

Skyline policy

The Shard and London's high-rise debate

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At a time when major cities are racing to build higher than ever, and when the construction of skyscrapers in France is proving contentious, particularly in ecological and social terms, new problems are emerging in the “old” European metropolises concerning the impact of towers on the landscape. As a result, cities such as London have had to revise their policies regarding the regulation of the skyline in an attempt to respond to these controversies.

Since planning permission was granted for the Heron Tower in 2001, more than a dozen towers have been built, with almost 50 others planned and set to radically transform the city's skyline, modifying London's horizon and the extensive history and symbolism that goes with it. These new towers are powerful vehicles for speculation and communication for developers, investors and architects. Supported more or less openly by the mayoral teams in office since 2000, they are also markers of a regional political project that seeks to maintain and enhance London's stature as a global city and the driving force of the British economy.

These new towers have, however, attracted debate and controversy, centred in particular on the issue of respect for the built environment and for the desired skyline (Appert 2008). In the chaos of the central London skyline, the Shard (310 m), a tower defined by superlatives and sobriquets – as well as some of the most heavily publicised controversies – has finally revealed its pyramid shape to a curious and inquisitive public. Irrespective of the functions it houses or its supposed environmental qualities, the Shard invites controversy: “a glass spike through the heart of London” for some, a “masterpiece” for others, it is a monument to the debate on the regulation of the skyline in London. In a context mirroring current discussions on skyscrapers in Paris, the Shard reminds us that the liveliness of the debate on towers in the British capital is, more generally, a sign of the economic, representational and political stakes of the skyline in contemporary metropolises. Building the city today also means designing and imagining the skyline.

The Shard: “spike through the heart of London” or “masterpiece” of a triumphant metropolitan architecture?

The Shard¹ project was unveiled for the first time in 2000. At 310 m (1,017 ft), it will be the tallest tower in the European Union and the first mixed-use skyscraper in London – a vertical city combining shops, offices, a 5-star hotel, housing and an observation platform, according to the tower's architect, Renzo Piano.² The skyscraper, due to be completed in 2012, is located at London

¹ <http://www.londonbridgequarter.com/the-shard/overview>.

² Extract from an interview with Renzo Piano in *The Times* in 2008, consulted on 30 December 2008 at the following URL: http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/visual_arts/architecture_and_design/article5352742.ece (now subscriber access only).

Bridge on the south bank of the Thames, opposite the City. It is already a landmark, rising high above Southwark, a borough that is polarised in spatial terms by office districts around London Bridge station in the north and deprived housing estates in the southern two thirds of its territory. The mayor of Southwark borough council granted the project's developer, Sellar Property, planning permission in 2002, lauding the architectural qualities of the project and its role as a marker of urban revitalisation for the disadvantaged neighbourhoods further south. Planning permission was enthusiastically confirmed by the Greater London Authority (GLA), led at the time by mayor Ken Livingstone, who declared that the Shard, to be built partially on top of London Bridge station, will maximise public transport use and, thanks to its technical characteristics, consume 30% less energy than a conventional construction.³

The Shard during construction, seen from the Millennium Bridge



M. Appert, 2011.

However, at the request of English Heritage (EH), the statutory body responsible for protecting the built environment in England, a public inquiry was launched in 2003 to examine the impact of the tower. EH appealed to the secretary of state, decrying the intrusion of the skyscraper into the protected view of St Paul's Cathedral from Kenwood House, north-west of central London. The two key objections made were in relation to the height of the tower and the fact that it would compete with the monumentality of St Paul's.⁴ The public inquiry was also an additional opportunity for supporters of the Shard to put forward their points of view. At this time, the GLA recognised that it would alter the surroundings of the cathedral, but underlined the fact that its architectural qualities are such that they compensate the building's intrusion on the skyline. Richard Rogers, a renowned architect and also chief consultant to the GLA on matters of design, then shifted the debate towards

³ According to Arup, the engineering firm responsible for building the tower.

⁴ The press release issued by English Heritage at the time of the public inquiry could be found at the following address when the French version of this article was originally published: <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/default.asp?WCI=NewsItem&WCE=274>.

the highly subjective matter of architectural quality, with what was ostensibly a statement of evidence and support, in which he declared that the Shard is “a masterpiece of architecture and design”. He went on to add that “the contrast between the dome of St Paul’s and the transparent glass spire of the Shard reinforces the cathedral’s silhouette”.⁵ For Ken Livingstone, the juxtaposition of the two buildings is perfectly compatible with the notion of a changing and contrasting skyline that seeks to reconcile London’s dual status – as a historic city and a global city – within a single landscape (McNeill 2002).

