

Height vs. history

Tall buildings in the heart of London

Controversy over tall buildings in central London is not a recent phenomenon. **Peter Stewart** explains how heated debates on the issue began as long ago as the late nineteenth century.

The proposal for a 250m (820ft) tall residential tower to be built next to Paddington Station – the ‘Paddington Pole’ – is the latest in a line of controversial tall-building projects to come forward in central London over the last two decades. Designed by Renzo Piano, the architect of the ‘Shard’ at London Bridge (completed in 2012), and promoted by its developer Irvine Sellar, the project has provoked protests from lay commentators and architects alike. Journalist Simon Jenkins, a serial opponent of tall buildings, complained that the scheme flies in the face of established planning policies which set out where tall buildings should and should not be built in London; and architect Sir Terry Farrell has criticised the scheme as piecemeal and opportunistic. At the end of January, the developer announced that the scheme was being reconsidered in the light of objections.

Controversy over tall buildings in London is nothing new. An early example concerned Queen Anne’s Mansions, a 14-storey block of flats in Petty

France, Westminster, completed in 1888 (demolished in 1973). Crude and joyless in its design, it was considerably taller than any other London residential building at the time and prompted widespread complaints, including one from Queen Victoria, whose view of the Palace of Westminster from Buckingham Palace was obstructed by the block. Several generations of royals later, Prince Charles has proved just as vociferous a defender of London’s skyline.

The development of the passenger lift had made tall buildings possible from around 1870 but, while maximum buildings heights in New York and Chicago increased rapidly, reaching 240m (787ft) with the Woolworth Building in New York by 1913, the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe did not follow suit. In 1894, not long after the completion of Queen Anne’s Mansions, the London Building Act set a height limit of 30m (100ft) for buildings in the capital, on the grounds that people could not safely be rescued from a fire above that level.



This page, far left Entrance front, Queen Anne’s Mansions, Westminster, completed 1888 (demolished 1973), by Henry Hankey and Henry Alers. Photograph (detail), 1966, by Bill Toomey, © Architectural Press Archive/ RIBA Collections.

Left ‘London University - Nocturne’, drawing by Raymond Myerscough-Walker, 1936, of Senate House, University of London, Bloomsbury, completed 1937, by Adams Holden & Pearson. Image © RIBA Collections.

Opposite Post Office Tower (now BT Tower), 60 Cleveland Street, Fitzrovia, London, completed 1964, by Eric Bedford. Photograph (detail), 1965, by Henk Snoek, © RIBA Collections.





Hilton Hotel tower, completed 1963, by William B. Tabler, viewed from Hyde Park.

Senate House, designed by Charles Holden for the University of London (1937), is one of the few examples of tall buildings built before the 1950s. Its stepped form is reminiscent of the set-back style of New York's skyscrapers (which was a consequence of rules established to ensure adequate daylight at street level), although it is squashed rather than soaring in its proportions by comparison with American examples. Even today, it can be a surprise to come across it in the heart of historic Bloomsbury – an example of how tall buildings in densely developed areas can, up to a certain height, have rather less impact on their surroundings than is sometimes claimed by their opponents. Listed at Grade II*, it is also an example of the potential for tall buildings to be notable works of architecture.

The first significant wave of tall buildings in London appeared in the 1960s, the age of the space race and a time of rapid technological change, when Harold Wilson as Labour Party leader warned in 1963 of the need to forge 'a new Britain' in the 'white heat' of scientific revolution. The spirit of the age was represented by Eric Bedford's Post Office Tower – at 177m (581ft) the tallest building in the UK when it was completed in 1964 – which captured the public's imagination with its revolving restaurant at the top. More representative was a series of tall office buildings built by developer Harry Hyams, several of which were given names that perfectly reflected the mood of the time, such as Space House, off Kingsway in Holborn, and Astronaut House in Feltham, West London. The apotheosis of this first period of tall building was Hyams' Centre Point in the heart of the West End, designed by Seifert and Partners and completed in 1966. Controversial for being left unlet

for many years as well as because of its height, it was designated a Grade II listed building in 1995.

The current wave of tall buildings in central London was kicked off by Foster and Partners' original London Millennium Tower proposal in 1996 for the site which is now occupied by the 'Gherkin', 30 St Mary Axe, also designed by Foster. The abandoned scheme would have been 386m (1,265ft) tall – over twice as high as the tallest building in the City at the time, the former NatWest Tower, now called Tower 42 (completed in 1980). It indicated a new ambition to build tall in the 'Eastern cluster' of the Square Mile, an area where towers could be built without interfering with protected views of St Paul's Cathedral.

