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Author: Peter Murray, Chairman, Wordsearch

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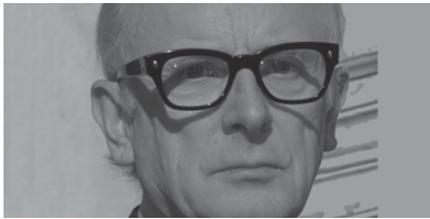
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## Building Tall in a 2,000-Year-Old City



Peter Murray

### Author

**Peter Murray**, Chairman

Wordsearch  
91 Goswell Road  
London EC1V 7EX  
United Kingdom

t: +44 20 7549 6600  
e: studio@wordsearch.co.uk  
www.wordsearch.co.uk

### Peter Murray

Peter trained as an architect but has spent his career in the communication of architecture rather than in its construction. He was formerly editor of *Building Design*, the weekly newspaper for architects, and subsequently editor of the *Royal Institute of British Architects' (RIBA) Journal*.

He founded Wordsearch in 1983 to focus on the design of communications collateral for architecture and real estate. Peter was made an Honorary Fellow of the RIBA in 1999. He is a member of the Royal Academy Architecture Committee and Honorary Secretary of the Architecture Club. He is Founder Chairman of the London Festival of Architecture and the New London Architecture Centre. Peter served on the CTBUH Awards Committee in 2010 and 2011, and spoke at the CTBUH Mumbai Conference in 2010.

Much attention has been paid to London's current wave of tall building construction. But the city has been getting taller – and more interesting – for the last three centuries. Ruled by commercial necessity rather than planning fiat, London is an accepting patchwork of change. Today's designs are part of that tradition.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, St. Paul's Cathedral loomed over London, wildly out of scale with its context of low brick homes and riverside warehouses, interspersed with the spires of churches constructed after the Great Fire of 1666. The height of the great baroque church was accentuated by its location on Ludgate Hill, the highest point of the city at the time and the site believed to have been selected by the Romans for the Temple of Diana in the first century AD.

The juxtaposition of God and Mammon is brilliantly captured by Canaletto in his painting of 1750, the *Thames from the terrace of Somerset House*, where Sir Christopher Wren's great dome, a homage to Brunelleschi, forms a backdrop to the busy wharves and wherries of the River Thames (see Figure 1). This created an image of London that haunts the planning system of the British capital to this day. It is an image that was seared into the British psyche on December 29, 1940, when Hitler's Luftwaffe destroyed large areas of central London. Photographs of that night show St. Paul's standing imperiously and unharmed above the billowing smoke of 22,000 incendiary bombs (see Figure 2).

To understand the mechanisms for the control of tall buildings in London the visitor must understand the city's history as well as the system of planning and development in the British capital. It is a system driven by pragmatism rather than a vision of what a city might be. It is a system that reflects London's mercantile origins more strongly than its role as a center of government, and a system where many decisions are influenced by argument and debate, rather than fixed rules. The City of London Unitary Development Plan (UDP) of 2002 defines "tall" as "a building that significantly exceeds the height of [its] surroundings" – how open to interpretation is that? Visitors from Chicago, Dubai or Hong Kong might question whether any buildings in London are tall at all. For their reference, an application for a building that is more than 30 meters high is considered of Potential Strategic Importance (PSI) where the borough in which it is located is required to formally notify the Mayor.

### The 1930s: The Length of a Ladder and Beyond

Until 1930 the height of buildings was controlled by the Building Acts and restricted



Figure 1. Canaletto's painting of River Thames with St. Paul's Cathedral in the background. © Canaletto



Figure 2. St. Paul's Cathedral after the German Blitz on December 29, 1940. © New Times Paris Bureau Collection/USIA/NARA



Figure 3. Aviva Tower, London. © Herry Lawford

to 24 meters – the length of the Fire Brigade’s ladders. Although it was increased to 30 meters in that year, the London County Council, which administered the Acts, increasingly granted waivers permitting some structures higher than this limit. The erection of a number of buildings that blocked views of St. Paul’s caused a public furor at the time. As a result, in 1938 the Corporation of the City of London – the historical core and financial center of the capital – adopted controls known as St. Paul’s Heights, which protected views of Wren’s dome from the river and adjoining streets. These controls remain in place to this day, and together with the London View Management Framework, are key to the control of tall buildings.

#### Post-WWII: A Certain Ratio

The redevelopment of London in the postwar period was driven by County of London Plan 1951 which set floor-to-area ratios (FARs) with the aim of restraining the physical bulk of buildings and reducing congestion. In the City of London the ratios ranged from 2:1 to 5.5:1. While they limited the total floor space on a site, they did not control the form of development, and so did not restrict the height of buildings.



