**Special Issue**

The London Plan 2000–2010: A Decade of Transformation

**Guest Editor:** Robert Tavernor

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Editorial


The urban development of London, the capital city and powerhouse of the UK’s wealth, does not result from a comprehensive unified vision, political, social or economic. It is instead a city of many distinctive parts that have become highly stratifying socially and physically. A coherent approach to unifying London was attempted in the last decade, and the essays submitted to this special edition of City, Culture and Society consider those aspects of the latest period of urban transformation that were shaped through the new office of the Mayor of London.

Ken Livingstone was elected Mayor in 2000 by London’s large and diverse ethnic citizenry to unite the nation’s capital economically, socially and spatially through planning policies set out in the London Plan. Livingstone oversaw its initial drafting and promoted it vigorously. Subsequent iterations of the London Plan reflect debates surrounding its efficacy during the last decade, and the shift from a socialist to conservative policy perspective when Boris Johnson succeeded Livingstone as Mayor in 2008.

The changes that Londoners have experienced during the last decade were considered by Ph.D. candidates in the Cities Programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in a seminar series I convened in the 2009–2010 academic session. With the support of a selection of these students and prominent academic colleagues at LSE the seminar series was developed into six essays for this special edition. The first essay, by LSE academics Professor Ian Gordon and Tony Travers, sets the political scene in relation to the creation of the London Mayor by considering the processes of strategic planning in London during the first decade of an executive Mayoral system. They consider Doug Yates’ thesis regarding the un governability of major cities and London’s long history of conflict around metropolitan governance issues and invite the conclusion that this metropolitan region is indeed ungovernable, at least in strategic planning terms.

The next two essays focus on the London Borough of Southwark (one of 32 London Boroughs plus the City of London Corporation), a unitary authority with a long history of relative poverty and social inequality, which is set across the River Thames from the City of London, a generator of extreme wealth through banking, the unrelenting of which brought this decade to a recessionary close and has left already poor parts of London considerably worse off. Cities Programme Ph.D. student Jamie Keedie and Dr. Fran Tonkiss, Cities Programme director, examine recent processes of urban renewal and housing provision in London, led by market agents and shaped by the 2004 iteration of the London Plan, and considers Bermondsey as a mixed income and mixed tenure community so central to current urban and housing policies in London. The third essay, by recent Cities Programme graduate Dr. Suzanne Hall and Cities Programme academic Dr. Ayona Datta looks at the different ways that visual signscapes along an inner London street – the Walworth Road – produces particular types of translocal connections to different spaces and places that are physically distanced but symbolically proximate, and examines the ways in which this street is made and remade through these particular connections which are material, embodied, everyday and ordinary.

The fourth essay focuses on Tate Modern in north Southwark, a significant international symbol of modern culture and local transformation, which is a conversion of a former power station. Facing the River Thames and the City of London and St. Paul’s Cathedral, London’s historic symbol, this modern temple of culture links Southwark to the City by a new pedestrian link, the Millennium Bridge, and generates a powerful new public realm and urban axis. Professor Andy Pratt (formally at LSE, but now at King’s College London) and Cities Programme Ph.D. students Corinna Dean and Caroline Donnellan question in their paper the conventional limits of urban regeneration in relation to cultural institutions, with their multiplicity of audiences. The legacy of urban regeneration is then considered by Cities Programme PhD student Juliet Davis and LSE academic Professor Andy Thornley in relation to London’s plans for 2012 Olympics. They explore the process of planning for legacy after the London Olympics, and consider some debates and issues that this has raised in relation to land acquisition and community participation.

Finally, my essay with Cities Programme Ph.D. student Gunter Gassner focuses on the visual consequences of the London Plan and the attitude to very tall, mostly commercial modern buildings in an historic context. It considers the intellectual and policy basis that has permitted – indeed encouraged – the introduction of a new wave of tall buildings into central London since 2000, and highlights the subjectivity of visual interrelationships experienced.
locally in the context of the most highly regulated view management system in the world.

