

## 23 Shaping symbolic space: Parliament Square, London as sacred site

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### **The process of sacralization**

The concept of a 'sacred sight / site', as defined in this chapter, exerts a strong and enduring influence on the policies, practices and outcomes associated with the construction of built heritage. In spite of linguistic and cultural differences notions of 'separateness, respect and rules of behaviour' are common to all sites that are considered to be sacred (Hubert, 1994: 11). Based on examples from the United States, Kenneth E. Foote has identified a general schema by which a place might become sanctified (Foote, 1997: 8-10). In the first instance it is clearly bounded and inscribed with a 'durable marker'; it is maintained over time and is likely to pass from private to public ownership; it becomes a place for ritual commemoration and a site for further monuments and memorials.

From this one can deduce that a heritage site becomes "sacralized" by its ascribed associations' (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1994: 19). The 'stages of sight sacralization' as set out by Dean MacCannell (1976: 43-48) form the theoretical basis for this chapter. Although this will be elaborated where appropriate throughout the text it is pertinent to mention at the outset the most salient aspects of MacCannell's argument. The process commences with two phases: that of '*naming*' succeeded by '*framing and elevation*' (original italics). These occur when a 'sight is marked off from similar objects as worthy of preservation' and circumscribed by 'an official boundary'. An additional level is termed '*enshrinement*' whereby the 'framing material' itself becomes characterised as sacred. The final two stages concern '*mechanical*' and '*social reproduction*' whereby the sacred sight is replicated and disseminated in the form of souvenirs and 'when groups, cities, and regions begin to name themselves after famous attractions' (MacCannell, 1976: 44-45).

This chapter will seek to apply a reading of the MacCannell thesis to a specific European city and on one particular locale within that metropolis: namely Parliament Square in the City of

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Westminster, London. The historical circumstances that shaped this urban landscape both physically and symbolically, as well as the various legislative regulations and cultural categories subsequently adhered to that site, manifest the naming, framing, elevating, enshrinement and reproduction that have led to its sacralization. In addition this chapter seeks to make an important modification to MacCannell's argument. It contends that, within the sphere of built heritage, the process of sacralization is less robust than MacCannell implies. The pattern is instead contingent and not necessarily linear or progressive, with sacred sites perpetually susceptible to profane incursions.

### **The sacred and profane**

The association between memory and place is crucial to the establishment of a sacred site. Westminster is accordingly replete with historical connections: it has had royal and religious affiliations since at least the reign of Edward the Confessor. Indeed, the King's long-vanished Saxon palace 'directly gave rise to the present location' of the British Houses of Parliament (Factsheet 48). Adjacent to this, and built on the site of an eleventh-century Benedictine monastery, is Westminster Abbey, the nation's principal church. Westminster is therefore of great secular *and* religious significance. This serves to indicate a further important principle of what qualifies as a sacred site. The *Oxford English Dictionary* avers that the word 'sacred' has connotations with religion and worship. However, it also makes clear that it can equally refer more generally to something 'dedicated, set apart, [or] exclusively appropriated to some person or some special purpose' (Simpson & Weiner, 1989: 338-9, especially definition 2b). This non-religious quality is further enunciated in a series of 'special collocations': sacred artery, sacred vein, sacred axe, sacred circle, *sacred place* and so on (Simpson & Weiner, 1989: 339, definition 7). A sacred site therefore does not refer solely to a place of religion. In the case of Westminster the coalescence of church and state enriches it as a sacred site. The Houses of Parliament therefore garners as much approbation for

being 'renowned world-wide as a symbol of democratic government' (Wheatley, 1997: 15) as Westminster Abbey does for being a place of religious pilgrimage. The image of the Houses of Parliament's Clock Tower is widely recognised and the chimes of 'Big Ben' are broadcast around the globe by the BBC World Service (Cannadine, 2000: 11), providing an instance of '*social reproduction*' whereby the nation and its capital city "names" itself after its most illustrious attraction.

