LONDON'S TALL BUILDINGS - THE FIRST 1000 YEARS

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Kaleidoscope City - Reflections on planning and London, 2014

The last ten years has seen a wave of new tall buildings, built and planned, in central London. With the 'Gherkin' and 'Shard' and others now complete, and the 'Cheesegrater' and 'Walkie Talkie' topped out, the city's skyline and its lexicon have both been transformed; the nicknames, widely used and in the case of the Shard, officially adopted, indicative of the fact that these new buildings are more attention seeking than their plainer twentieth century predecessors. The merits of the projects were hotly debated through the planning application stage; in several cases, at public inquiry. Why were they needed at all? Were they in the right place? Would they harm London's historic cityscape? Was the architecture good enough? Were they sustainable? At a debate on the question 'are tall buildings blighting our skyline?', at the RIBA in 2013, there was a surprising degree of consensus (for such a subject that seems to be so emotive, at least in architectural and planning circles) with most agreeing that the answer to the question is that the ugly ones are and the beautiful ones aren't; but that it would be preferable if tall buildings were located more as a consequence of positive planning, and less as a result of opportunism.

A changing skyline

In fact, London's recent wave of towers has emerged against a background where the balance between planning and opportunism is consistent with the way London has always developed. While Paris and New York appear to present opposing models of how a city might react to the prospect of tall buildings (broadly, by saying 'no' and 'yes' respectively), the answer in London today is much as it always has been; 'maybe'.

The Tower of London, now a World Heritage Site (albeit said by UNESCO to be 'under threat' from the building of new towers in its setting) can be considered London's first tall building, if we take the widely accepted definition of that term as 'buildings which are substantially taller than their neighbours and/or which significantly change the skyline'.[1] Its location was certainly strategic, its design first class, all qualities that we might seek today in a tall building. Whether London's citizens welcomed its construction probably depended on whether they saw it as helping to defend their city, or to exert unwelcome control over it.

From the middle ages, London's skyline was dominated by St Paul's Cathedral and the spires of its parish churches, with the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire of 1666 recreating the former skyline on a grander scale. Technological advances made tall multi-storey buildings possible from the middle of the nineteenth century, but while the opportunities afforded were taken up enthusiastically in New York and Chicago, tall commercial buildings did not begin to appear in London until nearly a hundred years later. One of the principal reasons for this was regulatory: the height of buildings was by and large limited by law to about 100ft (30m) until after the Second World War.[2] This was probably because taller buildings were considered to be unsafe in the case of a fire; but the persistence of the height limit may also have been influenced by the notorious case of Queen Anne's Mansions, an unusually tall apartment building built near St James's Park which was universally unpopular (not least with Queen Victoria; an early example of royal intervention in questions concerning London's skyline).
It is also evidence that visual and aesthetic considerations, as well as practical ones, were as important then as now.

Mid-twentieth century onwards

With the exception of one or two proto-towers such as London University's Senate House, it was not until the 1950s that the first tall buildings for office, residential and hotel use appeared in London. While there were some notable examples that are now listed, such as Centre Point (1966), the Millbank Tower (1963) and the Barbican towers (1970s), most tall buildings of the period were simply dull, and of mediocre architectural quality at best. Some commercial proposals prompted strong opposition, perhaps

most notably the Hilton Hotel on Park Lane (1963), and Centre Point attracted negative criticism for many years.

Outside the centre of London, however, tall apartment buildings were built by many local authorities as part of 'mixed developments' to provide public housing across a range of high-rise and low rise buildings. Many of these were of a low standard of design and construction, exacerbated by poor management and maintenance, with the result that such towers became powerful symbols of the various problems of public housing; most of which subsisted in the low buildings as much as the high buildings.

The last thirty years

The recent story of tall buildings in London can be considered in two waves. The first is dominated by Canary Wharf, conceived and begun in the 1980s and not complete yet. In urbanistic and architectural terms, this is a piece of North America transplanted to a part of East London that (in the layout of the docks) had, unlike any other redevelopment area in London, a Manhattan-style grid ready and waiting. With its density of tall buildings and its height, it represented a step change in the character of London.