Through this collection of essays we are describing aspects of London's distinctive modern character, and highlighting very recent manifestations of the delicate balance that has see-sawed through the urban history of London (and British culture and society more generally), between authority and its repudiation.
Visual consequences of the plan: Managing London’s changing skyline

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ABSTRACT

The skyline of London is composed of historic monuments of national and international importance, punctuated tall buildings built during post-war building booms, particularly since the 1960s. Currently, some of the tallest commercial and residential buildings are under construction and the emerging skyline is intended to reflect London’s premier world city status, as a stable global capital that balances finance and culture within an integrated society. Its skyline image has been managed since 2000 by the Mayor of London through the London Plan. This paper will consider the historical, intellectual and policy basis that has permitted – indeed encouraged – the introduction of tall buildings into central London since 2000 by focussing on the design of the Heron Tower, located at the northern edge of the Eastern Cluster of tall buildings in the City of London, and discussions regarding its visual impact on St Paul’s Cathedral. Drawings explore the visual impact of the City’s tall buildings on a famous view of St Paul’s from Waterloo Bridge, and highlight the subjectivity of visual inter-relationships experienced locally in the context of the persuasiveness of global finance.

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Introduction: the evolving urban image of London and its management

London is a city of considerable visual contrast, combining buildings of different heights and ages: traditional, mid-rise and tall; ancient and ultra modern. Distant views of its evolving urban form have long been enjoyed from the surrounding hills and, as with other major cities, London’s river provides a visual focus and thread of continuity, as well as an opportunity for open panoramic views of its distinctive, unique and picturesque skyline. It lacks the centralised visual order and regular building heights of Paris, and the aggressive vertical thrust of the dense, apparently chaotic New World bristle of very tall skyscrapers that define Manhattan. Unlike them London’s skyline is neither highly controlled nor mainly the manifestation of market forces, instead, it attempts to balance history and modernity through careful – almost painstaking – visual management. Since the foundation of the Greater London Authority (GLA) in 2000, London’s skyline has been increasingly managed by the Mayor, as an integral part of the three-dimensional spatial planning enshrined within national and regional planning policy.1

The decision by New Labour to create the office of Mayor of London to head the GLA coincided with the publication of the publication of Towards an Urban Renaissance, the Final Report of the Urban Task Force (Urban Task Force, 1999), chaired by the internationally acclaimed British architect, Richard Rogers, subsequently ennobled as Lord Rogers of Riverside. The first Mayor, Ken Livingstone, and the London Plan which his office was charged with formulating, were highly influenced by the conclusions reached by the Urban Task Force. Principally, their emphasis on the value of good design for the urban environment as a primary means of reversing the population exodus from English towns and cities, reasoning that urban renaissance will be stimulated by re-establishing ‘the quality of urban design and architecture as part of our everyday urban culture’ by establishing ‘a new vision for urban regeneration founded on the principles of design excellence, social well-being and environmental responsibility within a viable economic legislative framework’ (Urban Task Force, 1999, p. 1). The key to regeneration, they argued, will be cities with densely populated, compact, well-connected cores, which will encourage people to travel

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1 Principally, national policy Planning Policy Statement 1 (PPS1), Planning Policy Guidance 15 (PPG15) – recently replaced by Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5); and regional policy, which in London focuses on the London Plan.
by public transport, to cycle and walk, and Towards an Urban Renaissance sketches out ten key principles of urban design that – its authors argued – would encourage the creation of 'more liveable places' (Urban Task Force, 1999, pp. 70–71). After half a century of post-war planning of Britain’s cities in which traffic was put before pedestrians, the notion of an urban approach that harmonised people, buildings and spaces truly suggested a renaissance – and the new Mayor embraced the key principles set out by the Urban Task Force for London.

Of course, the underlying notion of re-birth is that there has been more than one already – most famous was the Italian Renaissance which reinterpreted the art and architecture of the ‘golden age’ of classical Greece and Rome for the 15th century. More recently, the Viennese architect and planner, Camillo Sitte, was the first ‘modern’ to articulate his admiration for the civic and artistic character of pre-industrial European towns and cities (Sitte, 1889/1965). He criticised the Ringstrasse that encircles the historic core of Vienna, and the relentless straight-edged, mid-nineteenth century Boulevards that Baron Haussmann had sliced through medieval Paris, and argued instead for more varied urban spaces based on artistic principles inspired by pre-renaissance cities. However, his textual sources were similar to those of his 15th century Italian forebears, and he deferred to the wisdom of the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius (Vitruvius, 2009): the basic idea of his book he wrote ‘is to go to school with Nature and the old masters […] in matters of town planning’ (Sitte, 1965, p. 49).

