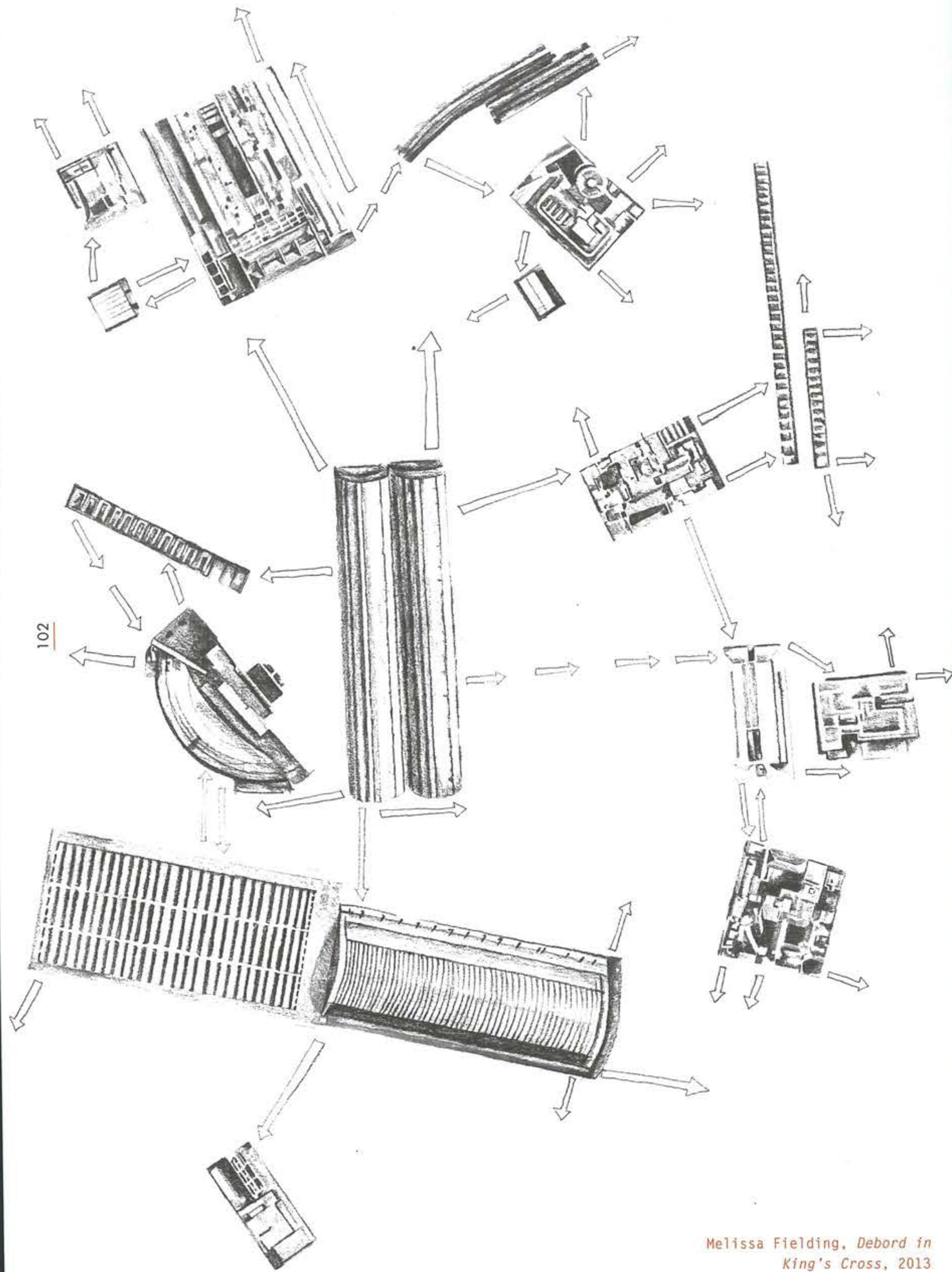
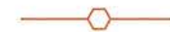


Melissa Fielding, *Debord in King's Cross*, 2013

THROUGH THE GLASS WINDOW

by

MELISSA FIELDING



Glass has been used throughout the King's Cross regeneration to create a supposedly desirable place to live, work, eat and travel.

