**New Digs, Old Digs**

**Vauxhall Cross, Whitehall, and the London of Craig’s Bond**

Nick Jones

Iconically British, the character of James Bond and the films in which he stars operate as useful barometers of the cultural terrain of the country and how it sees itself on the global stage. As shown by a range of writers (Chapman 1999; Black 2001; Funnell and Dodds 2017), the Bond franchise reveals how Britain has dealt with its waning influence as a colonial power in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond, with Bond subtly shifting from a British Imperialist to a more global icon, albeit one still defined by his home nation. As Tony Bennett and Jane Woollacott note, Bond’s Britishness is often aligned in Ian Fleming’s novels alongside a broader concept of Western-ness (99), while the films, particularly those of the Roger Moore era, expose the concept of British geopolitical supremacy as something of a crude, kitsch joke (113). The Craig films continue to wrestle with changing ideas around national cultural identity in twenty-first century Britain, and this is played out in the shifting architecture of the filmic MI6 and the London in which it is situated. Bond’s MI6 has moved around in the last two decades in ways that are not exactly nomadic, but which do point towards an ongoing debate around what constitutes Britain’s validated structures of power, and the architectural expression these powers might take.

For the first 25 years of the film franchise, MI6 and British power are located within Whitehall locations. With its cushioned doors, Turner-like oil paintings, and sumptuous wooden desk, the recurring office of Bond’s superior M functions in these films as “a mnemonic device to assist the recollection of eighteenth and nineteenth century expansionism”, and thus works to assert historically validated British power (Stock 37). However, with the arrival of Pierce Brosnan in *GoldenEye* (Campbell 1995), the series consciously updates itself, moving into the sleek new space of 85 Vauxhall Cross, a distinctive, Aztec-like structure on the south bank of the Thames. This change aligned the franchise with the operations of the real MI6, who moved into the same building in 1994, a year which also witnessed the first public acknowledgement of the service itself in the form of the Intelligence Services Act (“Our History”). The building then became a relative, albeit rather incidental, trapping of the Brosnan entries. By contrast, over the course of Craig’s four films, Vauxhall Cross has been variously used (*Casino Royale* [Campbell 2006]), ignored (*Quantum of Solace* [Forster 2008]), attacked (*Skyfall* [Mendes 2012]), and finally destroyed (*Spectre* [Mendes 2015]). In the meantime, MI6’s operations have in these films been steadily relocated back to Whitehall, with brief detours into science-fictional techno-offices and underground bunkers.

This changing terrain must not be read solely as narrative exigency or architectural wanderlust. Rather, these movements highlight broader transformations occurring in British culture throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond which played out across the London skyline. The centre of Thatcherite deregulation and privatisation (which continued into the Blair years, albeit with more emphasis on public works), the British capital’s built environment is a key index of shifting political, economic, and cultural trends. Fundamental to its current shape was the city’s drive in the 1980s to become a so-called “global city”. Modelling itself as a “significant centre of coordination” of the world economy, and particularly of finance capital (Massey 37), London needed at this time to build new spaces appropriate to this role (Jacobs 372). As Chris Hamnett describes, financial trading environments like dealing floors demand a particular sort of architecture, including high ceilings, open plans, and room for extensive electronic cabling, all of which is “rarely found within existing [pre-1970s] buildings” (225). The new spaces thus constructed are invariably tall glass skyscrapers, which have come to define London as much as the tourist sites of Westminster, Big Ben, and Tower Bridge. Clustered around Docklands and the Square Mile, these new skyscrapers, with their distinctive shapes and affectionate (and not-so-affectionate) nicknames, reveal how London’s built environment has “adapt[ed] to the needs of contemporary global capitalism” (Hamnett 232).

85 Vauxhall Cross may be a far cry from structures like the Gherkin, the Shard, or Heron Tower, but it is part of the same process of transformation—a conscious restructuring of the city that denies the Gothicism of the Victorian Age, the Neoclassicism of the Edwardian, and the concrete brutalism of post-war regeneration. As such, the Bond franchise’s developing treatment of this building can also be read as a commentary on this kind of architectural restructuring and its place in British culture. In this light, the move away from Vauxhall Cross and back towards Whitehall in *Skyfall* and *Spectre* is instructive. London may have become a vital hub in a global finance network, its twenty-first century skyline reflecting its position on the world stage as a cutting-edge, up-to-the-minute metropolis, but the franchise defiantly returns to more historical territory. The skyline of and around Whitehall and Parliament Square originates from the 1860s (the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and the 1890s (the Old War Office), and the area is thus strongly associated with the moment at which the British Empire was at its height (Black, *London* 309). As the Craig films relocate here they accordingly find increasing value in what was previously outmoded or forgotten, rooting their newfound nationalism in architectural spaces that denote Empire and Commonwealth, alongside a nostalgic summoning of post-war London and the “Blitz spirit”.