In London, the principles of classical design promulgated by these ‘old masters’ were filtered through Italian Renaissance Palladianism and the Hanoverians during the urban transformation and expansion of medieval London into an ordered ‘classical’ 18th century city (Summerson, 1945/2003). The Victorians in the 19th century built to a grander scale, extending the underlying spatial structure and urban character of London with new railway bridges and a major embankment along the banks of the River Thames (Halliday, 1999). Their larger and taller 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 skyline silhouette. Changes introduced during the nineteenth century were not however as radical as those of the 20th century. The wholesale clearance of urban infrastructure by World War II bombing, and the introduction of new technology permitted commercial and residential towers to be built increasingly tall, and the skyline was ‘pepper-potted’ by seemingly randomly placed tall buildings by the late 1960s.

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 and Sitte: they were concerned with a human-scaled and a relatively low-tech environment in which five or six storeys was regarded as tall. Recent planning proposals in London have made it clear that height is limited not by classical notions of human scale but by planning policy driven – particularly since the Urban Task Force – by a vision for a dense urban core for London marked by clusters of very tall buildings. Towers – residential and commercial – have been designed for London that will be the tallest in Europe. Planning consent was granted in 2002 for London’s tallest building yet, the London Bridge Tower (the ‘Shard’), a mixed residential and commercial tower designed to be 306 m tall (66 storeys). In 2006, The Pinnacle (DIFA Tower) was consented at 288 m tall (56 storeys) and as the centrepiece of tall buildings in the commercial core of the City of London located north of the Shard (in Southwark), across the River Thames (Table 1).

The consequence of these planning applications and for other tall buildings close by (around 200 m tall) is that the preservation of the setting of St Paul’s Cathedral –

Table 1
Recently completed or consented schemes in the Eastern Cluster of tall buildings in the City of London between 2000 and May 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/address</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Height</th>
<th>Status</th>
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<tr>
<td>100 Bishopsgate</td>
<td>Office and retail</td>
<td>165 m (40 storeys)</td>
<td>Consented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 Lime Street (The Willis building)</td>
<td>Office and retail</td>
<td>125 m (29 storeys)</td>
<td>Consented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–70 St Mary Axe</td>
<td>Office and retail</td>
<td>203 m high to top of plant (46 storeys); 230 m to top of mast</td>
<td>Under construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110 Bishopsgate (The Heron Tower)</td>
<td>Office and retail</td>
<td>95 m</td>
<td>Under construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staple Hall Tower (1 Heron Plaza)</td>
<td>Office</td>
<td></td>
<td>Under construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Leadenhall Building (122 Leadenhall Street)</td>
<td>Office and retail</td>
<td>225 m (48 storeys)</td>
<td>Under construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pinnacle (The Bishopsgate Tower (DIFA Tower))</td>
<td>Office and retail</td>
<td>288 m (59 storeys)</td>
<td>Under construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nido (Rodwell House) (100 Middlesex Street)</td>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>105 m (34 storeys)</td>
<td>Under construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>125 Old Broad Street (former Exchange Tower) and 60 Threadneedle Street</td>
<td>Office and retail</td>
<td>26 storeys and 9 storeys</td>
<td>Under construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To the north of the Eastern Cluster, north of Liverpool Street Station</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Broadgate Tower (201 Bishopsgate)</td>
<td>Office and retail, office, hotel, residential, retail and leisure</td>
<td>178 m (35 storeys) and 77 m (13 storeys)</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishops Place (Land fronting Worship Street and Norton Folgate)</td>
<td></td>
<td>176.7 m (51 storeys)</td>
<td>Consented</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>To the east of the cluster, at Aldgate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aldgate Union 1 and 2</td>
<td>Office and retail</td>
<td>20 and 22 storeys</td>
<td>Under construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Commercial Street</td>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>22 storeys</td>
<td>Consented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>At the southern edge of the Eastern Cluster</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Fenchurch Street</td>
<td>Office and retail</td>
<td>45 storeys</td>
<td>Under construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallbrook Square</td>
<td>Office and retail</td>
<td>23 storeys</td>
<td>Consented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannon Place</td>
<td>Office</td>
<td>8 storeys above concourse</td>
<td>Under construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To the west of the Eastern Cluster</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ropemaker Place</td>
<td>Office and retail</td>
<td>23 storeys</td>
<td>Under construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Moorfields</td>
<td>Office and retail</td>
<td>13 storeys</td>
<td>Consented</td>
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City's and London's most visually prominent and venerated religious symbol – has become a battleground for modernists and traditionalist architects and planners. Both groups are represented by government quangos (quasi-non-governmental organisations): good design is safeguarded by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), and the English Heritage (EH) are the guardians of England's historic environment.

