



CITY HERITAGE SOCIETY

ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2001

Dislike of office towers is reaffirmed

A year ago we described the granting of approval for the Swiss Re tower -- the "erotic gherkin" -- as the great planning disaster of the year 2000 with its opening of the doors to more skyscrapers in the City and surrounding areas. The year 2001 saw that forecast all too fully realized with, in particular, the applications for the Heron tower in Bishopsgate (602 feet) and the still more astonishing tower conceived by Renzo Piano for the south side of London Bridge rising to double that height.

In striving to prevent Lord Foster's tower for Swiss Re the City Heritage Society had few allies. English Heritage had so far forgotten its true purpose and function that against all the advice of its own expert officials, it had indicated its liking for a scheme which would involve the destruction of a Grade II* listed building, the former Baltic Exchange -- an incredible falling short on the part of our national conservation body.

This time round under its new chairman, Sir Neil Cossens, English Heritage resumed its proper role in leading the fight against the proposed Heron Tower. Because of English Heritage's stance, the Secretary of State for the Environment on this occasion responded correctly to the swell of opinion against such towers and "called in" the application for a public enquiry.

That enquiry took place during November with English Heritage, Save Britain's Heritage, the City of Westminster and City Heritage as objectors. Of course our case, strong as it is, was undoubtedly weakened by the previous lapse on the part of English Heritage.

The reasons for our objection can be briefly summarised:

- The City's financial sector workforce will inevitably contract as the result of mergers, take-overs, "restructuring" and new technology and the overall demand for office space will therefore shrink, not grow as claimed by the City Corporation.
- There will be a very restricted demand on the part of major conglomerates for large buildings.
- Smaller firms (said to be the Heron tower's designated occupants) are more economically housed in buildings of low-to-medium height of which ample exist in the City.
- The World Trade Centre attack will make towers increasingly costly to build and maintain because of more stringent Building Regulations and far higher insurance costs.

- High buildings are increasingly likely to be under-occupied and less cost-efficient.
- The City's future prosperity lies not in towers but in high-grade buildings of medium size.
- Towers have inherent safety problems being attractive as targets for arson and bomb threats, because of the widespread effects of any disaster to the surrounding area, and in the danger to occupants because of the time it takes to evacuate people from higher floors.
- Existing City towers have created skyline chaos and any new tower would compound that chaos with St. Paul's dome increasingly diminished as London's dominant point of reference.
- The Heron tower, like the Swiss Re tower, would overshadow and dominate everything around it, impacting adversely on listed and other buildings and on conservation areas. Such towers are the very worst of neighbours going right against the grain of what is still an historic city centre.
- It is environmentally perverse to design buildings intended for thousands more commuters when public transport cannot cope with existing demand.

We await the outcome of the public enquiry and the Secretary of State's decision on this matter.

* * *

On all sides there is debate as to whether London should have more skyscrapers. Those in favour include, not surprisingly, some property developers and architects who receive encouragement from Mr. Livingstone on the one hand and the City Corporation, alas, on the other, its elected members having been badgered into believing that without high buildings the City is in danger of losing its leading place as a centre for financial and business dealings.

Tall buildings are the subject of three recent consultation exercises to all of which our Society has contributed.

We have told **English Heritage and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment** that in general we believe tall buildings are out of character in an historic commercial centre such as the City of London.

In response to a **Civic Trust** draft statement we have said we oppose further high buildings in the City because of their adverse effect on the City's character and environmental



Restored Daily Express building, winner of City Heritage Award 2001

quality, whereas Canary Wharf, for example, is a suitable location. We pointed out that planning policies in the city and elsewhere are not so much informed by the views of local people as by greed for development and fear that "if we do not permit the skyscrapers someone else will".

Most recently we have responded in similar terms to an enquiry into tall buildings by the **House of Commons Urban Affairs Sub-Committee**.

A MORI poll commissioned by English Heritage showed that 62% of those questioned do not want any more tall buildings in London; 91% approved the protection of views of St. Paul's.

The City's Development Plan

The City's updated Unitary Development Plan which provides the framework and ground rules for development over the next few years will be published later this year following lengthy consultation and a public enquiry which took place in April and May.

There were far fewer objections (on environmental grounds) than there were for the first UDP published in 1994, mostly from the Society and members of its Executive Committee: the Chairman and Messrs. Fitzpatrick, Thomas and Wilmot.

The Chairman in his evidence to the enquiry on 25 April observed that the policies expressed in the new UDP were admirable and would guarantee a City of London wholly in accord with the desires of the City Heritage Society! Alas, he added, experience since 1994, when the first UDP was adopted, had demonstrated all too clearly that policies were so phrased to make it possible to read into them quite the reverse of what was seemingly intended.

