

Tall buildings put critics in a tizz – as usual

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Those of an Enlightenment persuasion can only hope that rationality will continue to play a part in planning and environmental policies related to tall buildings, whatever their first use.

It comes as a surprise to a certain sort of media commentator that London is increasingly a focus for the development of tall buildings. The annual survey by the New London Architecture organization has, for several years, noted the increasing number of buildings of more than 18 to 20 storeys being proposed in the capital. It should not come as a surprise.

In one of the least successful 'campaigns' in recent London architectural history, an attempt was made a few years back to form an alliance of people who wanted a more reflective planning policy to deal with the supposed problem of height. Unfortunately, the magazine and national newspaper which backed the initiative never got round to properly defining what its aims were.

The result was that outright opponents of anything tall were able to sign up to a campaign which also attracted support from developers and architects who made a living out of high-rise buildings. A worthwhile ambition came to nothing, and the following year showed the biggest increase in tall building proposals on record. The campaign faded away.

However, judging by media commentary following the latest NLA survey, things haven't got much more reflective. The working assumptions included the idea that developers and investors are ignorant dupes of duplicitous estate agents, encouraging them to waste their money on bad investments. If that were not enough, they have failed to notice that we live in a pandemic world where nobody is going to want to work in the office. From an environmental point of view, the big disaster of tall buildings is that they are impossible to demolish without the investors losing their shirts.

This is mostly codswallop, of course. Anti-capitalist headbangers, including hilariously non-rigorous 'academics', have paraded their ignorance and prejudice about office development for the past 60 years, happily to very little effect. They are almost always wrong, initially because they did not regard office employment as 'work', therefore seeing it as a threat

to 'real' work, by which they meant manual labour. Dockers good, pen-pushers bad.

A favourite trick was to add up all the available office space (much of it third-rate, small-scale accommodation) to 'prove' that there was no need for big modern buildings. Then there was the argument that offices were somehow a threat to the creation of much-needed housing. Centre Point was evil because it was a high-rise office. Now, a listed building, it is still reviled because while converted to residential, it is not 100 per cent 'affordable'.

More recent complaints have involved the alleged damage done to the London skyline by tall buildings; in fact the skyline has become far more interesting. Next came environmental damage, which on examination turned out to be mistaken because car parking has largely been eliminated in tower applications, and the workers arrive by public transport. Of course the head-bangers quickly changed tack, arguing that in any particular case, a proposed tall building would 'overload' the public transport system.

Come the pandemic, and the argument switched

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again: this time, so few people will want to use public transport that the increase in office accommodation is totally unnecessary. If the towers are residential, then obviously they are in the wrong place; if they are in the right place they are not delivering enough 'affordable' (ha ha) accommodation.

In short, whatever the world of development wants to do must by definition be wrong, should be severely controlled and preferably blocked – following the creation of policies by people who have never

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built anything (particularly housing). Their aesthetic prejudices, as frequently expressed in local design policies, refer to buildings in a way which would result in Commission for Racial Equality prosecutions were they applied to people and communities – all that stuff about 'fitting in', not being 'alien' or 'non-local', not to mention traditional colour palettes.

And of course the as-of-right re-use of offices for homes has infuriated professional bodies, especially planners, because they fear their default activity being diverted to something more useful than obstructive development control.

Those of an Enlightenment persuasion can only hope that rationality will continue to play a part in planning and environmental policies related to tall buildings, whatever their first use. Actually we want tall buildings that will not be demolished once they have made investors their return; we want long life, loose fit, low energy; we want more timber used in construction (assuming the claimed embodied carbon arguments are verifiable); we read the London Plan and note the anticipated demand for homes and workspace based on a significant further population increase in the capital over the coming decade.

Critics who hate developers because they are part of the global financial system will, of course, hate the product they create, but they have few answers as to how we are to improve our cities, neighbourhoods and buildings, beyond opposing whatever it is that people prepared to take a risk are proposing.

This is student politics, and about as useful. ■

Paul Finch's column, formerly published in the Architects' Journal, now appears weekly at www.worldarchitecturefestival.com