

words
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photos
James Burns

Plague, fire, attacks, rival football teams, an archaic tube system, host to worldwide events, Boris Johnson, the seat of a perpetually iffy government, the best music, food and arts in the world, endless growth out and up, and a sticky, melting hot pot of a populace that just about get along, cheek and jowl. It can only be London.

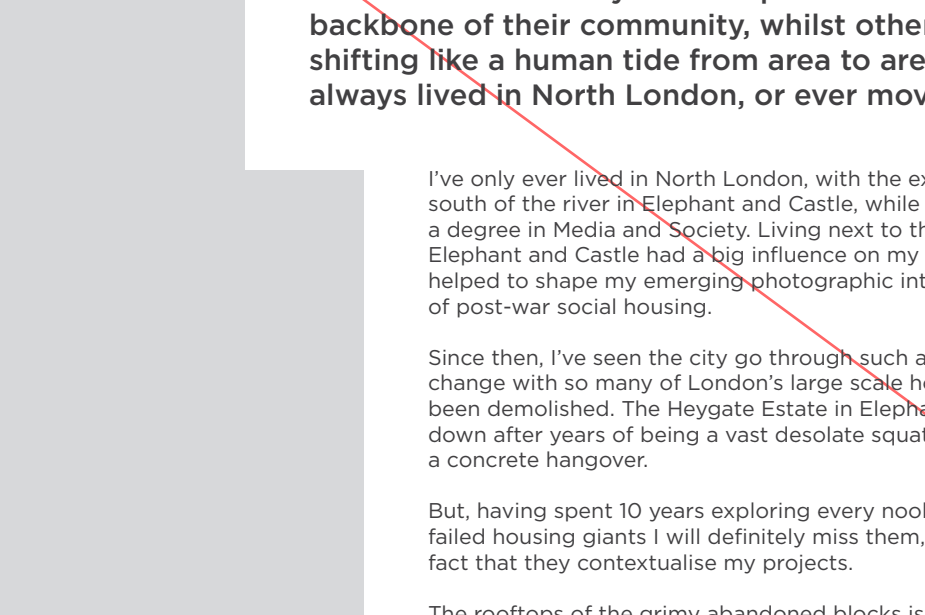
2000 years plus in the making, and now? The skyline is dominated by monolithic cranes, London natives are finding it hard to stay, and its infrastructure is slowly crumbling like an old digestive in a mug of hot Thames. But, we still love it, and people flock to it.

One Londoner who can literally survey his kingdom from on high is James Burns. Never-ending curator of his London from the Rooftops photography project. He's a North London residing photographer with vistas of talent and a burning love for the city he calls home. It's time to see how deep his love affair with London really goes.

As an obviously love-struck resident of London, is it the thrill of the location, or getting the shot that fires up your rooftop missions?

It's a bit of both to be honest. On one hand it's like a game of photographic monopoly. I definitely get a thrill from the knowledge of having a certain area covered and slowly piecing together a photographic map of London. A large part of the satisfaction also comes from pulling a bait off, reaching a location at the right time to catch the perfect light and getting the shot I had in my mind's eye.

London will always be my home and I will never tire of photographing it. The city is vast and as the seasons change, the opportunities arise for very different shots from the very same spots. However, there is a big world out there with so many cities I am dying to shoot. China in particular fascinates me.



