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Title: **Debating Tall: Is UNESCO Going Too Far?**

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Subjects: History, Theory & Criticism
Social Issues
Urban Design

Publication Date: 2012

Original Publication: CTBUH Journal, 2012 Issue II

Paper Type:

1. Book chapter/Part chapter
2. **Journal paper**
3. Conference proceeding
4. Unpublished conference paper
5. Magazine article
6. Unpublished

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Debating Tall: Is UNESCO Going Too Far?

Controversy has erupted over development proposals in London and Liverpool in the UK, which UNESCO says will damage views of World Heritage sites. Critics counter that UNESCO is over-stepping its mandate by inserting itself into the planning process and threatening to revoke world heritage status. The question for this edition of Debating Tall: Is UNESCO going too far?

YES

Paul Finch

Editorial director of Architectural Review and Architects' Journal; deputy chair of the UK Design Council

Impertinent claims to authority by UNESCO, the unelected Paris-based bureaucracy, are resulting in Gauleiter instructions to cities as to what they should do with their built history. The latest example is London, where UNESCO is throwing its weight about in relation to the "world heritage site" of Parliament Square, location for the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben.

UNESCO is "warning" Westminster Council and the UK government that proposals in the Waterloo area, on the other side of the River Thames, will put the status of the world heritage site at risk. This is because views of planned buildings by David Chipperfield, among others, would allegedly ruin the experience of the heritage site.

Why is UNESCO concerning itself with developments in a highly regulated western city? The answer: developing countries with real world monuments, like Egypt and its pyramids, became fed up with demands UNESCO kept making on them. How come UNESCO never made similar demands of developed countries?

UNESCO began looking for cities in developing countries where they could interfere. One consequence of this was a government decision to hold a public inquiry into Rafael Vinoly's "Walkie-talkie" tower in the City of London. It had been given planning permission, but then entered UNESCO, with some menacing noises about the Tower of London losing its world heritage site designation.

The threat to remove world heritage site status from the Tower of London had occurred earlier in respect of Renzo Piano's Shard scheme at London Bridge. This can be seen from the Tower, though it is not directly opposite and is also on the other side of the Thames. The inquiry inspector had no problem about view impact and recommended approval for the Shard, which is now nearing completion.

Earlier, at a public inquiry into the Heron Tower office building in the City of London, the inspector recommended allowing the

development, also nearing completion. He said that just because you could see a building from a conservation area did not mean that the area had been ruined.

We need to give a robust response to UNESCO. That might be along the lines of: we have looked after our heritage for centuries without you telling us what to do or how to do it.

To use an old-fashioned London phrase: why don't you stick it up your jumper? And remember Waterloo!

Editor's note: This article is adapted by the author from an earlier version which appeared in the Architects' Journal.



London Skyline © CTBUH

NO

Marie-Noël Tournoux and Patricia Alberth
UNESCO World Heritage Centre

UNESCO is concerned by the multitude of historic cities and World Heritage sites facing difficulties in reconciling conservation and socio-economic development. The challenge is to promote heritage-led planning policies that consider the significance of heritage, and artistic and architectural achievements.

We are witness to a living paradox. On the one hand, heritage sites and historic cities experience increasing economic success and are promoted, or marketed as never before. On the other hand, the actual values and fabric of heritage are frequently neglected, insufficiently maintained, destroyed or "Disneyfied" in the name of progress and modernization. What is often forgotten is that an integrated approach to heritage-led

regeneration delivers measurable economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits. Examples from cities such as Paris, Rome and Edinburgh demonstrate why heritage should not be seen as a marginal issue, but as inherently linked to economic development, social cohesion and identity.

World Heritage is not just about preserving national monuments or natural wonders. It is about reclaiming values. Compare today's trendy Marais Quarter of Paris to the derelict slum of the '50s. Today the area thrives, the skyline is preserved and companies compete to invest in listed monuments with heavy heritage preservation constraints.

The heritage quality is now an important part of the real estate proposition in Paris. It has developed new areas mixing houses and office space, attracting architects and developers from around the world. Pritzker Prize winners have created daring designs which are compatible with the historic environment. The issue is adapting projects to context, not constraints

Unfortunately, the pride and visibility gained by the listing of a specific site does not always become a lever for development. In some cases it is perceived as a handicap. However, why should respecting height limits, visual integrity, and contextual adaptation based on the assessment of a site's value be less feasible than observing fire security restraints or climate protection measures?

The last 30 years have witnessed rapid changes in global population growth and migration, increasing pressures on land use and energy consumption. Today, with more than three billion individuals living in cities, the challenge is developing a system to manage change and integrate cultural assets in planning to understand cities in their complexity as historic urban landscapes. Heritage should be considered as a link to develop change in a sustainable manner. Conservation addresses the past and the future at the same time. It is an intellectual process of mediation between different paradigms.

More information on UNESCO's recommendations on the historic urban landscape can be found at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/638/>