We opposed Corporation policies which would promote over-provision of over-large office buildings, our case being that optimistic Corporation forecasts of employment growth in the financial services sector were out of date and fallacious and that the City's best interests lay in policies tailored to meet an inevitably diminishing demand for office floorspace. Current policies would result in smaller buildings and sites being subsumed into large sites which would never be developed or large buildings which would never be fully occupied.

The Chairman voiced the Society's concerns that proposed new policies, much the same as those in the 1994 plan, would no more ensure that the bulk and massing of development schemes were appropriate to their surroundings, nor that development had due regard to the scale, height and character of the locality. He added:

"Because of pressure from developers for large buildings, however unsuitable, and because planning officers and members of the Planning Committee are under intense pressure from within the Corporation itself to facilitate such development, the commendable objectives set out in the plan are ignored, such setting aside made easier because the plan has no fixed requirements".

It was for this reason that City Heritage called for the reintroduction of "plot ratio" control, a case most eloquently argued at the enquiry by James Thomas.

We also argued for tightening of requirements in respect of high buildings pointing out that the new UDP was even worse in this respect than the 1994 edition in that it would permit high buildings even in areas of the City considered inappropriate for them. We pointed out the deleterious effect on the backdrop of St. Paul's from the south of high buildings in the "north-central" area (Barbican) such as 125 London Wall and its newer neighbour, the Richard Rogers building on the corner of London Wall and Wood Street.

We asked for a height limit of 70 metres for tall buildings in the City and, indeed, hoped that any further proposals for towers would be positively discouraged.

We quoted the only Government pronouncement on this subject, made in November 1999, which said: "There is at present no economic imperative in terms of unmet demand or evidence that the competitive position of London is under threat through the lack of new high buildings . . . the existing character of London is highly valued; there is no need or desire for a radical change in the City's skyline in order to sustain or enhance London's image and status as a world city."

In his closing statement to the enquiry the Chairman said: "The City has enormous advantages over anywhere else in London as a location for finance and business. Those advantages certainly include the special character of the City which is the legacy of its past. Much of the historic character of the city has been lost as a result of wartime destruction and post-war insensitive development. Much however remains and we think the new UDP should seek in all ways possible to ensure that the City's still special character is not further eroded by permitting the development of inappropriately massive structures whether in terms of bulk or height, structures which, in any event, are likely to remain unbuilt, unoccupied or only partially occupied."

The Inspector appointed to the enquiry issued his report in September and we were disappointed to find that our views had been dismissed and to read that he believed the City to have one of the highest quality townscapes in England(!); and that the UDP should be modified to list the advantages of high buildings. We found the report astonishing for the level of its eulogy of the Corporation's planning approach.

Our comments on other planning applications

During the year we submitted comments to the Corporation on some 30 other planning applications. Here are extracts:

41 Lothbury The splendid former NatWest banking hall received the City Heritage Award in 1997 and proposals for its preservation as a large open space for meetings and reception area are acceptable.

60-63 Fenchurch Street Another very large increase in office floorspace from 3300m² to 7500m². Although we would have liked refurbishment at least of No.63, dating from the 1850s, we understand the pressure for redevelopment.

140 Aldersgate Street Our main reservation is that the scheme uses every inch of available site space -- why not devote a little of the space to public amenity, even a flower-bed to cheer up this dreary corner. We hope the applicants are serious about the 1489m² of new retail space.

N.B. It is disgraceful that the owners have allowed the existing building to grow more and more derelict since it became unoccupied some ten years ago!

Seacoal House, Limeburner Lane Up from 5000m² to 9500m². The impression we get is of one ugly building being replaced by one only slightly less so.

N.B. The application was subsequently withdrawn and we did not dislike an alternative proposal.

54-66 Gresham Street No.54 (1878) is a pleasing, small-scale building and its facade at least should be retained. The upper Doric aedicule of Nos.56-60 is handsome and also worth retaining. The new building proposed is commendably in stone but we dislike the style of the 7th and 8th storeys.

21 Lime Street We commend the planning officers for the way they have encouraged the architects to produce an acceptable building for this sensitive site -- but it is still too high at the rear. We like the arcading proposed for the retail frontage.

7 Lothbury Handsome listed building. Assume change of use to club is acceptable and that the club will be of a kind that does not go against the character of this area.

Whitbread Brewery, Chiswell Street Applaud the proposed conversion to "apartment hotel" use. Historic buildings largely retained. We urge the Planning

Committee and the owners to re-open the courtyard for public access -- cafe, restaurant?