This cinematic restructuring occurs alongside a broader cultural move in Britain away from an overt politics of deregulation and “world city” architecture and towards a nostalgia for 1945–1955, a time whose own austerity rhetoric is paralleled in that of the Coalition and Conservative governments of 2010 onwards, even though the aims and outcomes of each respective period of austerity are entirely different (Hatherley 2016). *Casino Royale* and *Quantum of Solace* depict MI6 as modern, technological, and at odds with Whitehall governance; by contrast *Skyfall* and *Spectre* situate MI6 within Whitehall and valorise heritage-inflected spaces and power structures. This article will trace the movement from one to the other, paying attention to both the spaces and narratives of these four films, and how they move towards a nostalgic, but entirely contemporary, conception of “Britishness”.

**Vauxhall Cross in the Brosnan Years**

Prior to finding a new home at 85 Vauxhall Cross in 1994, MI6—or the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) as it is more accurately known—was based in various buildings throughout London. Situated in Whitehall between 1911 and 1926, it relocated first to 54 Broadway, near St James’s Park, until 1964, and then spent thirty years at Century House in Lambeth. Thus, for the majority of the Connery, Lazenby, Moore, and Dalton years, the real MI6 was located inside a visually unremarkable concrete tombstone cube of a building, with a petrol station in its base and few features of aesthetic interest nearby. Unsurprisingly, filmmakers eschewed this site. It was, after all, supposed to be a secret (albeit one that was apparently well known), and its aesthetic hardly fit the seductive gloss of the franchise. Instead, the character of Bond was briefed in various other locations, many in the area of Whitehall. Thus, in *A View to a Kill* (Glen 1985) the changing of the guard in front of Horse Guards Parade is shown, and then the camera tilts up to a neo-baroque building used by the Ministry of Defence. A cut then moves “inside” to show Bond receiving his latest mission briefing.

Whitehall is an apt exterior location. As Simon Jenkins describes, this street “embodies the power of empire” (vii), while for Jeremy Black its buildings are “symbols not only of Englishness, but also of the timelessness and power of a strong Britain” (*Politics* 93). As a metonym for British colonial authority and governance, Whitehall was a logical point from which to launch James Bond on his various global excursions to “keep the British end up”. Even more consistent than the external Whitehall locations was the interior design of MI6, in particular M’s ubiquitous office. With wood panelling and cushioned doors conveying privileged Establishment power, and nautical objects and oil paintings emphasising Britain’s historical maritime strength and its global colonial presence, this office was a minor but consistent presence in the series up to the late 1980s.

As mentioned, from Pierce Brosnan’s first filmonwards, the series took the opportunity to align itself with the authentic location of MI6 after the latter’s move into the unusual and ostentatious building on the south side of Vauxhall Bridge. Designed by renowned architect Terry Farrell—who has published books on London’s urban form (see Farrell 2010), and is also responsible for the art deco offices that sit atop Charing Cross Station—Vauxhall Cross is something of a “hulking, postmodern fortress” (Glancey), equally interpretable as “a Mayan temple or a piece of clanking art deco machinery” (Sudjic). In *GoldenEye*, it is afforded a brief, unlabelled establishing shot, its presence seemingly inevitable given the amount of press attention that its design and construction had received in the early 1990s (Pile 241). The inside of the building (unsurprisingly always filmed on sets, rather than on location) is depicted as somewhat cramped and bureaucratic, its operation rooms resembling those of the CIA in the contemporaneous Jack Ryan franchise (*Patriot Games* [Noyce 1992] and *Clear and Present Danger* [Noyce 1994]). M’s (Judi Dench) office contains rectilinear lamps, modest coat-of-arms wall prints, a crème leather sofa, and a small, recessive bookcase, and is a far cry from its previous incarnation: in James Chapman’s words, this new office “eschews the traditional wood panels and leather-backed furniture in favour of a clinical modernist functionalism” (258), and Paul Stock describes how it is a “stark contrast to the cluttered antique shop” of yore (43). Rather than a gentleman’s club or naval captain’s quarters, the office of Dench’s M is clearly a workspace, and embraces an upmarket, minimalist kind of 1990s modernism. This character has remade the space to match her own focus on “intellect and cold reason” (Boyce 278), and the new décor goes hand-in-hand with her new relationship to Bond: in an oft-quoted line, M calls him a “sexist, misogynist dinosaur” of whom she generally does not approve. Moreover, while previous Ms were normally sympathetic functionaries, here Dench’s M is defined as a narrow-minded accountant: she openly calls herself a “bean-counter”, while her subordinate Tanner (Michael Kitchen) goes somewhat further in labelling her the “Evil Queen of Numbers”.