**Townscape and visual assessment**

While *Towards an Urban Renaissance* set the intellectual tone for urban development during the last decade, a parallel publication, *By Design. Urban design in the planning system: towards better practice* (2000), led by CABE, has become an influential practical guide book to modern design. Significantly, *By Design* defines urban design as the 'art of making places for people', and it describes a planning toolkit comprising of seven key principles or objectives of urban design that need to be mastered by would-be urban designers (*By Design*, 2000, p. 15). There is some overlap between the two reports: both are concerned to promote character in townscape by reinforcing locally distinctive patterns of development and culture, and by establishing a high quality public realm.

An important, but unacknowledged influence on *By Design* were the post-war editions of the monthly magazine, *The Architectural Review*, which – like Sitte – had trumpeted the virtues of pre-industrial European place making. A series of essays written by the English architect-planner Gordon Cullen in particular defined a humanist reinterpretation of twentieth century Modernism under the banner of 'Townscape'. Cullen defined Townscape as the 'art of relationship' and the 'art of environment' (Cullen, 1971, pp. 7 and 193), and like Sitte he preferred the formal and spatial associations of form and space that appeared 'natural' to someone experiencing a locality on foot: places that appeared to have been shaped by time and necessity, rather than the pragmatic dictates of urban regulators, especially traffic and street lighting engineers.

Townscape has entered the official planning lexicon: the effective implementation of current architectural and urban design polices being judged through 'Townscape and Visual Assessments', which is a key chapter in an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). A European Directive requiring developers to describe the likely significant impacts of a proposed development (Town, 2007). The EIA describes the use of materials, details, scale and massing in a proposed development, which is demonstrated through drawings, photographs and visualisations. These combine with professional judgement to provide an objective and subjective assessment of the proposals. Townscape and Vi-

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2 An organisation that is financed by the government yet acts independently of it.
3 The requirement for EIA comes from a European Directive (85/333/EEC as amended by 97/11/EC). It is a procedure that must be followed for certain types of development before they are granted development consent and requires the developer to compile an Environmental Statement (ES) describing the likely significant effects of the development on the environment and proposed mitigation measures. The ES must be circulated to statutory consultation bodies and made available to the public for comment. Its contents, together with any comments, must be taken into account by the competent authority (e.g. local planning authority) before it may grant consent. See also: *Handbook of Environmental Impact Assessment: Vol. 2: Environmental Impact: Impact and Limitations*, ed. J. Petts, Wiley-Blackwell, 1999.

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4 In England there are approximately 374,081 listed building entries. Listing marks and celebrates a building's special architectural and historic interest, and also brings it under the consideration of the planning system to safeguard its future whenever feasible to do so. Grade I buildings are of exceptional interest, sometimes considered to be internationally important. Just 2.5% of listed buildings are Grade I. Grade II buildings are particularly important buildings of more than special interest. 5.5% of listed buildings are Grade II. Grade II buildings are nationally important and of special interest, 92% of all listed buildings are in this class and it is the most likely grade of listing for a home owner.
urban fabric, and the image of tall buildings befits its status as a world capital. In fact, as the government's select committee research concludes: 'Tall buildings are more often about power, prestige, status and aesthetics than efficient development' (House of Commons, 2002). Tall buildings may not be necessary, but the report recognises that tall buildings are objects of desire for some: 'There is one powerful and irrefutable argument in favour of tall 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' (House of Commons, 2002; Sklair, 2006; Charney, 2007).