Figure 4. Tower 42, London. © Steven Henry

#### 1960s–1970s: Council Estates and Corporate Blocks

In the 1960s and 1970s some 2,000 tall buildings were built in the London area, the majority of them public housing projects erected as replacements for homes destroyed by German bombing in World War II, and as a response to national Government policies which aimed to build up to half a million new homes a year. Industrialized building systems were encouraged and local authorities were given subsidies to build high. The higher they went, the bigger the subsidy. The most economical height at the time was 22 stories. Thus, today views of London outside the central area are characterized by a generally low-rise city dotted with 22-story concrete blocks, many of them of questionable architectural quality.

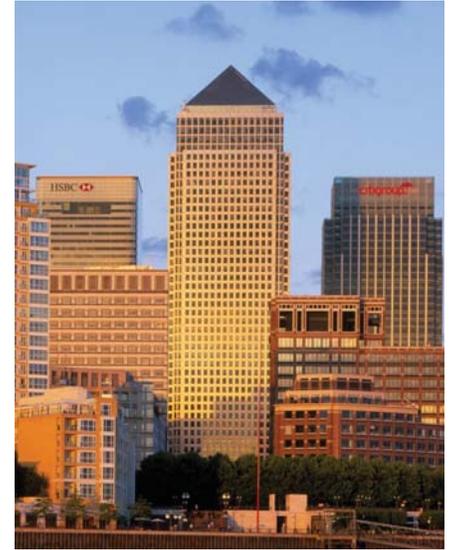


Figure 5. One Canada Square, London. © Pelli Clark Pelli

In the City of London – the capital’s historic business core, also known as “The Square Mile” – a handful of office towers were constructed during the 1960s. The Miesian 23-story Commercial Union building (now Aviva) by Gollins, Melvin and Ward – a homage to United States ascendancy in modern office design – was the best (see Figure 3). This spate of building ended with the construction of the National Westminster Building (now branded Tower 42) by Richard Seifert which rose to 183 meters (see Figure 4). Conceived in the late 1960s but not opened until 1981, it was the tallest building in the capital until the completion of the 235-meter One Canada Square at Canary Wharf a decade later (see Figure 5).

Few other tall buildings were built in the 1970s and early 1980s, partly because of the

“A London tall building is generally considered to be “a building that is significantly higher than its surroundings” – how open to interpretation is that? Visitors from Chicago, Dubai, or Hong Kong might question whether any buildings in London are tall at all.”



Figure 6. 30 St. Mary Axe, London. © Phillip Oldfield

rise of the heritage lobby and a public distaste for tall buildings, engendered by the concrete monstrosities of the post-war period, and partly because of the perilous state of the UK economy.

### The Late 1980s: “The Canary” as a Goldmine

The next phase of building tall began in 1988, when Olympia & York started construction of Canary Wharf in the redundant docks area to the east of the Square Mile. In terms of planning, Canary Wharf was an accident. The government had designated the area as an Enterprise Zone, a tool for regeneration that relaxed planning controls and reduced local taxes. The authorities had expected these *douceurs* to encourage the construction of sheds and light industrial spaces. Instead, the American developer G. Ware Travelstead came up with the idea of a new financial center that would appeal to the United States institutions that were flocking to London, following Prime Minister Thatcher’s deregulation of financial services (the Big Bang) in 1986. “G Whizz”, as he was known, sold the idea to Paul Reichman’s Olympia & York. Although the firm collapsed in the 1990s recession, the development has continued to grow, and has now formed London’s most substantial cluster of tall buildings.

Also in 1986, Thatcher abolished the Greater London Council. She had become frustrated by its left-wing leader, Ken Livingstone, his profligate spending and his controversial stance on the IRA. This meant that London was without proper strategic direction for over a decade. Most of the GLC’s powers were devolved to the local boroughs; strategic planning guidance was provided by the London Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC) until the Greater London Authority was set up in 2000 and the role of Mayor of London created.

### The 2000s: Livingstone Lives to Fight Another Day

The first elected Mayor was the aforementioned Ken Livingstone, who began his Mayoral victory speech in 2000 with the words: “As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted 14 years ago...”

Despite his political color, Livingstone as Mayor was a good friend of the property industry. He realized that development was essential to economic growth and that it provided his administration with vital resources in the form of affordable housing and planning gain income (increase reserve from land value). He also understood that tall buildings were iconic signifiers of London’s role as a global business center.

