wanted to create an impression of San Francisco as a bustling, up-to-date city.

The film is accompanied on the DVD by sixteen other short impressions of downtown San Francisco at various stages during the twentieth century. Immediately following the cable car ride down Market Street in 1905 is a four-minute film shot by an unknown individual from a vehicle, perhaps a cable car, moving down Market Street shortly after the earthquake and fire in 1906.2 Large crowds of people, dressed for a Sunday outing rather than in workday clothes, are shown walking down the street to get a firsthand view of the disaster. The film has faded in places, and many spots and stains dance over the images, all of which enhances the romantic, ghostly feeling inherent to the topic of a destroyed metropolis. In addition, the DVD presents a forty-five-second newsreel clip on the parade celebrating Tom Mooney’s release from prison in 1939; four minutes of 16 mm color home movies shot during the Victory over Japan (VJ) Day celebrations on 14 August 1945; and a two-minute local news profile from 1992 on bike messengers at work in the city’s downtown district. These increase its value and supplement the films available online.

The VJ celebrations make for particularly interesting comparison with the 1905 film. Normal traffic patterns have broke down as the streets fill with tens of thousands of men and women, but the structure governing normal use of what was then the city’s major boulevard remains visible and readable throughout, showing how thoroughly codified street life had become. A second interesting feature of the 1945 home movies is the proliferation of signage. Almost every storefront sports a marquee and electric lights with the name of the store in large letters as well as large printed signs in the windows. In 1905, some buildings had large though simple signs with a company name painted at the top. Storefront signage appears to be considerably more modest than in 1945, though that could be an effect of the lighting. Nonetheless, the contrast between the stately, elegant commercial street of 1905 and the tawdry, cluttered jumble of 1945 is striking, suggesting the degree to which consumerism had moved to the center of everyday life along with state regulation.

The DVD program of seventeen films produced by the Exploratorium is more celebratory than analytic or historical. There is no overt effort to trace different elements of street life across a century. In addition to the five archival films, the DVD presents twelve commissioned films, including four abstract studies of contemporary Market Street by young San Francisco film makers; seven films attempting to capture the spirit of the city at different points over the past century; and one film about a 1915 campaign to change the name of Market Street to Lincoln Boulevard, with young actors in period dress handing out leaflets in front of surviving monuments from the era. Other films honor the movie palaces that once lined Market Street, the emergence of the city’s prominent gay and lesbian community in the 1970s, a popular shoe-shine stand in the city’s financial district, and earlier cultural moments. None of the historical reconstructions use archived motion-picture footage.

The longest of the twelve new films is a fourteen-minute record of a ride down Market Street in 2005 shot from the front of a street car. One of the special features on the DVD allows for a split-screen viewing of the 1905 film, the 1906 postfire film, and the 2005 film, itself split between a high-definition color video image on one panel and a black-and-white 35 mm version on another, with the four films synchronized so that the same point on the street is shown simultaneously on all four screens. The split-screen comparison underscores how orderly traffic has become in the age of the automobile, governed by formal rules with elaborate signs at every intersection, painted lanes, and directions specifying what can and cannot be done at any given location at specific times of the day. Additionally, the time comparison dramatically reveals changes in the demographics of the city. In the 1905 film, one wagon driver is African American. The overall impression is either that the city’s inhabitants were uniformly of European descent and/or that racial minorities were discouraged from tarrying on Market Street. The 2005 film reveals a transformed population coming from every corner of the globe.

The music commissioned in 2005 to accompany the 1905 film is amusing and effectively conveys the sense of haphazard order. This score no doubt worked well for a large public event, but an option of watching the film with music from the period would have been appropriate. Internet Archive contains a large number of films related to the 1905 film, including a set of color home movies shot in 1941 that explore Market Street, Chinatown, and several residential neighborhoods.3 It also has posted newsreel footage from 1929 of the city’s first state highway linking San Francisco to its southern suburbs4 as well as a film from 1956 made to promote the expansion of the San Francisco Bay Area’s freeway system.5

Richard Cándida Smith
University of California, Berkeley

Notes
1. For American Memory, see the Prelinger Collection, http://sfmuseum.org/loc/trip.html; for the Internet Archive, see http://archive.org/details/TripDown1905.
2. This film clip is also available online for viewing and downloading at www.archive.org/details/Summersc1941_2.
3. See www.archive.org/details/SanFranc1906_3; the online film includes a sequence of devastation in the residential Western Addition district not included on the DVD.

