



*London is being pepperpotted with un-composed high buildings (view NW from Greenwich Park)*

## London Skyline Landscape Policies

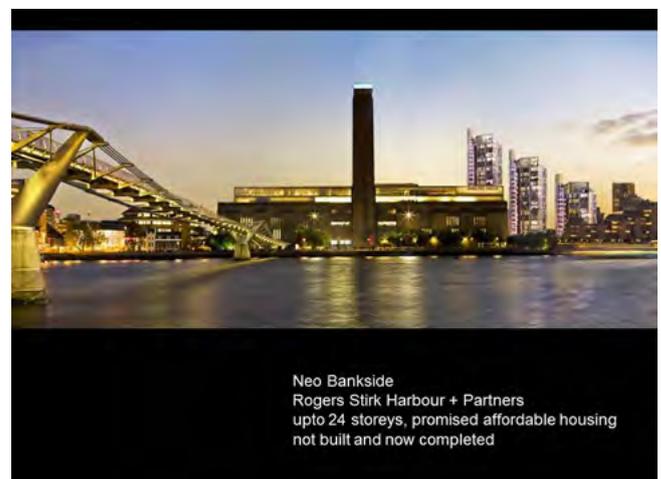
The scenic quality of London is a significant public good. It impacts upon the welfare of citizens and on the city's attractiveness to residents, tourists and investors. Scenic quality results from the presence of natural features, including rivers, beaches, hills, parkland and forests, and in part from the way in which buildings are composed in relation to these natural features.

In London, the River Thames and the Royal Parks are key landscape features. They relate to the gravel terraces north and south of the Thames and to basin of hills in which they lie. The River Thames flows to the open landscape and seascape of the estuary.

Riverside buildings can enhance the river landscape when well composed and detract from its quality when poorly composed. London's best examples of large-scale scenic compositions are The Serpentine in Hyde Park, the lakes in St James's Park and Regents Park and the 'processional route' which links St James's Park to Regent's Park, via Regent Street, Piccadilly Circus and Portland Place. These compositions resulted from the picturesque landscape ideas of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century.

Queen Caroline commissioned The Serpentine in 1737 and regarded it as 'helping Nature, not losing it in art'<sup>1</sup>. The policy considerations for London's skylines are as follows:

1. London's identity is a primary consideration. It must be allowed to evolve but changes require a perspective which includes the past and relates to a future vision. In the 1930s, Rasmussen wrote a famous book on *London the unique city*<sup>2</sup> and Abercrombie<sup>3</sup> used diagrams to show the different characteristics of English cities, continental cities, garden cities and Corbusier's City of the Future, with apartment blocks in a park-like setting<sup>4</sup>. London should take a view on its future form.
2. Suitable areas for high rise development, and those parts of London in need of protection from domination from high buildings, should be identified and mapped as part of a *London Roofscape Plan*. The West End is generally low rise and human in scale, with squares and areas of parkland secluded from the surrounding metropolis. This contrasts with the dramatic high rise areas of the City and Docklands. Maximum heights should be controlled to conserve this distinction.
3. The Royal Parks, and other parks, should be protected from enclosure by high rise buildings.



4. High buildings and skyline policies should be integrated with wider landscape policies for pedestrian circulation, scenic composition, the social use of outdoor space and the use of vegetation on roofs, on walls and at street level.
5. The GLA should commission a digital model of the existing city and of projects which have been granted planning permission. New proposals at the pre-planning stage should be placed in the model and used to generate accurate eye-level perspectives from all surrounding viewpoints. The cost of the models should fall upon the developers of proposed high rise buildings.
6. London also needs local skyline studies for supplementary planning guidance and for the preparation of site-specific planning and development briefs. Special attention should be given to the social, economic and visual impact of high buildings on adjoining streets and the impact on the River Thames. All Boroughs should include metropolis wide effects in their skyline studies, including impacts on key views in other Boroughs.
7. The GLA and the London Boroughs should carry out *Skyline Studies*, along the lines of the *City of Edinburgh Skyline Study* (Colvin & Moggridge, 2010). A Skyline Study for the *Thames Policy Area* would be a good starting point. Protection of London's designated view corridors, their sky backdrops and panoramas should be maintained and reinforced.
8. Protection of views of St Paul's Cathedral from the south-west (St Paul's Heights) should be maintained,
9. Protection for views of and from London's World Heritage Sites, as required by UNESCO. These sites are:
  - The Tower of London,
  - The Palace of Westminster, and Westminster Abbey
  - The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and
  - Maritime Greenwich.
10. Existing buffer zones for World Heritage Sites should be extended. The buffer for the Tower of London should be extended to the east and to the south of the river. It the City it should be reinforced. The proposed buffer zones for the Westminster World Heritage site should similarly be enforced extended northwards and southwards along the south bank of the river (in Southwark and Lambeth). In the case of Westminster ICOMOS-UK have recently prepared preliminary viewing corridors of key views.
11. London's floorspace requirements can be met without high rise buildings<sup>5</sup>. But a continuing demand for high buildings is expected - for branding, prestige, and other reasons. Positive and negative impacts of high buildings on the public landscape should be assessed by



neutral assessors and taken into account during the planning and design process.

