

'Boris is much misunderstood'

Stanley Johnson on life inside Britain's most political family



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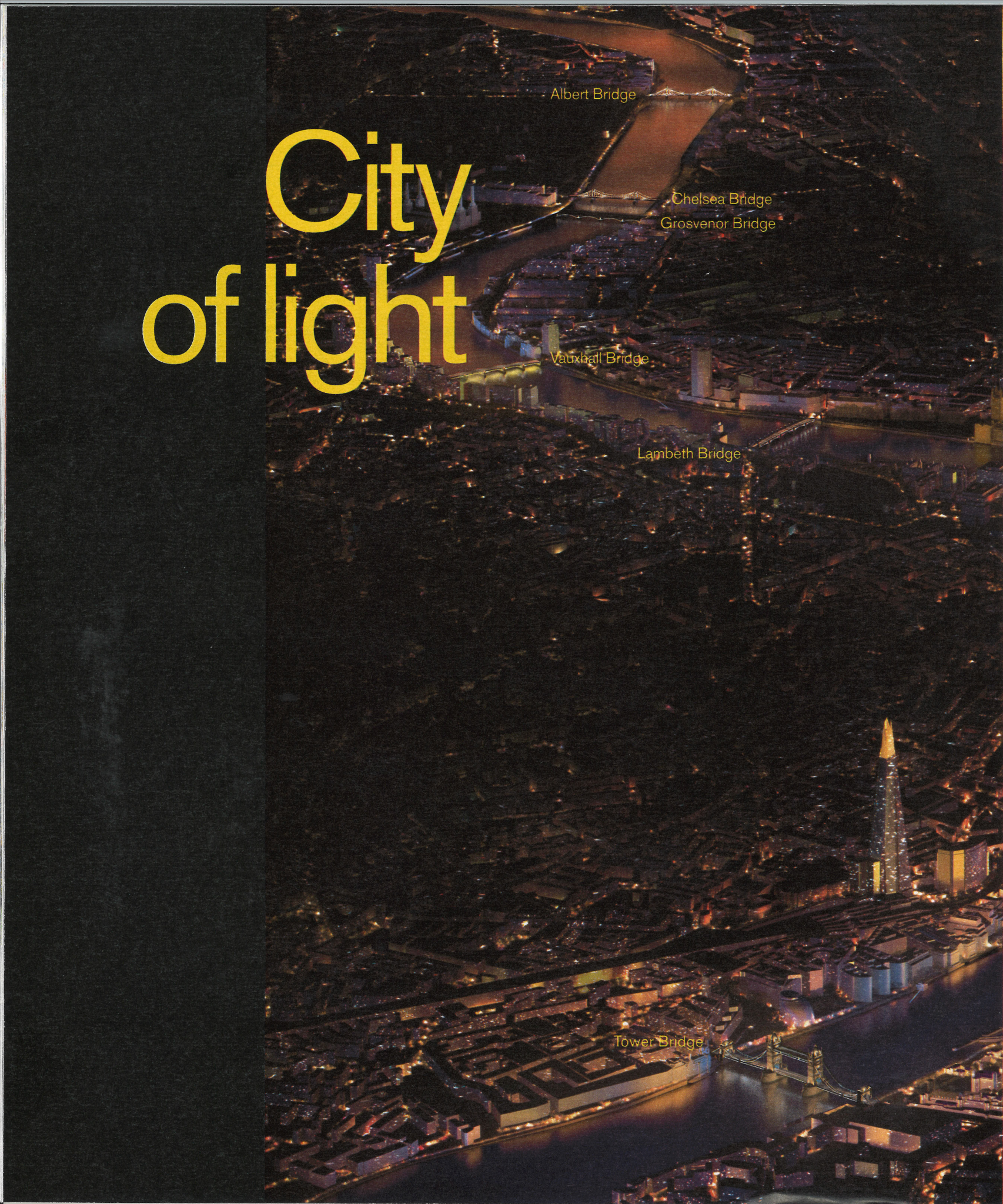
Albert Bridge

Chelsea Bridge
Grosvenor Bridge

Vauxhall Bridge

Lambeth Bridge

Tower Bridge





Westminster Bridge

Hungerford Bridge

Waterloo Bridge

Blackfriars Railway Bridge

Blackfriars Bridge

Millennium Bridge

Southwark Bridge

Cannon Street Railway Bridge

London Bridge

At a time when private funding of arts and culture is facing greater scrutiny than ever, the Rothschild family is getting behind what is claimed to be one of the biggest artworks in the world, painting the capital's 15 most iconic bridges in a visual spectacle of colour and light

The announcement last month that Sir Mark Rylance was resigning from the Royal Shakespeare Company, in protest against its sponsorship deal with oil giant BP, was yet another blow to the British arts community, reeling after a year of difficulties. The actor, an associate artist who last appeared on stage for the RSC in 1989, pointed to climate change, writing, 'I do not wish to be associated with BP any more than I would with an arms dealer, a tobacco salesman or anyone who wilfully destroys the lives of others alive or unborn. Nor, I believe, would William Shakespeare.'