Although some of the arguments proposed during the inquiry served only to confirm positions adopted during inquiries into previous skyscraper projects, others conferred a specific and paradigmatic status upon the Shard. Subsequently, the tower’s architecture evolved considerably following amendments requested by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE),⁶ Southwark borough council and English Heritage. In particular, the architecture firm Broadway Malyan was replaced by “starchitect” Renzo Piano, the height of the tower was reduced from over 400 m to 310 m, its opaque cladding was replaced by transparent glass, and its pyramidal shape was stretched vertically so that the apex would be as fine and transparent as possible. Piano’s concept – which sought to echo the church spires and ships’ masts of Canaletto’s London – was to create a new, democratic monument for London that would be visible on the skyline and open to the public. In this way, the tower would foster the sort of admiration that Londoners have for St Paul’s or that Parisians have for the Eiffel Tower. Planning permission for the Shard was finally approved in 2003, but construction was not to begin until the end of 2009: faced with the difficulties of making this mammoth project a reality, the GLA had to act as guarantor for the development by deciding, in 2005, to rent office space in the tower (Craggs 2007). Although the GLA eventually went back on this decision following the election of Boris Johnson, in an effort to cut costs, it nonetheless lent credibility to the project in the eyes of investors in the Middle East and banks, who had become somewhat reticent at the start of the financial crisis. As a result of its size and central location, the Shard project helped to orient debates on the impact of towers on the skyline. More recently, its appearance on the horizon of the British capital has revived opposition between preservationists and tower supporters, and also reminds us that politicians are both judge and defendant when it comes to regulating the skyline.

⁵ Report originally located at: http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/planning_decisions/call-ins_appeals/evidence/richard_rogers_summary_proof_of_evidence.pdf.

⁶ A non-statutory body that advises developers and planners with regard to the evaluation of development projects. CABE was abolished and then partially absorbed by the Design Council in 2011.

St Paul's Cathedral and the Shard seen from Centrepont



M. Appert, March 2011.

A monument to the governance of global cities

The Shard is therefore exceptional in terms of its size, its architecture, its location and the paradigmatic status accorded to it by its developers and supporters. On the one hand, it acts as a model for “beacons” signalling urban revitalisation, inspiring similar constructions in many other urban development operations, particularly in east London. On the other hand, it is exemplary with regard to the regional strategic development plan (the London Plan 2004), as it is the three-dimensional embodiment of a policy that seeks to increase density and encourage mixed use in the vicinity of public transport hubs. Just like Norman Foster’s Swiss Re tower – better known as the Gherkin – in the City, the Shard shows how aesthetic and environmental considerations are mobilised in order to give legitimacy to the project and compensate for the intrusion of its silhouette upon the urban landscape. Lastly, it reflects a willingness to use the bold architecture of certain towers to promote the interests of economic, as well as political, players. This collusion reflects an implicit understanding between a young city authority that wishes to encourage central government to invest more in London’s infrastructures (Gordon 2004) and private bodies that know that they will be supported. This support can be measured first in terms of public relations and communications, to judge by the size of the GLA’s stand at the MIPIM (International Market of Real-Estate Professionals) property exhibition, where municipal and private projects are presented and marketed together; and, secondly, the GLA helped make the Shard viable by agreeing to rent office space in the tower from Sellar Property just when demand for offices was at its lowest. In this way, the Shard was the first tower to be instrumentalised prior to completion – the virtual object of a forthright, confident form of metropolitan governance where the interests of players in key economic sectors have an influence on urban transformations (Imrie *et al.* 2008).