The negotiation of gender, managerialism, and professional competency that the franchise undertakes in relation to Dench’s M in these scenes and beyond has been explored by a range of scholars (Boyce 275–279; Kuntze 239–241; Patton 251–254). In the context of this article, though, it is important to note how Vauxhall Cross is a particularly appropriate home for this M. It is a glass pseudo-skyscraper that evokes London’s place as a global city—a node in a finance network—rather than as a seat of Empire. Its occupants are not Imperial presences but management professionals. The new M and her new MI6 headquarters are evidence of the changing face of Britain and of London, and the restructuring of the country away from manufacturing and towards financial and business services (Hamnett 2003). The architecture “ceases to be a monument to an old Empire. Instead it is the subtle administrator of the new” (Stock 43). Cinematically, the ideological valences and spatial consequences of this shift are iconically traced in *The Long Good Friday* (Mackenzie 1980), in which a mob boss tries to use American money to profit from the deregulation of the Thatcher years by building a casino in the then-rundown Docklands (Brunsdon 193–200; Black, *London* 348–350). Although relegated to a fleeting establishing shot, and situated in a different part of the city, *GoldenEye* begins a trend in the films of making Vauxhall Cross part of the same lineage, an architectural expression of London’s new identity as a centre of global finance. In this light, it is not surprising that the plot hinges on a weapon that disrupts electronic signals rather than material infrastructure, and that the villain Alec Trevelyan (Sean Bean) intends to wipe out the (electronically-managed) London stock-exchange. His motive is revenge for Imperially censored historical actions: as Lienz Cossacks, his family were betrayed by the British government at the end of the Second World War and surrendered to the Soviet Union, where they were executed. Alec thus urgently reminds Britain of the mistakes of its past, even as he acutely understands the vulnerabilities of its present.

However, if in Brosnan’s hands Bond “reassumes his role as the foremost champion of Britannia” (Chapman 248), the image of this Britannia is architecturally fluid. In *Tomorrow Never Dies* (Spottiswoode 1997), MI6 seems to be based in Somerset House in London’s Aldwych, a neoclassical location that helps align Bond and M with specifically British Imperial might, in contrast to the globalised villainy of media baron villain Elliot Carver (Jonathan Price) and his towering glass skyscrapers.[[1]](#endnote-2) M’s office and Vauxhall Cross then reappear at some length in *The World is Not Enough* (Apted 1999), and it is here that the changes to Bond’s London become most apparent. When a bomb detonates in MI6, tearing a hole in the building, Bond commandeers an experimental nautical craft from the wet-dock improbably located on the fifth floor and engages in a furious downriver chase, a chase that takes in key landmarks like the Houses of Parliament and Tower Bridge, but which privileges Docklands and the newly finished Millennium Dome in Greenwich. In her book *London in Cinema*, Charlotte Brunsdon proposes that this chase reveals the kind of London that Bond must navigate in the late 1990s, as well as those parts of the city that are no longer his concern (203). Heritage sites become postcard backdrops, while the Docklands and the Dome are subject to tactile, embodied engagement of the kind associated with the contemporary action hero (Jones 31–39). As Brunsdon stresses, the film privileges those sites where the structural changes to London’s spaces and economics are readily apparent. This is a London that seeks to be defined by the present and its capacity to redevelop disused industrial space into restaurants, middle-class neighbourhoods, and even an enormous tent-like structure to celebrate the year 2000, rather than by traces of its longer history as a colonial empire.

After this pre-credit sequence (which, it must be noted, also shoehorns in Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, exactly the kind of successful, conspicuously iconic architecture that the Dome tried so hard to emulate), *The World is Not Enough* moves to MI6 headquarters in Scotland, from where M and others then monitor Bond’s global actions. This film therefore compresses a transition that occurs on a lengthier scale throughout the Craig films, which similarly transition from contemporary iconic architecture to neoclassical heritage spaces.

**Craig’s MI6: From Bankers to Bunkers to Whitehall**

While Bond rebooted with the first Daniel Craig entry *Casino Royale*, the series retained both the authentic portrayal of MI6 at Vauxhall Cross as well as Dench’s portrayal of Bond’s superior. Her office is essentially identical to its appearance in the Brosnan era, while the adjacent control room is the kind of blue-hued, screen-filled surveillance space familiar from any number of twenty-first century geopolitical spy thrillers. However, while Bond and M once again butt heads, her competency as a spymaster is not called into question. In fact, *Casino Royale* repositions her from the bean-counter she was in *GoldenEye*, doing so by introducing alternative forms of authority associated with the (unseen) British “Establishment”.

