The Overhead Railway

"Out of control" was what, by the year that Grimshaw painted it, the Dock Head had become — a continuous thoroughfare, parallel to the river, of all the port's traffic. Liverpool had brought the world's first public railway, in 1836, through tunnels down to the docks, and in 1896 opened an underground railway to the Wirral. Now it was decided to add from New York the solution of an elevated railway to run along the Dock Road, but to culminate York's 'T' by making it the world's first eleccted "Overhead Railway." "The Dockers' Umbrella," as it became known, opened in 1895 and carried millions each year until its closure, to general dismay, in 1956. 12 That declining reflected its immense popularity, often from memories of the parade of ships and docks afforded to all who rode aboard. It that appeal was instantaneous was evidenced in that, in 1896, it prompted Laxstam's "dock," what may be the world's first "trucking shot," running from Canada to Albert Docks, past tumbelows, sailing-ships and giant steamers. For from Grimshaw's perspective, this mode was a historic phenomenon of a half-century that had not yet even begun. Without mention, it presents a single continuous view; but that is its key: a one-and-one-eighth-second interval to zoom, which translates space, through "real in real" motion, in-time. This new technique of the visible would open Dock's instinctive didactically to new eyes; and the tracking view from the Overhead would feature in every montage of modern Liverpool. Throughout Anne Doris' 1927 "city symphony" film, A Day in Liverpool, shots from and of the Overhead were re-used as a model of urban energy among streets, offices, exchanges, liners, cranes, breakers and dockers — the running scene that, surely also viewed from the Overhead, excited Karel Capek on his visit in 1924. 13

But Liverpool is the largest port ... there was something to see from Bridge up to Bootle; and as far again as Birkenhead on the other side. Yellow water, bellowing steam ferries, white-transatlantic liners, towers, cranes, stevedores, stilts, ships' caps, trains, smoke, hoisting, ringing, hammering, puffing, the racket of the ships, the smell of staves, the sweat, noise, and waste from all the continents of the world. And if I hopped up words for another half an hour, I wouldn't achieve the full number, confusion and rage which is called Liverpool. 14

Indeed, a half-hour was the Overhead ride from Birkenhead to Bootle, which unfurled not just a pagetant of ships, but Liverpool's master- narrative, which was recorded by countless eyes and amateur cameras following Eyes and Lumiere. In architecture, "turbulent" is a line, a rope, which twists spatial and temporal events together into organised and self-sustaining form. We can say, then, that the era of the Overhead was when Liverpool attained its definitive city Sound so clearly, and to effect, a city running parallel to the river, from the airport to the famous Tony's, and from there to the city's famous minster, which is also the most famous to the sea, from the airport to the famous Tony's, and from there to the city's famous minster, which is also the most famous to the sea.

Contenders at the Pier Head

The influence of the Overhead played its role in the Dock Head too, as Lumière's film shows, when the line opened, that elmagical trio of giant buildings that became twentieth-century Liverpool's world-image did not yet exist; the Pier Head was what was held for the ferry to the Wirral, which drew it to the site of the train station. What transformed it was the liners, which began to moor there on the mile-long floating landstage, adjusting princes Dock's site with its awaiting Pullman trains. Yet in 1900, the great threshold was still in effect an end, cut off by George's Dock. It was the Dock Board's decision to close that basin — which was big, but too small for the latest ocean-strips - that created the site for the monolithic monument and grand new building. Yet how much of it was planned? Adam's Jarvis has described the Dock Board's bluffs and opportunities in using the south end of the docks as site for a new high-quality to impress investors. 15 This they completed by 1903, with no plan for what might fill the other sites; so that when, in 1911, the taller, American-scale Liver Building rose on the north side, they were pat out, and were with those who thought that the Custom House to the middle should be lowered. Peter de Canevaro has cast light on the Pier Head development, yet much remains obscure as to how this most monumental parade actually came about. 16 Evidence however is that, as with Canning Place, the civic domain again benefited from translating the functional rationality of the dock crate into formal rationality in the city plan. As the Custom House had sat on the Old Dock, flanked by custom houses, so now George's Dock was divided by extensions of Brunswick and Water Streets into the angular sites on which arose the three giants of the Pier Head.

On the Pier Head tri, much has been written about their variable elevations, but not enough about their site plan. The significance of the Pier Head is that, only there are the contradictory poles of Liverpool urbanism. One, modelled by the docks, and evident in the Georgian districts and Laurence Keay's housing and boardings, is towards formal rationality; the other is the chaos and extravagant off-shoots of the "tropic" styles: St George's Hall, Custom House, St George's Hall, two terraced churches, Rowan's Mercery Tunnel tunnels, St John's beacon and the fantasy of the 4th Grace. Whatever the merits of the various designs for the "4th", none of them followed the logic of the prime trio. Which was to maximize their power as freestanding monuments to themselves, but also to affix the transcendent order of the civic domain. This they do by squarely measuring their sites (on rational commercial grounds) and confronting as blocks to streets in a disciplined rhythm of solid-volume-void-volume. The stump of the black-tiled-commercial-monument group is of course Manchester, whose pragmatic ideology was celebrated in Newman's "Lavelle's New Rot." Yet, beyond the Pier Head, grids and planned layouts do not altogether reappear in Liverpool until the Georgian district and Prince's Avenue. The most distinct grid indeed, is Birkenhead, laid out by shipbuilder Laird and his Scottish architect Gillespie Graham, running a mile from Hamilton Square to Birkenhead Park. 17 But unlike

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