Patrick Keiller, director

London
Zurich and Bristol, England: Condor Communications and Icon Films, 1994, DVD, 82 min., $29.95, www.facets.org

Mirjam von Arx, director

Building the Gherkin
London: British Film Institute, Konink Films, and Channel Four, 2005, DVD, 52 min., $29.95, www.cinemaguild.com

Perhaps at no time since the great fire of 1666 has London undergone as radical a transformation as at the end of the twentieth century. These changes have been both encouraged and condemned, but
any recent visit to the city confirms the pace of new building and the transformation of historic neighborhoods. Both of these films, though very different in their approach to London and the status of buildings as monuments within the city, explore the effect of proximity, adjacency, and even serendipity in the experience of the modern city. They examine the physical ways in which the city has changed as well as the reaction to that evolution.

In London, a film by Patrick Keiller, and the documentary Building the Gherkin, by Mirjam von Arx, terrorist bombs provide a backdrop for the experience of the past and construction of the new. Keiller made his film in 1992, a year in which numerous bombs were set off across London. They interrupt the activities of theprotagonists as they journey throughout the heart and suburbs of the city. But the sites of the explosions serve primarily as distractions and signs of the city’s tumble into decay.

Building the Gherkin, an account of the design and construction of Norman Foster’s London skyscraper, known as 30 St. Mary Axe Tower, presents a contentious exchange between client and architect punctuated by two terrorist attacks. The building of the new London headquarters for the Swiss Re Company was initiated after a massive bomb set off by the IRA destroyed the Old Baltic Exchange in the financial district of London. That destruction made the new building possible, and the scenes of the explosion are a somber start to a film that revels in the complexities of the construction process for a recent skyscraper. The architect punctuated by two terrorist attacks. The building of the new London headquarters for the Swiss Re Company was initiated after a massive bomb set off by the IRA destroyed the Old Baltic Exchange in the financial district of London. That destruction made the new building possible, and the scenes of the explosion are a somber start to a film that revels in the complexities of the construction process for a recent skyscraper.

London follows two friends in their peregrinations around the city center and outer neighborhoods, described by the narrator (voiced by Paul Scofield), an otherwise nameless individual who has returned to London after an absence of seven years. He has reunited with his former lover, Robinson, to explore London based on his friend’s elaborate intellectual quest and researches. Robinson is an academic and a flaneur, intent on experiencing London as the site of historical associations. His treks to Strawberry Hill, South London, and the City are motivated by past events, yet the experiences are very much those of the present. Although shot in 1992, the thread of current events and politics suggests that the past is constantly being reshaped by the patterns of present experience. The reelection of the conservative government in that year, a spate of bomb attacks, and fluctuations in the London economy all shape the historical project that the two travelers follow.

Robinson’s project echoes journeys through the heart of the nineteenth-century city, and the narrator describes their journeys as a search for the sources of English Romanticism. The format of the film as travelogue and Scofield’s ironic tone and accent evoke the writings of Daniel Dafoe and Lawrence Sterne. Looking for places associated with historical figures such as Joshua Reynolds or Edgar Allen Poe, Robinson more often finds only a sculpture bust that stands in for the historical personage in the modern city. At the end of the movie, the dispassionate narrator shifts moods; by then he speaks less and observes more. At a Guy Fawkes bonfire, music takes the place of the commentary, and the city as the location for emotional experience takes over. The reason for this shift is unclear, but we feel it palpably as the narrator describes the end of Robinson’s journeys and claims “the true identity of London is in its absence.”

Robinson concludes that London is a failure. It has failed to live up to its promise and potential and has isolated its citizens through mercantile greed and social neglect. The disparity between the history and traditions of the city and the everyday existence of its denizens causes the greatest unease for the narrator and the viewer. At the Trooping of the Colors the narrator says, “I was amazed at the contrast of the richness of the display and the squalor of the surrounding city and suburbs.”

London is hypnotic, mesmerizing, and at times exasperating, a parallel reality to the city it explores. Trained as an architect in London, Keiller sees his films as a counterpart to architecture. He has described the relationship of film to architecture “as offering a way to transform experience of (architectural) space, and increasingly also as a great reservoir of space that it is no longer possible to experience directly.” As an interpretive medium, film for Keiller offers the opportunity not only to make social commentary but to create and shape architectural culture. More than a decade after its release, London retains its interest not as an historical document but as an interpretive model. The density of the narrator’s monologue, rich with details and
references, struggles against the primacy of the images themselves. Creating a narrative, a history of the friends’ travels around the city, is an attempt to give meaning to the city, and such imposition of sense onto an urban or rural landscape is perhaps the ultimate Romantic conceit and the motivation for Robinson’s travels. 

