

CITY HERITAGE SOCIETY

ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2005

Towers under fire and a new threat to St. Paul's

It is encouraging that at last the office towers we have for long criticised as wrong for the City have come under attack from a variety of expert commentators as the threat they are.

Writing of the thousand-foot "pinnacle" tower proposed for the centre of Bishopsgate, the architectural critic Deyan Sudjic called it "the peak of a jumble of brash, aggressive, new blocks each attempting to grab our attention ... a mountainous landscape or an alien space station dropped into the middle of the City ... the nearest Europe comes to Shanghai". (The Observer, 31.07.05).

This existing threat to the skyline posed by the so-called "cluster" of towers already approved by the City is now exacerbated by Mayor Livingstone's intention to change the rules by which views of St Paul's are protected. Peter Rees, the City Planning Officer, himself an enthusiastic supporter of the City's towers is now complaining, quite rightly, that with the Mayor's proposals (and if the towers are ever built) the famous views of St. Paul's from Hampstead, Greenwich and Richmond would be reduced to narrow slots. (Daily Telegraph 31.10.05).

Rowan Moor, architectural critic of the Evening Standard, and another long-standing admirer of high buildings, has taken up this threat to St. Paul's and in doing so effectively demolished the economic case for towers. He wrote: "there is nothing modern about skyscrapers. Nor are they essential to the economic vitality of a City. Whatever extra space London needs for offices and homes can be accommodated in lower but still densely used buildings. Towers are expensive to build and difficult to use which is why for all the fever of proposed towers only the Gherkin has been built. London need never

build another tower and it would be no less dynamic and contemporary". (Evening Standard 01.11.05).

City Heritage could not have put the case better. Indeed we have been saying much the same for the past ten years. But will the members of our Planning Committee take heed? Messrs. Livingstone and Prescott certainly won't!

A threat of a different kind

It is not only the tops of towers that threaten St. Paul's. Right next to the Cathedral in New Change there is a proposal for a massive lump of a building with great sheets of glass staggering and lurching in what we have described as "an architectural nightmare, a recreation in architectural terms of images from early German surrealist cinema".

The existing New Change Buildings in highly appropriate red brick, stone and granite, elegantly follow the curving line of the street. In their place we would have a series of jutting-out chunks of glass. Other elevations are equally flawed, particularly where Bread Street meets Cheapside. The valued open space within the existing buildings is totally lost.

The French architect asserts: "The material of the external facades sets up a dialogue with neighbouring buildings and St. Paul's ... their colours echo the surrounding stone and brick facades." City Heritage told the City Planning Officer that this claim was a nonsense since materials and colours are in utter contrast – "not so much a dialogue as a one-sided screaming match".

We can only hope that members of the Planning Committee will demand something more respectful of St. Paul's and, indeed of the City as a whole

The latest tower proposals

201 Bishopsgate: This 35-storey tower on the City's borders with Hackney and Tower Hamlets we described as "a reasonably hideous addition to once-attractive Broadgate". We wondered how the developers could hope to let all of its 800,000 square feet of space – an astonishing 20% addition to the already vast Broadgate development.

22-24 Bishopsgate: It is this tower which its developers say will form the "pinnacle" to the whole of the City "cluster" and with this 63-storey, 1,000 footer, we felt that further serious



Under threat: The elegant sweep of New Change Buildings. Picture by A. Hemy.

comment was hardly necessary and that disbelieving laughter was the only possible response. For with this “pinnacle”, as our Chairman said at the Annual Dinner in November, we have the absurd culmination of a wild game of architectural leapfrog with the Gherkin trumped by Heron, Heron by Minerva, Minerva by 122 Leadenhall Street and that one well and truly trumped by this Bishopsgate giant.

Culmination? Heron, which got its approval in 2002, has now come back to ask for an extra four floors on top of its already over-generous 37. Presumably as time goes by the developers of the other approved towers will also be back asking for yet a bit more on the top. Meanwhile, all these vast sites, out-of-action for years, remain a blight on the City.