Sky on Fire

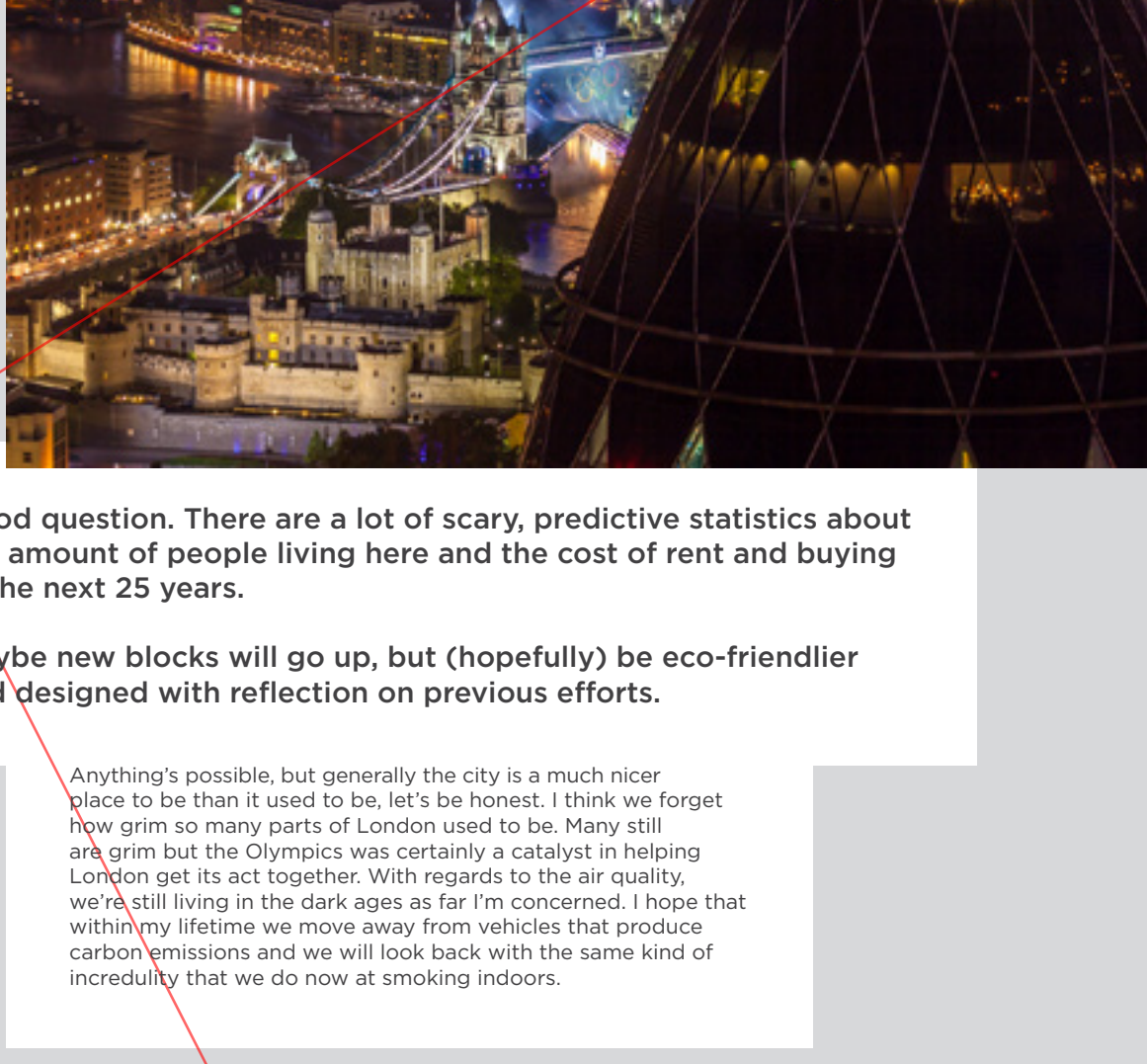
Some Londoners stay on their patch forever, forming the backbone of their community, whilst others move around, shifting like a human tide from area to area. Have you always lived in North London, or ever moved around?

I've only ever lived in North London, with the exception of a year spent south of the river in Elephant and Castle, while I was at University doing a degree in Media and Society. Living next to the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle had a big influence on my imagination and definitely helped to shape my emerging photographic interest in the architecture of post-war social housing.

Since then, I've seen the city go through such a period of intense physical change with so many of London's large scale housing estates having been demolished. The Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle finally came down after years of being a vast desolate squat and we're now left with a concrete hangover.

But, having spent 10 years exploring every nook and cranny of London's failed housing giants I will definitely miss them, and also take joy from the fact that they contextualise my projects.

