

SKYLINES TEACHERS' RESOURCE

Explore skylines at the home of creativity

Key Stages 3-5 Art & Design and Design & Technology

A black and white aerial photograph of London, showing a dense urban landscape with numerous buildings and rooftops. In the background, the large dome and spire of St Paul's Cathedral are prominent against a hazy sky. The foreground is filled with a variety of architectural styles, from traditional brick buildings to more modern structures.

V&A

Skylines

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Introduction

This resource focuses on city skylines and explores how individual buildings and their design, structure and materials create an important aspect of a city's visual identity. The resource asks students to explore a range of drawing approaches, discuss their views on historical and contemporary architecture and think about what they would like cities to look like in the future. Students will develop their research skills and develop ideas for school-based follow-up activities, inspired by architecture at the V&A and their local built environment.

This resource was created as part of the V&A+RIBA Architecture Partnership education programme.

Pre-visit activities

- Investigate architecture in your local area. Work collaboratively as a group to create a giant visual representation of the local skyline using coloured electrical tape on a large floor, or coloured chalk in the playground.
 - Discuss what makes some of the buildings in the skyline iconic and identify which ones contribute to the identity of the local area. Consider why some city skylines are more distinctive than others.
 - Debate what improvements could be made to your local skyline. Which buildings should remain and which should be replaced?
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The Museum visit

Visit the V&A and RIBA architecture collections to see original architectural designs for some of the world's most iconic buildings, including some that have redefined the skylines of the cities they are based in.

Book a visit to the Prints & Drawings Study Room and request the Exploring Skylines Resource Box, which contains a selection of architects' drawings from the V&A and RIBA's Architecture collections that explore iconic buildings and skylines from the late 1600s to the 1980s. Find out more about how to book by visiting the V&A's website: vam.ac.uk

What is a skyline?

A skyline is the outline formed by the profile of a collection of buildings against the sky on the horizon. Skylines can be a key distinguishing feature as each city or town is different. The outline shape of some buildings has become iconic as they have become universally recognised and contribute towards the identity of a place.

Who designs skylines?

Architects design buildings. The style of buildings they create contribute towards the 'look' and identity of our cities and places. One architect who has had a particular influence on London's skyline was Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723) over 400 years ago. His classical design for London's St Paul's Cathedral, completed in 1708, had, and still has, a considerable impact on London's skyline. Sir Norman Foster's (1935–) contemporary design for the Gherkin, completed in 2004, has transformed the look and identity of London's skyline.

How has London's skyline changed over time?

The Great Fire of London in 1666 provided Wren with the opportunity to masterplan the rebuilding of the City of London. Though his utopian vision was rejected he found scope for expression and invention in the rebuilding of St Paul's Cathedral whose dome is one of the largest and most majestic in the world. He also designed another 52 churches, and the shapes and forms of these spires dominated the London skyline for nearly 400 years, up until the mid-20th century. Following the extensive bombing during World War II (1939–45), London was re-built once again. Post-war developments during the 1950s and 1960s led to the emergence of a new variety of Modernist shapes, styles and influences, setting a fresh precedent for architecture and London's skyline. During the latter part of the 20th and early 21st centuries, glass, steel and concrete structures came to dominate the city. Changes in design techniques such as the use of computer aided design (CAD) combined with changes in building and engineering techniques, and the use of new materials such as reinforced concrete, steel-frames and glass, meant buildings could be built taller, and faster.

How have skylines been explored through drawing?

Architects use drawing to research, visualise and present their ideas to a client. These might be accurate representations or more fantastical aspirations for a futuristic or imaginary vision. Before digital technologies, traditional media such as drawing and painting were used for three-dimensional views and elevations. Nowadays, computers can be used to render drawings so they look completely life-like. They can be manipulated to reflect different times of day.

Follow-up activities/find out more

- Create new designs for a visionary skyline that reflects the character and identity of your local area. Retain the buildings you like, and create designs for the ones you would replace.
- Create an artist's impression of your new skyline, using 3D modelling, digital imaging, collage or scale drawings to display your ideas.