This came on top of calls for the National Portrait Gallery to stop accepting sponsorship from BP. It has already announced that it will no longer be taking a grant from the Sackler family, one of this country's biggest donors to the arts, which has found itself mired in scandal thanks to the deadly opioid epidemic in America. Much of the family's wealth comes from its ownership of Purdue Pharma, the maker of OxyContin, a painkiller that is seen as one of the major contributors to the current crisis.

As the Sacklers have found, the sources of money behind the arts are under the microscope now more than ever. At the Serpentine Galleries in Kensington Gardens, CEO Yana Peel stood down last month after it was revealed that she indirectly co-owns an investment firm with a large stake in NSO Group. The Israeli cyberweapons company has been accused of supplying

This 19th-century stately home – grand enough to impress Queen Victoria – reflects many of the Rothschilds' interests over the years, from art to zoology. (Walter, the second Lord Rothschild, trained zebras to draw his carriage, and founded what is now the Natural History Museum at Tring.) Today Waddesdon is the National Trust's fourth most-visited property in England.

Educated at St Paul's Girls' School in London, and then Oxford, Hannah Rothschild started her career as a film-maker, with documentaries about artists including Frank Auerbach and Walter Sickert and contributions to the BBC's *Storyville* series. She is also a critically acclaimed novelist. In person she exudes charm, the result no doubt of the confidence that comes from being a scion of one of the most famous families in the world. She is also a compelling mix of bluestocking and rock chick, all intellectual intensity dressed up in camouflage combat trousers, the latter making her seem younger than her years.

The original inspiration behind the Illuminated River came from her father's restoration of Somerset House. 'He thought that it would be a fantastic idea to light up the adjacent Waterloo Bridge, itself the site of one of London's greatest views, and approached the American artist James Turrell to come up with a plan,' she explains. 'Unfortunately, it was 2000 and a different time. Ken Livingstone had been elected mayor of London and his office made it clear that there was no interest in public-art

'There is a fine line between sponsorship and philanthropy... The latter should be an end in itself'

software that has enabled authoritarian regimes to spy on dissidents – and has been linked to the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. This was particularly embarrassing as Peel is a self-proclaimed champion of free speech. She hit back with her own accusations of 'bullying' and 'toxic personal attacks'.

Against this backdrop, this month sees the opening of what is claimed to be the biggest public artwork in the world, the Illuminated River. The initial stage involves lighting up the first four of 15 iconic Thames crossings, from London Bridge to the Millennium Bridge, and eventually the project will reach Albert Bridge, more than four nautical miles upstream.

The driving force behind it is Hannah Rothschild, and thanks in large part to her family's philanthropic foundation, the cost to the public purse – apart from a small amount of seed funding used to set up the original design competition – is zero.

'There is a difference between sponsorship and philanthropy,' explains Rothschild. 'The former is for specific reasons while the latter should be an end in itself.' And those demanding that the arts should be like Caesar's wife seem unable to come up with any particular proposals for alternative funding. 'How is the National Portrait Gallery to survive?' Rothschild asks.

Her family's dynasty was established in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when the Frankfurt-based banker Mayer Amschel Rothschild sent his offspring to set up branches of his business across Europe, including in London and Paris. In honour of this the family adopted the famous 'five arrows' as its personal symbol – one that is still displayed outside its London office today. It has been calculated that during the 19th century they became the richest family in modern history.

The London-based branch has long been among the city's greatest benefactors. Indeed, the boardroom in its St James's office overlooks Spencer House, restored at the expense of Rothschild's father, Lord Jacob Rothschild. Hannah, now 57, has for decades been active on the cultural scene and will this year step down as The National Gallery's chair of trustees.

Much of her work revolves around the family seat in Buckinghamshire, Waddesdon Manor, now a National Trust property.

projects, even if privately funded. Our approaches were stonewalled and so it came to nothing.' The fact that Livingstone was quoted during his campaign as saying that 'every year the international financial system kills more people than World War Two', suggests that he may not have relished an approach from the world's best-known banking family.

Then came 2012 and the Olympics. 'The world changed overnight,' says Rothschild, 'and suddenly London rediscovered its confidence and everything seemed possible.' Specifically, she was inspired by watching the opening ceremony – in



Hannah Rothschild, photographed by Brian Doherty

which David Beckham helped to deliver the Olympic torch by speedboat up the Thames – to look again at the old Turrell plans for Waterloo Bridge. ‘The first thing we decided was that we had to think big. I said, “Why stop at one bridge?”’