The film’s first London scene, shortly after an early action sequence in which Bond violates an embassy in Madagascar, uses a classic image of the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Bridge (complete with a red Routemaster bus) to establish the location. The film cuts inside to show M leaving a meeting. She complains loudly that she is unreasonably being asked to reveal sensitive information, and moreover to a group of people whom she does not respect. “Have you ever seen such a bunch of self-righteous, arse-covering prigs?” she asks loudly, and halfway through this sentence the film cuts from a medium shot of M and her assistant Villiers (Tobias Menzies) to a wide-shot of their surroundings: a wood-panelled, Georgian library. The expansive shot allies the subject of her complaints with these trappings, from which she eagerly departs. A similar space is depicted in *Quantum of Solace*, when M must defend Bond’s actions to an ideologically opportunist foreign minister (Tim Pigott-Smith). This Whitehall office resembles a law library, and the minister is more than happy to do deals with villains if it secures a declining Britain access to valuable oil reserves, thus securing its otherwise precarious geopolitical future.

The spaces in these two films that most closely resemble M’s office of the pre-Brosnan era are therefore linked to inefficiency and even outright corruption. By contrast, the narrative of *Casino Royale* establishes Bond and MI6 as operating within a globalised terrain of financial speculation. Just as Le Chiffre (Mads Mikkelsen) attempts to play the stock market, so too does M who orders Bond to engage in his own form of casino capitalism, or casino espionage, to take down Le Chiffre. As treasury agent Vesper Lynd (Eva Green) comments, if Bond loses, the British government will have directly financed terrorism. Neither the City of London nor Canary Wharf are represented in the film, but the economic system they embody is well in evidence, with the London-based MI6 endorsing a risky, financialised scheme with no necessary guarantee of success. Meanwhile, M’s emphasis on opacity—“I report to the Prime Minister and even he’s smart enough not to ask me what we do”—strikes a discordant note in a post-Wikileaks, post-Snowden world, and further allies her with the kinds of unregulated, laissez-faire fiscal speculation personified by London’s banking industry. These aspects of Dench’s tenure will receive fuller attention in *Skyfall*, which focuses on accountability and, for all that it valorises her, makes her M into something of a scapegoat for the faults of MI6 during its Vauxhall Cross period.

Before this, *Quantum of Solace* takes MI6 away from both Vauxhall Cross and Whitehall. Establishing shots indicate (although this is not made explicit) that the organisation is now located within London’s Barbican Estate, a monumental mixed-use series of tower blocks and low-rises constructed in the late 1960s and early 1970s and sandwiched between the historic city centre and the financial City of London. Frequently voted London’s ugliest building (“Barbican Tops Ugly Buildings Poll” 2003; Smith 2014), the Barbican may contain arts venues, museums, and residential flats, but it is certainly not home to Britain’s foreign intelligence agency (at least, not publically). The section used for exteriors in the film, Frobisher Crescent, is populated with black and grey-suited extras, helping visually stress that these are diegetic offices rather than flats.[[2]](#endnote-3) To add to the idiosyncrasy of the location, the interiors shown establish no continuity with the Barbican’s architecture, being instead a series of white corridors and glass-panelled rooms that are quasi-science-fictional in their clean slickness and digital functionality. This space is technologised to an extent that has not been seen before in the franchise—M’s Scottish castle in *The World is Not Enough* may have featured holograms and moving platforms, but here “fetishized objects of counter-terrorism and [digital] surveillance” include floor-to-ceiling translucent screens that visualise the tracking of phone calls, and sensor-rich touchscreen tables that scan fingerprints instantly (Hochscherf 314). The various control rooms and offices seen in previous films seem hopelessly outdated by comparison.

Normal service resumes in *Skyfall*, some early scenes of which take place in a newly seen section of Vauxhall Cross—a large, high-ceilinged, corporate-looking control room, from which M and her staff oversee Bond’s mission in Istanbul. M’s desk is situated near a semi-circular window designed to visibly match the exterior contours of the building, in particular its river-facing “summit”. Significantly, it is exactly this part of the structure that explodes later in the film when M’s computer is hacked by cyber-terrorist Raoul Silva (Javier Bardem). The distinctive architectural shape helps viewers connect the exterior and interior of the building, underscoring that it was quite specifically M’s office which was destroyed (in line with Silva’s later-revealed grudge). More importantly, the spatial correlation highlights how the flamboyant riverside structure’s very visibility is a source of weakness: it is the point at which the interior meets the exterior, the former perceptible in the latter, which is so successfully breached (a fact emphasised by M’s own witnessing of the attack from the outside, from nearby Vauxhall Bridge).[[3]](#endnote-4)

