

Signals and Sightlines: BT Tower



Urban walk from Fitzrovia to Primrose Hill via the BT Tower, exploring how technological infrastructures shape our cities and public spaces.

Scan the QR code for an audio guide and additional features on the London National Park City website, plus detailed step-by-step route instructions in the Go Jauntly app.

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nationalparkcity.london/signals-and-sightlines



Introduction

When the BT Tower opened in 1965, it was heralded as a symbol of ‘the technical and architectural skills of this modern age’. Offering the possibility of instantaneous telephonic and televisual communication, it was an icon of publicly owned national infrastructure. Sixty years on, in the context of the tower’s planned re-development into a hotel and leisure facility, this walk from Fitzrovia to Primrose Hill reflects on the ways technological infrastructures—often concealed and ill-understood—have shaped the city.

Since the 1880s, St Paul’s Cathedral has benefited from protected sightlines extending deep into suburban London parks and commons. Less widely known is that the BT Tower—originally the General Post Office Tower—has enjoyed its own form of protection, although not for aesthetic or heritage reasons. For decades, the tower relied on clear, uninterrupted microwave paths routed through a network of repeater stations in outer London and the home counties. Any tall building constructed within these corridors risked causing signal loss or distortion. The BT Tower therefore acted as a brake on development in this part of the West End, shaping both the skyline and the formation of public squares and parks.

This walk invites you to think about ‘signals and sightlines’ in new ways, reflecting on what we can’t see as well as what we can. Now that the tower has been deemed technologically obsolete, we draw your attention to the obscure infrastructures running beneath our feet, as well as the flows of data coursing invisibly through the ether. Across twelve stops, we trace and record a series of sightlines to the tower from parks, squares, and incidental green spaces, inviting you to consider the multitude of factors that interweave in the production of ‘public space’ in the city and the shaping of its skyline.



(Un)welcome sign at the BT Tower entrance.

Walk Highlights

The Eisenhower Centre

At the north end of Alfred Place, the ‘Eisenhower Center’ comes into view. When we’re talking about ‘Sightlines’ on this walk, we are also interested in what we can’t see – and this connects to our interest in the significance of this vicinity as a strategic location. One of eight deep-level shelters commissioned in 1940, it was completed in 1942, but not actually opened to the public for another three years, in response to V2 bombing.

Part of this one became a US signals headquarters—its name derives from the rumour that Eisenhower planned the D-Day landings here. After the war, the space was used by the Ministry of Defence and the British Library. It is now a data storage facility.

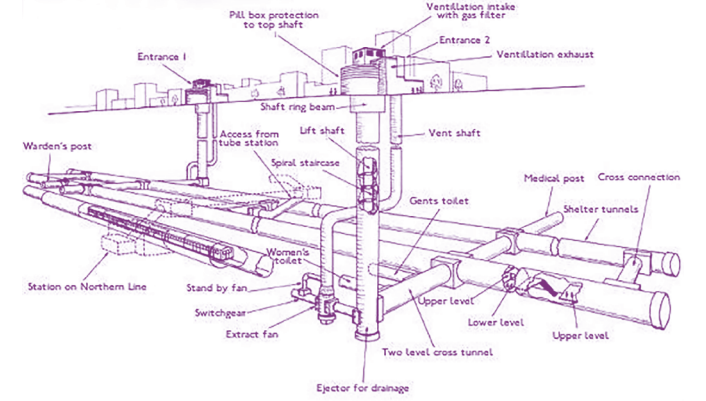


Diagram of the deep-level shelter.

Fitzroy Square and ‘Townscape’

During construction of the BT Tower, Fitzrovia was used as the case study in *Traffic in Towns*, a report for the Ministry of Transport exploring how cities could be reshaped in response to the motor car. Its wonderful artist’s impressions were by Kenneth Browne, ‘townscape’ editor at the *Architectural Review*. Browne argued for the need to list, survey and protect ‘points of view’ in response to the ‘inevitable’ construction of tall buildings. ‘Townscape’ was also about preserving the urban centre as a place of in-person exchange of ideas, often by creating pedestrianised areas and consigning cars to underground routes. Browne’s 1964 proposals for Covent Garden, then facing wholesale demolition, called for the protection of its ‘splendid chaos [...] of bananas and ballerinas, top notes and turnips, ripe fruit and riper language’. His formulation of ‘townscape’—preoccupied by questions of planning, perspective, mixing and zoning—is full of ideas about aesthetic and strategic sightlines, and speaks to contemporary issues like the pedestrianisation of Oxford Street.



Illustration of Fitzrovia’s proposed stratification, in ‘Traffic In Towns’ (1963).