Twenty years on, the Gherkin has been joined by several other office towers of around the same height, such as the Heron Tower (110 Bishopsgate) by Kohn Pedersen Fox (2011) and the 'Cheesegrater' (122 Leadenhall Street) by Rogers Stirk Harbour and Partners (2013), and further significantly taller towers have been granted planning permission. In the same period the most notable new tower in London, the Shard (2012), has been designed and completed, and other major tall buildings are under construction at Blackfriars and elsewhere.

A notable aspect of this second wave of tall buildings is that many of them have been designed by world-famous international architectural practices such as those of Norman Foster, Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano, each of them a winner of the Pritzker, architecture's equivalent of a Nobel Prize. By contrast, in spite of the 'white-heat' rhetoric and the excitement of the space race, most 1960s towers were not very interesting or architecturally ambitious, and they were not generally designed by well-known architects.

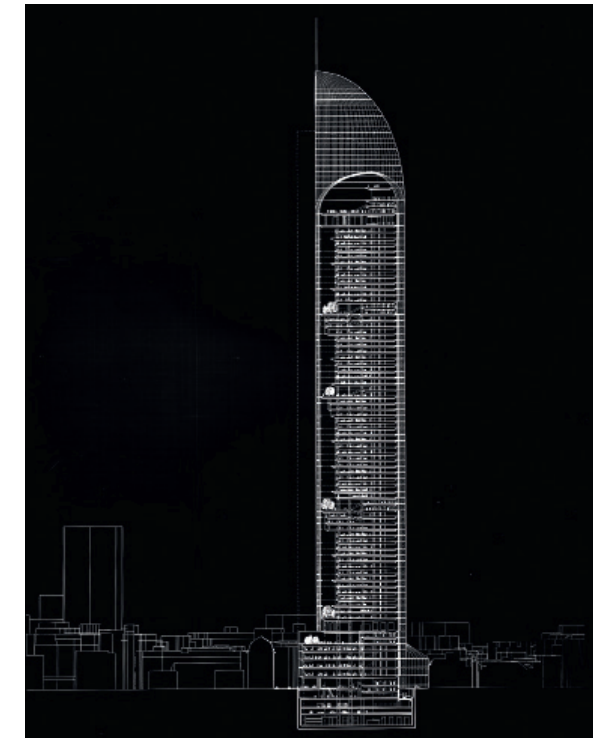
In the late 1950s, the protests that greeted the proposal to build the Hilton Hotel tower on Park Lane in Mayfair (designed by William B. Tabler and completed in 1963) foreshadowed present-day objections to tower proposals, such as that at Paddington, which are said to be in the 'wrong place'. The Hilton overlooks Hyde Park – an attractive view for a hotel room. The corollary is that it can be seen from all over the park, destroying the illusion of 'countryside in the city' that was held to be one of the Royal Parks' main attractions. *Country Life* magazine condemned the proposed tower as 'a monstrosity' which 'would obliterate the amenity values of Hyde Park and Mayfair', and the plans were criticised publicly by many of the great and the good, the violinist and conductor Yehudi Menuhin characterising the tower as being 'suitable to a land of cliff dwellers'. The tower of Knightsbridge Barracks, now known as Hyde Park Barracks (1967–70), designed by Basil Spence, prompted similar objections.

The latest wave of tall building projects has also been accompanied by considerable debate and controversy – about whether London needs tall buildings at all, and about the merits of individual proposals – but little or no consensus has emerged. Opponents have generally been led by conservation interests, and the strongest and most widespread objections have tended to arise where tall buildings are close to or have an effect on central London's most special and historic sites: St Paul's Cathedral, the Royal Parks and World Heritage Sites such as the Tower of London and the Palace of Westminster.

Because many of the recent projects have been in the hands of highly regarded architects, as noted above, the arguments have generally focused not on whether the designs were of a sufficiently high standard of architecture, but rather on whether a given site was suitable for a tall building in the first

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Right Drawing of Foster and Partners' London Millennium Tower proposal, 1996, which was never realised. Drawing © Foster and Partners.
Below Visualisation of the 'Eastern Cluster' in the City of London, including towers approved but never built.



place. A new mantra emerged, and was established in planning policy: further tall buildings in London would not be accepted unless they were of first-rate design quality, and in 'the right place'.