Responding to this dangerous visibility, MI6 subsequently decamps underground to dilapidated bunkers near Smithfield Market. While the franchise has frequently featured MI6 sections in improbable locations (such as a half-sunken boat in *The Man With the Golden Gun* [Hamilton 1974] and a Brazilian monastery in *Moonraker* [Gilbert 1979]), these were always foreign outposts, their novelty and quirky exoticism reflecting the unusual gadgetry used in the films. *Skyfall*’s new HQ is quite different, being a decidedly historical, nationalistic, and supposedly authentic space. When he introduces Bond to these “new digs”, Bill Tanner (Rory Kinnear) emphasises the lineage of this new location:

Tanner: The old building was declared strategically vulnerable.

Bond: That’s putting it mildly.

Tanner: [Silva] was able to breach the most secure computer system in Britain, so we’re on war footing now. This was part of Churchill’s bunker. They’re still discovering tunnels dating back to the eighteenth century. Quite fascinating – if it wasn’t for the rats. […] Welcome to the new MI6.

The bunkers are not part of the London skyline. Their strength lies in their concealment and their disconnection: unlike Vauxhall Cross, they are secure and hidden. Even their IT systems are isolated from the world at large to make them less “strategically vulnerable”, with Silva only able to hack them later thanks to a misstep by Q (Ben Wishaw). Moreover, the inclusion of this space in the longer sweep of British history—and triumphant aspects of national pride like Churchill’s war cabinet—is stressed, an inclusion clearly denied newer architecture like Vauxhall Cross. Later, when Bond is escaping from Silva with M in tow, she asks where they are going, and he replies, “Back in time—somewhere *we’ll* have the advantage.” Bond is referring to Skyfall in Scotland, the childhood estate on which he grew up, but the words carry deeper meaning, pointing to the film’s valorisation of history over modernity. This is underlined by the images accompanying the dialogue: Craig driving *Goldfinger*’s (Hamilton 1964) classic Aston Martin DB5 defiantly *away* from the glittering, super-modern towers of Canary Wharf.

By the end of the film, MI6 has returned to Whitehall. Dench’s M has been killed, and Ralph Fiennes’ Mallory replaces her as Bond’s superior. The last scenes show Bond standing proud upon Whitehall roofs, with Big Ben and a fluttering Union Jack clearly visible. He then goes inside, discovers that his colleague Eve (Naomi Harris) has the surname Moneypenny, and enters an office that closely resembles that featured throughout the pre-Brosnan era. *Skyfall* thus consciously situates this Bond within the milieu of earlier incarnations of the character (coyly eliding Brosnan’s tenure), and hints that the three films starring Craig have operated as a kind of origin trilogy (albeit one with little temporal logic in relation to previous incarnations). The return to a recognisable M’s office is very much intended as a comforting resumption of earlier codes and practices. For all that Bond films from *GoldenEye* to *Casino Royale* had stressed the outmodedness of these historical sets and the connotations they carried—often linking Establishment privilege with hotheadedness (*Tomorrow Never Dies*), myopia (*Casino Royale*) or corruption (*Quantum of Solace*)—*Skyfall* uses them as reassurances. We are reassured that Bond is “back” (or that a particular conception of him is), and that the British Empire still has cultural currency. Crucial to both is the activation of heritage discourse through the quotation of an architectural space not only iconic to the franchise, but embodying British tradition and history more generally (Stock).

In *Spectre*, architecture continues to shape meaning around the cultural identities of MI6, Bond, and Britain, and what these are all for in the twenty-first century. Early on, the husk of a now-unused Vauxhall Cross is shown, with a gaping, scorched hole still scarring the building from Silva’s attack in *Skyfall*. On the north side of Vauxhall Bridge, opposite and overlooking this shell, is the CNS building, the headquarters of the newly created Joint Intelligence Service. JIS, run by the shady C (Andrew Scott), turns out to be a cover for villains SPECTRE, who will use its new surveillance apparatus (called Nine Eyes) to spy on innocent people the world over. In the film’s twin-stranded finale, Fiennes’ new M faces off against C on the top floor of CNS, while Bond rescues his love interest Dr. Madeleine Swann (Léa Seydoux) from the dilapidated Vauxhall Cross. C ends up falling to his death from the peak of CNS’s interior ramp, while Bond escapes just as Vauxhall Cross is destroyed by demolition charges. Bond then shoots down villain Ernst Stavro Blofeld’s (Christoph Waltz) helicopter, which crashes on Westminster Bridge, allowing their final confrontation to take place in the shadow of the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben. A coda showing Bond leaving MI6 with Swann is subsequently introduced with a short but conspicuous montage of images of Whitehall’s historic buildings standing proud in the early morning light, emphasising the endurance and quiet, stoic beauty of structures made of brick and marble.