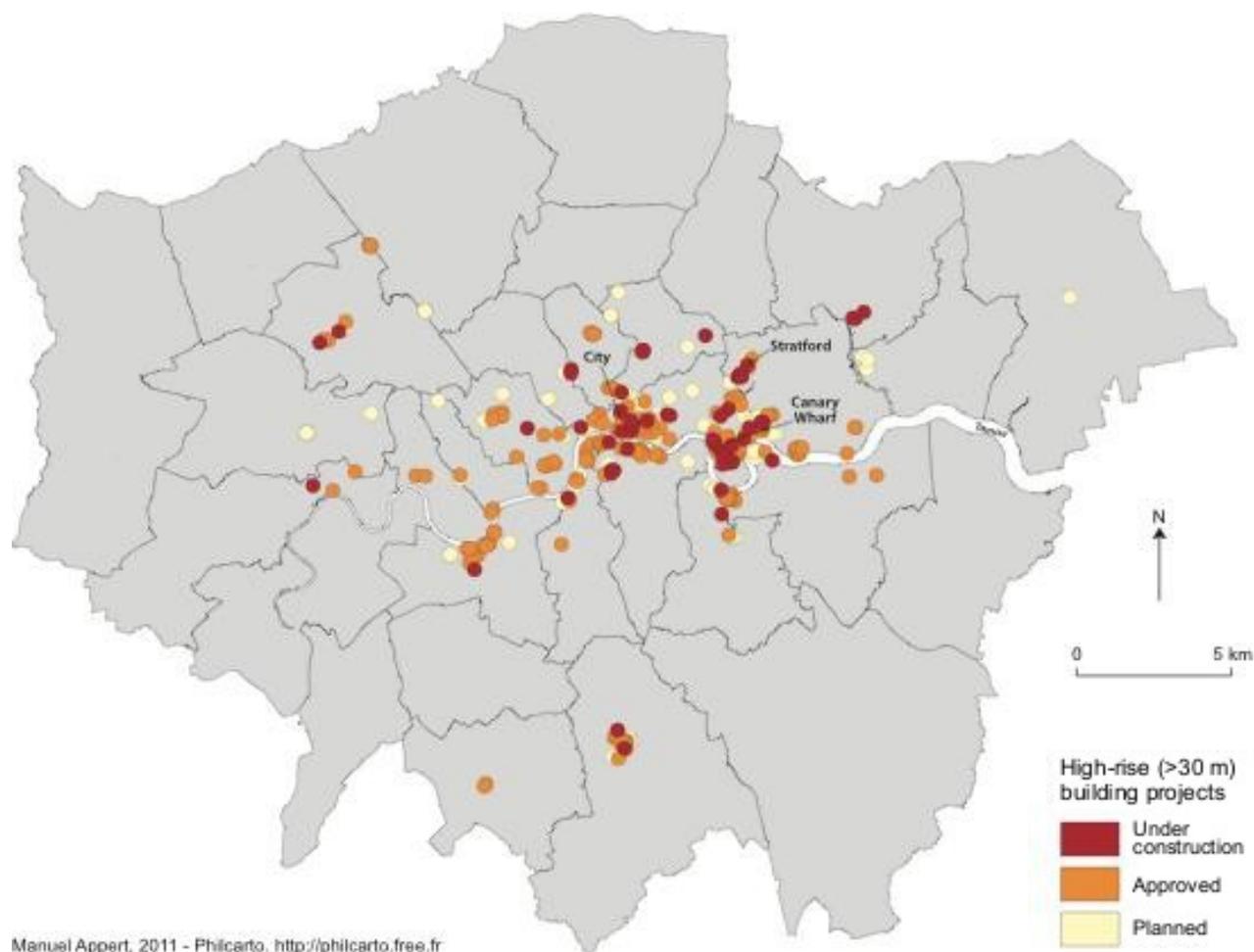
A contested contribution to the cityscape

The pioneers – the Swiss Re Building, Heron Tower and the Shard – have paved the way for numerous high-rise projects, albeit for towers that are smaller and often less iconic. As of 2011, out of 404 applications for high-rise buildings (i.e. over 30 m tall) submitted to borough councils in Greater London, 223 had been approved and 64 were currently under construction (see map below). In response to this trend, a regulation seeking to protect views and perspectives of historic monuments from the proliferation of towers was introduced by the GLA in 2007.

The London View Management Framework (LVMF) (Greater London Authority 2007 and 2010) is one of the legislative texts drafted by the fledgling city authority in an effort to obtain greater independence from a central government that is omnipresent in all matters relating to planning and development in the UK. Its aim is to clarify the rules for each of the different parties involved (borough councils, developers, investors, architects, heritage bodies, associations) in order to protect the views and surroundings of historic buildings and, unofficially, to try and remove the need for recourse to public inquiries, which tend to discourage developers, considered essential players by the GLA in a context of urban planning via public–private negotiation (Imrie *et al.* 2008). What this actually means is that the LVMF identifies those monuments in the skyline that are to be protected (St Paul’s, the Houses of Parliament, the Tower of London, Buckingham Palace, etc.) and the protected views within which the silhouettes of these monuments must be distinctly visible on the horizon. This allows applications for buildings that would be visible in front of or behind protected monuments from the viewpoints defined by the legislator to be strictly controlled (Appert 2008).

