

Prospects and views Comments from key built environment figures on London's rapidly changing skyline



Peter Rees, professor of places and city planning at The Bartlett

The residential towers going up in London are simply safe deposit boxes for Russian and Chinese money. This mini-high-rise boom is going to create ghost towns in parts of London and there will be a negative reaction. There is easily potential for London's unique character to be damaged.

The London Plan doesn't say where the right place is for tall buildings or what 'well designed' means. And, sadly, many residential housebuilders don't know much about good design, nor do they often choose good architects. This is because they can sell their product to people who won't see it before they buy. Around 50 per cent of such apartments are sold off-plan in Hong Kong, and all those buyers are concerned about is where it is on the map.

We want to attract investment for job-creating commercial buildings and of course we want to build enough

homes for Londoners – but the residential boom is not doing that. Local authorities are under pressure to meet housing targets and desperate for planning gain because of cuts to their funding. They see these sort of residential developments as a way of solving both problems, but these are not homes – they are residential investment opportunities.

These problems need addressing at government level. We have to tackle under-occupancy and somehow discourage this tsunami of residential development, which is causing buildings to be grossly under-occupied. My worry is that the bubble won't burst, but we need to find a way of taking the steam out of this wave of investment because it appears to be infinite.

Furthermore, you don't have to build tall if you are trying to house more. London's highest household density is in low-rise Chelsea. The only reason developers build tall is because the view is selling the investment product.



Tony Travers, director of LSE London at the London School of Economics
Who could disagree

with the aspiration that tall buildings should be 'well-designed and in the right place'? The problem comes when someone has to decide what these are.

Hitherto, politicians have made these decisions on the advice of professional planners and inspectors. The proposed Skyline Commission would, according to its proponents, examine proposals for the development of tall buildings and then guide developers. There would need to be a designation of neighbourhoods where height was acceptable, and where not. However one looks at this idea, it would surely mean a transfer of power upwards. Also, by giving more authority to 'experts', there would be a weakening of democratic control.

The current distribution of planning powers between the 32 boroughs plus the City, the mayor and the Secretary of State means there are, in effect, three levels of decision-making. The South Bank, as part of central London, is actually the northern edge of four boroughs. The fact that places such as Vauxhall, Waterloo, Lambeth and Southwark were 'peripheral' has left them relatively under-developed and thus ripe for new housing and offices.

The government has given council tax and business rate incentives to encourage local development. Indeed, councils are having their funding drained in the name of austerity: every penny derived from new developments means fewer cuts. On top of this, big projects are required to make Section 106 and CIL contributions to fund things the state won't pay for.

The Skyline Commission would have to factor in these factors. It would have the power to affect spending on social care in Southwark or Lambeth. Would a single London-wide commission be less susceptible to fads and bad decisions than the current system? If it had guided the skyline in 1960, would we like the results today?



Grabam Stirk, partner at RSHP

What makes the London skyline so different to

most cities is that it doesn't have the prescriptive global development envelopes you might find in New York or Tokyo. Tall building development in London is more about judgement and interpretation. This also creates the diversity which gives it strength.

Canary Wharf is a masterplanned piece of city, whereas London is an accumulation of possibilities and opportunities where one can only help the overall picture by developing a dialogue about your immediate topography. This makes masterplanning quite difficult, because, other than metropolitan restrictions, it is difficult to say whether a tall building is a good neighbour to another in objective terms. A London-wide skyscraper masterplan could therefore be dangerous, because it would give so much power to planning authorities, without scrutinising who makes the judgements.

Earlier tall projects in London – such as our 122 Leadenhall Street, submitted for planning in 2005 – were far more heavily interrogated. I don't know whether we were made an example of, but we had to jump through massive hoops. This helped us balance economic and social needs, but I am not sure how this level of interrogation could be maintained.

We are not always aware of the challenges clients and architects have faced and new buildings are not necessarily judged on aesthetic principles but on moral and other ones.

Despite all the planning restrictions, you will always find some who say a building is hideous, but it is difficult to find one common view for what the profession as a whole is aiming for – more likely a shared dialogue used to justify building tall. So quality in tall buildings comes down to peer pressure and peer review. This had been important in CABE, though it seems now to have lost some ability to influence local authorities. >>



CHRIS BATTAGLIA



Keith Griffiths, chairman, Aedas

Densification of cities is bound to happen, but how did we end up with 200 towers spread out across London instead of gathered together in a district like Canary Wharf? Most London buildings are low-rise and don't shout at each other. But, as more tall buildings get built, the landscape will merge with taller towers, and those with space around them will stand out.

