

Westminster's call for better design

We are competing with the other great cities of the world many of whom are ahead of us and our partner organisations when it comes to the quality of design they are delivering, says Robert Davis.



Councillor Robert Davis DL is Cabinet Member for Planning, Westminster City Council

Westminster has a long and successful commitment to architectural excellence and best planning practice. Specialist design teams continue to spearhead the Council's continuing efforts to achieve good architecture through the observance of its enduring civic design philosophy. Accordingly, Westminster City Council recognises its duty to ensure that any new development is appropriate to the character of the locality, is in scale with its surroundings and pays due respect to any features of acknowledged importance, which it may affect.

The City Council is also determined to maintain and steadily raise the 'threshold of acceptability' for the

design and appearance of new architecture in Westminster. This reflects growing public expectations and interest in new building projects. A sustained improvement in design can be fostered by the positive and well-informed operation of Unitary Development Plan policies together with the continuing expert advice made available to applicants by Council officers with relevant specialist skills. This professional advice will continue to form the basis upon which Council Members make their planning decisions, especially those relating to the design of new buildings.

This year, Westminster Council is challenging architects and developers to raise their game, ensuring that the capital remains world class. The value of well-designed places and spaces is well established: visually attractive, safe, accessible and inclusive developments attract residents, visitors and investment.

Covent Garden, which was under threat of demolition and complete redevelopment in the sixties, is an example of an area that has been transformed and revitalised by virtue of its conservation. But the City needs to progress as well and in areas where there is potential for area regeneration, like Paddington, the City Council is encouraging radical new design to create a vibrant new inner city quarter.

The Council intends to challenge the notion that design quality is a peripheral aspect of the planning process. Design has been considered secondary for too long. But redeeming the role of design does not mean forgetting and neglecting our antique edifices, which play a paramount role in contributing to Westminster's unique character. The Council values the importance of achieving a balance between creative initiatives and the preservation of historical



buildings, while ensuring environmental sustainability.

This leads to consider that innovation and groundbreaking design do not necessarily imply tall buildings. Skyscrapers are often associated with successful cities and, in London, they are often considered to be a requirement for the capital to maintain its status as a world city.

Westminster Council confronts the pressure for tall buildings and the notion that skyscrapers are an essential expression of the city's economic progress. We are asking architects and developers to challenge stale clichés and received wisdom – Westminster has demonstrated time and time again that you can preserve and enhance your heritage whilst also achieving and increasing economic success. For example, the Apple store on Regent Street has been overhauled for a modern purpose in keeping with the street's character.

We believe that it is not the height of a building that renders it strategically important, and use the guidance from CABE, English Heritage and Westminster's Existing Tall Buildings Policy to help deter-

Paddington Basin, before and after





mine planning applications. The guidance emphasizes context, design and detail as the three principal considerations and notes that existing tall buildings do not set a precedent for new ones.

The council's guidelines and reports stem from our belief that our City's skyline should be protected, in line with the Unitary Development Plan. View protection is extremely important as it impacts on the way we appreciate historic buildings and is about protecting the wider setting of listed buildings, which can be as important as protecting the historic fabric.

High buildings will not be permitted in Westminster where the development would intrude upon strategic views or upon the setting of the Palace of Westminster, the Westminster Abbey World Heritage Site, views from Royal Parks, London Squares or the River Thames, or would be incongruous with respect to the prevailing character of the area within which they would be located. Where high buildings are granted as an exception they shall contribute to the regeneration of the local area.

We are inviting developers to remember that there are alternatives to building tall. The parliamentary committee and the EH/CABE guidance both stressed that tall buildings are not necessary to accommodate higher densities. A good example of this in practise is the former Department of the Environment Building on Marsham Street in the south of Westminster. Colloquially known as the three ugly sisters, the three towers and podium housed the Department of the Environment on Marsham Street. The 20 storey towers were demolished in 2003, and have been replaced with a more human scale building that despite its low rise formation manages to increase the floor space to 49,000 sq m.

Westminster's challenge must be seen as a stimulus to push the boundaries of creative thinking. Over the next twelve months, the council's planning department will organise design-led events and seminars, gathering industry leaders to stimulate debate and challenge current thinking, as well as re-considering its own policies and seeing how it can more effectively demand the highest

possible standards.

In Westminster, appropriate opportunities have often been found for architects to create notable buildings, which now form a valuable part of its unique architectural legacy. The City Council is concerned to ensure that this positive tradition is continued. In any period, the art of architecture normally reflects the predominant economic conditions, cultural values and preoccupations of the time. It has also been subject to fluctuations in fashion and taste and the twenty first century will be no exception.

It is important that the design of new buildings should endeavour to attain an enduring quality and thereby, contribute to the long-established overall impression of permanence and stability, which is so characteristic of the City of Westminster.

We need to recognise that we are competing with the other great cities of the world many of whom are

ahead of us and our partner organisations when it comes to the quality of design they are delivering. We simply cannot afford to be left behind when it comes to innovation, creativity and courage in our own built environment.

Westminster Council aims to deliver a world class city, in line with the Council's One City Programme, which is about providing excellent services and building strong communities. Good design will foster and help reinforce strong communities.

Our Planning committees will demand only the best and reject the mediocre. We invite architects, developers, land owners, Property Journalists, planning consultants and the public to join our debate for better architecture and come up with better quality, innovative and sustainable design.

Top: Marsham Street before and after.
Below: Covent Garden.