“I support high buildings, both as clusters, and as stand-alone buildings, where they are in close proximity to a major public transport interchange and contribute to the quality of London’s environment,” he said. “I have no objection in principle to London having the tallest of buildings.”

He understood that tall buildings are often flagship developments that play an important part in regeneration, and he commissioned a review of strategic policy relating to high buildings, including their role in maximizing the density of development and their potential impact on strategic views as part of the preparation of the London Plan – the regional spatial strategy that forms the key planning mechanism for the capital.

Of all Livingstone’s planning policies, tall buildings attracted the most interest from the media and from his detractors, who claimed that he wanted to “recreate Manhattan in London,” or “turn Hyde Park into Central Park with a ring of tall buildings all around.” He reassured his critics that policies would remain in place to protect conservation areas and strategic views, although he added, “I am reviewing these policies to ensure they are not over-restrictive.”

At that stage he expected only a limited number of tall buildings to be constructed over the next decade – probably only 10–15 in all – located in the City of London and in the Canary Wharf area.

Livingstone’s support for tall buildings remained unshaken by 9/11. He believed they were essential if the UK capital was to provide enough affordable offices for the fast-expanding financial markets. A shortage of office space could result in London losing out on its “World City” status, as a competitor to New York and Tokyo, and as the European center for financial and business services. He saw tall buildings as safeguarding and enhancing London’s “World City” role. He was right to be concerned: office availability in central London had almost halved between 1995 and 1999, resulting in rising costs, which in turn affected business competitiveness.

### The Boom: Of Gherkins and Shards

The first of the new generation of towers in the City cluster was Foster & Partners’ Swiss Re tower at 30 St. Mary Axe (see Figure 6). This received planning permission in 2000 and was completed in 2004. It was popular with the public and soon nicknamed “The Gherkin.” Swiss Re was no higher than Tower 42, but its curved form reduced its perceived bulk and its elegant profile became the symbol of London’s increasing confidence as a global city. The realization that a tall building could actually enhance the skyline came as a surprise to many, and eased the paths of future applications for tall buildings.

The Gherkin was coming out of the ground when the proposed Heron Tower, designed by KPF, was questioned by the government. A public inquiry was held in November 2001. The quasi-judicial inquiry cost developer Gerald Ronson £10 million, but he won permission to build his tower. It changed the landscape of decision-making in relation to tall buildings. Permission was given for Renzo Piano's Shard in 2003, The Leadenhall Building in 2005, the Pinnacle in 2006 and 20 Fenchurch in 2007.

The City of London Corporation was keen for buildings in the Square Mile to go higher. It liked the idea of a cluster, and was worried about growing competition from Canary Wharf. The supply of individual large sites for "groundscrapers" was limited by policies to protect the intimate grain of the City. Site assembly for low- and medium-rise

developments of a million square feet or more would destroy this character. A groundscraper on the site of 30 St. Mary Axe, for example, could have accommodated only half of the floor space of the tower.

### Who's In Charge, Exactly?

Although the City Corporation took tall buildings to heart, not all local authorities welcome them. The Westminster City Council, for instance, opposes them in most locations; Islington policy guidelines only permit them in the southern part of the borough. It is up to each individual borough to set its own policies regarding tall buildings, but in terms of location each tall building must observe the London View Management Framework (LVMF). The LVMF protects specific views.

The rules go back to 1991, when the Government set out ten "strategic views" (see Figure 7) to be protected from inappropriate development. Ken Livingstone adopted them and Boris Johnson increased the levels of protection. The area of protection includes the direct line of sight from viewpoints such as Hampstead Heath in the north and Richmond Park in the west to the drum and dome of St. Paul's Cathedral and the Palace of Westminster. The view corridor extends in the form of a "cone of vision" on either side of the line of sight, including the backdrop to each view. Within the protected cones, no buildings may be erected that would obstruct the view of St. Paul's Cathedral or the Palace of Westminster, or obscure the wider setting or backdrop.