The prosaic post-war residential slab blocks that sprang up seemingly randomly across London are (with few exceptions) not regarded as beautiful, but an influential report in 1960–62 by the Royal Fine Art Commission (RFAC, the forerunner of CABE) suggested that 'exceptionally high buildings look better in the form of towers rather than slabs and a carefully arranged cluster of towers may be preferable to a number of isolated ones' (RFAC, quoted in Catchpole, 1987, p. 14). The notion of 'clusters' of towers, combined with the protection from the intrusion of tall buildings of important views across London, have together proved influential in London and this principle has been tested through several major public planning inquiries in the last decade in relation to views of St Paul's Cathedral looking east down the River Thames.

Several follow-up studies to the RFAC report through the 1980s caused the government to respond with its Strategic Guidance for London Planning Authorities (RGP3A, 1991), which established a list of 10 Strategic Views across London – eight of which focus on St Paul's Cathedral, and two on the Palace of Westminster (the seat of national government and a World Heritage Site (WHS)). The Strategic Views were intended to prevent tall buildings from visually interfering with the settings and silhouettes of these internationally recognisable landmarks, it having been observed since the late 1970s that tall buildings seen behind St Paul's can have two effects: they can either create an effective backcloth of building mass with which the character of the Cathedral can be compared, or spoil its distinctive silhouette by obscuring and diffusing its clear outlines (City of London, 1978, paragraph 11.11). The 'backcloth' referred to is the emerging group of tall buildings to the northeast of St Paul's known as the City or Eastern Cluster, which comprises a loose grouping of high-rise commercial buildings, which protrude above a general plateau of mid-height commercial buildings, and which has had since the early 1970s Tower 42 (the former National Westminster Bank tower), as its most prominent structure at around 180 m in height, and was joined in the last decade by 30 St Mary Axe (completed in 2003 and known more popularly as the 'Gherkin', which has a similar height to Tower 42). The Tower, which is currently under construction having been granted planning approval by the Secretary of State in 2002. It will join Tower 42 and 30 St Mary Axe among an upper tier of office buildings in the Eastern Cluster, which is about to be supplanted by the even taller grouping of office buildings at its centre led by the almost 300 m tall Pinnacle (the Bishopsgate/DIFA Tower) already referred to above. The City towers are all slender towers with narrow floor plates (compared to typical US plan dimensions for skyscrapers that have been adopted at Canary Wharf), because of the small plot sizes that characterise the City's ancient urban grain. The overall effect being sought – in line with RFAC thinking – is to create a physical mass that creates a 'hill-like' profile, and which provides a unified backdrop to St Paul's when viewed from the west (Fig. 1a and b).

The preference in London for building isolated hill-like clusters of tall buildings like the Eastern City cluster, contrasts with the "valley skyline" of New York City, which has two distinct skyscraper clusters in Lower and Midtown Manhattan (Fig. 4). The scale of the Midtown cluster can be best appreciated from the open space of Central Park and when moving southward along the straight streets towards the peaks of the Empire State and Chrysler Building. Lower Manhattan is at the southern fringe of this area and its buildings were lower rise until Minoru Yamasaki designed the twin World Trade Center (WTC) on its south western waterfront in the early 1960s. He consciously designed the WTC in response to the prevailing scale of the locality, and decided that it should literally stand out: "[i]t should not be an overall form which melts into the multi-towered landscape of Lower Manhattan, but it should be unique, have excitement of its own, and yet be respectful to the general area" (Boyer, 2002). Until their destruction by terrorists on 9/11 2001, the former twin towers of the WTC made a singular urban statement – particularly when

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5 London was founded by the Romans and named Londinium.
viewed across the expanse of the Hudson from Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, themselves important symbols of America and its relations to the world (Tavernor, 2007b).