The rooftops of the grimy abandoned blocks is where I began but now they are gone and I am shooting from the top of gleaming new skyscrapers. Not every structure enhances the skyline though, and I have a feeling that history is repeating itself. In 40 years' time will we be tearing down the glass giants of today?



The Gherkin

Good question. There are a lot of scary, predictive statistics about the amount of people living here and the cost of rent and buying in the next 25 years.

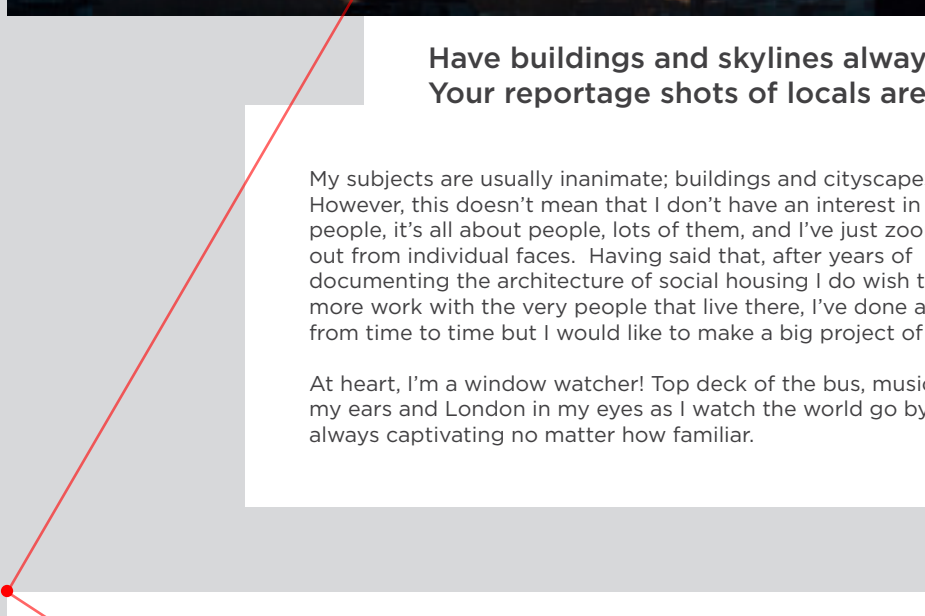
Maybe new blocks will go up, but (hopefully) be eco-friendly and designed with reflection on previous efforts.

Anything's possible, but generally the city is a much nicer place to be than it used to be, let's be honest. I think we forget how grim so many parts of London used to be. Many still are grim but the Olympics was certainly a catalyst in helping London get its act together. With regards to the air quality, we're still living in the dark ages as far as I'm concerned. I hope that within my lifetime we move away from vehicles that produce carbon emissions and we will look back with the same kind of incredulity that we do now at smoking indoors.

What are your feelings on gentrification?

Gentrification is a long-burning topic, which I have mixed emotions on. On one hand, I'm working with a variety of developers, construction companies and property managers who give me the type of exciting commissions that I had always dreamed of. Each new development I see is a potential opportunity for London from the Rooftops however, it's a London that I, and many other average Londoners will never be a part of. Furthermore, what is happening in the process is a cultural sterilisation of the places and venues that mean so much to the subcultures of London's recent past.

English Heritage is there to protect the buildings of historical significance but who protects the recent past? The pubs and clubs that made this city so cool are being shut down left right and centre and no one cares except for the real Londoners who have no real voice. It's a huge shame that there isn't official respect for London's recent cultural history.



Down

Have buildings and skylines always been your main focus? Your reportage shots of locals are very poignant.

My subjects are usually inanimate; buildings and cityscapes. However, this doesn't mean that I don't have an interest in people. It's all about people, lots of them, and I've just zoomed out from individual faces. Having said that, after years of documenting the architecture of social housing I do wish to do more work with the very people that live there. I've done a bit from time to time but I would like to make a big project of it.