Discourse on the Abbey further compounds this relationship. The building was filled with sculpted memorials of national heroes throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries (Orbach, 1987: 214-6). A report in *The Times* newspaper of 1827 alluded to it as 'holding in its precincts the sacred ashes of the departed sages, heroes, patriots, and Kings' (Anon, 1827). This description had been prompted by the funeral of the incumbent Prime Minister, George Canning (1770-1827). Following a suggestion that a monument be erected to the late lamented statesman within the Abbey, John Wilson Croker (1780-1857) declared with enthusiasm: 'Let his memorial be, as his remains were, placed in that sacred & immortal neighbourhood where are concentrated the most glorious names & recollections of our history' (Croker, 1828). Both quotations feature the word 'sacred' but in a markedly secular vein. Standing to the north of the Abbey- and of comparable importance in political as well as religious terms- is St. Margaret's Church. Established in the eleventh-century it later fostered close connections with parliament, as an entry in the *House of Commons Journal* of 1735 makes clear: 'It is as it were a National Church for the use of the House of Commons' (Wilding and Laundry, 1972: 663-664).

This is further evidence of the integration of the holy and the laical at Westminster. Parliament Square lies physically and symbolically at the juxtaposition of this crossing, located as it is to the west of the Houses of Parliament and to the north of St Margaret's Church and the Abbey. This seemingly "empty" space was formed in the early nineteenth-century. From 1800 onwards legislation was enacted to enable the purchase and removal of a swathe of property in the vicinity of the Palace of Westminster in order to isolate the principal monuments: Westminster Abbey,

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Westminster Hall and St Margaret's Church (Crook and Port, 1973: 516). Throughout the nineteenth-century this area of Westminster saw the removal of a plethora of post-medieval accretions including small dwellings and workshops, public houses and coffee shops (PRO WORK 8/1A-8/10C). This allowed the grounds of St. Margaret's Church to be enlarged and, 'for the sake of a better alignment', the area was 'cleared and levelled' and enclosed by railings (Parliamentary Papers, 1809).

This open space, grassed-over and planted with trees, became known as Garden Square, St. Margaret's Churchyard or Square, and by its present epithet: Parliament Square. This is analogous to the '*naming phase* of sight sacralization'. The differing titles for this site provide further evidence of the layering of religion and politics alluded to above. MacCannell opines that this initial stage of 'sacralization takes place when the sight is marked off from similar objects as worthy of preservation' (MacCannell, 1976: 44). Jane Hubert has similarly commented that, if

something... is said to be sacred, whether it be an object or site (or person), [it] must be placed apart from everyday things or places, so that its special significance can be recognised, and rules regarding it obeyed (Hubert, 1994: 11).

The clearance in the nineteenth-century of extraneous features from this centre of ecclesiastical and political power meant that the remaining structures were indeed situated at one remove from the commonplace and mundane in order that their 'special significance' could be appreciated. The stated reason for this undertaking was

for improving the access and approaches to Westminster Hall and both Houses of Parliament... an accommodation much wanted upon all public solemnities: And to all travellers passing over Westminster Bridge, whether entering into or departing from the Metropolis, this clearance has at the same time opened a striking and magnificent view of Westminster Abbey in its whole extent, from Henry the Seventh's Chapel eastward,