All of this completes a reorientation away from Vauxhall Cross’s postmodern, glass-fronted iconicism and its embodiment of the spatial restructurings of the neoliberal city, and towards more traditional seats of power. The destruction of Vauxhall Cross—an “epitaph” for 1980s architecture (Sudjic)—helps clear the way for this reorientation, but crucially a replacement is *not* found in the new CNS building, which is ideologically compromised before it opens its doors. This towering glass skyscraper may be very different in design from Vauxhall Cross, but it represents the same kind of spatial restructuring of London into a global city with a skyline of iconic shapes and designs. Scenes set within CNS were even filmed inside London’s City Hall, a self-conscious structure in the shadow of Tower Bridge designed by brand-name architect Norman Foster. Built at the turn of the millennium, City Hall was designed to express “the transparency and accessibility of the democratic process”, doing so partly through its glass design, but most distinctly in its curving central ramp (“City Hall”). Parts of the building are open to the public, allowing Londoners to see the Mayor’s staff in action. *Spectre*’s redeployment of Foster’s transparent architecture as the headquarters for what turns out to be a villainous, inescapable global surveillance network run by a cartel of megalomaniacs is certainly suggestive. As such, *Spectre* continues and deepens *Skyfall*’s distrust of the contemporary, skyscraper-dominated London skyline. The transparency of CNS stands not for open democratic governance but for the right of shady organisations to breach civil liberties. Bond and M must act as unwelcome agents in breaching both Vauxhall Cross and CNS, ridding the buildings of the threat they pose but then abandoning them to destruction or inoperability. As a result, it is once again left to neoclassical architecture of heritage to provide a firm foundation for MI6, British foreign policy, and Bond’s sense of identity.

**An Exemplar of British Fortitude: Architecture and National Identity**

The closing scenes of both *Skyfall* and *Spectre* cement the somewhat overt project of these films to firmly embed the character of Bond within a specifically conservative British cultural terrain, a move which paints the architecture of accessibility as an architecture of suspicion and vulnerability. In previous films starring Craig, Bond was more interested in revenge than with “exhibiting fidelity to ‘Queen and country’” (Dittmer and Dodds 77). The two recent films by contrast tilt heavily towards “Queen and country”. While on a character level, *Skyfall* might do this work in particular through its implicit and explicit alignment of M with Queen Elizabeth II (Funnell and Dodds, 204–206; Kunze 242), spatially both *Skyfall* and *Spectre* not only privilege London as a key location, but depict various kinds of London and generate structured oppositions between them in order to find the ‘right’ kind of London for Bond, and for Britain.

For all that Bond’s lineage and history mean that he always stands as an icon of the British Empire (see Black 2001), throughout the 1990s and 2000s he had become instead a kind of global action hero. This was partly a response to Britain’s lessening influence on the world political stage, and partly a result of the need for the films to garner global audiences: Bond could be British, yes, but the values he espoused and embodied needed to be universal. Hence, in *GoldenEye*, when he is about to dispatch Trevelyan, the latter asks “For England, James?”, and Bond replies defiantly, “No, for me”. Personal revenge trumps national duty as a sympathetic motivation (as it does, similarly, in *Licence to Kill* [Glen 1989] and *Quantum of Solace*).

*Skyfall*, however, plays up not only Bond’s Britishness, but more specifically a Britishness rooted in nostalgia and unapologetic national pride. We are told that in a presumptuous obituary M described Bond as an “exemplar of British fortitude”, a platitude Craig’s Bond is shown to appreciate, but which would not snugly fit any of the role’s previous actors, or even Craig’s own brutal, cold-hearted performances in *Casino Royale* and *Quantum of Solace* (Bolton 73–74). *Skyfall*, though, carefully constructs him in this fashion. During a word association exercise he responds “England” to the prompt “Country”. The only thing to survive the explosion in M’s office is a china bulldog with a Union Jack emblazoned on it, which is then left to Bond in her will, the mantle of iconographic Britishness passing to from her to him. Meanwhile, the focus on the geography of Bond’s childhood cements his identity as a production of the natural landscape of the British Isles, and the ongoing theme of his possible obsolescence offers a mirror image of Britain’s own place on the contemporary geopolitical scene (Dodds 128–129). Bond and *Skyfall* combat such possible obsolescence through engagement with a nostalgic conception of national character: both Bond and Britain were once great and formidable, and this is what allows them to survive today’s threats.

