

DREAM ISLE

By CJ Lim

London is a city and cities are alive. They breathe, they grow, they spawn, they die and they dream. This is London's dream.

Feeding on the memories of its visitors and cosmopolitan populace, London's dreams traverse icons such as St. Paul's Cathedral, the Houses of Parliament, Primrose Hill, Trafalgar Square and the green courts of Wimbledon, but not as we know them. In these dreams, the city is protagonist, and this is how it sees itself.

Causality and reason drift through the gargantuan proscenium windows of Buckingham Palace and across the roving kaleidoscope of the realm's ancient mounds of tea and baked sponge. The denizens of the Dream Isle comprise puffed-up swans borne on palanquins and an anarchic monarchy circled by MPs (appropriately dressed in shark costumes), while a skein of magpies unfurls the British Museum, daily revealing their hoard of sequestered treasure.

Dreams, like cities, shape us and are shaped by us. Architects would have us believe that the edifices that make up the city are immutable and solid, monuments to their designers' immortality. They are not. In both London's imaginings and reality, landmarks and events assume shifting magnitude and significance, constructing distorted maps of desire and experience. Narrative obeys no logic as London searches for an ever-changing identity imprinted by its waking life. Time, scale and relationships become fluid, and the city is forever on the brink of the strangely familiar and the familiarly strange.

East India Docks

The history of London, built on the fruits of colonial trade as much as clay and chalk, is entwined with the history of tea. Of the bountiful merchandise from both eastern and western civilizations that would cross paths at the East India Docks, tea was the most significant. The bedrock of London, the national beverage began as an expensive and fashionable pastime, leading to London's suburban tea gardens that became bywords for hedonism and depravity.

The British East India Company, which gives its name to the docks, was virtually an independent imperial power with its own army, policies and governance. The monopoly of the company culminated in the Tea Act of 1773 and the Boston Tea Party in which 342 crates (45 tonnes) of fine loose-leaf tea were jettisoned from the company's ships the *Dartmouth*, *Eleanor* and the *Beaver* into Boston Harbour by individuals dubiously clothed in Native Mohawk dress.

In the autumn of 1774, the flotsam and jetsam of 45 tonnes of tea drifted across the Atlantic, gradually accumulating at 51° 30' 00.55" N, 0° 07' 34.45" W.

The Whispering Gallery of St. Paul's Cathedral

In the sixteenth century the main thoroughfares of the city, built in timber and plaster, would act as echo chambers giving rise to a unique 'London Sound'. The murmuring of the city would intensify in different pockets of London, reaching its apotheosis in the whispering gallery of Wren's masterwork. Running around the interior of the dome of St Paul's, ninety-nine feet above the cathedral floor, a whisper against its wall is audible to a listener with an ear held to the wall at any other point around the gallery.

London's soliloquy resonates within colossal teacups embedded in the island's spongy earth. The susurrations are composed from an amalgam of tongues, drawing on words from one dialect that makes no sense in another. If a listener spoke every language from every era, perhaps the secrets of the city would be revealed.

The Changing of the Guard

The mute swan, *Cygnus olor*, was introduced to Britain around the twelfth century as a prized bird for the table. Since that time, the reigning monarch has been entitled to claim ownership of any unmarked swan swimming in open water. Every year in late July when parent birds are moulting and cygnets are still too young to fly, the birds are rounded up during the Swan Upping and identified by the Queen's swan marker by order of the crown. Dressed in uniform and travelling in six traditional wooden skiffs, the swan uppers circle a bevy of swans and converge on the brood with the cry 'all-up!'

The Monarch and the royal palaces have been protected by the Household Troops since 1660 and the Changing of the Guard still takes place at Buckingham Palace at half-past-eleven in the morning. When the Queen is in residence, there are four sentries; when she is away there are two. The soldiers are drawn from one of the five regiments of foot guards in the British Army.

