



A personal view

Michael Squire, partner at Squire and Partners, argues for a less blinkered approach to heritage and views than UNESCO's, in order to keep London ahead of the game



Rooms with a view: Squire and Partners' One Tower Bridge scheme at Potters Fields

London is a rich and varied city that embraces an extraordinary range of historic fabric and cultural diversity while at the same time embracing the contemporary world. Allied to its fortunate time zone, international language and political stability, this has allowed London to establish itself as the international capital city for both the old world and the new.

As a result of its popularity and the relentless growth of world population, London needs to intensify development to provide high-quality accommodation for both commercial enterprises and residential occupiers. This intensification of development is best delivered in city centres close to exceptional transport infrastructure, creating sustainable communities and avoiding a carpeting of the countryside with low-density, car-led developments.

The question for London is how to provide this intensification without

losing or significantly damaging the character of the city itself. London's physical heritage is based on a rich variety of architecture rather than a simple consistent typology and form. The City of London, the Georgian estates to the west, the docks to the east and the extravagant Victorian house building connecting the historic villages in the north and south are all part of the character of London.

In the 20th century, the Blitz left the centre of London punctured and damaged. In many cases, two generations of redevelopment have occurred on the war-damaged sites, as another natural stage in the evolution of the city. The proximity of new and old, including dramatic changes of scale, is part of London's character and a demonstration of its engagement with the contemporary world. There are successes and failures in the new buildings that have come

forward, but the evolution is healthy and reveals vitality.

London should not become a museum, but rather continue to address the careful balance of preserving its heritage and engaging with the intensification of development needed to meet its position in the modern world. This includes new developments within the heart of the historic city, where enormous care needs to be taken to complement the historic fabric. We also need to maximise the potential of developable land, as has already been demonstrated at Canary Wharf and continues in the Royal Docks. Objection to the development of these districts has been muted because the great and the good can't see it from the comfort of their heritage world.

There is also a massive swathe of land to the south of the River Thames where intensification of development close to transport infrastructure such as London Bridge, Waterloo and Vauxhall is obvious and will meet the needs of modern occupiers. The fact that these new developments can be seen from historic locations north of the river provides a complex layering of history and is part of the richness of our city. The relatively distant views of new buildings from heritage locations are an absurd reason to try to prevent their development. What matters is that these proposals are considered, well designed, deliver excellent public realm, proper amenities for the new inhabitants, and revitalise and regenerate acres of London to the immediate south of the river.

UNESCO's part in this debate is profoundly superficial, and concerned only with whether something can be seen rather than its quality, and what it delivers to the wider community. UNESCO suggests that world heritage sites such as Westminster are 'threatened' by visible new developments across the river. The important issue London needs to address is whether a blinkered approach to the protection of heritage will threaten the remarkable international status of our city as part of the contemporary world. ■