Regent’s Place and ‘POPS’

Regent’s Place—like Canary Wharf, King’s Cross or Battersea Power Station—is an example of privately owned public space (POPS). These spaces are pseudo-public, securitised and constrained by obscure byelaws and conditions. Current proposals for the BT Tower include a new POPS development

at ground level. The tower itself would become part of a critical mass of spaces creating new vantage points *of*, and nominally *for*, the city. These spaces—like the Sky Garden or The Garden at 120 Fenchurch Street—are often billed as ‘parks’. But their conception of a public open space can involve airport-security measures, pre-booking requirements, corporate event closures, and the ability to reject and eject people, especially those on societal margins. This is something to be alert to as development capital continues to re-shape our understanding of shared urban commons and the city at large.



Regent’s Park and Regent’s Place from the BT Tower (2019).

Primrose Hill and ‘View Management’

The views from Primrose Hill of St Paul’s and the Palace of Westminster—the two ‘poles’ according to which London is traditionally oriented—are the most central of those protected by the ‘London View Management Framework’. Introduced in 2007, but with its roots in 19th century royal displeasure with the construction of buildings overlooking Buckingham Palace. In the years since, restrictions have eased, but these classical sightlines have remained. For the past 60 years, the practical restrictions on development around the BT Tower have also shaped the urban skyline. In a strange way, the strategic requirements of the invisible microwave network, with the need to maintain an unhindered panorama of the city, were their own form of ‘view management’.

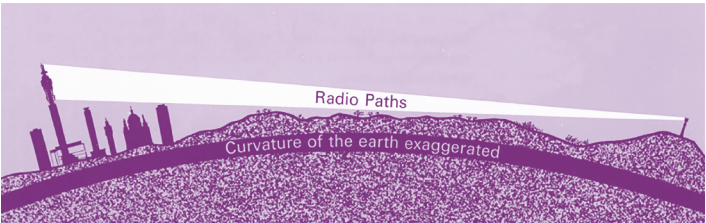


Diagram of radio paths from ‘The Post Office Tower’ publication (1965).

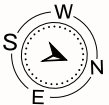
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FORTEPAN / Ormos Imre Alapítvány (1970)

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Signals



1 The Building Centre

Exhibition and events space for the built environment hosted in a former Daimler Car showroom since 1950. Store Street is something of a showcase for the golden age of motoring, with a redeveloped art deco petrol station also identifiable to the east. The road has been conspicuously 'curated' in recent years into a lifestyle destination by the Bedford Estate.

2 minutes to next stop

2 Alfred Place

Good example of a new model of 'parkspace' renovation—transforming an unloved backroad into this area's first new park in a quarter of a century. Part of Camden Council's West End Project to remove traffic congestion, improve road safety, address poor air quality and limited access to open space and nature. The building at the far end is one of two entrances to the WWII-era deep-level shelter, now a data storage facility. **See The Eisenhower Centre overleaf.**

2 minutes to next stop

3 Whitfield Gardens

Our first opportunity to stand in the clear presence of the BT Tower. This space is another fruit of the West End Project, with nifty interventions hidden in plain sight, such as an electricity unit concealed amidst the individual seating on the square. The recently restored mural depicts Fitzrovia life in the 1980s, with a comment on the area's severe lack of open space viewable in the top right corner.

2 minutes to next stop



Start
1
The Building Centre

4 Crabtree Fields

Another space created as the result of WWII bombing. After the war, this site spent decades as a car park, but in 1982 the Fitzrovia Neighbourhood Association asked the Greater London Council for help to buy the site and convert it into a public park. After a long legal battle with owners NCP, it reclaimed its original pre-development name in August 1985.

6 minutes to next stop

5 Howland Street

When the tower was opened to the public by Postmaster General Tony Benn, he compared it to the famous clock tower at the Palace of Westminster. Big Ben 'represented the fussy grandeur of the Gothic revival that epitomised Victorian imperial affluence, founded on the first industrial revolution'. The Post Office Tower, by contrast, was 'lean, practical, futuristic', symbolising 'the technical and architectural skill of this new age'.

1 minute to next stop

6 Cleveland Mews

The only location where the tower can be viewed cohesively. To overcome the challenges of placing a 13,000 tonne structure on soft London clay, engineers pioneered a solution combining a concrete raft, a re-inforced concrete pyramid, and a hollow reinforced concrete shaft that acts as the tower's foundation and spine. The structure expands and contracts as the temperature changes: in summer it can gain up to 23cm in height.

1 minute to next stop

7 Maple Street

At the visitor access point, the tower itself disappears from view. This entrance once led to the famous revolving restaurant. Run by the holiday camp magnate Billy Butlin, and famous for its French-only menus, the restaurant completed 2½ revolutions each hour. Its 1971 bombing is fictionalised in Hari Kunzru's novel *My Revolutions*.

5 minutes to next stop

8 Fitzroy Square

Suddenly we are in an established 'heritage' space, festooned with blue plaques indicating the house Virginia Woolf once lived in or Roger Fry's Omega Workshops. The square was developed in 1790 by Charles Fitzroy, who employed Robert Adam as architect.