*Skyfall*’s rebooting therefore does not strike the modern, invigorated tone of *Casino Royale*, but instead stresses history and perseverance. This is highlighted by the narrative’s move to the Skyfall estate, an isolated and non-technological space (Dodds 128). This estate may be blown up spectacularly, but the kind of values it embodies—historical weight, inherited wealth and power, tradition—live on in M’s office, seen in the film’s final moments. As Stock argues, this office (in its pre-Brosnan incarnation, as seen again here) is a “metonym for England”, a space where “ideology, iconography and office fittings converge” (35). Its presence in *Skyfall* and *Spectre* promises us that MI6 is “stable, conservative and dependable” once again (Stock 36), and that with the passing of Dench’s M it has returned – in the film’s eyes, reassuringly – to being an “unequivocally masculine place” (Kunze 254).[[4]](#endnote-5) These values, moreover, are explicitly founded upon a withdrawal into the past. MI6’s move out of Vauxhall Cross and into bunkers explicitly connected with the Second World War, and then finally into the traditional seat of British government Whitehall, underscores the equation of safety (and indeed Britishness) with historically-validated, neoclassical spaces. Cautious post-Second World War optimism is conflated with the earlier might of the global Empire, and this concoction is problematically hailed as providing answers to contemporary dangers. In the film’s final scenes, Bond is proudly and fiercely (re)constructed as a historical British presence. He stands atop the new MI6 with quiet dignity, Union Jack flapping nearby. Bond is not only back on track but ascendant in these moments—he has overcome his injury, killed the villain, and is returning to work.

*Spectre* underlines this interweaving of fortitude, Britishness, Bond, and neoclassical architecture. Vauxhall Cross is not only vulnerable but entirely abandoned, while its twin sister CNS and the kind of globalised financial architecture it embodies is unmasked as corrupt. Fiennes’ M is installed as an infallible ally—the concerns about competency that plague Dench’s M in *Skyfall* are nowhere in evidence, and Mallory is even instrumental in killing C—and his retro-office continues to be a key location. Westminster Bridge provides a tourist-friendly backdrop for Bond to prove his character (by not executing Blofeld in cold blood), while the last moments place him in the driving seat of the character’s classic 1964 Aston Martin and amongst a Whitehall scenography (albeit one he is supposedly resigning from). Spatially, the kind of “British fortitude” that the earlier M described in relation to Bond is represented here through the structures of Whitehall, rather than Vauxhall Cross (which is now rubble) or the CNS skyscraper (the glass architecture of which has been revealed as under the sway of villainous global cabals).

This aesthetic and narrative shift around representations of Britain and Britishness has not occurred in a vacuum. In the twenty-first century, and particularly after the financial crisis of 2007–08 and the resulting policies of austerity and cuts to the public sector, significant parts of British culture and politics have alighted upon nostalgic models of history for guidance. Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn describe how, “as the spectre of recession surfaced in broadsheets, broadcast news, current affairs and documentary, there was a distinct turn to myths of ‘making do’ and of thrift as one positive strategy for individuals to manage a growing insecurity around homes and jobs” (*Class* 171). These myths were fundamentally linked to post-War Britain and a discourse of gruelling, hard-won victory. The ubiquitous “keep calm and carry on” poster, which was designed in 1939 but popularised from around 2005 onwards (Hughes), is emblematic of this link, as is the value of quiet, apolitical endurance it espouses. (This might be contrasted with the vocal politico-cultural outrage associated with the punk scene and labour strikes of the 1970s and 1980s). Moving image media has equally taken up this rhetoric, with coverage of the Royal Wedding, Diamond Jubilee and London 2012 Olympics all conjuring up ideas of “wartime fortitude and a nostalgic community spirit” (Biressi and Nunn “London 2012”).

British heritage in these media events as well as recent Bond films is not neutral but “highly commodified”, an economic and political resource used to shape cultural discourse, concealing certain ideas and responses to government policy and propagating others (Jacobs 361). Bond and the mega-events described above of course intersect, not only in the sense that Bond films perform extremely well as global cinematic commodities, but also in the use of Bond himself in the London 2012 opening ceremony, in which Craig apparently parachuted into the Olympic stadium with the Queen in tow. His Union Jack parachute may not have been new—it was a nod to Moore’s famous stunt in *The Spy Who Loved Me* (Gilbert 1977)—but Craig’s cosy relationship with “Queen and country” certainly struck a new note. Bond’s willed Britishness is not primarily the source of knowing humour in Craig’s tenure (as it was in Moore’s), but becomes, as it was in the Olympic ceremony, part of a wider cultural embrace of nostalgic, austerity-minded understandings of national identity in the twenty-first century.

