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Urban conservation in London and beyond, 1979-2014: drawing the balance sheet

As a city almost eleven times as old as Melbourne, London has accumulated a vast architectural and historic heritage that contributes immeasurably to its international reputation and allure. To protect that legacy a layer of defences is in place, some formal, others unofficial.

The main legal basis of protection is the listing system, overseen by English Heritage, the government's statutory adviser on historic buildings, and administered by London's 32 local authorities or boroughs. This system has been gradually developed since 1947, just after the Second World War. Its reach is powerful and broadly respected. There are estimated to be almost 40,000 listed buildings in London which cannot be substantially altered without special consent. In practice many changes do take place to them, and only a small minority prove to be contentious. But the authorities try to be vigilant about all alterations to exteriors as well as to the interiors of the 2,000 or so London buildings in the highest of the three categories for listing. Consent for the demolition of listed buildings is rare.

In addition London has something like 1,000 conservation areas, districts where external changes to all buildings – notably their street fronts – are subject to some control by the local authority, with civic amenity in mind. In some parts of London with a dense stock of high-quality older buildings, particularly Westminster and Kensington & Chelsea, a high proportion of the borough is covered by conservation areas.

The strength and effectiveness of these legal systems of protection for London's heritage depend ultimately upon wide public commitment to conservation at many levels. This ranges from the amassing of architectural and historic knowledge by scholars and experts in series like the Pevsner guides and the Survey of London, through to the campaigning of membership-led national amenity societies and the vigilance of a network of local groups. One recent manifestation of this public interest has been the growth of the Open House movement, inaugurated 22 years ago and now a massive jamboree each September, comparable in scale to sporting activities. In 2013, over 700 different sites were opened, with thousands queuing for the last chance to see inside the celebrated Battersea Power Station before redevelopment commenced within its long-derelict shell.

These positive forces and factors notwithstanding, all is far from rosy for London's heritage. Among current concerns are the systematic reduction of government funding for official bodies like English Heritage, and an apparent decline of interest among younger citizens in conservation – an aspect of culture that at first sight offers little instant excitement and gratification. But perhaps the most manifest frustration is the failure to protect London's streetscape and skyline from the worst excesses of commercial development.

Like Melbourne, the centre of London is under enormous pressure. That pressure derives ultimately from the city's continuing and rampant commercial success, the consequent spiralling costs of land and property, and the rebirth of an old tendency, dormant during the welfare-state decades after the Second World War, to equate civilisation and culture with material development and consumption.

The most spectacular symptom of this malaise, it can be argued, is London's failure to create and control an effective policy for high buildings. The British capital managed to maintain its commercial strength right up until 1939 with very few buildings over 100 feet in height, despite the skyscraper-led growth in New York, Chicago and elsewhere. When change came after the war, it originated not with businessmen but with planners and architects, who found London drab and monotonous and hoped to enliven it by breaking up the street pattern, increasing open space and encouraging 'mixed development' of different heights. That strategy worked quite well on housing estates but not at all well in the commercial centre, where the pattern of older buildings and narrow, irregular streets contrasts with the kind of city grid which gives logic and order to tall buildings in the great American cities (or, for that matter, Melbourne).

When a few tall office towers began to encroach on the City of London during the 1960s, they were regulated mainly by reference to their effect on views of St Paul's Cathedral. The result was a curious policy of 'viewing corridors', spasmodically elaborated ever since. If the policy has saved the immediate environs of St Paul's and the Tower of London from being overshadowed, the City has not escaped an increasingly chaotic skyline. Over the years an incoherent group of high buildings has emerged. Apart from being poorly interrelated, they have a highly damaging effect on the immediate street context around their bases, which have too often been contrived in a brash, unneighbourly manner.

How has all this coarse indiscipline come about? The reasons are complex. Over time, the call for tall (or, more accurately, large) buildings in London came increasingly from developers and bankers, who claimed they were essential to the scale of their operations and that without them London would lose its financial hegemony to Frankfurt, New York or Hong Kong. Successive British governments since 1979 have proved all too willing to heed this argument, though it has never been proved in substance. In theory, it would have been possible to concede that view while confining high buildings to the regeneration of the London Docklands area downstream from the City, going on apace since the 1980s, rather as La Défense has been reserved

for high buildings on the western edge of Paris. But once the Docklands developments showed signs of success, vested interests in the City of London had little trouble in persuading the authorities that it too needed to build high if it was not to lose prosperity and prestige forever.

Another factor in the advance of high buildings in London's centre has been the support of leading designers. Architects of the calibre of Norman Foster ('The Gherkin') and Renzo Piano ('The Shard') have had no compunction about building high in London, bringing their skills and allure to bear on towers which while undoubtedly striking objects are just as undeniably poor neighbours. The most effective of these advocates has been Richard Rogers. Throughout his career Rogers has championed density, excitement and challenge as essential to modern cities, notably London. For Rogers bold and wilful clashes of scale and type, as manifested in his Lloyds Building and later performances by his firm, are signs of urban vitality and welcome departures from staid, conventional taste.

Rogers was able to convert Ken Livingstone, London's mayor from 2000 to 2008, to the view that the conservation lobby should be disregarded and high buildings encouraged. And under Livingstone's successor, Boris Johnson, that policy has continued and spread way beyond the bounds of the City of London. All along the South Bank of the Thames and to the north and east of the City, office and apartment towers are now springing up. Most of these developments serve no identifiable need and have scant architectural merit. They are being built because with London's ever-rising property prices they represent an investment opportunity. Capitalism, it seems, really is the only game in town.

Against this Goliath the defenders of London's heritage, strong on paper, look like those of David with his slingshot. English Heritage, for instance, is under constant pressure from government not to obstruct commercial investment, which is often presented today as the only road to national salvation and prosperity. Yet many Londoners, reeling from the sky-high cost of housing and a palpable coarsening of the environment, question whether over-development is not now in danger of killing exactly the amenities which have drawn people to London in the first place, not least investors.

In principle the forces behind high buildings in London and Melbourne are similar. But because the two cities differ in scale and layout they present themselves differently on the ground. The broad grid and deep lots of Melbourne's CBD mean that in many places, notably at corners, a single glance can encompass buildings of two, ten and fifty storeys. The result is often a painful muddle. Though (as in London) it is probably too late now to go back to any simple rules about heights, something might be done by excluding further high buildings from certain sensitive zones of the CBD and, who knows, even by introducing the concept of viewing corridors.

In London, bigger, more densely planned and multi-centred, the impact of tall buildings has been uneven. The City of London has been permanently blighted – in the end poor and inconsistent planning policies are most to blame. But the West End, for instance, better regulated and under less aggressive financial pressures, has so far largely escaped the rash of tall, indifferently designed office and apartment towers. So it is important that conservationists do not throw in the towel and say, as some are tempted to do, that with so many towers now in some stages of planning all over London it is pointless to oppose them. UNESCO, for one, does not agree. It has commented adversely on the impact of commercial development on the backdrop of three of London's four designated world heritage sites – the Tower of London, the Palace of Westminster and Maritime Greenwich. The British government has not affected to take much notice, but it would be well advised to do so. In the long run over-development could well turn out to kill the goose that laid London's golden egg. To ensure any city's long-term prosperity and attractiveness, a fair and thoughtful balance has to be struck between conservation and development.