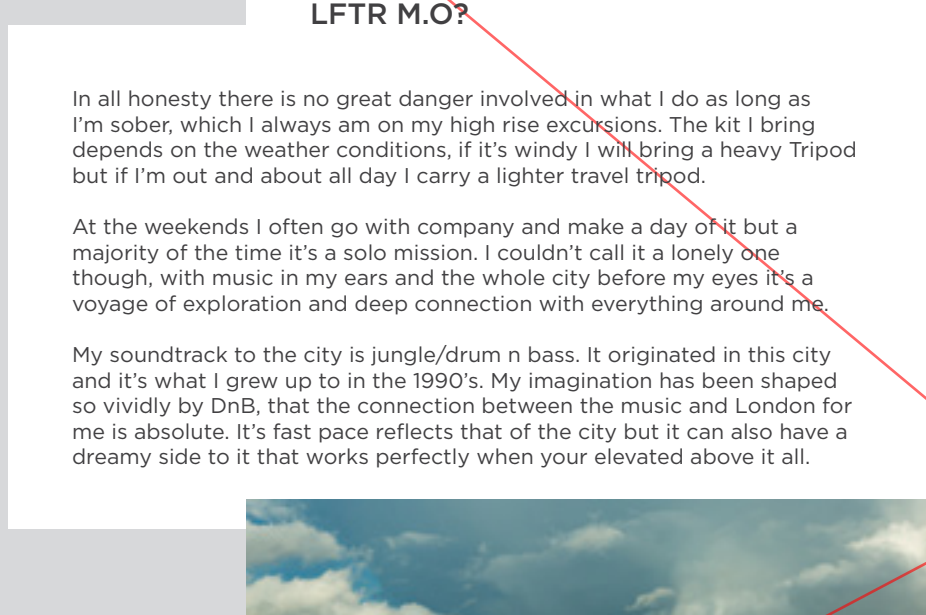
At heart, I'm a window watcher! Top deck of the bus, music in my ears and London in my eyes as I watch the world go by. It's always captivating no matter how familiar.

As (wealthier) Londoners are burrowing down or building skywards, restaurants and clubs are still looking for that elusive, never used before space to host in, it's becoming harder and harder to find a truly original space.

Have you got a photo location you think nobody has been to?

There's a few! Although I wouldn't say no one has been there, as maintenance workers have legitimate business on the roofs I frequent. As for other photographers, some roofs I have on lockdown, others are fair game to anyone with a budget and some, well, some photographers also happen to be part time ninjas so fair play to them.

What I dream of is being in a great location during extraordinary environmental conditions. A dream shot for me would be to capture a London view whilst the sky shimmers green with the aurora borealis. It's a very unlikely scenario but one that was forecast as a possibility during a spell of intense solar activity. Other than that, I would quite like to capture the perfect bolt of lightning connecting with the ground or a perfect full rainbow over the city.