**Conclusion**

For all its unusual qualities, Vauxhall Cross never quite becomes iconic in the Bond franchise, or indeed in real life. Although the Brosnan films made efforts to equate the building with Bond’s activities, these were never whole-hearted. *The World is Not Enough* highlights its existence only to quickly abscond, while Brosnan’s last entry, *Die Another Day* (Tamahori 2002), uses Bond’s “rogue agent” status as a pretence to brief him in a disused tube station in the shadow of Big Ben rather than in official premises.[[5]](#endnote-6) Continuing this pattern, we can see from the fact that Daniel Craig never sets foot in Vauxhall Cross until it is seconds away from demolition that his Bond is far from at home in its walls.[[6]](#endnote-7) More celebrated are the corridors of Whitehall and in particular M’s office, so familiar to viewers of the Connery, Lazenby and Moore films. It is here, *Skyfall* and *Spectre* assure us, that British power, fortitude and national identity are correctly located. This (re)location occurs alongside the conservative realignment of gender roles (Fiennes’s battle-hardened M replacing Dench’s ultimately compromised mother figure, and Moneypenny taking her place behind a desk), and the already discussed turn in the public sphere to post-War nostalgia and quiet, wilfully resigned perseverance rather than engaged civic debate.

The move to Whitehall heritage structures in these two most recent films is to be taken as an honourable homecoming, a re-placement of Bond within the correct milieu and away from the postmodernism of the 1980s and its links to Thatcherite deregulation and Blairite iconicism, and away also from the twenty-first century skyline of glass towers discernible in the internationalised spaces of the City of London and Canary Wharf. Male, implicitly colonial power returns to centre stage. This move should not be read as a rejection of more modern structures *tout court*, but rather as an assertion by the films that British identity is best and most usefully situated in traditional spaces. As Nigel Thrift (350) and Jane M. Jacobs (365) have argued, London, and in particular the banking industry, may rely on late twentieth-century architecture, but it equally trades on a heritage aesthetic to gain cultural capital on the global stage. In Massey’s description of London’s move to become a world city,

The symbols of the old Empire, often icons of the very characteristics that had now to be abandoned, were retained. If the old class ways had, perforce, to be opened up, nonetheless they could be mined to shore up the legitimacy and the social cachet of the new. (46)

We can see these same operations at work in *Skyfall* and *Spectre*, films which use the heritage trappings of colonial-era government buildings and the significance they carry in the Bond franchise (M’s iconic office) in order to better construct the “new” (actually, old) MI6 as more solid than its Vauxhall Cross-based incarnation (a building attacked twice in the franchise, then finally demolished by a villain), and as more trustworthy than towering glass alternatives. In the same vein, the “new” Bond (actually, by this point in the series over two films old) is aligned with historically-validated power structures which articulate key, albeit highly questionable, discourses around British nostalgia for post-War austerity and pre-Cold War politics. Bond embraces the politics of twenty-first century Britain in these films, but does so with a revealing eye towards the past.

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1. The apparent placement of MI6 in a heritage building like Somerset House in *Tomorrow Never Dies* may also be seen in light of its discussion of the Hong Kong handover, an event that contrasted Britain’s past role as colonial presence with the increasing geopolitical and economic strength of Asia. Lisa Funnell (42–46) discusses these changing ties in relation to the character of Wai Lin (Michelle Yeoh), whom she suggests is positioned as a “bridge” between West and East. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. The look of these shots may consciously evoke the paintings of LS Lowry and his gloomy, industrial view of Britain – in the Britain of *Quantum of Solace* it is always overcast. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. The same idea recurs later, when M attends a *public* hearing. She is again attacked by Silva, shortly after pleading that MI6 must operate “in the shadows” like the people with which they do battle. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. This masculine place may include the female character of Eve Moneypenny (Naomie Harris), but crucially she has been moved from field agent (at the film’s start) to secretary or sidekick, a process Kristen Shaw describes as a kind of conservative “disciplining” that articulates masculine (and racial) values (Shaw 76–78; see also Dodds 130). Moneypenny may be part of MI6, but she is here more like a piece of iconic furniture than an agential presence. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Notably, this tube station is called Vauxhall Cross. When Bond *is* seen in MI6 in this film, it is revealed to be a digital simulation, part of an elaborate virtual reality training exercise undertaken in the tube station. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Bond does enter Dench’s M’s own home in both *Casino Royale* and *Skyfall* to receive briefing-like information, and although he does attend a mission briefing at the cyber-MI6 in the Barbican in *Quantum of Solace*, he loiters at the back of the room and does not say a word, something unthinkable for previous Bonds. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)