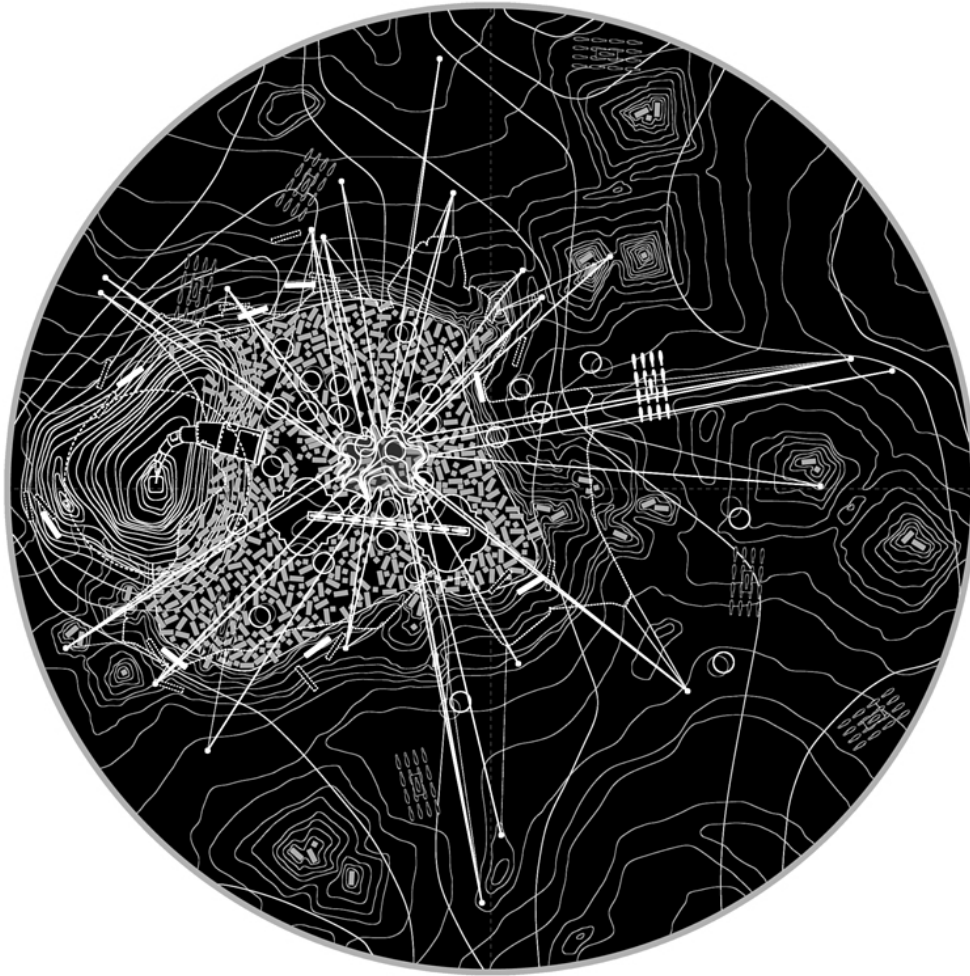
Wimbledon & the British Museum

The All England Lawn Tennis Club in Wimbledon hosts the world's premier tennis tournament at the end of June each year. Rain-stopping play during Wimbledon fortnight has become as much an institution at SW19 as strawberries and cream – the groundskeepers of the rye grass courts furl and unfurl the rain covers in tune with the capricious movement of black skies overhead. The pigeon population at the All England Club has dramatically declined in response to an increase in the number of hawks and trained marksmen. Magpie numbers in the area are, however, on the rise.

The European magpie, *Pica pica*, appears frequently in European folklore, known for its tendency to steal and hoard shiny objects. According to tradition, one should pinch oneself as if in a dream on sight of a lone magpie to ward off ill fortune. Like other members of the *corvidae* family, magpies become attached to particular nesting grounds, and are portents of doom should they abandon them.

The British Museum is a universal museum holding an encyclopædic collection of material from across the world and all periods of human culture and history. For the benefit of its audience now and in the future, the Museum is committed to sustaining and improving its collection. The Museum deplores the looting of antiquities with the ensuing damage to archaeological sites and loss of cultural context. The Museum does not acquire objects that are known to result from such looting.

At this particular moment on the Dream Isle, the British Museum and the grass courts of Wimbledon have fused into a hybrid entity, coming into being through the aid of a tiding of magpies. As grey clouds threaten, a thousand black and white feathered stewards, tethered to the perimeter of a folded grass tarpaulin, take flight and open out a canopy to protect the hoard of artefacts and treasures they have accumulated since 1753.



Trafalgar Square

Trafalgar Square is the largest square in London and has been a meeting place since the Middle Ages. Set within it are the Jellicoe and Beatty Memorial fountains, positioned to break up and control crowd surges during riots. Designed by Sir Charles Barry and erected in 1845, the original granite basin walls are quatrefoil combined with a square in plan.