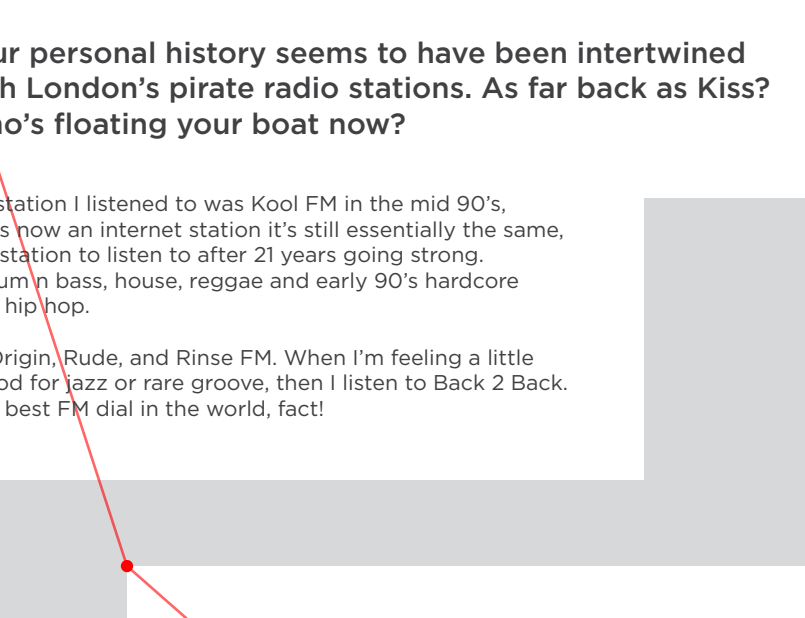
Light Show

Work for most is probably repetitive and arduous, but for you, is it in an adrenaline thing? Do you put yourself in danger? What's your LFTR M.O.?

In all honesty there is no great danger involved in what I do as long as I'm sober, which I always am on my high rise excursions. The kit I bring depends on the weather conditions. If it's windy I will bring a heavy tripod but if I'm out and about all day I carry a lighter travel tripod.

At the weekends I often go with company and make a day of it but a majority of the time it's a solo mission. I couldn't call it a lonely one though, with music in my ears and the very city before my eyes. It's a voyage of exploration and deep connection with everything around me.

My soundtrack to the city is jungle/drum n bass. It originated in this city and it's what I grew up to in the 1990's. My imagination has been shaped so vividly by DnB, that the connection between the music and London for me is absolute. It's fast pace reflects that of the city but it can also have a dreamy side to it that works perfectly when you're elevated above it all.



Rainbow

I remember taping Kool FM on a weekend, going to Camden to buy tape packs, and heading to Paradise, Roast or Blue Note to get my two-ste on.

Your recent history seems to have been intertwined with London's pirate radio stations. As far back as Kiss? Who's floating your boat now?

The first pirate station I listened to was Kool FM in the mid 90's, and although it's now an internet station it's still essential the same, and is my main station to listen to after 21 years going strong. It represents drum n bass, house, reggae and early 90's hardcore as well as some hip hop.

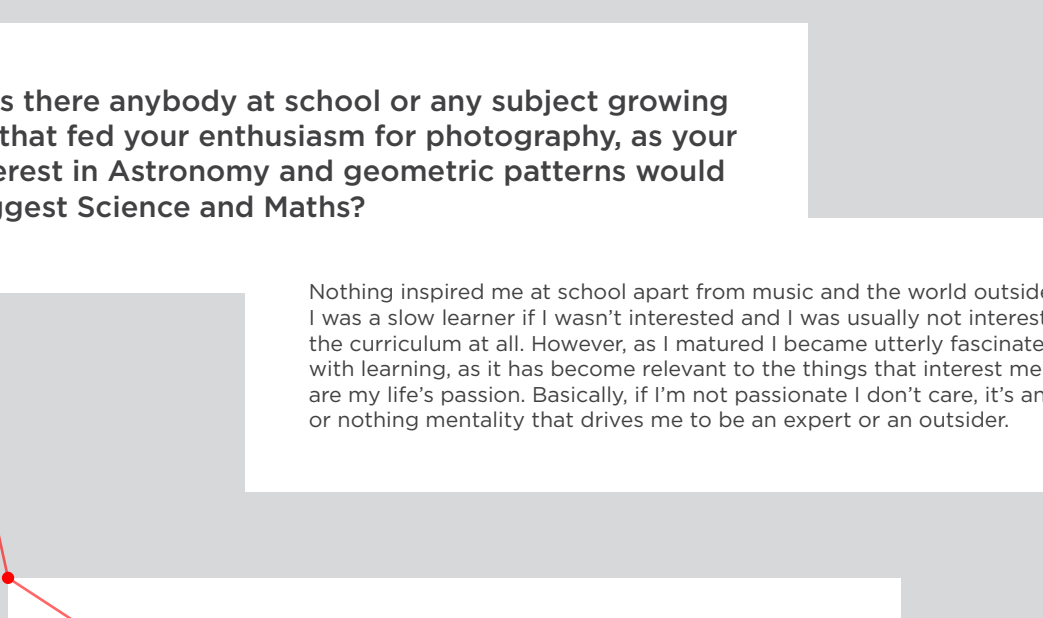
I also listen to Origin, Rude, and Rinse FM. When I'm feeling a little more in the mood for jazz or rare groove, then I listen to Back 2 Back. London has the best FM dial in the world, fact!