In addition to the assumed beneficial impact on views and settings, the London Plan has identified the suitability of locating tall buildings in economic clusters which are well served by public transport (railway, bus and underground stations), which reduces the need for private transport, and is regarded as a sustainable approach to urban planning (London Plan, 2004, 2008). This thinking stems again directly from the recommendations of the findings of the Urban Task Force in Towards an Urban Renaissance (Urban Task Force, 1999) as well as arguments for economic clusters relating to London's status as a world city, and the demand for international - global - corporate headquarters buildings accommodating large numbers of employees in a single location and with easy access to kindred activities and supporting services.

Markusen (1996) describes places like the City within its central London context as "sticky places within slippery space", specialised centres of activity where business will stick because of the benefits of quantum, scale and stability. The specialisation of cities (and of specific areas within cities) is an important contributor to global competitiveness and London as a world city needs to continue to attract the most significant companies, New York City being its principal competitor in the northern hemisphere (Pain, 2009; Sassen, 2001). A study commissioned by the Corporation of London and undertaken by Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC) has analysed the distinctive features of these "sticky" places, in which the City of London as an economic cluster comprises companies of different sizes, each contributing to the functioning and vitality of the whole while still maintaining direct, face-to-face contact, which is regarded as particularly important by many of the globally operating companies (Corporation of London, 2001, p. 10). Physically, from a distance, this diversity is lost from view, and the Eastern cluster of tall buildings is regarded by many as a homogeneously agglomerate of sameness: of international corporate architecture - hence the 'Manhattanisation' accusation levelled at London's planners by traditionalists (but compare the silhouettes of Manhattan and the City in Fig. 4 below).

Planted on a broad grid of streets and visible across wide stretches of water, the tall buildings on Manhattan rise densely from their natural granite foundation. The buildings are taller than those in London, and their greater height enables the tallest to appear very slender. Conversely, the ancient streets of the City of London, which were laid out originally in Roman times and have been adapted down the centuries have relatively small building footprints and lower tall buildings compared to Manhattan and Canary Wharf (its closest UK counterpart in urban design terms - one Canada Square at Canary Wharf and the World Financial Center and Winter Garden at Battery Park that stood adjacent to the WTC shared the same architect, César Pelli). Also, restrictions set by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) relating to City Airport, between the City and Canary Wharf, have set the maximum height of buildings to around 300 m, which is why The Pinnacle at 288 m is likely to be the City's tallest building (the Empire State rises to 381 m). The tight cluster of buildings around The Pinnacle step down to 180–225 m for to the fringe, with 'foothills' of mid-rise buildings around 100 m tall.

Towards a view management framework

While RPG3A identifies ten Strategic Views in London, the London View Management Framework (LVMF) (GLA, 2007), which is appended as supplementary planning guidance to the London Plan, includes several additional principal viewing locations around London (Fig. 2).

The LVMF also updates the terminology and photographic techniques used to assess the impact of new buildings on London's historic townscape. Cullen had used a graphical method in Townscape (1961/1971), a reductive process that smooths out visual and does little or nothing to explain the specific identity of a building in its context. The LVMF adopts the Guidelines for Landscape (2002) produced by the Institute of Environmental Assessment (now IEEMA) and the Landscape Institute. As the name of the latter organisation suggests, the concern of this document is to establish a visual approach to the rural landscape. London of course is experienced quite differently from a rural landscape and the guidance formulated by CABE and EH (Guidance on Tall Buildings, 2003) also rightly makes the point that tall buildings should be assessed from viewing positions that people can easily frequent, that is, they should be viewed from publicly accessible, not private space. The Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment guidelines recommend the use of specific camera lenses to avoid distortion, and so that results of incorporating montages of proposed designs can be verified accurately and independently. This is developed in the GLA's LVMF, which recommends creating panoramic views by combining multiple images taken from a common viewpoint, and also providing moving images using video or film based conventions, or computer-based interaction (London Plan, 2004, p. 209, paragraph 352). Similar techniques were used at the Heron Inquiry (Corporation of London, 2002, p. 1; Day, 2002).

