

Why can't we identify sites where towers would be suitable?

Historic England, Why don't you say where towers would not have a deleterious impact on heritage assets?

Just about the only certainty about high-rise development in London is where you absolutely cannot build: that is to say in the protected view corridors related to St Paul's Cathedral. Everywhere else, why not have a punt?

That is why there are more than 400 applications for buildings of 20 or more storeys currently in the planning pipeline, and why the Skyline Campaign and Historic England are so jumpy about the subject. It is undeniable that Ken Livingstone's promise of only 'world-class' towers being permitted under his mayoralty was not kept; Boris Johnson has proved only too happy to permit average developments accompanied by a big cheque for Crossrail; and the mayoral candidates do not sound at all convincing about their tower strategies.

Historic England, under good new chairman Duncan Wilson, is now leading the charge on protection of what it sees as London's main unique element: the Thames. There is talk of protected zones on either side of the river, with new view protections. There is also a demand that under the next mayor, suitable sites for towers should be identified, because heritage folk are not against towers, you understand, just badly designed ones in the wrong place.

However, if you accept the Unesco view of the world, it is not just aspect but prospect which is critical to the protection of heritage. What this means is that virtually any historic site in London would suffer from the 'impact' – that loaded word reminiscent of car crashes – of a new tower, assuming it could be seen from the site.

Make no mistake, there are plenty of people who, despite their claims to the contrary, would like to put a halt to tall buildings full stop. Renzo Piano's Paddington tower design was the metaphorical lightning conductor for their explosion of negative energy, despite the encouragement of Westminster planners to go high in order to generate enough value to sort out the infrastructure mess at the station.

Incidentally, would the same people be happy if there were 400 proposals for 19-storey towers, which for some reason don't count in the current debate?

There would be one way of approaching the height issue whereby planners, architects and the public might find common cause, even if it left sections of the property market less than happy. This would be to have an honest debate and then identify specific sites where towers could/should be located. The question for Historic England is: why it don't you say where towers would *not* have >>>

Planning in London has been published and edited by Brian Waters, Lee Mallett and Paul Finch since 1992

a deleterious impact on heritage assets? Why wait for a new mayor? Why hasn't it been done before if it is so important? Why won't conservationists put lines on maps (other than for new conservation areas)?

Unless and until they do so, there will be a suspicion that they will simply snipe at any lines that someone else draws, or complain endlessly about individual developments as they arise. English Heritage lost the three tall building inquiries where it went to war (Heron, Shard, Walkie-Talkie), partly because it was picking a fight over distinctive buildings by good tower architects, rather than focussing on the mediocre. Putting towers in a world financial centre, or next to one of London's busiest railway interchanges, doesn't sound too dumb from a locational point of view.

Some architects supporting the HE line have themselves produced designs for buildings close to the Thames that in theory they might now oppose, for example Graham Morrison's three-tower scheme at Waterloo (abandoned), or Terry Farrell's Hong Kong-scale development in Deptford (progressing).

Be careful what you wish for.

Bring back design champions

It's not only the Mayor who needs a Chief Architect to bring back quality control to London's built environment

Mayoral candidate Zac Goldsmith promises a new Chief Architect for London. He says he wants a city architect to support 'high-quality design' in major developments, oversee the creation of 200 'pocket parks' and advise on town-centre regeneration.

He also pledges to assemble a team of 'flying planners' to beef up the 'hollowed out' planning departments of austerity-struck London boroughs: "As mayor, I will not just build more homes but build better homes too, working with my new Chief Architect and local communities to design a London we will all be proud to call our home," Goldsmith says.

The Chief Architect would also gain jurisdiction over the design of buildings on public-sector land and would help hold developers to account.

Despite their past achievements, the influence of both CABI and Urban Design London has faded where they used to present developers and their architects with a high bar and sophisticated design review. Now approvals are just about viability and CIL/s106 contributions.

This absence of quality control at the design level is not just absent at the London-wide level. The disappearance of the Borough Architect deprives local planning authorities of the expertise once taken for granted. In his speech to the Clothworkers livery company (see page 37) Brian Waters makes a plea for the City to appoint a champion for great architecture and townscape to fill the void recently vacated by Peter Rees. This applies equally to all London boroughs. ■