When did photography first snap you into action?

My Dad always gave me his old cameras as a kid but it was never something I gave a great deal of thought to. Then, at university I studied a little bit of film photography as part of my degree and it was the best thing I did. However, as soon as I had I got into my stride, the course was closed and replaced with a unit in web design. After a particularly miserable and photo-less period of my life, my girlfriend at the time bought me a camera and with it came the realisation that this was my calling in life.

As soon as I left university I knew that I would never apply for a job. Instead, I set about building my portfolio and laying the foundations of the career I wanted to forge for myself.

It was a long road for me in the beginning. I had to juggle jobs for about 5 years to make ends meet before I could survive off of photography alone, so, my advice to anybody is to be patient. Also, it takes a while to find your style and build a unique body of work so again, patience and determination. I would be lying if I said I haven't had my fair share of luck along the way but that is something that in large part you make yourself.



London Bridge

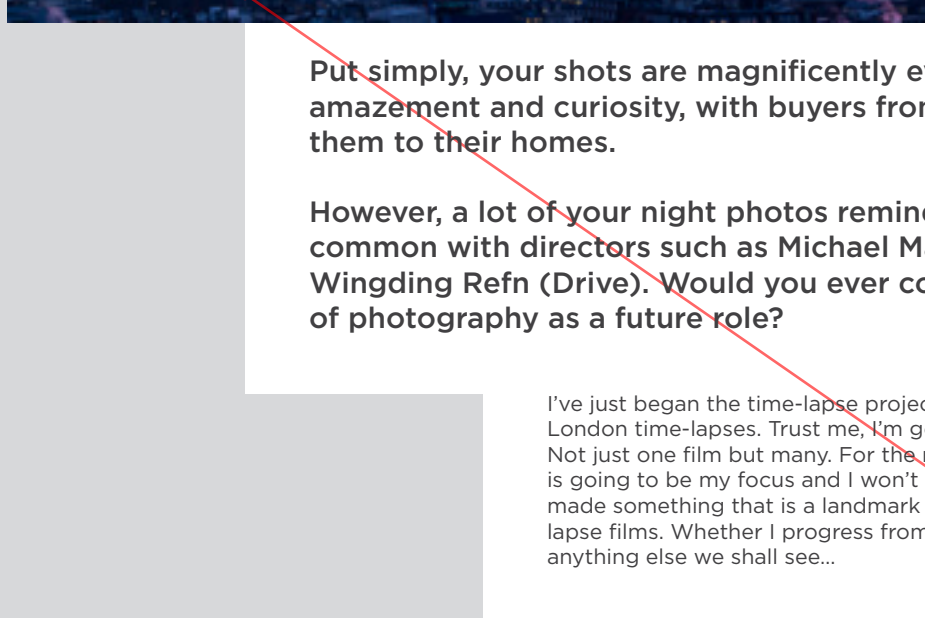
Was there anybody at school or any subject growing up that fed your enthusiasm for photography, as your interest in Astronomy and geometric patterns would suggest Science and Maths?

Nothing inspired me at school apart from music and the world outside. I was a slow learner if I wasn't interested and I was utterly not interested in the curriculum at all. However, as I matured I became usually fascinated with learning, as it has become relevant to the things that interest me and are my life's passion. Basically, if I'm not passionate I don't care, it's an all or nothing mentality that drives me to be an expert or an outsider.

You sound like a bit of a passionate soul! Is there a most romantic skyline in London for you? Ally Pally rocks it for me. Picnic, chill, view.

Anytime between sunset and sunrise along the Thames is quintessential romantic viewing but there are loads! Sitting on the grass at Primrose Hill or Greenwich Park.