This time round the reaction could not have been more different. ‘The enthusiasm was palpable. Justine Simons, deputy mayor for culture [Boris Johnson was mayor at this time], was on board from the beginning and was perhaps the project’s most enthusiastic cheerleader.’

The next step was to set up an international competition to attract proposals. ‘As the most exciting city on the planet, London has to reach out to the world’s best artists and architects.’

It wasn’t just aesthetics under consideration. For a project of this size, the Illuminated River team had to collate vast amounts of data, much of which had never previously been gathered. For instance, the Thames isn’t just an important artery for humans. Now that it is one of the cleanest urban rivers in the world, it supports an enormous number of species, from fish to bats and birds. ‘How you light the bridges at night can have an enormous impact on wildlife,’ explains project director Sarah Gaventa. ‘For example, like many humans, most species of fish prefer to have sex in the dark. All these issues had to be considered.’

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Gaventa also saw this as a project about communities, especially when research discovered that one in 10 of the capital’s children had never seen the Thames, and two-thirds of London parents had never taken their children to the river. Perhaps more surprisingly, it found that a third of London’s millennials didn’t think of the Thames as one of the city’s icons. These figures convinced the team – and Rothschild – that the river was ripe for reinvention.

The results of the competition were announced in 2016 by now-mayor Sadiq Khan. The winning proposal, chosen from over 100 submissions, came from New York-based artist Leo

Villareal and London-based architects Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands: to create a kinetic artwork of coloured lights that ebbs and flows with the river, and is unique to each bridge.

‘All the proposals we considered were extraordinarily imaginative – if not always practical – but Leo was always one of the serious contenders thanks to his work on the Bay Bridge in San Francisco,’ explains Rothschild. The Bay Lights, which debuted in 2013, had been his biggest work to date. Illuminating the bridge linking San Francisco to Oakland, it was intended to be temporary but proved so popular that it is now permanent.

Villareal told Rothschild that the Bay Lights had turned the bridge into a popular spot for couples to become engaged. ‘He told amazing stories of people meeting [there], and how bridges were hands across the water,’ she explains. ‘His pitch was more emotional than artistic, but he nailed it for me when he said his hero was Monet, and what Leo did was paint with light.’

Just as importantly, the judges were convinced that the architect teamed with Villareal on the proposal, Alex Lifschutz, had the know-how to get the job done. ‘Alex had already built a bridge over the Thames, the Jubilee Bridge at Hungerford, and he was British-based, which seemed right,’ Rothschild says.

‘There is nothing like experience to give you a feel for a project,’ says Lifschutz, ‘and how to deal in this case with the 55 dif-

ferent bodies involved, from the Port of London Authority to the environmental agencies.’ Lifschutz had originally met Villareal through a personal introduction. ‘They said, “You’ve done bridges, he’s done bridges, you should meet.”’

‘Leo has a very sophisticated view of architecture and engineering,’ he continues. ‘And I think our bid succeeded because we set out very clearly what we were doing. We aren’t just putting art against the structures as superfluous additions. The idea is to illuminate what you want people to look at – the amazing bridges themselves.’

It was vital that people could see the project was privately funded – and it will come in at £3 million per bridge, a fraction of the £200 million budget of the failed Garden Bridge. Sir Mark Rylance should have little to complain about as it also aims to be carbon-neutral. Still, against the current backdrop, foundations such as the Rothschilds’ tread carefully. ‘We have to admit that philanthropy is not necessarily a selfless act,’ Rothschild says. ‘It can be used for different reasons. It can be used to enhance your reputation or to save your conscience. If you take the case of Notre-Dame, where two French families came in with shedloads of money, you see the gesture rather backfired. Rather than the public saying thank you, people angrily asked who these billionaires thought they were and whether they were simply outbidding each other for reasons of ego.’

You might have thought that the Rothschilds would have chosen to keep their heads below the parapet. ‘But early on we realised that we had to declare our involvement,’ she insists. ‘First, to encourage other potential donors, but also we felt our name would help reassure people that public money wasn’t being spent.’ Other prominent philanthropists involved include the Blavatniks and the Rausing.

The project also has potential long-term benefits for the capital, kick-starting a debate about how to light London’s great monuments sympathetically and sustainably. Shakespeare would surely approve.

‘So, of course, we have to be careful,’ Rothschild says. ‘But we think that this is a lovely project and just hope that people will like it. We aren’t trying to impose something on them. If Londoners don’t like it they can turn it off.’ ♦

Clockwise from right
Sir Mark Rylance recently left the Royal Shakespeare Company, citing its ties to BP; Yana Peel, former CEO of the Serpentine Galleries; Madeleine Sackler, whose family’s donations to the art world have been criticised

