

Views on views

London is in danger of the kind of 'stasis' apparent in Paris' built environment if it does not embrace the new, and 'real life, not some bureaucrat's vision.'

That was one of the beliefs expressed by Design Council deputy chair Paul Finch at NLA's 'north-south debate', exploring the city's system of protected views in the light of UNESCO's call for greater control over tall buildings on the South Bank.

'The moment you start being frightened of the new, you stop building, and the city that stops building dies', said Finch, claiming that the debate was more about 'prospect than aspect', and certainly not about height. London had plenty of buildings which started out as 'excrescences' but which are now much loved parts of the city, such as Battersea Power Station. 'This is a kind of neo-colonialist aesthetic takeover, and being aesthetic it is bound to come from Paris.'

English Heritage planning director for London, Paddy Pugh said that the way of dealing with tall buildings applications was through the planning system, which he claimed was 'the most sophisticated in the world'. But London is a world city, and can't be managed like other World Heritage Sites. 'A plan-led approach is the rational way', he said. 'The only way that will work is if a plan-led system is brave enough to define where you can and cannot put tall buildings.'

City of Westminster head of design and conservation Robert Ayton said it was not an issue of cultural imperialism but of the protection of some of the most important views in the world. Westminster's World Heritage Site, designated in 1987, is a heritage asset in the NPPF, and in the London View Management Framework produced by Ken Livingstone there are 13



History and modernity: the balance view protection must strike

viewpoints from which you can see it, but none in Parliament Square. Ayton claimed the reason why it was excluded was 'political' – he said the GLA and Lambeth were concerned they would be protected and prevent new tall buildings in Lambeth which had already been planned. He also revealed that UNESCO had encouraged all parties to analyse views and prepare a dynamic visual impact study, but this has not happened because of disagreement between parties on the north and

south of the river. 'We have a duty to protect Westminster from insensitive development and are entitled to object', said Ayton. 'We regard UNESCO as an ally.'

Michael Squire disagreed, illustrating London's position by recalling when he sat on an appraisal panel in Kensington and Chelsea, dealing with OMA's scheme for the Commonwealth Institute. The OMA architect had told Squire that the 'strange thing about working in your city' was that first

you select 'the finest architects in the world', let them develop design, and then prepare 60 views of the building to establish it can't be seen from anywhere in the borough. Squire added that any scheme, anywhere in London today is analysed in 'incredible, forensic, anal detail' – the idea of having UNESCO as a layer on top of that level of scrutiny was 'absurd'. We need to accept that we need to intensify, most of which should be done south of the river, and the last thing we want to become is a museum,

like 'tragic' Paris, he added. 'My fear is that UNESCO will want restrictive, nothing-will-happen rules.'

During questions, Finch contested Pugh's claim that the public inquiry system should not be seen as 'gladiatorial', but Pugh said that even Renzo Piano was on record as saying that he believed a public inquiry should have been held to debate the full implications of The Shard. Others from the audience questioned how we can have faith in the planning system when

it is overridden by former secretary of state John Prescott (at Vauxhall), and whether the buildings that had 'sprung up' along the Thames recently were of sufficient quality.

Finally, Finch reminded the audience that everything was new once, and that cities change and adapt, along with public opinion about the built environment. After all, even Pugin and Barry had not done Westminster Abbey any favours. 'But it can take it', he said. 'It's a tough old bird.' ■