

Title: **Debating Tall: A Skyline Commission for London?**

Authors: Barbara Weiss, Director, Barbara Weiss Architects
Karen Cook, Partner, PLP Architecture

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A Skyline Commission for London?

As hundreds of buildings over 20 stories are set to rise in London over the next few years, the Skyline Campaign, a non-profit organization, has asked Mayor Sadiq Khan to establish a Skyline Commission as part of his Plan for London, due to be finalized later in 2017. CTBUH Journal asks two prominent London architects, "Should a Skyline Commission be established as part of the new Plan for London?"

YES

Barbara Weiss, *Director of Barbara Weiss Architects/Co-Founder of the Skyline Campaign*

A mere eight years with Boris Johnson as Mayor has destroyed the integrity of the skyline of one of the world's most loved cities. An outrage to many Londoners, it is now almost impossible to look up without one or more of 470 poorly conceived, mediocre, and generic skyscrapers blighting a unique historic view or setting.

In this rush to build tall, we are seeing complex and entrenched private and public interests, but above all, an unregulated pursuit of financial benefit, without due consideration for broader urban and social costs.

Sold as a "solution" to the housing crisis, luxury towers actually contribute little or nothing to it, at best temporarily propping up cash-strapped boroughs. This is, in reality, a textbook example of expedient "selling the family silver".

Our new Mayor, Sadiq Khan, appears to understand the negative impact of towers on our city, recognizing Londoners' horror in seeing their beloved neighborhoods forever trashed. The Skyline Campaign is delighted that the tide is turning, planning applications for towers are declining, and that Khan, while consulting widely on the New London Plan, is recruiting new advisors for various architectural and planning panels. We live in hope that things

might actually improve, with only the very best tall buildings being consented, and only in patently appropriate locations.

The sad reality, however, is that, under current arrangements, fluctuating political will always determines how London grows. With our terminally flawed planning system, too often short-term economic interests override fundamental, long-term, urban quality issues.

Yes, we would indeed welcome a serious Skyline Commission of the highest caliber, to contribute independently and thoughtfully to the debate. We would, however, also need to be convinced that this could be more than appeasing window-dressing.

NO

Karen Cook, *Partner, PLP Architecture*

London's architecture includes historic neighborhoods and modern objects, coexisting. Half the city is green, contributing to its identity and societal stability.

This is largely because London has interpretive constraints that allow government to monitor the built environment, while allowing development to respond well to current issues. The London View Management Framework protects views to Church and State monuments, such as St. Paul's Cathedral and the Palace of Westminster. River Prospect Views protect views from the Thames. Conservation Areas cover large land tracts.

Our generation's biggest issue is quality, not style. An imbalance between soaring land value and restricted supply of employment space and new homes makes a good quality of life increasingly out of reach for many. Greater London Authority (GLA) data show London's population has surpassed its pre-World War II peak, surging in the last decade by one million. A demographic shift toward smaller families, single and elderly people exacerbates demand.

Everyone wants to walk to local shops and services and to public transport, if not to work. Tall buildings with public spaces offer an opportunity to help meet these desires. There are underdeveloped sites, e.g., transport facilities, where denser redevelopment would mend gaps in the urban grain. The planning authorities must foster tall buildings where neighborhood services will benefit from added density, and development can rely on existing infrastructure.

How will the new London Plan address urgent demands for more employment space and more housing? Devolution, rather than a Committee, is vital to adapt to growing pressures. British cities need greater independence from national government to develop their own plans, incentivizing inhabitants to implement effective responses to local concerns. London needs well-designed tall buildings to successfully integrate its higher-density population, or it will lose the creative and hardworking people who make it a wonderful city.