Glass is often the architect's material of revolution, its crystalline form synonymous with Utopian visions of the city. It is viewed as openness, a way for the city to be released of its secrets, removing optical barriers to allow an interchange of light, sight, and security. Its material seems to state: there is nothing to hide, yet also nothing to protect.

Walking around the developing area of King's Cross, the recently renovated buildings and new architectural commissions present a multitude of windows and glass walls. Omnipresent glass and steel are hidden under a facade of light, bright and gleamingly new forms of urbanised living, working and learning on the edge of a mass of North London residences. The use of glass comes into question. Its material dominates the new buildings and affects not only the aesthetics of the area, but it also determines social behaviours.

Over the last century, Utopian connotations of glass have been explored in literature. Futuristic cities paved with glass, floor-to-ceiling walls and vast expansive living all feature in Utopian, and contrastingly, Dystopian novels. Transparency is more often than not represented as uplifting. It alludes to equality, nature and openness. One of the first books on the subject, *Glasarchitektur*, written by Paul Scheerbart in 1914, spoke of the need to eliminate "the closed character of the rooms in which we live".[1] It promoted physical, and consequently political, economical and social freedom. Later on it was Le Corbusier who keenly advocated the use of glass in construction. He famously favoured the horizontal window that would reconfigure the relationship between interiors and exteriors. Glass used in architecture promises unexpected and substantial openings into the private territory of the building.

German critic Walter Benjamin commented, "glass is such a hard, smooth material to which nothing can be fixed... objects made of glass have no 'aura'. Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets. It is also the enemy of possession".[2] Glass has no hierarchy, no individuality. Benjamin used the materiality of glass as a potent metaphor for social change. He believed it had the ability to reform social systems, companies and personal exchanges. The invisible is made visible.

The area behind King's Cross Station, the development called St Pancras Square, is destined to be the corporate hub of the newly developed area. Already, modernist-inspired offices are rising above the North London skyline between the two train stations. Simple in form, the uniform rows of rectangular windows reveal themselves through concrete frames, highlighting the vast walls of glass. The glass used in this context is constructed, discursively, as already reflecting the visibility, accountability and accessibility of the future corporation. However, for the new offices of King's Cross, glass is an advantageous prospect: glass as the anti-bourgeois material described by Benjamin ceases to exist. The prospective subjection to the gaze of others is what corporations value. Nearer to the ground, glass-fronted shops and restaurants under construction promise to create a new, highly idealised way of working and living. The sharp contrast of the surrounding residential and shopping areas, including the Caledonian Road and neighbouring estates, reveals that glass is an elite material, synonymous with wealth and increased standards of living.

Glass used in architecture promises unexpected and substantial openings into the private territory of the building.

The Central Saint Martins complex, designed by Stanton Williams Architects, suggests a liberating design with vast, cavernous spaces and floor-to-ceiling glass walls. Studios are exposed. Work is exposed. But what is the effect of such exposure on creative processes? You walk around the buildings and see students visible in their studios. What's more, the outside world is visible to them. In a sense it achieves Le Corbusier's dream of uniting two worlds, but is there a cost to creative vision in such a unified working environment? Long before modernism came along, Cornelius Gurlitt, writing in 1888, suggested that:

> **The large window has joined the room too intimately to the outside world; human skill in creating large and entirely transparent panes by means of which the dividing line for the eye between the room and the outside world is blurred has increased too much for it not to have impaired the room's artistic seclusion.[3]**

There is now no space to be alone. Space for individual subjectivity has all but been eradicated.

The regeneration of King's Cross has created this new hub of working, dining and living, but the process is global. All over the world districts are being constructed where mutual visibility is the key architectural aim. Surfaces gleam. Inside and outside blur. It seems, however, that the use of glass within buildings has limiting effects. The "visible" becomes stifled, overexposed, part of a new hierarchy. Compared with the surrounding thoroughfares of North London and the residential streets, it might be that all that has been made visible is merely the glass itself.

There is now no space to be alone. Space for individual subjectivity has all but been eradicated.

1. Paul Scheerbart, *Glass Architecture*, trans James Palmes (New York, Praeger, 1972), p41.
2. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (Volume 2: part 1, 1927-1930) Michael W Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, eds, trans Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass and London, Belknap Press, 2005), p734.
3. Cornelius Gurlitt, *Im Bürgerhause* (Dresden,1888), quoted in Scott McGuire, "From Glass Architecture to Big Brother", *Cultural Studies Review*, vol 9 no 1 (May 2003), p109.