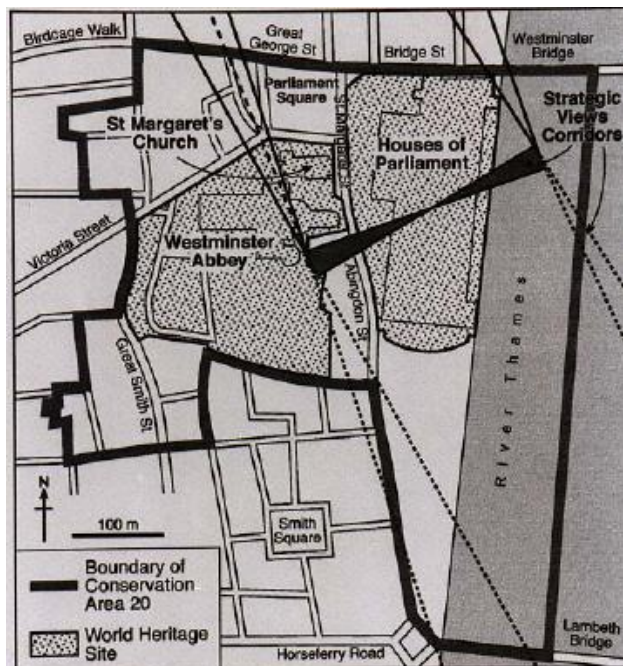
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to the great Towers of its western entrance' (Parliamentary Papers, 1813-14).

This conforms to the second phase of sight sacralization: that of '*framing and elevation*'. The former occurs when a sight is circumscribed by 'an official boundary' whilst the latter 'is the putting on display of an object' (MacCannell, 1976: 44). It can be seen that this mode of separation and display occurred in Westminster whereby Parliament Square formed the "frame" delineating the sacralized monuments. What is more, to perpetuate this 'magnificent view', it was directed that no subsequent structures be allowed to 'interfere with the view of the Abbey from the intersecting centre of Bridge-street and Parliament-street' (in other words across Parliament Square) (Parliamentary Papers, 1811: 109-110). There are still in force today 'Strategic Views Corridors', consisting of cone-shaped areas three-hundred metres in width, which are intended to further preserve the aspect of the Houses of Parliament, St. Margaret's Church and Westminster Abbey ([www.westminster.gov.uk/map](http://www.westminster.gov.uk/map)).

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Plate: A map showing the extent of the Conservation Area, Strategic Views Corridors and World Heritage Site in the vicinity of the New Palace at Westminster



### Barriers and interstices

The ancient Palace of Westminster was almost entirely destroyed by a disastrous fire in 1834. Only the medieval Westminster Hall survived intact to be incorporated into the New Palace at Westminster designed by Sir Charles Barry (1795-1860) and A.W.N. Pugin (1812-52). Following the death of his father, Edward Middleton Barry (1830-80) assumed responsibility for the completion of parliament, including the open spaces around it. In 1864 he was commissioned to redesign both Parliament Square and New Palace

Yard, the latter being a space lying just to the east and within the precincts of parliament. He was instructed that:

The railings must be sufficiently high and strong to exclude a mob on important occasions, but should not necessarily interrupt the view. The enclosure of Parliament, or St. Margaret's Square is to be remodelled, and the roadway is to be carried through the centre of what is now enclosed (Alfred Austin to E.M. Barry, 26 November 1864; PRO WORK 11/20).

Following the realisation of this plan the connection to St. Margaret's Church and Westminster Abbey was severed and the space became a square in the full sense of the word. The central enclosure of Parliament Square was bisected by a pedestrian walkway. On either side, lined by ornate wrought iron railings and decorated with bedding plants, were sites intended to accommodate commemorative statues of eminent statesmen.

MacCannell argues that, in modern urban society, there exists a plethora of 'physical divisions' such as walls, fences, hedges and signs that mark 'the limits of a community, an establishment, or a person's space' (MacCannell, 1976: 39). In addition to these boundaries there are 'interstitial corridors': halls, streets, subways and the like. Within these public places are 'representations of good and evil'. The former—consisting of monuments, museums and parks—inspire respect. At the other extreme evidence of decay, refuse and dereliction invoke disgust. Taken in conjunction these two extremes 'provide a moral stability... that extends beyond immediate social relationships to the structure and organization of the total society' (MacCannell, 1976: 39).

The re-figured Parliament Square can be understood as an additional enhancement to the "frame" of Westminster. Furthermore, it represents both a division *and* a corridor. It was intended as a permeable barrier: whilst facilitating the movement of people and traffic it was also a store for commemorative monuments intended to both remind and inspire. Although the railings of New Palace Yard were similarly intended 'to exclude a mob' they were not to 'interrupt the view'. In other words they were to serve as barriers to any unwelcome elements of society whilst enabling those willing to

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engage in the ritual of good citizenship to admire the nation's political and religious shrines.