In recent years the debate about the location of tall buildings has been complicated by

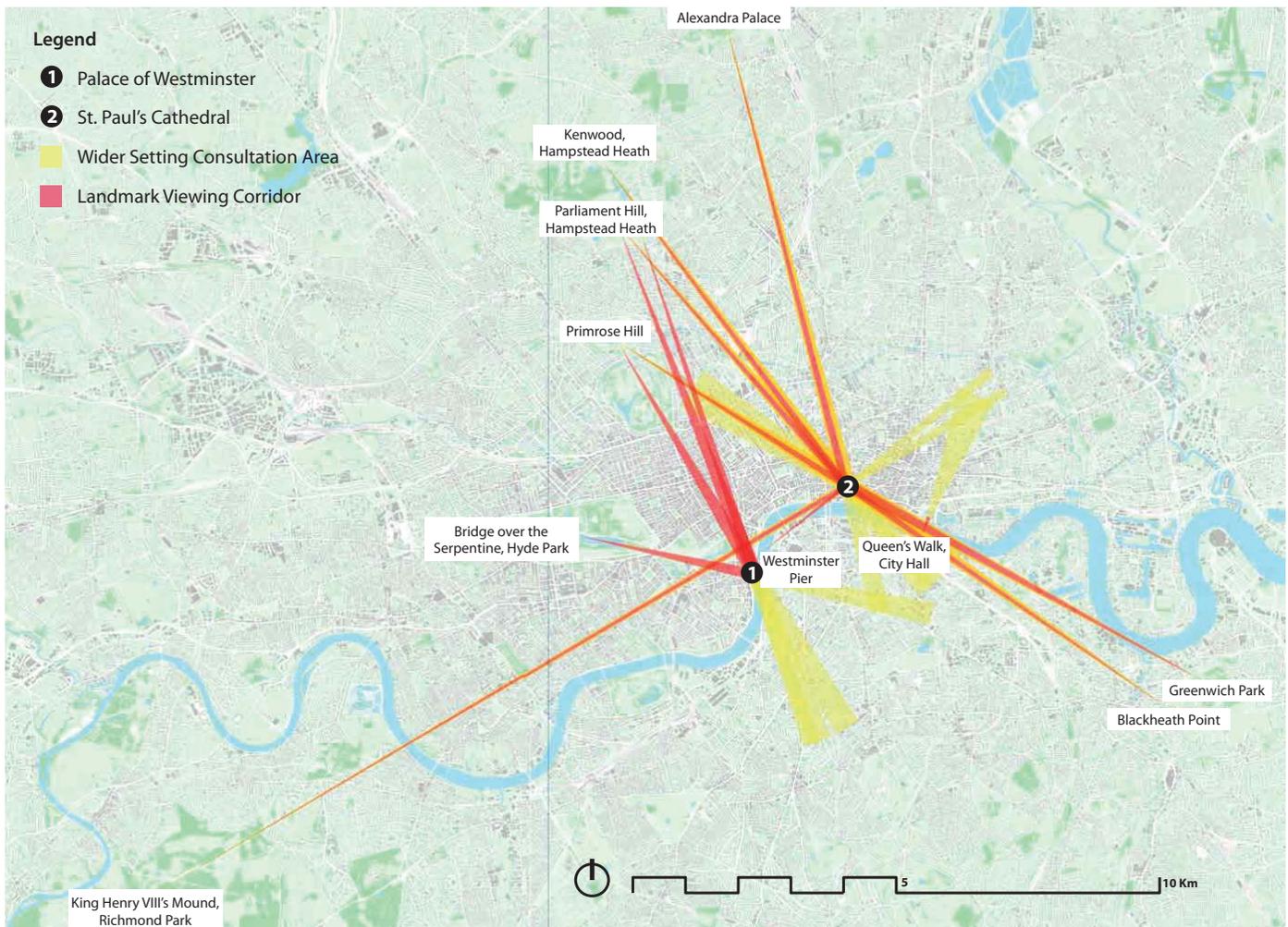


Figure 7. London's protected vistas (March 2012). © Greater London Authority

“While the perceived scale of St. Paul’s dome may have shrunk since the days of Canaletto, it will remain a dominant force on the London skyline, rising above the melee just as it emerged triumphant in 1940 above the dense smoke of Hitler’s bombs.”

UNESCO concerns about the World Heritage status of The Tower of London and the Palace of Westminster. UNESCO has called for a buffer zone around the Tower of London and has regularly complained about the back drop of towers that impinges on view of the Tower from the south bank of the Thames. They raised concerns about David Chipperfield’s designs for Elizabeth House next to Waterloo Station and Michael Squire’s plans for the Shell Centre, both on the south bank. Chipperfield

lopped four floors off his design (see Figures 8 and 9).

English Heritage – the Government’s advisor on the historic environment – plays a key role in the debate over tall buildings, putting forward the conservationist case. This has in the past been balanced by the voice of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, which until recently was funded by government to provide advice on architectural quality. The two organizations fell out in 2001 when CABE felt obliged to support the Heron Tower in the public enquiry while English Heritage led the charge against it. But they later made up, and in 2003 prepared a report that provided joint guidance to developers and local authorities.

