

Life & Style



Illustration Paul Dallimore

So can the secret Ring of Steel save the City from terrorism?



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Take your A to Z and look up Vandy Street, a tiny back street at the northern edge of the city in EC2. On a map, it looks like any other road, just another of the capillaries that make up the rich plan of the City of London.

But go there, and you'll find a very different story. Its street sign is still in place but it is no longer a road. It has been transformed into a manicured lawn with a thin strip of gravel edging it - not comfortable to walk on, and certainly not possible to drive down.

At the southern end of the street is a dense series of outsized plant pots, with colourful flowers and trees. More significantly, perhaps, this former public byway is private property, managed by an anonymous security firm, which has placed helpful signs explaining what can and can't be done in that space.

Vandy Street is now part of the Ring of Steel, the 6.5 miles of bollards, police boxes, CCTV cameras and other subtle obstructions that has transformed the capital since it was conceived in 1993. It is the City of London's defence against car-borne terrorism, an unbroken security cordon that encircles London's financial heart.

The ring, which stretches from Aldgate to the Strand, and from [Shoreditch](#) to the Temple, allows police to monitor and record every car that enters the City, and provides solid barriers (such as the plant pots in Vandy Street) that prevent unauthorised entry. It is probably the most radical shift to the urban order of any part of London in decades, and continues to evolve almost unnoticed, shaping who uses the City of London, and for what.

The phenomenon has been relatively covert, that is, until documentary photographer Henrietta Williams and cartographer and trainee architect George Gingell began their project *Entering the Panopticon*: a study of the Ring of Steel, earlier this year. The project is now complete, and their comprehensive mapping and

photographic survey of every element of the ring will be exhibited at a festival in east London beginning next Friday for three days. Their research reveals one of the most significant transformations of an urban plan anywhere in London, 17 years of alterations to the public realm that have fundamentally changed the way the City meets the rest of the city.

Williams and Gingell's work documents a landscape of explicit security measures, such as new chicanes in roads manned by armed police, security cameras and bollards, as well as more subtle segments of the ring. The pictures reveal decorative water features and planters that are in fact built solidly enough to prevent car-bomb attacks. They also show many places that were once streets, part of the public realm, that are now private property, staffed by security guards who move on homeless people, prevent photographers from taking pictures and stop kids skateboarding.

The statistic that is most shocking is that two-thirds of all the streets that used to lead into the City of London have now been closed to traffic. There are just 19 ways to drive into the City of London, each of them monitored by two CCTV cameras, one trained on the driver's face, the other recording every car's number plate. This information is kept indefinitely in a database that is accessible to any police force in the country.

Williams and Gingell taught me how to spot the cameras. They are always black poles with two cameras at different heights, plus a light at the top acting as a kind of flash. Traffic in the entire City can be controlled by just 80 or so policemen, manning these deliberate 19 pinch points. The last time this happened was in September when the Pope was in London. Each box is manned, usually, by a minimum of four policemen, and they will stop cars and question drivers as they pass through the checkpoints.

The Ring of Steel was born in 1993, after the Bishopsgate bomb of the same year and when fear of attack by the [IRA](#) was at its height. It began with what has been described as the "ring of plastic", consisting of temporary plastic bollards, manned by armed police, all very visible. This temporary ring gradually solidified into permanent installations, sometimes consisting of police boxes, always augmented by the ugly standard Corporation of London metal bollards (the black ones with the white star on the top). These bollards are standard throughout the City of London, so do not always denote the Ring of Steel, but they are used frequently at the border to prevent vehicular access.

Of course, all these measures were designed for a different character of threat than the one posed today by suicide bombers like those who carried out the 7/7 attacks. The IRA would pack vehicles with explosives, leave them unmanned and detonate them remotely, as in the case of the 1993 Bishopsgate bomb, which killed one person and caused huge material damage in the City.

The IRA was also concerned with preventing their members' capture, so the idea of photographing every face entering the City made sense. Today, the Ring of Steel is highly unlikely to prevent bomb attacks by individual pedestrians, but this has not led to any questioning of its continuing relevance.

As new buildings appear at the edges of the Ring, their architecture now takes account of its position along the perimeter of the cordon. This means that buildings tend towards very large block sizes to make an unbroken wall of buildings, so different to the fine grain of lots of smaller buildings that they often replace. More recently, Ring of Steel adjustments are carried out under cover of environmental improvements, creating a new generation of public spaces in a corporate idiom of minimalist and joyless sandwich spots for City workers that suits its security agenda.

During their research, Williams and Gingell were told by security guards to stop taking photographs at various points, but their work has ended up as an admirably comprehensive survey.

When I ask them whether they are concerned about any security implications of their work, Williams answers: "Well, one thing that our research proves is that the Ring of Steel works. It functions as a perfect, unbroken ring, and whenever there is a high security situation and the police man the sentry boxes, it becomes even more effective."

But while the security ring is unbroken and vehicular entry and exit to the City is tightly controlled, Williams and Gingell are sceptical of the effectiveness of the CCTV surveillance element of the ring as a weapon against

terrorism. In addition to the argument that CCTV curtails civil liberties, it is unreliable: they highlight the death of John Charles de Menezes as a recent and tragic example of the failure of surveillance culture in London.

As the July 7 bombing inquiry began this week, Hugo Keith QC, counsel to the inquests, said it will need to look at the issues of preventability in relation to terrorist attacks. This clearly goes far beyond security infrastructure like the Ring of Steel. But in being vigilant, we must be alert to how seeing everything through the lens of security can transform London into quite a different place from the one we know and care about.

In the case of the City of London, it is altering the richness of the City, replacing multiple buildings with large, singular office blocks, and transforming streets into meaningless pedestrian spaces designed so that no one lingers there.

The next time you become dimly aware of large, solid blocks in the middle of the pavement, prettied up with some pansies, with just too little space between them to drive a car, know that they are there to stop a van with a ton of fertiliser in the back from entering the City.

The Corporation of London has created a London where paranoia is written into its footprint, and succeeded in what everyone from Wren to the [Luftwaffe](#) has more or less failed to do: changed the very plan of the ancient City.

Entering the Panopticon: a study of the Ring of Steel will be on display at This is Not a Gateway festival, Hanbury House, Hanbury Street, E1, from October 22-24. There will also be walking tours of the Ring of Steel with Henrietta Williams and George Gingell, and places on these are bookable at thisisnotagateway.net/