But what are the right places? Policy on the subject is complex, often vague, and open to interpretation – more like guidelines than rules. Much policy is negative, stipulating where tall buildings could not be built – for example, where they would block familiar views of St Paul's Cathedral from the hills of north and south London. Today, the protection of views of St Paul's, the Tower of London and the Palace of Westminster has a considerable influence on where towers are proposed in central London. Because the Tower of London and Westminster are World Heritage Sites (but not St Paul's), the UK Government has international treaty obligations to protect them. Unesco has complained to the Government on several occasions that in allowing tall buildings to be built within the settings of such sites, it is failing in these obligations.

The question of whether the settings of historic sites are 'threatened' by tall-building proposals lies at the heart of many objections. At Paddington, Piano's tower would be built next to Brunel's Grade I-listed railway station, and Historic England (formerly English Heritage) have objected to the impact on listed buildings and conservation areas in Paddington and further afield. The Royal Parks have also objected, as the tower would be prominent from Hyde Park and other parks – although since that organisation uses its

own green spaces for structures such as Ferris wheels for much of the year, its traditional objections to buildings seen in the distance are probably not taken as seriously as they were in the past.

Since 2004, the London Plan, which sets out strategic planning for the city, has contained positive policies which encourage tall buildings. The Plan is predicated on very substantial growth for London within its existing boundaries over the next two decades, and building upwards is seen as part of the solution. But such positive policies tend to be rather general in character, and are hedged with caveats and get-out clauses concerning effects on the historic environment. Foreign developers seeking to build in the capital, used to a rule book, are left baffled by the apparent whimsy and subjectivity of the decision-making process.

In the absence of clarity, proposals such as the Shard, characterised by its opponents as 'a spike through the heart of London', have frequently ended up at a public planning inquiry, for decision by an inspector or, ultimately, a Government minister, rather than a local-authority planning committee. In London, even the largest planning applications are decided in the first instance at borough level, though the effects of a tall building may be seen across much of the capital.

In 2013, the RIBA hosted a debate on the question, 'Are tall buildings blighting our skyline?' An opponent of the motion, the architect Julia Barfield, one of the designers of the London Eye, pointed out



View of St Paul's Cathedral with the Shard in the background, from Parliament Hill, north-west London, 2016. Photograph © Miller Hare.

that you can't blight a skyline with beautiful buildings. The City of London's then chief planning officer, Peter Rees, made a rather different case: that you shouldn't build high unless it is necessary to do so, but that it is necessary in the City, because there is no spare land, and that it is therefore important that you should do it well. This brings to mind the architect Hugh Casson's dictum from the 1960s on the subject, that 'if you are going to build high then the least you can do for your fellow citizens is to see that your building is a good one as well as a high one'.

The Skyline Campaign was launched in London in 2014 with the aim of calling a halt to the wave of 'badly designed and poorly placed tall buildings', which it says is harming London's skyline. It is supported by eminent architects, developers and others, some of whom have been responsible for significant tall buildings themselves – so it is apparent that it is not tall buildings per se that are held to be the problem, but particular examples of the type.

Which tall buildings are to be supported and which opposed is, unsurprisingly, hard to pin down. A survey commissioned as part of New London Architecture's 2014 exhibition *London's Growing Up* confirmed that opinions on the subject are very mixed, and that there is no clear consensus for or against the way that London's skyline is changing. A total of 46% of Londoners agreed that tall buildings have made London look better; 25% disagreed. Over the next five years, 37% of Londoners would like to see fewer new

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Vickers House, also known as Millbank Tower, completed 1963, by Ronald Ward and Partners, seen from the River Thames. Photograph, 1963, © RIBA Collections.

tall buildings than were built in the last five years, 33% would like to see about the same number, and 26% would like to see more.

The listing, over the last two decades, of a number of London's first wave of tall buildings has exemplified the polarised attitudes. Even within the Government's advisory body Historic England, opinions have been divided between those who wanted London's best mid-century towers to be recognised and protected by listing, and others who, engaged in battles to resist what they saw as unsuitable proposals for new towers, felt that buildings such as Millbank Tower (1963) on the Embankment, were to be regretted rather than celebrated; and that it was their demolition rather than their preservation that should be sought. Such listings inevitably prompt the thought that if the Millbank Tower, designed by relatively middle-of-the-road commercial architects, is to be protected today, surely the works of Foster, Rogers and Piano will qualify in due course.

The view of St Paul's and the Shard from Parliament Hill in north-west London, a popular spot with a panorama of much of the centre of the capital, illustrates the issues as well as any. For some, the effect on Wren's masterpiece is an act of vandalism at a metropolitan scale; for others it exemplifies the transformation of London, at the beginning of a new century, into one of the most exciting cities in the world.