A symmetrical shape that forms the overall outline of four partially-overlapping circles of the same diameter, the quatrefoil is an old Christian motif that recurs throughout London's history, stamping its distinctive form cookie-cutter like, from medieval times through to the twenty-first century, on Gothic churches, military decoration and shortbread tins.

Bank

The bowler hat, pin striped suit and umbrella remain universal signifiers of the faceless London City 'Gent'. The bowler hat is nowadays seldom seen, but the treadmill existence of the faceless city worker has proliferated exponentially to colonize the four million square metres of land that were dropped into London's commercial heart in the 1980s.

Swans in bowler hats feed the insatiable machine that is the most advanced and elaborate foreign exchange in the world. A perpetual motion machine in the form of a gargantuan waterwheel spanning between the quatrefoil fountains of Jellicoe and Beatty completes a revolution every 24 hours, delivering the worker swans from home to work and back again.

Primrose Hill

Primrose Hill, at a height of 256 feet (78 m), forms part of an elevated region known as the 'northern heights' lying between the smaller eminences running from London's north in a north-westerly direction. At the hill's apex at the north end of Regent's Park, there is a small plateau at the confluence of several footpaths where the viewer experiences the London panorama in more detail than from any other location. The kaleidoscopic view takes in Trellick Tower to the west and Canary Wharf to the east.

As such, the tyrannical gaze of Primrose Hill wields great influence on the shape of London, shackling its natural growth. The vistas to the Cathedral of St. Paul and the Palace of Westminster are determined by geometrical definition, slicing two conical voids through the city that no man-made edifice may encroach.

Primrose Hill manifests itself on the Dream Isle as a roving telescopic contraption mounted on a promontory of air-filled Victoria sponge. Watched through this kaleidoscopic lens from on high, the Dream Isle takes the form of a giant glass Petri dish, its components jockeying like bacterial cultures for dominance, continuously shifting scale and morphing into one another.

Houses of Parliament

The laws of the land are debated and decreed at the Palace of Westminster where the two Houses of the Parliament, the House of Lords and the House of Commons, meet.

Two red lines, just over two sword lengths apart, are inscribed on the floor of the House of Commons. Protocol dictates that Members may not cross these lines when Parliament is in session, preventing debate from degenerating into duel. Today, swords may no longer be worn inside the Palace, and a loop of ribbon in the cloakrooms is reserved for each Member of Parliament for the storage of weapons. Members may not address each other by name and are obliged to use the monikers 'my honourable friend' or 'honourable lady/gentleman'.

The shallow waters around the Dream Isle are hazardous – sharks in the guise of MPs, Tory Blue and Labour Red, circle each other warily, ever vigilant of the slightest vulnerability or slip of tongue. These pitiable predators are condemned to an eternal cycle of attack and counter, never reaching a conclusion or resting, other than for the occasional feeding frenzy one when of their number succumbs to age or scandal.

New Britannia

The Second British Empire came into being when Great Albion dispensed with the sword and took up the pen. Invading the world by culture instead of military might, the BBC World Service and the Beatles floated out across the airwaves, the Mini Cooper became a cinematic star, and Messieurs Lipton and Twining appropriated tea from the Orient and sold it back as a symbol of Britain.

London's mental picture of the world is a perfectly circular flat disc. In this world, London lies at the epicentre, its unique spirit rippling out and transforming every outcrop it touches before spilling over the edge into the ether. In time, as with all things, the well will run dry, whereupon London shall re-imagine itself again, replenishing the source that will nurture future empires.

Buckingham Palace

The 775 rooms of Buckingham Palace have served as the official London residence of Britain's sovereigns since 1837. The Throne Room is dominated by a proscenium arch supported by a pair of winged figures of 'Victory' holding garlands above the 'chairs of state'.

The British Royal Family is the world's most famous family. The British tabloids are the world's most powerful press. The relationship between these two formidable institutions is symbiotic – the Windsors help the press sell newspapers in return for their celebrity, stature and power, simultaneously satisfying the public's voracious appetite for scandal and voyeurism.

The fenestration of the Palace appears on the Dream Isle as colossal proscenium arches – or perhaps the rest of London is miniaturized, it is impossible to tell. The arches are not windows onto the world, but windows onto the palace, where the Royal Family, unwittingly or otherwise, stage the world's favourite soap opera and original reality show.

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