Parliament Square's retention of memorials of the past is complemented by its facilitation of the orderly transportation of people and business in the present: it stores and regulates. In the 1850s the journalist George Augustus Sala (1828-95) wrote that Leicester Square functioned as 'the liver of London' (Sala, 1872: 174-175). The liver acquires the products of digestion, breaks down fats, produces bile and blood-clotting factors and expels toxins such as alcohol from the blood: it therefore serves to store and regulate (Dresner, 1995: 538). In contrast, Sala described Westminster before the urban clearances as 'a *cloaca* of narrow, tortuous, shabby, stifling, and malodorous streets' (Sala, 1894: 78). A 'cloaca' can be defined as 'a sewer; a cavity in birds and reptiles, in which the intestinal and urinary ducts terminate' (Schwarz, 1997: 193). This represents the two extremes in the 'interstitial corridors' of modern society: the one before the process of sight sacralization had begun and the other following the phases of 'framing and elevation'.

### **Re-framing sacred sites**

The delineation and ornamentation of Parliament Square in the late 1860s meant that it had (to reiterate Kenneth Foote) itself become a place for ritual commemoration and a site for further monuments and memorials. In addition to the siting of political statues it became a focal point during royal coronations and jubilees. That it had become sacralized is indicated by comments made in response to the decision to reorganise the square in the late 1940s. Throughout the nineteenth-century Westminster had endured some of the densest traffic in the metropolis. By the mid-twentieth-century, with the demands of the motorcar and the decision to site the 1951 Festival of Britain on the South Bank, it was decided to alter the road layout to better enable the movement of traffic. When the future of the square and its various commemorative memorials was brought before parliament the Government was instructed to pay heed to the fact that this was 'the site of the very heart of the Empire' and



needed to be treated with due deference (Parliamentary Debates, 1948-49: 470).

The architect George Grey Wornum (1888-1957) was responsible for the design whereby the central island was considerably enlarged to allow for the most extensive “weaving” lengths for traffic on all four sides of the square’ (Wornum, 1949: 137). Internal footpaths were created along the north and west angles and the statues were shifted from the centre to the periphery. The bulk of the central space was taken up by a grass clearing ‘to provide a worthy pedestrian approach across it from the north side of the Square to the Abbey’ (Wornum, 1949: 137).

This represents a modification to the initial phase of sight sacralization as conceived of in the nineteenth-century, thus indicating that it is not necessarily an exclusively linear process. When the Wornum scheme was implemented pedestrian access to the square was deliberately restricted on grounds of safety. Its remoteness may actually emphasise the sense of sacralization: rather than providing for its general use the design instead focused on ‘the main needs of the public for viewing processions’ (Wornum, 1949a). The grandiose temporary stadium erected in the square for the coronation of Elizabeth II in June 1953 testified to this (LMA 96.0 PAR: DS1322). However, to this day and under ordinary circumstances, the square remains underused and inaccessible.

Reversing the dominance of traffic and increasing pedestrian access is central to a far-ranging scheme initiated in 1996 under the title *World Squares for All*. Attesting to the marked shift in attitudes towards the urban environment, this project was in response to a study commissioned by Central Government and Westminster City Council. A multidisciplinary team of architects, urban and landscape designers and transport planners headed by Sir Norman Foster and Partners addressed the area linking Trafalgar Square, Whitehall and Parliament Square.<sup>1</sup> Foster was of the opinion that:

The London of the postcards is the nucleus of Britain, the most precious site in the land... Yet the innate harmony of Westminster is today invisible. Although pockets are well known and loved, the pieces do not fit together, severed by

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traffic arteries. There are more barriers than links. Sadly, the settings for some of the finest buildings are so appalling that they cannot be appreciated. To ignore the paucity of space and allow traffic to rush past them is a national disgrace (Foster, 1997: 5).