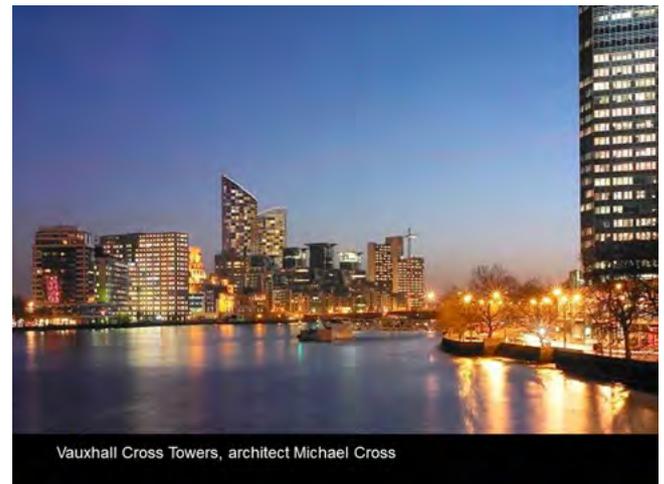
12. High rise should be composed on an all-London basis. Both residential and commercial towers should be scenically composed. The cluster at Canary Wharf, for example, is better than the 'pepper-potting' of tall buildings in other parts of London, and views of The Shard benefit from being 250m from the Thames foreshore and being removed from any key Inner London picturesque views.



Shell Centre, masterplanner Squire & Ptnrs, developers Qatari Diar with Canary Wharf Group, 75000 sq.m , 877 new homes, including social housing, called in for public inquiry by Secretary of State

## Conclusion

An all-London skyline policy integrated with an urban landscape policy is an urgent priority and could begin with a Thames Policy Area study. The study should deal with the issues raised above and with the issues illustrated and questioned below. London's skyline policy should draw up, and integrate, existing policies issued by the GLA, the Boroughs, English Heritage and other bodies.



Vauxhall Cross Towers, architect Michael Cross



*The view from Greenwich Park is well composed - with the London Basin enclosed by hills, the River Thames, the City Cluster and the Canary Wharf Cluster. Elsewhere, there is a pepper-pot-*

## Issues

- Are clusters of high buildings better than pepper-potting them across London?
- Are tall slender buildings acting as focal points less obstructive to views than long 'walls' of building?
- Should tall buildings be set back from the Thames waterfront, like the Shard, so that they can benefit from river views without making the Thames a 'Grand Canyon'?
- Are these the most suitable locations for high rise clusters: (1) Croydon, (2) Woolwich (3) Old Oak Common (4) Canary Wharf (5) The City of London. (6) Tottenham Hale (7) Clapham Junction?
- Should the separate identities of the high-building clusters south of the Thames be maintained: London Bridge, Blackfriars, Waterloo, Elephant and Castle and Vauxhall?
- Should there be continuous high-rise on the South Bank from London Bridge to Vauxhall?
- Are there places where more visually prominent buildings would provide orientation points and a welcome contrast with large areas with similar streets and buildings,?
- Do tall high rise buildings look better when they are light and recessive in tone and hue, e.g. the Shell Building or One Canada Square.;
- Are unusually shaped tall buildings a welcome or unwelcome addition to the London Skyline?



*The 'Walkie-Talkie', left, (20 Fenchurch Street by Rafael Viñoly) shouts at the Thames, the City and St Paul's Cathedral (photo 2013)*



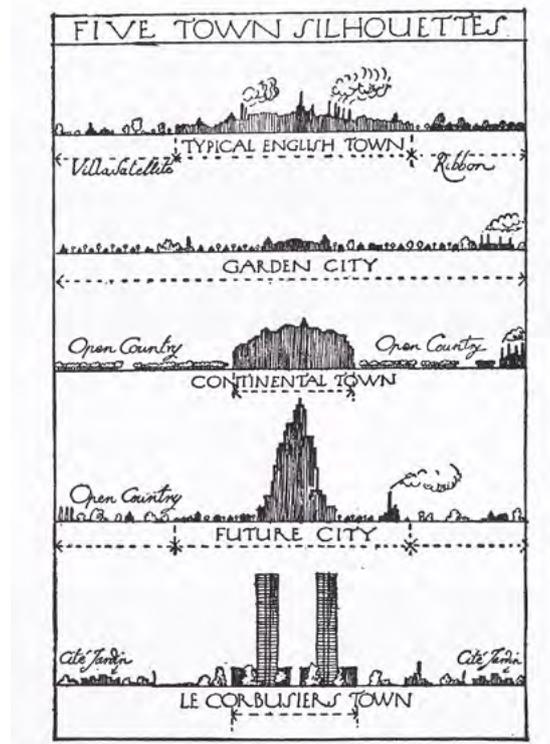
*The Shard, designed by Renzo Piano, is set back from the Thames but offers good view of the river*

## References

- 1 Quoted in the Dictionary of National Biography (from *Egmont Diary*, 2.138)
- 2 Rasmussen, Steen Eiler, *London, the Unique City* (1937)
- 3 Abercrombie, *Patrick Town and country planning* (1933, 1959)
- 4 Corbusier, Le, *La Ville Radieuse (The Radiant City)* (1935)
- 5 *Tall buildings: Report and proceedings of the House of Commons Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee. Sixteenth report of Session 2001-02* (The Stationery Office:2002)

## Historical note

The drawing, left, is from Sir Patrick Abercrombie's *Town and Country Planning* (1933, 1943, 1959). Abercrombie sat on the Council of the Institute of Landscape Architects (which became the Landscape Institute). He was also a town planner and an architect. His drawing is remarkable for its far-sighted approach to the composition of cities in cross-section. The fourth diagram, labelled FUTURE CITY shows the type of clustering recommended in this paper and his fifth diagram, labelled LE CORBUSIERS TOWN shows a peppercotting approach of the type which has too often been used in London.



Abercrombie's diagram shows four skyline choices: (1) a traditional English city (2) a low-rise garden city (3) a cluster of high buildings (4) the high-density-low-rise form, typical of old continental cities and current developments in London.