Agreed, Alexandra Palace is unbeatable in the summer with an alcoholic beverage and sweet company. It's my neighbourhood and has always been a special place to enjoy the scenery and take time out, long before I got into photography. Other views that are ingrained in me are those that can be seen along the train routes I have always taken, most notably the views along the lines into Liverpool Street, London Bridge and Waterloo Station.

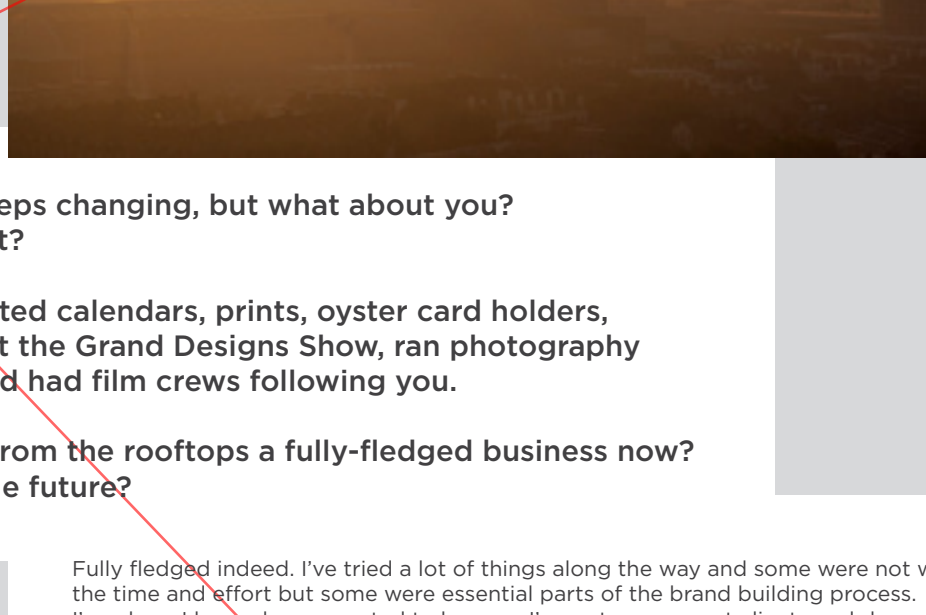


Red Sky at Night

Put simply, your shots are magnificently evocative, and inspire pride, amazement and curiosity, with buyers from all over the world adding them to their homes.

However, a lot of your night photos remind me of a visual style in common with directors such as Michael Mann (Heat) and Nicolas Wingding Refn (Drive). Would you ever consider film, or director of photography as a future role?

I've just begun the time-lapse project to kill all other London time-lapses. Trust me, I'm going IN on this! Not just one film but many. For the next few years this is going to be my focus and I won't stop until I have made something that is a landmark for London time-lapse films. Whether I progress from time-lapse to anything else we shall see...



Dark

The city keeps changing, but what about you? What's next?

You've printed calendars, prints, oyster card holders, exhibited at the Grand Designs Show, ran photography courses, and had film crews following you.

Is London from the rooftops a fully-fledged business now? Plans for the future?

Fully fledged indeed. I've tried a lot of things along the way and some were not worth the time and effort but some were essential parts of the brand building process. I'm where I have always wanted to be now, I've got some great clients and demand for my prints grows all the time. What this means is that I have plenty of time for my own shoots now and everything I do over the next year is geared towards the book which is due autumn 2017.

The book will be launched with my biggest exhibition to date. It will feature the biggest prints I've ever made as well as a cinema area where you can view the time-lapse films that I'm working on as well in 4k. I've also managed to secure the talents of an absolutely wonderful producer who will be writing the music to go with the visuals, so it will be a feast for the ears as well as the eyes.

Support for the book project is unbelievable. I'm working closely with some of the biggest names in London property, as well as tourism, local government and business. If I don't put on the best contemporary exhibition of London landscape photography, then I'm giving up and moving to the North Pole.

That's the level I have set for myself and nothing less will do, so stay tuned!