His reference to 'the London of the postcards' is one manifestation of the penultimate stage of sacralization: '*mechanical reproduction of the sacred object*' (MacCannell, 1976: 45). This had already begun in the nineteenth-century with the dissemination of souvenir photographs of the main sights in the capital by such firms as York & Son (NMR). This process of replication and the concomitant transformation of a sight into a mass-tourist attraction continues to the present day. The *London Eye*, a colossal Ferris wheel with a diameter of one hundred and thirty-five metres designed by Marks Barfield Architects, was erected last year on the south bank of the River Thames opposite the Houses of Parliament ([www.britishairways.com/londoneye](http://www.britishairways.com/londoneye)). It provides an additional layering of marking, framing, elevation and means of reproduction both social and mechanical to this and other sacred sites in the centre of the metropolis.

In the above quotation, Norman Foster ennobles this central area as 'the nucleus of Britain, the most precious site in the land'. In spite of this, however, the process of sight sacralization has broken-down: the marking and framing of individual sites has led to fragmentation. To use the language of MacCannell, the number of barriers or 'physical divisions' has become overly excessive whilst the 'interstitial corridors' are so full of traffic as to invoke an expression of disgust: it 'is a national disgrace'. Foster's objective is to re-frame these sacred sites in a more holistic manner in order to make the 'innate harmony of Westminster' visible. This can be considered to represent the beginning of the third stage of sacralization: '*enshrinement*'.

## **Enshrinement**

In MacCannell's opinion '*enshrinement*' occurs when the 'framing material' itself becomes integrated into the sight that has been marked off and elevated (MacCannell, 1976: 45). The area addressed by the *World Squares for All* project, as well as incorporating a World Heritage Site, consists of four Conservation Areas and over 170 listed structures, more than 30 of which are ranked Grade I (Masterplan, 1998: 21). It is, in its entirety, a 'sacred site' rather than a series of discrete clusters of 'buildings of outstanding or exceptional interest' (National Audit Office, 1992: 7). This, a definition of a Grade I listed building, is reserved for structures 'of particularly great importance to the nation's built heritage' and 'likely to be of international significance' (Suddards and Hargreaves, 1996: 47-8). Included within this category are St. Margaret's Church, Westminster Abbey and the Palace of Westminster. Moreover, in 1987, these buildings achieved the status of World Heritage Site, for being illustrative, among other things, of 'significant stages in human history' (UNESCO 1972: 12-15; Number 426, 1987). This double inscription represents a further aspect of the '*naming phase*'. MacCannell stresses that, before this occurs, 'a great deal of work goes into the authentication of the candidate for sacralization... Reports are filed testifying to the object's aesthetic, historical, monetary, recreational and social values' (MacCannell, 1976: 44).

It has been observed that the 'boundaries' of many World Heritage Sites 'are inconsistent and are generally acknowledged as needing reviewing' (Suddards and Hargreaves, 1996: 70). Dr Christopher Young, Head of World Heritage and International Policy at English Heritage, states that the borders of the Westminster World Heritage Site were 'drawn very tightly' around the buildings and that, in retrospect, this has proven inconvenient. He believes 'it likely that the World Heritage Site Management Plan for Westminster, on which work is likely to commence shortly, will want to re-open the question of boundaries' (Young, 2001). As currently configured they divide it into two parts, with the Palace of Westminster in one section and the area around Westminster Abbey in another. It has been remarked

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that this arrangement 'has the curious result that Parliament Square with its statues of statesmen... [is] excluded from the site, despite being an integral part of the immediate setting of the Palace and the Abbey' (ICOMOS UK, 1995: 143).