In March, ‘The Grand Court of Wardmote from the Ward of Portsoken’ made a resolution that “the Planning Committee and Property Sub-Committee be urged to put pressure on the developers of the Minerva tower to proceed with the development or release the S106 funds (i.e. ‘Planning Gain’ money) which are held in escrow as mitigation for the blight and disruption that have been caused and are causing to local businesses and residents in the Ward”.

In fact, there is no mechanism whereby a planning authority can force development to start but it has been reported that Minerva have had second thoughts about their 50-floor tower and now have in mind a lower building which would have a better chance of finding tenants.

Let us hope that some of the other tower will also never actually happen!

Other planning applications we disliked

Mermaid House, Queen Victoria Street: We would like to have seen this 1970’s slab demolished for something better but the developers seem to have been frightened off their earlier grandiose proposals (perhaps by the daunting financial cost of meeting Section 106 “planning obligations”). The poor, underused Mermaid Theatre is included in this refurbishment.

Mondial House, Upper Thames Street: While the existing building (1969-1976) is no architectural joy, we see little improvement in the proposed replacement – a very boring Upper Thames Street elevation, although the riverside treatment is better.

Clements House, Gresham Street: Too big and overbearing (though better than an earlier consented scheme). Office content is up from 20,000m² to 32,000m². The real answer on this large site would be for two or three separately identifiable buildings.

181 Queen Victoria Street: The design is quite inappropriate for this important entry into the City, at total variance with the style of Blackfriars Bridge and Unilever House. The existing brick and stone building should either be retained or its style echoed in any replacement.

Faraday Building, Carter Lane: This application for a hotel is greatly preferred to the earlier proposal for an office development but we have serious reservations about its design,

particularly with the over-regular monotony of the elevations along Carter Lane and Godliman Street. Surely these facades need not look like so many boxes – why not introduce features such as a cupola to provide a break.

36 Great St. Helen’s: Late Victorian but Queen Anne in style this is a pretty three-storey building. To impose another three storeys on top would quite destroy its attractiveness.

The Arcade, Liverpool Street: Application for an extension of time to begin work on proposals approved in 1999. Such permission should not be given and a totally new scheme demanded. We join with English Heritage in asking that a new conservation area be established to take in the Arcade, the Great Eastern Hotel, the Church of St. Botolph and the former Turkish bath.

Crossrail: The proposal (we had earlier opposed) for an excavation shaft in Finsbury Circus would destroy this unique and beautiful space and should never have been contemplated. A cost-benefit analysis might show that the higher cost of some solution other than excavation of Finsbury Circus might be less than the cost of the lost amenity for years of this best of City’s open spaces.

Thameslink, Blackfriars: We think it quite wrong for any infringement of St. Paul’s Height limitation to result from the design of a new rail bridge. The link across Queen Victoria Street with a stair and lift behind the Black Friar public house would impact adversely on the pub’s setting and should be omitted. The development of the station should take into account the style and configuration of existing buildings as they curve towards Blackfriars Bridge.



The Lord Mayor and City Heritage Chairman at Barts for the 2005 Award

These proposals we commended

107 Cheapside: Two schemes, both of which retain the existing elevations that were good of their time (1950’s), and superior to recent proposals for new buildings on this street.

Guildhall North, Basinghall Street: Eminently commendable except that the new sixth floor should match or echo the elevational style of all the floors below.

1 & 2 Serjeants' Inn, Temple: Sympathetic to much of what is proposed in this scheme to modernise barristers' chambers, but would urge reinstatement of the important pedimented centrepiece.

8-9 Botolph Alley: Commend change of use to residential in place of redundant offices.

22 Chancery Lane: Nondescript; 1970's building would be replaced with something much better and which attempts to measure up to its handsome neighbours including the Public Record Office building.

20-26 Cursitor Street: This replacement for Spectrum House is much better, in Portland stone and yellow brick with interesting overhanging bay windows.

140-144 Leadenhall Street: Imaginative new treatment for redundant banking premises.

