

Tall buildings and open space

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London's 'tall building problem' is more to do with planning and urban design than architecture; and for residential towers, but also for office towers, the problem is more to do with density, plot ratio and overcongestion of built form than it is to do with height per se. We want our city to look beautiful, but we also need it to work in a civilised way, and for that we need public space as well as buildings – public space that is not being delivered in most of the tall building projects currently proposed.

In Marsh Wall / South Quay on the Isle of Dogs, there is massive development pressure, and very dense and tall residential projects are coming forward on a plot by plot basis, in the absence of any overall plan. At Nine Elms, where there is similar development frenzy, the problem is just as bad.

There are no clear overall masterplans for these areas, and only the sketchiest of planning frameworks to guide even those who are minded to take a collaborative approach. And because proposals are coming forward concurrently, there is no mechanism for showing what they will look like as a group of projects, let alone for assessing the consequences. Designs for each site are prepared on the basis of what may be vague or rapidly changing information, or no information, about massive schemes on immediately adjacent sites.

It is the visual consequences of this lack of planning that have attracted much of the attention. There has been less focus on the practical problem of how public open space can be delivered within this free-for-all. With fragmented ownerships and competing interests, there is no mechanism for providing public space of any substance. In areas where very dense developments with very tall buildings are proposed, the provision of significant, usable open space should be part of the package.

At Nine Elms, development has come forward in the context of a GLA framework which

suggested a linear park - better than nothing, but not really much more than a wide street. The biggest open space will be around the new American Embassy, but that is predicated on planning for terrorist attacks, not residential amenity.

Large and small open spaces are needed. The Olympic Park is a rare example of a major new public space – if London was properly planned, new residential towers should have been built around the park rather than along the benighted environment of Stratford High Street.

The Royal Parks have in the past suggested a strategy for controlling building heights that involves contours rising away from the parks, in other words the further you are from the park the taller your building can be. This is the wrong way round – at least it is if you accept that access to green open space is more important than hanging on to an idea of *rus in urbe* that has not corresponded to the reality of the Royal Parks' settings for fifty years or so. A modern Nash – perhaps noticing that New York's Central Park is still a rather fine park in spite of (...or could it be partly because of?) the large scale development around it – would might ring Regents Park with towers, not terraces.

At a smaller scale, the Smithsons' Economist complex in St James remains an exemplar of how to arrange tall-ish buildings around an open space. The Rockefeller Centre in New York does the same thing on a massive scale, in a way that has hardly been possible elsewhere in that city, let alone in the City of London. Canary Wharf is successful in this respect because of the huge land area available and the gridded layout given by the docks allowed a private sector developer to bring forward a rational plan – the large buildings are carefully arranged and the docks mitigate against a feeling of overcrowding in a way that will not be matched in the City when the Eastern cluster is built out.

Because of fragmented ownerships, open space cannot easily be delivered by the private sector in Marsh Wall or Nine Elms - the area that would be needed to provide proper open space is more than can generally be found in one ownership.

There has been little positive spatial planning for

tall buildings in London since Canary Wharf was planned thirty years ago, other than some rather hopeful suggestions that some sites in development areas might be given over to open space, but without any explanation of why Greedico Properties on one site should get to build a large tower while Muggins Development Company on the adjacent site should dedicate their land to the park to service it.

Today, there seems to be no public sector appetite for land assembly or rationalisation even though legal measures exist. It needs a Development Corporation or a similar mechanism – or in the spirit of Tory ‘nudge’ theory, incentives for private owners to cooperate that are so compelling that they cannot be ignored.

Many planning authorities in London see it as their job to suppress the ambitions of developers to build tall. Once pre-application discussions are under way, and in the absence of projects starting off under the guidance of a positive plan, this sometimes has the perverse consequence of spreading projects out across a site and reducing the amount of open space that the developer had originally been prepared to offer, if allowed to build tall. Clearer rules from the outset could avoid this outcome.

But we should of course remember that Le Corbusier thought that Manhattan had been developed in the wrong way – without adequate planning – and that the towers should have been much bigger and spaced further apart. The Manhattan that we got is lot more palatable than the Manhattan he envisaged. The issue is one of urban design – arguably not Corb’s forte.