The design of the Heron Tower has an expressed external circulation core of lifts and stairs, and differentiated facades that are intended to relate positively to different orientations both for the benefit of its occupant internally, and in response to external views of its form. For example, when viewed from the north, "the exposed 'defensive' diagonal bracing of its structure symbolises a gateway", which was intended to relate to its location adjacent to the old Roman gateway into the City (later known as Bishopsgate) and the new gateway to the Eastern Cluster when entering the City from the north. When viewed from the north and northwest the tower has a "soaring landmark profile in the City, its strong verticals animated by lifts and glass; it steps up and southwards away from the dome of St Paul's when viewed at a greater distance from the west along Waterloo Bridge" (Tavernor, 2002; and compare Fig. 3a and b below). It was argued as a positive feature at the Heron Inquiry that in long views the form of the Heron Tower

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A walk of changing sky gaps

The principal visual battleground that the Heron Inquiry focussed on was Waterloo Bridge. Spanning the River Thames from the South Bank complex (including the National Theatre, Festival Hall) to Somerset House on the north bank, it provides one of the best, most historically celebrated platforms from which to view St Paul’s Cathedral. Along its downstream side there are spectacular views of the cathedral with its City backdrop in relation to the width of the Thames is from Somerset House River Terrace and from Waterloo Bridge adjacent to it. Viewing locations on Waterloo Bridge are identified in the LVMF (GLA, 2007 downstream views 15B.1 and 15B.2), and there are viewing plaques that were erected by the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1986 which provide skyline profiles of the distant view and identify the principal buildings (Tavernor, 2004, 2007a). Additionally, on the South Bank across Waterloo Bridge, the embankment River Walk outside the National Theatre (GLA, 2007, view 16A.1) leads down river to Gabriel’s Wharf (GLA, 2007, view 16B.1) a well populated route which has Somerset House and St Paul’s as key foci across the River (see Fig. 5).

A journey on foot from Somerset House River Terrace across Waterloo Bridge and along the South Bank to Gabriel’s Wharf (and vice versa) demonstrates the kinetic effect of movement on distant built form. In architecture, as in three-dimensional art and sculpture, the term kinetic (from the Greek, kinesis) relates to real or apparent movement, the effect of illusory movement when the spectator moves relative to several objects in the distance. This townscape effect was described by Gordon Cullen in Townscape (1961/1971) as ‘serial vision’ and ‘kinetic unity’ (Cullen, 1961/1971, pp. 144 and 147). On the walk notated on the

steps up in a spiral to terminate at the apex of the core at the location of the former Roman City Gate: “The massing rises toward Tower 42 emphasising the organic grouping of the cluster of City towers” (Blee, 2000).
plan here (Fig. 5) the apparent changing relationship of the City cluster of tall buildings to one another and to St Paul’s Cathedral can be clearly appreciated – that is, how tall buildings towards the perimeter of the cluster appear to change their position relative to the tallest buildings at the centre, and how the Eastern cluster as a whole appears closer to St Paul’s from the north bank of the Thames, and more distant from the south (Fig. 6a and b).

The evolving scale and density of these tall buildings in the City was raised as a major concern by English Heritage during the Heron Inquiry (2002), anxiety focussed on an ‘agglomeration’ of tall building forms that would create a dense, or so EH argued, a visually impenetrable wall of development with no ‘sky gaps’, or glimpses of the sky between buildings. The notion of sky gaps is based on a skyline silhouette and measured gaps between buildings: sky gaps refer of course to gaps between buildings not the sky (Fig. 7a and b). English Heritage measured the reducing sky gaps from different viewing positions that would result from the building of the Heron Tower to make their point (Fig. 8).

Waterloo Bridge is an eminently accessible public viewing platform and even before the bridge was built Somerset House (current and pre-existing) commanded views up and down river which have been immortalised by painters (including Canaletto in the mid-18th century and John O’Connor in the 19th: Tavernor, 2004). The geometrical relationship between Waterloo Bridge and the City of London was particularly relevant for the Heron Inquiry as the bridge is located at a bend of the River Thames, which re-
sults in a viewing direction towards the City that is approximately 45° towards the City's embankment. Due to the specific location of the Heron Tower within the Eastern cluster, the sky gaps differ significantly from southerly to northerly viewing positions on the bridge. EH argued at the inquiry that at the southern end of the bridge there appears to be "enough" of a distance between St Paul's Cathedral and the Heron Tower, but that the Tower and Cathedral converge towards the northern end, until ultimately, on Somerset House River Terrace the Heron Tower appears to sit directly behind and rise from the dome of St Paul's (Fig. 8).