The third and final phase of the £50 million *World Squares for All Masterplan* seeks to rectify this by removing traffic from the south side of Parliament Square in order to 'create an improved and appropriate setting for the World Heritage Site... [which] at present... is divided by heavy traffic and poor materials, with insufficient space for pedestrians' (Masterplan, 1998: 58-61 & 76). In the unlikely event of this being realised it would reverse the schemes of both E.M. Barry and Grey Wornum: the division between the Abbey and Parliament Square would be elided and enshrinement would occur.

The necessity of this process is demonstrated by the fact that Parliament Square is *already* linked with Westminster Abbey by being included within the same Conservation Area (reference number CA 20). It is in other words 'an area of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance' (Planning Act 1990: Section (69)(1)(a)). Such a designation is intended to address 'the quality of townscape in its broadest sense as well as the protection of individual buildings.' This includes recognition of 'the historic layout', 'particular "mix" of uses', 'vistas along streets and between buildings; and on the extent to which traffic intrudes and limits pedestrian use of spaces between buildings' (PPG 15, 1994: 4.2). It is therefore clear that, for the historical associations of a monument to be sustained, the milieu of which it forms a part needs to be treated with sensitivity (Sanpaolesi, 1972). Or, to put in MacCannell's terms: 'Advanced framing occurs when the rest of the world is forced back from the object and the space in between is landscaped' (MacCannell, 1976: 45).

### **Profane irruptions**

It is, however, extremely difficult to force back the rest of the world in the construction of built heritage, as the example of Parliament Square has demonstrated. Furthermore, a prerequisite of a World Heritage Site is that it evinces 'an important interchange of human values' (UNESCO 1972: 12-15; Number 426, 1987). This means that it is very likely to still remain within an area of cultural, political and commercial exchange. It has been observed that 'sacred places exist in sacred landscapes, alongside, or nested within, secular places and secular landscapes' (Saunders in Hubert, 1994: 172). Such locations are therefore often extremely difficult to manage. This is especially apparent with an urban environment like Westminster where a myriad of opposing factors converge upon a very diverse site that is subject to many conflicting demands.

The practice of sacralization represents an attempt to resolve this. As such it is an on-going process: *re-sacralization* is necessary in order to protect sacred sites from sacrilegious and worldly infiltration. There is a constant interposition between the contradictory requirement for imperative links and requisite barriers. The latter is essential in order to obviate the threat of desecration. In the case of Parliament Square this was made shockingly apparent during riots that occurred in May 2000. Every memorial, including the statue of the war-hero Winston Churchill (1874-1965) by Ivor Roberts-Jones (1913-96) of 1973 and Sir Edwin Lutyens's (1869-1944) *Cenotaph* of 1920, was clambered upon and scrawled with obscenities by anti-capitalist rioters (Stillwell, 2000). At the time of writing, almost exactly one year hence, these monuments have had to be encased in wood in order to forestall a repeat of this profanity (Sutcliffe, 2001; Cummins, 2001).

The process of sacralization outlined in this chapter is crucial to the precept that the 'historic environment' is a central component of the tourism industry (English Heritage, 2000: 33). By being at an 'interchange of human values' it is axiomatic that attitudes towards sacred sites are subject to change. Successive generations will have interpreted and evaluated such domains of memory in a continual search for the 'original spirit of place' (Shackley, 1998: 194-5).

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However, just as the process of sacralization is never static, so too is the 'original spirit of place' subject to reinterpretation. The "authentic" aura of Westminster might conceivably be the 'cloaca of narrow, tortuous, shabby, stifling, and malodorous streets' commented on so scornfully by G.A. Sala in the 1890s. That this is *not* the case confirms the fact that the built heritage needs to be sacralized in order for it to be both seen and protected. The outside world incessantly encroaches and the manner in which symbolic spaces are shaped— how 'the present frames up its history' (MacCannell, 1976: 88)— reflects the perceptions and priorities that each present places on its past.

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1 The Masterplan is managed by Westminster City Council and seven other study partners: the Government Office for London; the Department for Culture, Media and Sport; the Traffic Director for London; London Transport Buses; English Heritage; the Royal Parks Agency and the Parliamentary Works Directorate (DETR, 1999).