Its south side was destroyed in the Blitz, and scrupulously rebuilt after the war, but within a few years this area had become the subject of some of the postwar period's most radical ideas about how the city could be re-imagined for the automotive age. **See Fitzroy Square and 'Townscape' overleaf.**

2 minutes to next stop

9 Richardson's Mews

Barely 200 metres from the tower, it has once again disappeared from view. Late 19th century plans for the artificial illumination of cities didn't propose low-level streetlamps, but huge lighthouse-style towers. Plans to build a 'Sun Tower' in Paris—on the site of the Eiffel Tower—would have required complex systems of mirrors to avoid casting some streets into shade. Imagine if this had been done with the BT Tower—Richardson's Mews would certainly have posed a technical challenge!

4 minutes to next stop

10 Regent's Place

Having crossed the rubicon of Euston Road, with the world's first underground railway beneath our feet, we are now in Regent's Place, a good example of 'POPS' development. Our view to the east is framed by the Euston Tower, completed a few years after the BT Tower, but only after planners were able to ensure the tower's height and massing wouldn't affect signal paths. **See Regent's Place and 'POPS' overleaf.**

9 minutes to next stop

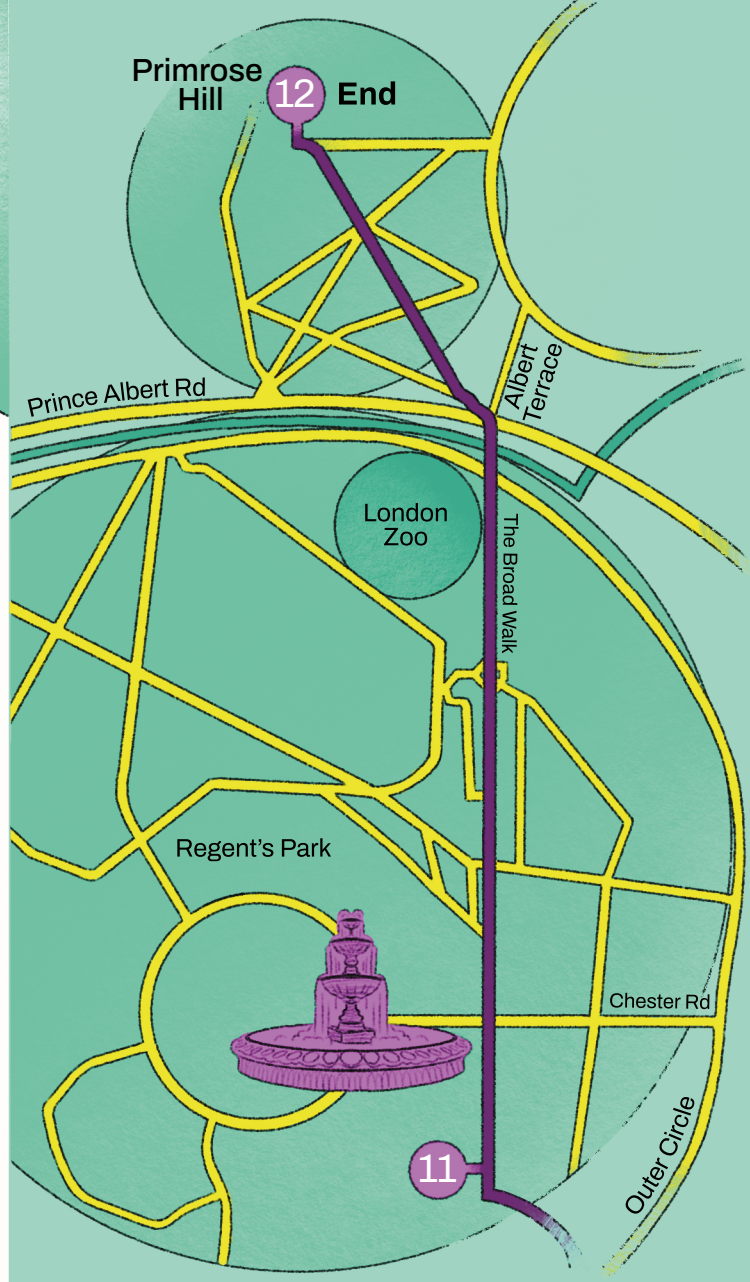
Sightlines



11 Regent's Park

Another example of how important 'perspective' is in the building of cities. As we walk north through the English Gardens, consider how nature mediates the skyline, with seasonal foliage altering visibility of the tower. From here, the tempo of the walk shifts. Having detached ourselves from the complex web of streets in Fitzrovia, we're now able to parade through the great Broad Walk of the park.

25 minutes to next stop



12 Primrose Hill Viewpoint

A well-rewarded grand finale, as the BT Tower re-appears after being obscured for most of the route through Regent's Park. As witnessed throughout this tour, the tower's visibility is co-produced by the townscape in which it is situated, not simply by its height. The spaces around it—public and private, green and grey—are not passive backdrops; they actively shape what and how we see. **See Primrose Hill and 'View Management' overleaf.**