

Visual and cultural sustainability: The impact of tall buildings on London

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Available online 12 July 2007

Abstract

Urban sustainability has been equated in *Towards an Urban Renaissance* (1999), with the need for compact, dense, vibrant urban cores. To this end, tall buildings are regarded by the Mayor of London as an integral part of the Greater London Authority's sustainable vision for the capital, and *The London Plan* (2004) provides Greater London with a spatial development strategy in which tall buildings will make a highly visible contribution.

This paper considers the impact of tall buildings on the visual and cultural sustainability of London, particularly the impact of tall buildings on the protected views of London (as defined in RPG3A). It compares definitions of sustainable urban design through national policy (PPG1 and PPS1) and policy provided to preserve the settings of historic buildings and conservation areas (PPG15) with the proposed management of these views. In this context, it charts the emergence of Townscape as the official means to composing and assessing the visual character and quality of new buildings in relation to old. It also sets out the divergent contributions made to the UK planning process by English Heritage and CABE and their opposing notions as to what constitutes a well-balanced sustainable urban environment visually and culturally.

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Keywords: Architecture; London; Tall buildings; Townscape; Urban design; Views management

1. Setting the scene—introduction

Planning Policy Guidance Note 1, *General Policy and Principles* (PPG1), published in February 1997, contained the first legal definition of the role of design in planning. It underlined the fact that the space between buildings is of proper public concern and placed the emphasis on good design:

Good design should be the aim of all those involved in the development process and should be encouraged everywhere. Good design can help promote sustainable development; improve the quality of the existing environment; attract business and investment; and reinforce civic pride and a sense of place (paragraph 15 of PPG1).

The current Labour administration replaced PPG1 with *Planning Policy Statement 1—Delivering Sustainable Development* (PPS1) in February 2005. The primary objectives of PPS1 confirm that achieving design quality is of paramount

importance in achieving a sustainable urban environment. Moreover, PPS1 reinforces the notion in PPG1 that planning has a key role to play in the creation of sustainable communities, which it defines as communities that will stand the test of time, where people want to live, and which will enable people to meet their aspirations and potential.

Not only is there emphasis on the design quality of buildings, but also the spaces between them, that is, the visual – spatial and physical – townscape that characterises the built environment: another important principle introduced in PPG1 (paragraph 14). Thus, PPS1 requires the protection and enhancement of existing urban environments: “A high level of protection should be given to most valued townscapes [. . .]. Those with national and international designations should receive the highest level of protection” (PPS1 paragraph 17). This is because:

The condition of our surroundings has a direct impact on the quality of life and the conservation and improvement of the natural and built environment brings social and economic benefit for local communities. Planning should seek to maintain and improve the local environment and help to mitigate the effects of declining environmental quality through

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positive policies on issues such as design, conservation and the provision of public space. (PPS1 paragraph 18.)

Consequently, “Planning authorities should seek to enhance the environment as part of development proposals.” (PPS1 paragraph 19).

To this end, PPS1 lists six key principles, the third of which equates sustainable development with spatial planning:

(iii) A spatial planning approach should be at the heart of planning for sustainable development.

In a UK context, the “most valued townscapes” are usually a creation of more than one approach to architecture and place making, and townscape quality and character is the outcome of generations, if not centuries of design and planning process. This is recognised in *Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 (PPG15)—Planning and the Historic Environment (1994)*, which describes the general government commitment to preserving the historic environment. PPG15 provides a full statement of policies for the identification and protection of historic buildings, conservation areas and other essential elements that characterise the historic environment. However, critics complain that PPG15 is conservation oriented, and only permits the introduction of high quality, innovative modern design, which – following a series of tests – can be demonstrated to “preserve and enhance” the physical and spatial balance of the existing built heritage. A recent review by a House of Commons Select Committee concluded that:

[Paragraph] 81. Too many consents and permissions are required before a historic building can be altered or adapted. The listing system is important in obliging developers to recognise the value of the historic buildings and to adopt a more creative approach. However, the listing system lacks transparency and appears haphazard and so can delay regeneration schemes. (Select Committee on Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004.)

PPG15 was introduced more than a decade ago, before the positive relationship of good design to sustainable development was placed so firmly on the planning agenda, and before the arrival on the planning scene of two Executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and English Heritage (EH), who can and do adopt conflicting positions regarding major development proposals: it being CABE’s role to promote quality modern design, and EH’s role, as the Government’s statutory adviser on the historic environment, to conserve. Moreover, while the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) funds both bodies, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) also funds CABE. As it is the duty of the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM), as First Secretary of State, to provide the final judgement by consenting or refusing contested planning applications, this funding base would suggest that the DPM is unlikely to be wholly impartial when asked to judge the potential impact of a modern design on a historic setting.

This apparent inequality in the status of CABE and EH is particularly pertinent when considering the impact of design

proposals for tall buildings, and especially in London, where a large number of tall commercial and residential buildings have been proposed and, as with Swiss Re (now known as 30 St. Mary Axe), completed since the turn of the millennium. The natural topography of London, a broad river basin surrounded by low hills, ensures that tall buildings can be seen across considerable distances, and can and do have a visual impact on the capital’s most major historic monuments: notably, St. Paul’s Cathedral and the Tower of London in the City of London, the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey in the City of Westminster: the latter two also being World Heritage Sites (WHS). Tall buildings constructed since the 1960s have already had an impact on these world-renowned sites, and those who wish to conserve London’s historic image are clashing with those who wish to modernise it.

The notion of sustainability is at the core of the current – at times very heated – debate, which takes place in the committee rooms and planning offices of London Boroughs, and at some recent major public inquiries in London, where a sharp distinction has been drawn between traditionalists and modernists: those who agitate against tall buildings, and those who promote them under the banner of urban sustainability.

Progressive modernists, led by the current Labour Government, argue that tall buildings should be regarded as desirable assets in London, that they are necessary to provide a compact-sustainable city, to meet practically the demands on the limited space available at London’s core, and – by building tall buildings next to and above major transportation interchanges – to provide a sustainable public transportation system. The City of London has several transportation foci around its perimeter, and Paddington Station in the City of Westminster is the site of a large commercial regeneration programme, which includes moderately tall buildings. Even more dramatic changes are promised for London Bridge Station in the London Borough of Southwark, across the River Thames from the City, where the internationally acclaimed architect Renzo Piano (the Renzo Piano Building Workshop) has designed a mixed residential and commercial tower, known popularly by its distinctive form as the ‘shard of glass’, which received planning consent in November 2003. With a projected completion in 2009, it would be 307 m tall, some 120 m taller than any existing tall building in the City of London, and will be very visible in relation to St. Paul’s and the World Heritage Site of the Tower of London. In the autumn of 2005, the architects KPF Associates submitted a planning application to the Corporation of London for The Bishopsgate Tower, for an office tower at the very heart of the Square Mile 307 m tall (57 occupied storeys). In 2001, KPF also received consent for 110 Bishopsgate, also within the City of London. Known as the Heron Tower, it will be 202.6 m tall to the top of the building (47 storeys), 242 m to the top of its mast. Tall buildings have also been consented along the embankment of the River Thames – the 183 m tall residential Vauxhall Tower, south and west of Vauxhall Bridge – which was supported by the First Secretary of State in 2004, in contradiction of his Planning Inspector who recommended refusal. Others have been submitted since and approved since then, including in January 2006, the proposal

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