There is therefore an apparent dichotomy of effect: between the perceived advantages of clustering tall buildings
and their resulting density. The London Plan and supporting design guidance makes it clear that tall buildings in London should not be pepper-potted, but grouped in clusters to maximise the distances between major historic monuments to minimise their impact on the settings of these buildings and spaces (GLA, 2005, 2007; CABE & EH, 2007).

But, inevitably, the so-called sky gaps within these dense clusters will be narrower and even non-existent in some views – leading to an agglomeration of forms.

The physical proximity of the Eastern Cluster of tall buildings as a hill-like form in relation to St Paul’s Cathedral, and the effect of kinetics on their apparent inter-relationship will be such that in some views the Cathedral will have the Cluster as its direct backdrop, while appearing more separated in other views. Similarly, at the northern edge of the Cluster, the Heron Tower will appear to be part of the cluster in some views, but read as a distinct entity in others. The impact of the Heron Tower on the setting of St Paul’s Cathedral was perceived by its critics at the Heron Inquiry (2001) to be more harmful when viewed in isolation than when subsumed into the identity of the whole cluster. Particularly as its very modern design, as a tall glass international-style ‘skyscraper’ symbolic of global finance, was regarded as antipathetic to St Paul’s Cathedral as a national and international symbol of the Anglican Church. Consequently, EH – as the guardians of the nations’ heritage, and all that that symbolises – focused on whether the sky gap between the Cathedral and the Heron Tower should be regarded as appropriate when viewed from the most important viewing locations on Waterloo Bridge. However, London has continually evolved physically, and in its current manifestation – as a premier world city focusing on financial services – the pressure to change remains.

Managing the views was never intended to affect London’s premier world city status, and ultimately, arguments about sky gaps are irrelevant – even absurd – in the context of the bigger economic picture for London as a premier world city, a position it retained throughout this decade (Pain, 2009). Unsurprisingly, therefore, the Heron Tower Inquiry succeeded in favour of the appellants, as indeed has every other major tall building planning inquiry in the City in the last decade, and the skyline of London is being transformed apace – apparently (at the time of writing) with only a momentary pause to take stock of the global recession.

Conclusions

Many tall building proposals have been challenged for not being part of an established cluster or a coherent masterplan for future tall buildings, or because they allegedly had a harmful visual impact on significant heritage assets. But UK planning policy and guidance already clearly establish parameters by which to define appropriate locations for tall buildings, and what has been very striking about the application of this policy in the last decade is the acknowledgement that seeing tall buildings in direct relation to historic assets – even in cases when they have a very obvious impact on Grade 1 Listed buildings, national monuments and World Heritage Sites – does not necessarily lead the decision maker to conclude that harm will result. The fact is that in the UK system every planning application is judged on its own merits, and the adjudged high quality of designs by architects whose calibre is confirmed by international reputation, has permitted the decision makers to conclude that tall buildings can add positively to London’s skyline even though very visible in relation to valued historic buildings and landscapes (the expanse of the River Thames as well as Royal Parks).

It is particularly memorable that the Inspector for the Shard Public Inquiry concluded that this 306 m tall tower, designed by internationally renowned architect Renzo Piano, while having a definite visual impact on the Tower of London WHS and St Paul’s Cathedral from a Strategic View (pre-LVMF), was appropriately located and of the highest design quality and therefore would not harm these buildings or nearby listed buildings and conservation areas. The First Secretary of State agreed with his Inspector (decision of 18 November 2003). Now under construction, this will be the tallest building in Europe when completed in a few years time, and will become a significant landmark from the distant hills and the Thames river bridges in central London. It will define – with St Paul’s and the City Eastern Cluster – the visual image of the capital for decades to come and will be a tangible expression of the balance sought in the London Plan between modern and historic architecture.

References


7 The UK planning system as it relates to England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but excluding Scotland which has its own planning law.


9 Founder of the Renzo Piano Building Workshop, and formerly a partner of Richard Rogers on the design of the Pompidou Centre in Paris.