There are moments in London when the narration seems to add to the image, as if the text has taken on a life of its own and left the city behind. As a city London resists easy classification because of its complexity but also because its architecture cannot easily be encompassed by even the most complex description or history.

In their three expeditions, Robinson and his friend take us to places both well known to architectural historians (Strawberry Hill) and others known primarily to local residents (Ealing Road, Wembley). The journeys do not particularly make us want to visit these places but rather to experience the city overall in the quirky, literary, and ultimately poignant way that they did. This subjectivity, the claiming of a vantage point from which we observe the world, is not a nihilist view where the physical retreats behind a series of textual descriptions. The physical, sensual experience of the city is very much present in London. Closely cropped views of the river or the graffiti on an East End street, combined with the sounds of the city, make it a real and tangible place. This is not a disembodied London but a revisited and maybe even resurrected city that lives on even in the face of government’s intent on eviscerating its autonomy and power.

Power struggles are at the heart of von Arx’s documentary on the design and construction of Norman Foster’s Swiss Re building in London. The main players in the film (and in the project itself) are the client (the Swiss Reinsurance Corporation), the architect, and the city of London. Interviews and footage of the building process in action present the needs and desires of each. In some ways, this is a rather straightforward documentary of how this building got built. What makes the film remarkable, and at times highly amusing, are the interpersonal dramas that develop between the client and the architect. Building the Gherkin is a wonderful film to show students as a corrective to any sense they might have of architecture as a rarified or ascetic profession.

The story starts at the IRA bombing of the Old Baltic Exchange and continues through the opening of the building in 2003. Funded in part by Swiss Re, the film presents the corporate view of the design process as equal to the views of the architect. Swiss Re wanted a building to bring together its London employees in one place and a memorable structure to increase its corporate visibility. A phrase used early on by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the “Biggest Gherkin in Christendom,” made Swiss Re and the building the focus of criticism from the moment its first designs were made public. Swiss Re sold the building in 2007, and it is now known officially as 30 St. Mary Axe Tower, though the nickname has remained.

The reaction to this idiosyncratic form, including the difficulty in receiving planning permission and the coverage by the popular press, was not initially positive. Footage of local office workers watching the construction process stands for the hesitant attitude toward this intervention into London. At forty-one stories, the new skyscraper was going to transform the city skyline and the experience of the older buildings. Even St. Paul’s gift shop now sells a postcard showing the great dome of Wren’s cathedral juxtaposed against the tower. Critics of the Gherkin warned of a swarm of new assertive buildings that would alter the historic character of London. Its proponents argued that this was exactly what was needed if London were to remain in the forefront of the global economy and not simply stagnate into a giant historical theme park.

Foster does not always come off in the best light. In describing the initial concepts he says, “as long as people have come out of the caves they have reached for the sky,” sounding a bit like Howard Roark in The Fountainhead. His relationship with the client does not play much better. Swiss Re decided to use another firm for outfitting the building, and as the design was a complete concept in Foster’s mind, losing control over most of the interiors was, as he put it, a shock. Footage of the meetings when Swiss Re made that decision puts much of the blame on Foster’s difficult manner.

The film includes some discussion of design process, showing how the unique form was derived. Yet, the very best parts of the film are the interpersonal dramas that accompany the project. Sara Fox, the new building director for Swiss Re, delivers many of the most memorable quotes. “Lord Foster is extremely charming, very very intelligent, and completely single minded about what he wants and what he would like the building to represent. The emphasis is going to be more on producing something beautiful than on producing something workable. And there’s always that tension, and we’ll continue to have that fight, little battles about it. So long as Lord Foster continues to be charming, I will continue to do the same.”

In the end, both architect and client created a memorable building that has changed the skyline of London in a remarkable and positive way; in the words of Fox, “it’s going to be big, it’s going to be visible, and it’s going to be fun. And in fact, we’re already famous.”

Christy Anderson
University of Toronto

Notes


4. See www.kamera.co.uk/interviews/a_quick_chat_with_patt_keiller.php.