denounced, for example in the *Independent*, as ‘a monument to the failure of post-war mass housing’, a ‘crime-racked labyrinth of grey high-rise blocks and small terraced houses, linked by raised foot bridges and stone stairwells’ (qtd 204). But not all its residents agreed: Laura Cross, for instance, said that ‘Every morning you’d come out of your door and there’d be people on the balcony and you’d chat’ and Kevin Watson observed ‘this wasn’t a bad place to live. There was a sense of belonging’ (qtd 204). Such voices were hardly heeded however, in the speculative conflagration that consumed old council estate communities in the Thatcher and post-Thatcher eras.

Moore does not deny that some council estates fail, but, as he points out, so do some traditionally designed projects; and in both cases, they fail not by bricks or concrete alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of politicians and pundits – in regard to housing policy, for instance. And of course, as the upthrust of fresh residential towers from the 1990s onwards shows, rich people do choose to live in skystreets (and sometimes not in new builds but in refurbished ex-council flats bought by their original tenants at subsidized prices under Thatcher’s Right to Buy scheme and then sold on so that their prices rise to market values), and suffer no social problems thereby. Lack of money is the root of council-estate evil.

Wholesale anti-capitalism is not on Moore’s agenda; he acknowledges the creative, productive role that private investment may play in constructing the capital. As he remarks, the ‘shaping of London by big landowners has the respectability of history’ (61), as in Bloomsbury, Fitzrovia and Belgravia. But it is likely to require public actions to make such spaces widely available, as happened with Regent’s Park, or with Hampstead Heath, where George Shaw Lefevre, later Lord Eversley, founder in 1865 of the Commons Preservation Society, along with supporters such as John Stuart Mill and W. H. Smith, invoked the Saxon concept of common land to block Thomas Maryon-Wilson’s attempts to turn his inherited ancient rights over the Heath to profit by building houses there. In a culturally and cinematically significant sequel, the Maryon-Wilson

family, after Thomas's death, donated Charlton Sandpits to the Greater London Council in 1891 and these later became Maryon Park, the crucial setting in that strange encounter between an Italian auteur-director in his fifties and young actors from Swinging London that took the form of Antonio's classic film *Blow-Up* (1966), where the enigmatic public spaces of a then-obscure London green space becomes a theatre for a puzzling psychodrama and a meditation on photography and movie-making.

While acknowledging the role of private investment, Moore stresses the positive effects of public planning and government intervention. His star example here is 'one of the foundation legends of modern London' (105), the provision of proper sewerage for the capital that Charles Balzagette masterminded in the nineteenth century, after 'the Great Stink' had impinged on the nostrils of politicians in the Houses of Parliament so strongly that it became unignorable. The sewerage scheme met with much resistance from vested interests, whom Moore compares to today's climate-change deniers, but it was finally overcome. The sequel, for Moore, is significant:

for all this opposition there was almost no trace of it once the works were complete. No one wished them undone or argued that they should never have been attempted. Not even the most ardent believers in free enterprise have, in the century and a half since, questioned this major government intervention which not only saved tens of thousands of lives but also helped the city's businesses prosper. (112)

Similar successes are, Moore argues, the Metropolitan Police Force, the London Transport system and the Clean Air Acts.

Although Moore thinks that planning and government intervention are important and can be positive, he also acknowledges the anti-planning case and recognizes the value of 'Non-Plan'. This term and notion had its origin in the radical 1960s, featuring as the main title of an article of 20 March 1969 in *New Society* by Rayner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall and Cedric Price (the last-named had helped to design London Zoo's aviary). In a decade of often aggressive and aesthetically obtuse top-down city planning, the article raised the question of whether no plan at all would be better and whether people should choose the sorts of places in which they would learn to live. This led, Moore argues, to the idea of the enterprise zone and to the emergence, after 1979, of the London Docklands Development Corporation:

The concept was an intellectual alliance common in that phase of Thatcherism, of an anarchistic reaction to centralized planning by free thinkers of the 1960s and 70s, with her belief in making conditions favourable to the operations of the markets. (48)

The LDDC led, in the new millennium and after many vicissitudes, to the construction of Canary Wharf as a habitat for bankers – and stimulated, in rivalry to this, the regeneration of the City of London. Considering Canary Wharf, Moore contends that its 'physical environment [...] is in many ways pleasant' (39), but the problem comes when you step outside its precincts and encounter 'the collapse of almost anything resembling urban planning' (73). This collapse of planning around a spectacular development or building is evident elsewhere: for instance, the Bankside

area with Tate Modern and the Globe 'should be and in some ways is one of the greatest places in London, but, if you were to walk around its open spaces, you wouldn't know it. They are disjointed and lack the positive qualities that make city spaces memorable' (350). With the Gherkin, its 'vigorous diagonal geometry disintegrates into a series of painful clashes when it hits the pavement' and the Shard 'fails to be part of a coherent vision for its neighbourhood' (322).

