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Paul Shephard Rebuilding London's Landscape

One night not long ago, while I was living in Austin, there was a huge thunderstorm, and the concrete-frame house in which I was living shook with every clap of thunder. After the storm the temperature cooled down, so I took a walk in Zilker Park nearby.

In the paths of the park there are ants that live in holes which they burrow out of the sand, and after these big storms their nests are all filled with silt, so they have to clear them out. I watched the ants at work, picking up grains of dirt, carry the grains out of the holes and dumping them outside. Then the ants go back while others are coming up the other way with their own lumps of dirt, so there is a continuous stream of ant activity.

One nest that I watched was busy piling the dirt in a concentric ring around its hole. Maybe ten feet away, however, there was another nest of ants doing the same work, but piling the sand in a little crescent, which I thought was more sensible; if it rained again, the sand would wash down the hill, not back into the nest. I wondered what kind of conversation might have occurred to make the distinction between those different approaches.

How ants would decide to do something like this is just as mysterious to me as how humans decide to do things. For example, there is a great controversy in London about Norman Foster's proposed one-thousand-foot-tall tower. People say that it is phallic, it is mammoth and it overshadows the rest of the world, and they do not want it. But it is the same height as the Eiffel Tower, and I don't think you can imagine Paris without the Eiffel Tower. I know this is not the same situation, but somehow, the height is not the problem.

In reflecting on the ants' nests, one realizes that the complications of London are all local complications. They are all interesting, and they all accrue to the making of a nest. But how do you make decisions, like the ants to deciding where to pile the earth? There are other tall buildings in London, so how do you decide how tall Foster's tower should be?

London sits in a basin of chalk, with the River Thames running through it. The City of London was founded in the middle of the river. Just out from the river plain are a couple of small hills, ten miles apart, both five miles from the center. The hills are exactly 328 feet high, and are the result of a glaciation that swept clay down the valley. London is inside these two little hills, which are inside the larger chalk basin.

A view of London from the northern of the two hills shows St. Paul's Cathedral in the center. Not long ago, I came to realize that the top of St. Paul's is the same height as the hills on either side. The cross sticks up above it, but the nipple of the dome is right on the horizon. According to Bannister-Fletcher, if you add the sea level to the 288-foot-height of St. Paul's it comes to 328 feet—exactly the same height as the hills on either side.

This is an interesting bit of information, if you are thinking about how tall things might be in a place. It is thrilling to discover this and to speculate about the intentionality of St. Paul's being the same height as the hills on either side of the basin. When you realize this, while you are standing on the hills, and imagine clearing London away and just leaving St. Paul's, you would still have London.



One of the difficulties about building high buildings in London is that they skew the view of Wren's churches. After the Great Fire of 1666, a proposition arose amongst the ants who lived there at the time of how the city should be rebuilt. Because the monarchy had been recently restored, the tax base was very uncertain. And because the ants could not be imperious about it, they decided instead to invest all the money in rebuilding the churches with the intention of putting heart into Londoners to rebuild the rest of city. So, they built churches and established anti-fire codes, and the result was London. Canaletto's famous painting, depicting the end-result of 1750, with all the churches sticking up above the bridges, is the city they envisioned, an idea that people who are visionaries of London today still hold to. To see the churches again, why can't we just clear it all out?

The Germans tried. When they came over in great swarms of planes and tried to bomb London out of existence in the Blitz of December 29, 1940, St. Paul's was saved by a group of volunteers from the Royal Institute of British Architects, who armed themselves with long snow shovels and stationed themselves on the roof. The incendiary bombs rained down by parachute, and when they landed, their fuses went off and they burst into flames. Every time one landed on the cathedral's roof, someone rushed over, picked it up with a shovel and heaved it over the side. Everything around St. Paul's burned, but St. Paul's was saved.

Because it took so long after the war to get the English economy working again, the environs of St. Paul's stayed ruined for ten years. The unsafe walls were demolished and pushed into the empty lots. Wild gardens then sprouted in the lots and the ecology of London reasserted itself, culminating at a certain point with nettles and blackberry brambles. The whole area was a shorn thicket after about five or six years. It must have been so beautiful that I sometimes wonder, "Why can't we do that again?"

Contemporary views of London reveal what is difficult about maintaining this position. From the same point where the Canaletto view was made, you can no longer see the churches. Now, when they rebuilt London after the Great Fire, the idea was to rebuild the churches, in order to give heart to Londoners to rebuild everything else. So, one must conclude, it was intended that London should be rebuilt, that the city should become enormously powerful, that Londoners should build and build and build, and that the churches ultimately should become obscured by the growth that they had inspired.

I suspect it is intentional that London has turned out the way it is today. There is a sense of vision about the positive way things could be, and even if you are very clear in this vision, things are going to happen that are beyond your control. Presumably, this is why urban planning was snatched from the landscapists (who are incorrigible visionaries) and turned instead into a science.

London's skyline, with St. Paul's Cathedral and more recent additions
Photo: Paul Shephard

