In London, the principles of Classical design promulgated by the ‘old masters’ were filtered mainly through Palladianism and two distinctive monarchies, the Stuarts and Hanoverians, who oversaw the urban transformation and expansion of medieval London. Georgian London, built during an extended monarchial period of 116 years between 1714 and 1830, is characterised by regular grid patterns and grand Classical square lined with palatial terraces. The Victorian built on this example, and on a grander scale, retaining or extending the underlying spatial structure and urban character of London. Their larger buildings affected the grain of the existing built form, by amalgamating several plots to create larger edifices that were usually bulkier than those they replaced. London’s skyline acquired a new urbanism, but the changes brought by the nineteenth century were not as radical as those of the eighteenth, when commercial and residential towers were built increasingly tall. There are no direct answers to the challenge that height presents to the image of a historic city like London in the writings of Vitruvius, Alberti and Sitter; they were concerned with a human-scaled environment. Judging by recent planning proposals in London, the challenge of height is set to increase. Towers – residential and commercial – are being designed for London that will be the tallest in Europe. Rinso Flats has recently been granted planning permission for London’s tallest building yet, a mixed residential and commercial tower that will be 306m tall when completed in 2009. Consequently, there is renewed interest in defining appropriate guiding principles that will enable tall buildings to retain the finest architectural and urban successes that characterise London. Intriguingly, many of the traditional principles advocated by Sitter have been absorbed into official planning policy guidance for the last decade in England and Wales, establishing a context within which tall buildings are being designed. This re-engagement with Sitter’s urban ideals represents a curious volte-face. During most of the twentieth century, tall buildings were a powerful symbol of a new political and social ideology, which attempted to sweep away a traditional attachment to the forms and spaces of the pre-industrial city, of traditional streets and squares lined with buildings.

In London, St Paul’s Cathedral and its surroundings have become a battleground for modernists and traditionalists. In longer views, its physical and social relations to the dynamically changing commercial core of London continues to provoke the form for an extraordinary debate on one that is likely to have a dramatic effect on London’s appearance during the next few decades.

London’s skyline and the impact of the dome of St Paul’s St Paul’s is in the western end of the city of London, the Square Mile originally settled by the Romans. By the seventeenth century, the city was overcrowded, and the Great Fire of 1666 thrived on its density, devastating a large section of its medieval urban fabric. Christopher Wren proposed a radical replacement master plan for the city, but this was rejected by the authorities in favour of a quick rebuilding of the foundations of the former medieval street pattern. In fact, the most radical physical changes were affected by legislation introduced in the 1667 London Building Act, which succeeded in restricting the use of inflammable building materials and building heights to a maximum of four stories. Well into the nineteenth century, non-public buildings were kept low, and buildings proposed higher than 30m required special Metropolitan Sanctions. Wren, of course, had succeeded in replacing the burnt out old St Paul’s with a great Renaissance-inspired edifice, and his cathedral grew to dominate, both physically and spiritually, the relatively church physical scene that surrounded it. The great dome form of St Paul’s has provided the primary focus for historic views of London, and because the medieval grain of the City is success and winding, the best of these are to be found across the River Thames, to the south and west. Some of the most famous views of Wren’s St Paul’s have been taken from Someret House on the Terrace. It is well placed for a panoramic view, being located on a major bend of the River Thames, roughly midway between the twin cities of London. Westminster and the City, offering views of each. Paintings by Antonio Canaletto (18th century) and John O’Connor (late nineteenth century) clearly illustrate the changing setting of St Paul’s over the centuries. They depict quite different scenes of London as a great maritime centre, an elegant Venice of the north, and as the capital of industrial might and global authority. The square mile of the City has since become a thriving global financial centre, and London is in the premier league of world-class cities, rivalling both New York and Tokyo. It is not unreasonable to suggest that its image should demonstrate and be emblematic of the considerable power and authority of London and in new – not unimaginable – ways.

Certainly, this is the positive view expressed by Corporations of London’s planners today, who regard tall buildings as valuable assets that will meet practical demands on limited space and will project an
image of an international, thriving location. Their vision is not
universally accepted. Traditional urbanists, and the heritage lobby
such as English Heritage, argue that tall buildings undermine the
‘charm’ characterised by valued historic monuments, and distasteful
views of St Paul’s are frequently used in evidence by...
theory

disadvantage of other high density buildings” (Rousey Commons, Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee. Tall Buildings: Monstrous submitted to the Urban Studies Sub-committee, 22 January 1992). In fact, the Committee’s research indicates that tall buildings are more often about power, prestige, status and aesthetics than efficient development. Tall buildings may not be necessary, but the report recognises that tall buildings are certainly objects of desire. There is no powerful and irrefutable argument in favour of all buildings; some people find them very beautiful. The Mayor of London is delighted by the Manhattan skyline. His love of tall buildings is shared by many architects and others.