However, despite this new legislation, the number of public inquiries has continued to increase, requested by parties that believe they have a legitimate grievance. It is primarily skyscraper projects on the South Bank that have courted controversy (e.g. Doon Street Tower, Beetham Tower, 240 Blackfriars). Indeed, since the Shard was approved, this side of the Thames – until now spared such projects – has been targeted by developers seeking to capitalise on the exceptional views offered by these sites. A recent confidential study – conducted by surveying firm into residential projects in Southwark – found that a view over the city added 20% to property prices, on average, and much more in the case of apartments on the highest floors. Indeed, from the South Bank, it is possible to enjoy a panoramic view across the whole of central London, from Westminster in the west to the City in the east. But the height of the proposed towers (over 150 m) and their proximity to the Thames makes them highly prominent, with some visible above the treetops of St James’s Park, much to the dismay of the Royal Parks Agency. The Doon Street Tower, immediately to the west of the Festival Hall, even manages to encroach upon the view from the main courtyard of Somerset House on the opposite bank of the Thames. Moreover, it was this tower that led English Heritage to call for a public inquiry in 2008, even though the building was not in a protected view corridor. The conclusions of this inquiry confirmed the approval of planning permission, leading EH to appeal the decision, only to lose for a second time.

High-rise building projects in London in 2011



The debate therefore remains heated and as pertinent as ever with regard to the question of the relevance of towers in historic cities. On the one hand, the City, CABE and the GLA, capitalising on the popularity of the Gherkin and the Shard, highlight the architectural quality of the designs in question, the need for densification and the contribution that these towers make to London's status as a global city. On the other, English Heritage⁷ consistently denounces the intrusion of towers not just upon perspectives and views of monuments but also upon cityscapes not protected by the 2007 LVMF.

In order to once again try to minimise the risks run by developers and appease heritage bodies and associations, the new mayoral team led by Boris Johnson revised the LVMF in 2009, enlarging view corridors and adding new protected perspectives. The new legislation has not really been tested yet, as few high-rise projects have emerged in the last two years because of the economic and financial downturn. However, attention is focused on inner-city areas, where tens of projects for residential towers have been submitted. In the British context of negotiated urban planning involving public and private partners, these towers contribute to development strategies that seek to trigger what the Labour Party calls urban regeneration, i.e. organised gentrification by developers and local councils that takes the form of a physical and then social transformation of deprived areas. In this context, residential towers – to use the language of commercial architects– are a popular solution among developers seeking to make as much profit as possible from land acquired at great cost or requiring expensive site decontamination measures prior to construction. It is therefore associations that, within the current framework of participatory practices, are taking action against

⁷ The statutory body responsible for defining and managing heritage protection in England.

these projects (Appert & Drozd 2010), decrying both the difference in scale that these towers create and the standardisation of the urban development solutions adopted.

A skyline to be imagined

Since the Shard was approved, the legislation in place has not managed to fully clarify the rules. Although protected view corridors broadly define the spaces where the construction of new towers is possible or impossible, the fact that they may fluctuate over time means that developers still run relatively high risks. Furthermore, to judge by the resurgence in public inquiries, this legislation is only a partial response to the requests of those seeking to protect London's heritage; similarly, it does not seem to take account of the fears and claims expressed by associations that are more involved than ever in Britain's negotiated urban planning.

A number of lines of thinking may be adopted in order to move beyond the challenges of regulating the skyline. For example, if a city's skyline is considered to be a dimension of the urban landscape, then it must be seen as an element that evolves, albeit in a more or less controlled fashion, and which is co-produced and interpreted as a result of the various interactions and intentions of architects, developers, residents, associations, urban planners and politicians. By this definition, the skyline – as a physical representation of past, present and future territorialisation – is inherently linked to issues of power and identity-building. Today's rhetoric surrounding towers and the skyline reveal the often conflicting strategies of different players, polarised primarily by heritage preservation – as an economic value and a vector of identity-related values – and the physical and symbolic inclusion of business services in a context of ever fiercer competition between cities.

Based on this interpretation, we can finally start to re-examine the current debate from a theoretical standpoint. In the context of a negotiated urban fabric and participatory practices in urban planning and development, the motivations, methods, framework and implications of exchanges between the different parties involved often reveal a technocratic and elitist debate, the regulation of which would all but exclude the majority of opinions and aspirations of residents when developers, investors and those in government determine the skyline of a contemporary metropolis. The contested modification of London's skyline therefore appears to be proof of the dysfunctional aspects of a form of metropolitan governance that has difficulty imagining this space to be public in the way that the street (a space that today has been widely analysed and theorised) may be considered a public space. If manipulating urban forms and their symbolism means being able to manipulate the processes that define and prioritise identities in the global city, then controlling the landscape is therefore a key issue when it comes to living together in harmony.

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