85 Fleet Street: This listed Lutyens building to be sympathetically refurbished. We find all the proposals totally acceptable in achieving an attractive new office building.

39-40 Cloth Fair: The architect-developers are to be congratulated for this, their third, scheme for conversion of historic City houses from unwanted offices back to their original residential use.

146 Queen Victoria Street: Good proposal to convert small office block into a place of worship and educational centre.

Problems with Government Legislation

Your Executive Committee last year expressed concern as to the implications arising from the Government's "planning gain" legislation which forces developers to make a financial contribution "to mitigate" the adverse impact of large development schemes. In our view a planning proposal is either acceptable or it is not and should not be approved subject to the developer paying a fine, as it were.

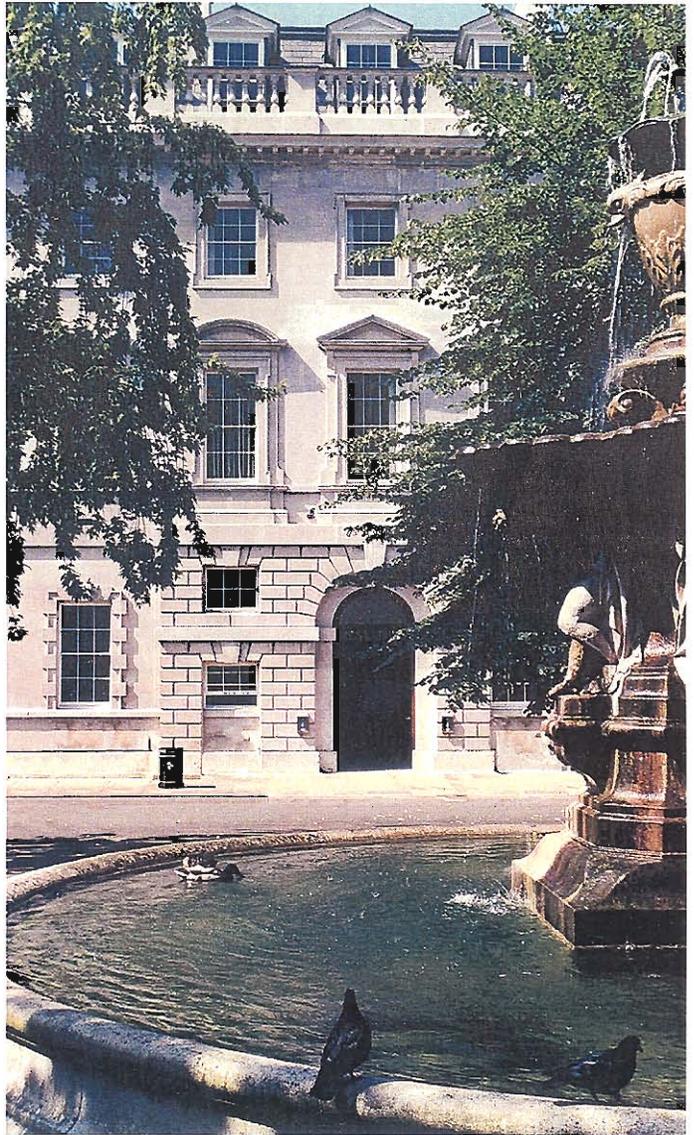
This year we have been concerned at the introduction of further dubious legislation, the substitution of "Local Development Scheme" legislation for the perfectly adequate Unitary Development Plans over which local authorities (and such bodies as City Heritage) put in such a vast amount of work over so many years.

These new schemes are sufficiently complex to require here in the City (and throughout the land) a team of planning officers to work full time on their introduction and implementation over the next three years. Perhaps at the end of that time it will all be changed again for another Government foray into planning.

Anything for change seems to be the driving force behind such unnecessary legislation, the chief results being the creation of vast amounts of paper and the imposition on local authorities of greater workloads. And of course, more work for architects, builders and developers who have to work their way through all the new tortuous requirements.