For London to become a beautiful high-rise city, there needs to be thoughtful consideration about the overall form and shape of the skyline in the future. At the moment the city doesn't have a clear plan for how an entire district might develop into high-rise. There needs to be an overall plan for connectivity at street, basement, first and second floor levels so that every high-rise tower allows for future buildings.

Without such a masterplan, the risk will be that we end up with piecemeal

high-rise development with no urban scale other than the site itself. Each site will be developed at the whim of the market and the time in which it is developed, and we will be unable to maximise the urban possibilities of a district.

In Singapore, every piece of land has a usage, development density and even a model within an enormous city model created by an urban renewal authority.

London, conversely, does it by engaging in public debate. This provides a very considered solution to a single site, but does not provide an overall holistic answer.

However, it wouldn't be massively expensive to commission an urban renewal authority for London, and it could be a model for discussion so people can appreciate the city in a simple three-dimensional form.

It would also be enormously valuable for developers, because it would move projects ahead to a certain position and create a vision for the future.

Above Unlike London, Tokyo has a prescriptive development envelope



Bob Lang, director at ARUP

London is a good place to build tall: there are no earthquakes, it has a benign climate, the ground is ok and it has good transport infrastructure. But we must not misappropriate the Corbusian dream again; some of his thinking was very good but it got abused here in the 1960s. Right now there is great government incentive to create new housing, but housing and transport should be seen as one. They got it right in Hong Kong. In the late 1960s the city was facing a housing and transport crisis and the government response was exemplary. The Mass Transit Railway Corporation they created was given a mandate to develop on railway property. Development above the plane was tendered to real estate developers which funded infrastructure. The MTRC developed the plate fast, and it was thanks to government intervention. Sometimes the burden on the private sector is too high.



Michael Squire, partner, Squire and Partners

London's skyline may be the victim of intensification of development, but this is not the first time that Londoners have feared increasing density. After World War I, EM Forster said: 'Greed moulds the landscape of London.' Most of the buildings he was referring to are now protected.

Our existing array of checks and balances, set against the economic force of commercial development, have created a natural pattern for development in London. Unlike Paris, Barcelona or New York, London was never a planned city, and has always evolved in response to the pressures of commerce and ownership. While we would all wish that tall buildings in London should be of the highest quality, I do not believe a new layer of planning control will have any meaningful effect on the quality of architecture we deliver. Only architects can do that for themselves.

The NLA's model illustrates that the 236 proposed tall buildings are mostly located in intelligent and interesting clusters, driven by local planning and economics.

Canary Wharf and the City have embraced towers. The Canary Wharf buildings are masterplanned, the City buildings are clustered without a masterplan and almost for that reason are more interesting.

The array of tall buildings along the South Bank between the river and the railway, which provide a natural buffer to our heritage, make sense and reveal that London is a living city, thoroughly engaged with the 21st century. The same model reveals the ruthless protection that has been applied in Westminster and the West End.

Singapore has a masterplan, Shanghai has a masterplan, New York has a grid, Paris has a museum. I think that, in its strange, muddled, democratic and disordered way, London is embracing the 21st century on its own terms.



Philip Oldfield, course director, Masters in Sustainable Tall Buildings, University of Nottingham

It's wrong to say that high-rise development in London is a 'free-for-all'. The location of tall buildings in London is influenced primarily through the London View Management Framework (LVMF), which protects 27 key views – some from several miles away. Originally developed as 10 protected views in the early 1990s, this is a relatively unique strategy, with Vancouver the main other city adopting a similar policy (although in that case the protected views are of mountains).

In London many high-rises go to extreme lengths to respond to strategic views, whether it is 201 Bishopsgate's split tower and block strategy maintaining a view of St Paul's across the site, or the Leadenhall Tower chamfering away from a view of St Paul's, creating its iconic

Towers will become a key component in a sustainable future London

Below Singapore is among the world cities whose skyline is guided by a masterplan



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'Cheesegrater' form. The problem is that there seems to be very little guidance that exists for high-rise development in between strategic views, and here discussion and policy examining where tall buildings could be located, and how they can respond to the local context and to each other, would be beneficial to work alongside the broader LVMF.

However, any debate on skyscrapers must not consume itself by discussing skyline alone. The integration of high-rise within the streetscape is an equally important consideration, as this is how we interact with these buildings on a physical level – at the ground floor interface.

Towers should, and will, become a key component in a sustainable future London, but it's clear that we need to explore how the tall building can respond better to local characteristics in terms of climate, culture and context, at both height and the ground level.

These are issues that we are currently exploring with students on the Masters Course in Sustainable Tall Buildings at the University of Nottingham, which is the world's only architecture course and qualification dedicated to the typology.