It was perhaps the commercial success of Canary Wharf, and the evidence that London could accommodate very tall buildings without the sky falling in, that emboldened developers to bring forward the second wave of tall buildings elsewhere in London; a wave which continues today. This began in the City of London with Foster and Partners' 30 St Mary Axe (the 'Gherkin'), winner of the 2004 Stirling Prize for 'the greatest contribution to British architecture in the past year', and rapidly gathered pace with further projects in the City and the Shard at London Bridge (unusual in that it is a genuinely mixed use tower building, with offices, flats and a hotel).

There has been considerable interest elsewhere in building tall buildings for the private residential market. While there had been a reaction against housing the tenants of social housing in tall buildings, and 'tower blocks' had an image problem in some quarters, the privately owned flats in the Barbican towers have nevertheless always been very popular, and commanded high prices. The Vauxhall Tower, nearing completion at the time of writing, is the most notable of these new residential towers but many others have been built and many more are planned, mostly in regeneration areas such as the Isle of Dogs, Stratford and Vauxhall.

Tower architecture gets better

The architect Sir Hugh Casson wrote of tall buildings in the 1960's 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'.[3] The majority of London's towers of that period had little architectural ambition. London's recent tall building boom, by contrast, has coincided with the age of the 'icon' building, in which 'starchitectural' projects such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao are commonly cited as examples of the potential for exciting buildings to transform the image of cities and thereby help to regenerate them.

Individualistic architecture is, however, not the preserve of the world's great architects. While the cluster of towers at Canary Wharf is a model of control, order and discretion (done to a very high standard, but perhaps a bit boring) the skylines of middle-eastern and far-eastern cities have been transformed at an astonishing rate with a collection of tall buildings that frequently manage to be both banal and attention seeking, prompting the thought that perhaps Canary Wharf had it right after all.

In central London the quality of architecture of the best of the new towers has been high. The age of the icon has left London with a group of towers that are less bland and less stern than their predecessors, and better when considered as works of architecture. Today, standing on Waterloo Bridge, you can see towers designed by three of the world's leading architects of the high-tech school: Lords Foster and Rogers, and Renzo Piano; all of whom are winners in their time of the Pritzker, architecture's equivalent of a Nobel Prize.

Regulating the skyline

Those and other new towers came forward within a complex and muddled regulatory system that mirrors the complexity and muddle of London's cityscape, but they did not, as some critics would have it, come forward mindlessly, or without anyone giving the matter the attention it deserved. Quite the reverse; whatever you think about London's recent tall buildings, they have been the subject of a more extensive and more sophisticated debate than could be found anywhere else in the world.

The British planning system has always been as much about stopping the wrong things being built as about getting the right things built. The history of tall buildings in London, spanning roughly the whole period since the first Town and Country Planning Act, has mirrored this. The skyline is of interest as much for where towers have not been built as for where they have been built.

London's administrative structure is not well suited to considering the visual consequences of tall building proposals. Planning applications are decided by boroughs, but a tower may be more visible from a neighbouring borough than the one which hosts it. Proposals are subject to scrutiny and comment by national consultees such as CABE in respect of their architectural and urbanistic quality, and English Heritage in respect of their effect on the historic environment. London's Mayor and his advisors chip in with a strategic remit, and the national Government has the power to call in schemes for its own decision if it sees fit.

There has however been very little clarity about where towers might or might not be acceptable. As a result, proposals have emerged opportunistically, and are debated (endlessly) on their merits; in respect of suitability of location and architectural quality. While the form of buildings is largely codified in New York, and there is limited scope for discussion, in London the process of applying for planning permission has been characterised as 'the occasion for a conversation'.[4] This is a state of affairs that may be thought of as characteristically English, and which bemuses foreign developers and investors. Everything is potentially up for grabs, with the most successful architects often being the most charismatic and persuasive.