One point can be made in favour of the new Development Framework – that it is said to include more extensive

opportunities for community involvement. If that turns out to be the case we should welcome it since the whole business of planning should take full account of the feelings and views of those who walk through the City's streets and occupy its buildings.



City Heritage Award joint winner - Barts West Wing

The City Heritage Award 2005

With entries described by the Assessors as of exceptional quality, two were selected for their outstanding excellence as joint recipients of the City Heritage Award 2005: the restoration of Temple Bar and the transformation of the West Wing of St. Bartholomew's Hospital.

Temple Bar, Paternoster Square

The bar is now installed as a splendid gateway into the new Paternoster Square – "A hugely successful restoration of a unique historical element of the City"

Owner: The Corporation of London
Architects: Department of Technical Services, Corporation of London and Freeland Rees Roberts
Contractor: The Cathedral Works Organisation (Chichester) Ltd.

The West Wing, St. Bartholomew's Hospital

The Barts West Wing is at the forefront of the hospital's reinvention as a cancer and cardiac "centre of excellence". The Assessors' called it "A phoenix rising from the ruins with marvellous internal decorations, a great building brought back with a valuable new use".

Owners: Barts and the London NHS Trust
Architect: Greenhill Jenner
Contractor: Costain Ltd



Sir Gavyn Arthur, chief guest at the Annual Dinner, with the Chairman and Ann Woodward. Picture by Ann Bradley.

The Assessors to the Award

Desmond Fitzpatrick	City Heritage Society
Lady Freeman, BA Dip.Cons (AA)	London Advisory Committee of the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission
R. C. Houghton, DipArch	Worshipful Company of Painter-Stainers Corporation of London
Peter Wynne Rees, BSc, BArch, BTP, RIBA, MRTPI	Ancient Monuments Society
Matthew Saunders, MBE, BA Cantab	Worshipful Company of Painter-Stainers
A. F. Shannon, ARIBA, AADipl	City Heritage Society
C. Douglas Woodward, CBE	



Outside Hall Place, Bexley, one of the Society's visits in 2005.
Picture by A. Norris.

Events for our Members during 2005

The *Annual General Meeting* in February took place once again in a Committee room at Guildhall, preceded by drinks in the Guildhall Club bar.

In April we had a visit to *Coopers' Hall* in Devonshire Square, one of the oldest buildings in the City used as a livery hall. In May we went to *Hall Place, Bexley*, a Tudor mansion with its magnificent Great Hall, built for an earlier Lord Mayor.

The *City Heritage Award*, presented in July by the Lord Mayor as is usual, was followed by a mini-bus tour of this year's five high-quality entries, culminating with refreshments at one of the two joint Award winners – the West Wing of Barts Hospital.

We visited *Eastbury Manor House*, an unexpected treasure of an Elizabethan merchant's house in Barking, in October and in November came our convivial *Annual Dinner* held for the second year in the agreeable surroundings of the City University Club in Cornhill with Sir Gavyn Arthur, a favourite former Lord Mayor, as chief guest and speaker.

We finished the year in great style with a visit later in November to the *Spitalfields headquarters* of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, located in a former Huguenot silk merchant's house, and entertained by SPAB's Secretary, Philip Venning.

With a final flourish we went off on a particularly privileged visit (the very last of its kind) to the *Lord Chancellor's Residence* at the House of Lords. Our tour was conducted in brilliant style by the Pursebearer to the Lord Chancellor.

THE SOCIETY'S EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE 2005

C. Douglas Woodward C.B.E.	Chairman
Norman Searle K.L.J., J.P.	Deputy Chairman
Desmond Fitzpatrick	Deputy Chairman
Ann Woodward	Membership and Events Secretary
Mary Hemy BA	Hon. Secretary
Sidney Morton	Hon. Treasurer
Tom Wilmot	
James Thomas BA Arch, Dip TP, FRIBA	
Anthony Hemy RIBA	
Anne Thomas BA, MA (Urban Design)	CAAC Representative