CABE and English Heritage called for a plan-led approach to tall buildings, with boroughs identifying locations appropriate for tall buildings. They suggested that when assessing the areas suitable for tall buildings, local planning authorities should take into account the historic context of the wider area, through the use by identifying those elements that create local character and other important features and constraints, including natural topography, urban grain, significant views of skylines, scale and height, streetscape as well as important local views, prospects, and panoramas.

#### Enter Mr. Johnson

While the anti-tall brigade thought that the conservative Mayor Boris Johnson elected in

2008 would take a very different line to his predecessor Livingstone, they were disappointed. While Johnson paid more heed to the historic context, he remained aware of London’s need to provide high quality accommodation to cater to the city’s global occupiers. He even granted permission to the controversial 237-meter Columbus Tower designed by Mark Weintraub (see Figure 10), overturning the decision of the local council. A major benefit of his decision was that it would deliver a £4 million contribution to the construction of the new Crossrail system and £1 million worth of affordable housing.

Johnson also strengthened the LVMF. He widened the viewing corridor from Richmond Park in West London to St. Paul’s Cathedral from 70 to 150 meters, and doubled the widths of others. He introduced two new corridors, and calmed the concerns of UNESCO by providing better protection of central London’s World Heritage Sites.

“This new guidance will help ensure that new development fits in with that built heritage,” said the Mayor “[It will also] show how new buildings can enhance, rather than detract from, some of our favorite views. By removing uncertainty, it will also help speed up the planning and development process, and help drive London’s economy forward towards continued growth and prosperity in the coming decades.”

He said he was happy to promote the development of tall buildings where they created attractive landmarks enhancing London’s character, provided coherent



Figure 8. Elizabeth House, London. © David Chipperfield



Figure 9. Shell Centre, London. © Michael Squire



Figure 10. Columbus Tower, London. © MWA+D



Figure 11. 360 London, Elephant and Castle. © Rogers Stirk Harbour and Partners



Figure 12. St. George Wharf Tower, Vauxhall. © Duncan Harris.

locations for economic clusters of related activities, or acted as catalysts for regeneration. He added that he would take into account the benefits of public access to the upper floors. Rafael Viñoly's 20 Fenchurch Street, for instance, will have sky gardens at the top and will provide free public access. The Shard has a public viewing platform on the 72<sup>nd</sup> floor, although there has been some criticism that the £25 entry fee restricts the level of public accessibility.

### Now in the Works

There is currently a new spate of taller buildings going through the planning system. This time they are largely residential. London's population is growing, and more than 30,000 new homes are required each year to cater to the increase in households. The limited supply of brownfield land in London, protection of the development-free green belt around the capital, and the London Plan's "compact city" policy that development for London should take place within the GLA boundaries, means that new residential development will have to be built at higher densities. Building tall is one way of achieving this. Although height is not an essential ingredient of higher densities, it can provide a greater sense of space than

lower developments, and is popular with overseas buyers, who are the major target market for housing developers right now.

At Stratford City, the 42-story Manhattan Loft Gardens is under construction and will be completed by 2016; a 44-story tower designed by Rogers Stirk Harbour is planned for Elephant and Castle (see Figure 11) to sit alongside the completed 43-story Strata building by BFLS and Brookfield. The leader of Southwark council has said he welcomes more tall buildings. In Vauxhall, the 50-story St. George Wharf Tower (see Figure 12) is nearing completion and will be joined by a cluster of others, including a 58-story proposal by KPF.

### A Fabric of Continuous Change

In its true pragmatic tradition, London continues to respond to circumstance and to the market. Architects experienced in delivering residential projects in the Far East are in demand, because the market for high-end London residences often comes from Singapore and Hong Kong. Somehow it works. London has never been a coherent or tightly planned city; rather, it reflects a wide range of styles and periods. It is a patchwork, a fabric that accepts change and new

interventions while managing to retain the best of the old. It is this very complexity and variety that makes it such a fascinating place.

London has been getting taller for three hundred years – the Victorians hid more of St. Paul's than the Georgians. The highest-density 19<sup>th</sup> century mansion blocks towered up to eight floors. Today, the lower-density residential developments of Nine Elms average out at 15 floors.

As London's population continues to increase, and while planners pursue Richard Rogers' vision of the compact, high density city, so will the capital grow taller, its skyline marked by clusters of towers located in areas of plentiful public transport. While the perceived scale of St. Paul's dome may have shrunk since the days of Canaletto, it will remain a dominant force on the London skyline, rising above the melee just as it emerged triumphant in 1940 above the dense smoke of Hitler's bombs. ■