A key exhibit in *Slow Burn City* is not a building but a book, B. S. Johnson's novel *Albert Angelo* (1964) whose protagonist, for most of the narrative, is himself an aspiring though unsuccessful architect. Moore first cites *Albert Angelo* for its description of Chapel Market and its pubs in the early 1960s, when Islington had not yet been gentrified, and contrasts it with the area in the 1990s when it was 'the home turf of a young and dynamic prime-minister-in-waiting' (90). He then quotes the narrator's description of his own home turf in the 1960s, Percy Circus, which serves in the novel as a symbol of the state of the capital, the nation, and humanity: 'decadent and decaying, decrepit, like my state, London's state, England's state, man's state, the human condition' (qtd 88; Johnson (2004), 115-16). Later, Moore gives in full, from the 'Prologue' of *Albert Angelo*, the precise two-paragraph description of Percy Circus which opens 'The first thing you see about Percy Circus is that it stands most of the way up a hill, sideways, leaning upright against the slope like a practised seaman' (qtd 131; Johnson (2004), 13). According to Moore, Johnson's narrator describes the Circus at its nadir: wartime bombing had broken its circle (as Johnson puts it, 'half of it is not there' (qtd 131; Johnson (2004), 13) and its houses, built for the affluent, had been partitioned into short-term lodgings (Johnson observes out that a 'blue plaque tells you that Lenin once lived at number sixteen' (qtd 131; Johnson (2004), 14).

Moore points out that in 1964 Percy Circus belonged to the New River Company who, in the early nineteenth century, had bought the fields on which the Circus now stands as a bed for an underground network of elm-wood pipes that often needed excavating for repairs. Once stronger cast-iron pipes were brought in, obviating the need for frequent maintenance, the Company, from 1811 to 1853, developed their land by building houses on it. In 1904, the Metropolitan Water Company assumed the New River Company's water supply tasks and the latter became, in effect, a property management firm. In the year *Albert Angelo* came out, it sought permission to demolish most of the streets and squares it owned and put modern blocks and paving in their place – a project thwarted by the recent legislation to protect conservation areas, which safeguarded the character of an area rather than specific buildings. The New River Company's dilapidated properties exemplified 'one of London's most admired and successful urban inventions, the estate of speculatively built terraces of houses' (132).

The irony of Moore's citations of *Albert Angelo* will be evident to those who know Johnson's work, because this is the novel in which, following a lyrical evocation of the sun shining on Percy Circus after fifteen hours of rain, the narrator exclaims, in 'an almighty aposiopesis' at the end of section four, 'OH FUCK ALL THIS LYING!' (Johnson (2004), 167, 163) and denounces all that has gone before as falsehood; but while the artifice of Albert as architect may be, in Johnson's severe terms, mendacious, the architecturally, sociologically and historically alert account of Percy Circus and of Chapel Market and its pubs is sufficiently factual to serve Moore as an illustration of

developments in more widely representative parts of London. Moore's use of them also reminds us of how good Johnson was as a realistic, documentary writer.

Inevitably *Slow Burn*, published this year but before the referendum, takes on a new aspect after 23 June 2016. Some, their crystal balls polished by a prestidigitating former London mayor, may see a future in which a prosperous capital at the hub of a thriving global free trade network flares into architectural glory. Others may strive to discern, through a glass darkly, what rough beasts are slouching towards London to be born – or built. London, of course, voted Remain and has a progressive Labour Muslim mayor, a position, as its two previous incumbents have shown, offering opportunities for dynamism and innovation – and the temptation of lucre. A key question in terms of London's built environment will be whether Sadiq Khan ultimately sanctions the Garden Bridge, a controversial project, conceived by Joanna Lumley, backed by Boris Johnson and George Osborne, and designed by Thomas Heatherwick, for a garden on a bridge over the Thames between Waterloo and Blackfriars. Moore roundly denounces this in his book:

It is a cartoon of architecture, which converts the medium's properties into parody. It has what looks like complexity – it's a garden AND a bridge – and the illusion of function: it helps you cross the river. It has a notable form, with sprouting mushroom-like piers and serrated edges, denoting the genius of the maker. It has a striking choice of material – the copper-nickel cladding whose expense would be reduced by the support of Glencore, the international mining conglomerate who deny accusations of involvement in environmental and human rights abuses. It requires the struggle – with budget, fundraising, objectors, planning law – that is the lot of artists.

What this digital jism lacks are considered relationships to the surrounding city, to the spaces and buildings around its landings, or between its own elements. (395-6).

As with Canary Wharf, Bankside and the Shard, it is the lack of a sense of relationships between its elements and with its surroundings that, in Moore's view, vitiates the projected Garden Bridge – and this absence is due, in a wider perspective, to the lack of a proper public dimension to our architectural adventures.

It seems unlikely that in the foreseeable future, there will be any extended revival of a powerful public dimension in London's building, planning and governance, and the force of global capital in the metropolis – far more opaque than any EU machination – will continue, though perhaps reduced if some financial operations partly relocate to Europe. House and flat prices may fall but not to the level where, as Moore would wish, residential London property would be realistically within reach of those on low or middle incomes. But, helped by Moore's book, the aspiration to affordable housing and to shared and truly public spaces, shaped by people as well as for profit, can stay alive and may, here and there, fragmentarily, make a difference, offering a glimpse of the utopian dyad adumbrated in the last line of Auden's 'Sir, no man's enemy' (1929): 'New styles of architecture, a change of heart'.

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Note on Contributor

Nicolas Tredell is a freelance writer who has published on authors ranging from Shakespeare to Martin Amis. He is Consultant Editor of Palgrave Macmillan's Essential Criticism series and formerly taught at Sussex University, UK. His recent books include *C. P. Snow: The Dynamics of Hope* (2012), *Analysing Texts: David Copperfield and Great Expectations* (2013), *Shakespeare—The Tragedies* (2014), and new and updated editions of *Novels to Some Purpose* (2015), his study of Colin Wilson's fiction, and *Conversations with Critics* (2016), his interviews with twenty leading writers.

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