The art of designing tall buildings

It is not clear how numerous these ‘others’ are. It is probable that public dislike of tall buildings outweighs those who find them beautiful. However, the notion that they could be beautiful is well-sited and designed, in contrast to the post-war residential slabs that sprang up seemingly randomly across London in the 1960s, when the first wave of commercial tall buildings were being built in central London. The Royal Fine Art Commission [the former Council for the Preservation of Britain (CPI)] completed its 18th Report of 1960-65 of the poor and inappropriate styling of tall buildings. The report noted that ‘exceptionally high buildings look better in the form of towers than slab and are carefully arranged clusters of towers may be preferable to a number of isolated cases’. In 1969, a government-sponsored Public Inquiry, the Hayfield Committee, recommended the creation of a ‘High Buildings Map’ for central London, where tall buildings would be permitted, and a Skyscraper Protection Bill was introduced to Parliament in 1977, which recommended the protection of views by designation that would be similar to the areas afforded to historic buildings and conservation areas. None of these recommendations passed the statute book. However, the notion of clusters of towers, combined with the protection of the views from tall buildings of important views across London, has largely been successful in relation to views of St Paul’s Cathedral from the west. It was demonstrated at a major Public Inquiry in 1976 that a tall building proposed for Broadgate, next to Liverpool Street Station – almost a mile north of the cathedral – would be in relation to the silhouette of the domed St Paul’s when viewed from Henry VIII’s Monument in Richmond Park – some 10 miles to the west. Planning permission was refused and the vast low-ground level building built instead.

The importance of distant views in this and other cases led to several follow-up studies through the 1980s and the government responded with the Strategic Guidance for London Planning Authorities (RGC 3A, 1994). This established a list of 19 Strategic Views across London, eight of which focus on St Paul’s Cathedral, and two on the Palace of Westminster: the seat of government and a World Heritage Site – which was intended to prevent tall buildings from visually interfering with the setting and silhouettes of these internationally recognisable landmarks. It had been observed in the late 1960s that tall buildings seen behind St Paul’s can have two effects: they can either create an effective backcloth of building mass, which is the characteristic of the Cathedral, or they can create a sense of dynamic silhouette by obscuring and diffusing its clear outline. City of London Development Plan, Subject Study St Paul’s Height, RPS, 111 1984. This principle is also used in the group of tall buildings to the north east of St Paul’s, known as the City or Eastern Cluster. It recognises the loose grouping of high-rise buildings, which provide a general plane at mid-height commercial buildings, and which for the last few decades has had Tower 42 (T42), the former National Westminster Bank tower, as its most prominent structure. T42 is around 84m in height, and it is surrounded by a lower-tier – a plateau of buildings – mostly ranging between 60m and 100m in height. The latest financial boom of the late 1990s has seen a Co-operation of London planners and property developers exploiting the potential for expanding and consolidating the Eastern Cluster. The most recent solution is SVG Sdn Bhd, designed by Foster and Partners and completed recently in 2000 with a height of 142. The London Tower, designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox, was granted planning approval by the Secretary of State in 2002, and is still under construction and Runnan, among the tallest – upper-tier – of office buildings in the Eastern Cluster. These are tall slender towers with more floor plates (compared to typical U-shaped units that have been adopted at Canary Wharf), because of the small site, of office buildings that characterise the City’s urban grain. As the RPA predicted in the early 1960s, a grouping of tall slender towers has a pleasing appearance and the overall effect here is to create a physical mass that is big but in profile and which provides a unified backcloth to St Paul’s, where viewed from the west. It is evident from sophisticated computer generated visualisation prepared for the London Tower, public inquiry that, when viewed from the west, St Paul’s continues to remain distinguishable and the skyline extended to the City of London.

The positive character of this particular assembly of tall buildings will not last for long. The dynamic of commercial tall change in the City is rapid and many new towers have been planned for the Eastern Cluster in recent months. If built, they will stretch its boundaries and challenge its present maximum heights. The evolution of the cluster’s form will require careful articulation and management, and a comprehensive three-dimensional appraisal will be essential of both the townscape’s experience at street level, and the skyline in medium and long views. It is anticipated that the Mayor’s spatial plan for London will respond with an open and non-urban solution.

Meanwhile, the most useful attempt to reconcile the different attitudes in tall buildings has appeared in a joint publication by English Heritage (EH), the government’s guardians of the nation’s historic built heritage – and CARE, the principal preserve of design quality in the developing built environment. The EH/CARE Tall Buildings (2000) recommends that approval for a tall building should be at the highest level of decision, which is the level at which local character and other important features and constraints, including streetscape, scale, height, urban grain, natural topography, significant views of skylines, landmarks and buildings and their settings, including backdrops and important local views, prospects and panoramas, Opportunities where tall buildings might enhance the overall townscape, or where the removal of past mistakes might achieve a similar outcome, should be highlighted.

Clusters of tall buildings are being planned at major transport nodes in London, and they are proposed for sites already growing in other UK cities. Traditionalists are right to be concerned about potentially harmful impact of tall buildings on historic settings. But ultimately, the design of tall buildings is a matter of time, and the continuity with the past as well as with the needs of now and the future. A complex – not simple – multi-disciplinary approach that pulls together the art and science of urban design is perhaps the best way to balance effectively the demands of time and necessity. So the historian has an essential role in the process of urban design as the architect, planner and politician. Sophisticated thinking is more than a century ago.