The proliferation of tall buildings, built and permitted, in central London over the last ten or fifteen years, has resulted in a certain amount of soul searching and taking stock. This is particularly in the light of criticism from UNESCO and English Heritage concerning the effects of tall buildings on the settings of the Tower of London and the Houses of Parliament. It's perhaps worth noting, therefore, that the most powerful planning mechanisms for the location of tall buildings in central London are negative rather than positive. These are notably the St Paul's heights rules (which have their origins in the 1930s and protect certain views of the cathedral) and the Mayor of London's London View Management Framework (LVMF, based on a set of rules first established in the 1990s) which has grown in scope to cover over fifty views.[5] The LVMF document undoubtedly has more influence than any other over where tall buildings appear (or don't) in London. In doing so it balances heritage and preservationist considerations against development considerations, taking account of regeneration areas, for example. Some of the guidance in the LVMF is prescriptive, but much of it is discretionary, with the result that questions of what may or may not be acceptable often end up being debated at public inquiry. Such inquiries determined the future of the Heron Tower, the Shard, the Walkie Talkie and the Vauxhall Tower, and through the precedents they have been considered to set, have been highly influential in encouraging developers to bring forward further tall building projects.

Tall buildings and the image of the London

The debate about tall buildings is unusual in that unlike other planning issues the considerations are largely visual.[6] That does not mean that it is just to do with aesthetics, though. Towers and clusters of towers are so widely visible that they affect the image of the city as a whole.

Twenty years ago, there were only a few modern buildings that would be used in a foreign TV news report to represent London, and the Palace of Westminster might have been first

choice. Today, the Gherkin and the London Eye have already become international icons, their profiles instantly recognisable, and the Shard is on course to become as much a shorthand symbol of London as the Eiffel Tower[7] is of Paris; as seen in television coverage of the 2012 Olympics.

But as has been noted, the recent transformation of London's skyline has also been a source of complaint and uneasiness. Simon Jenkins, chairman of the National Trust, has written that 'The Shard has slashed the face of London for ever'.[8] In the past, the tallest and largest buildings were the most important, and their prominence in the city conveyed meaning, representing religion or civic power; and they were also amongst the most notable works of architecture in the City. Most tall buildings today are 'just' speculative office buildings, or apartment blocks; and in spite of the improving standards of architecture, they are not all great, and many of them still lack the architectural ambition or first rate quality that might justify their prominence in the cityscape.

There is still a sense, though, that tall buildings must be symbolic of something. Animus against them, some of it vociferous, is usually underpinned by an objection to something other than their built form or skyline impact; a dislike of property speculators, anxieties about the reputation of local authority housing estates, worries about London being bought up by sovereign wealth funds and perhaps money launderers. For those who are in favour of them, they represent progress, regeneration, investment, and a sense that London as a world city in the twenty-first century should be represented by more than (or at least, in addition to) the Beefeaters, bearskins and similar Ruritanian-style trappings of tradition on show during the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.

London's skyline is, in fact, emerging as symbolic of something more particular to the city: complexity (or muddle, if you like). Central London is made up of a collection of places with no strong pattern, no code, no grid. Its administrative system is complicated, planning policies are vague and contradictory, different interests clash and argue (appropriately enough for one the most dynamic and diverse of western cities). Decision making is unpredictable, but for all that opponents of London's new towers may huff and puff, the buildings are subject to huge scrutiny and if they are approved, it is through a thorough process underpinned by a democratic mandate.[9]

All of this is entirely appropriate for a world city that is a place of exchange above all else. London's towers and skyline reflect that fact that the city is, intrinsically, a glorious mess.

Endnotes

1. This is the definition in the CABE / EH 'Guidance on tall buildings' (2007) and also in the London Plan (2008).

2. The London Building Act 1930, updating similar provisions in earlier Acts, set a general limit of 80 feet plus two storeys in the roof, for buildings other than churches or chapels.

3. Paul Finch's characterisation of developer Nigel Hugill's view of the UK planning system in 'A little bit of the right regulation goes a long way', Property Week, 28 April 2011.

4. Cited in W. Attoe, Skylines: Understanding and Moulding Urban Silhouettes, Chester: John Wiley & Sons, 1981, pp. 119-120.

5. There are 27 'viewing places' listed in the LVMF (2012), but many of these include several different views.

6. Most other considerations said to relate to the question of building tall are really more to do with density than height.

7. The Shard is almost exactly the same height as the Eiffel Tower.

8. 'The Shard has slashed the face of London for ever', Simon Jenkins, The Guardian, Tuesday 3 July 2012.

9. Unlike the Tower of London, for which there is no record of a planning application, let alone a public inquiry.