81-90 Cheapside Society much impressed by this application for rebuilding Mercers' Hall and premises around it.

20-22 Cursitor Street Details indicate a heavy and rather ugly building, too high in comparison with its neighbours and will not help improve the look of this once attractive street.

70-80a Fenchurch Street Proposed building though largely glazed is of quite pleasing design except for its upper two storeys which appear ugly and need to be rethought -- better still to omit them altogether.

25 Little Trinity Lane A large development of some quality with careful retention of Queenhithe Dock, improved riverside walkway, correction of present infringement of St. Paul's heights and welcome addition of 1000m² of new public space - enormous improvement on the ugly Fur Trade House of the concrete 1960s.

Condor House, St. Paul's Churchyard We welcome proposals for internal reconstruction behind retained facades while new facades along Carter Lane and Dean's Court will improve the quality of the building.

101 Queen Victoria Street Unlike many applications for ultra-modern buildings this proposal for a new Salvation Army headquarters holds promise of attractiveness and quality.

6-8 Tokenhouse Yard We have doubts as to the treatment of the fifth and sixth floor fenestration -- inferior to that existing. The proposal for the rear elevation seems far less lively and interesting than the existing.

60-63 Fenchurch Street No.60, classical, stoneclad, with its handsome Fenchurch Street elevation should be retained. No.63 is also a handsome, Victorian survivor. The two provide a pleasing touch of class among the neighbouring dreary glass buildings.



The Lord Mayor makes sure the City Heritage Award plaque is well fixed with the Master Painter-Stainer and City Heritage Chairman standing by

Land bounded by Mark Lane, Hart Street This large site would provide 23000m² of office space compared with less than 9000m² at present, the five-to-seven existing storeys going up to sixteen. The objection to it is that it would inevitably overshadow everything around it, including St. Olave's church.

Site bounded by Breams Buildings etc The proposed demolition of two recent unattractive buildings is no loss and the large building that would replace them is far better architecturally. We regret that even more of the public space around the site would be lost and the Corporation should insist on some public space being provided.

16-18 Finsbury Circus, 18-31 Eldon Street The cry for large floorplate buildings is well met in this proposal that would link the floors of numerous separate buildings lying between Finsbury Circus and Eldon Street. All the handsome facades of both elevations would be preserved.

7a Laurence Pountney Hill Rectory House is one of the few survivals in the City from the eighteenth century, the recipient of the City Heritage Award in 1991. We are delighted with this application for change of use from office to residential.

London Bridge Tower We sent a letter to Southwark Borough Council objecting to the application for the 66-storey tower proposed on land adjoining London Bridge Station. We said the tower would dominate and diminish everything around it including five conservation areas and such listed buildings as Southwark Cathedral, the George Hotel and Guy's Hospital, that it would diminish the dominance of St. Paul's Cathedral and adversely affect views from the City and far wider afield.

The 2001 Awards

The City Heritage Award for outstanding excellence in building conservation, presented each year by City Heritage and the Worshipful Company of Painter-Stainers, was presented in 2001 for the restoration of the former Daily Express building in Fleet Street now serving as the headquarters of Goldman Sachs International. The Assessors considered that the building had not merely been brilliantly restored but improved. The architects were Hurley, Robertson and Associates acting for the Fleet Street Partnership, and the contractors were Kajima Taylor Woodrow.

The 2001 New Architecture Award, made by the Worshipful Company of Chartered Architects in conjunction with City Heritage, went to Foggo Associates for 60 Queen Victoria Street, the impressive green-coloured building on the corner of Queen Street. The new Merrill Lynch headquarters in Newgate Street (designed by Swanke Hayden Connell) was highly commended for its variety of architectural treatments involving both new and refurbished buildings.

Events during the year

- February: Annual General Meeting in the splendours of Goldsmith's Hall
- March: Tour of the atmospheric Wilton's Music Hall in Grace's Alley E1, an amazing survivor of the first generation of Victorian music halls.
- April: Visit and tour of Fulham Palace and Museum, one of the outstanding medieval domestic sites in London.
- June: One of the highlights of the year, a visit to Crosby Hall, Chelsea, led by Christopher Moran who has converted a great historic house from institutional use to what has been described as a private palace.
- September: Visit to Dr. Johnson's House, Gough Square, where extensive building work had just been completed.
- October: Tour of the buildings entered for the City Heritage Award culminating with champagne at the 2001 winner, the restored Daily Express building in Fleet Street.
- November: The Annual Dinner, in the magnificent drawing room of Goldsmith's Hall, with Lord Brooke as our principal guest and speaker.

THE SOCIETY'S EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE 2001

C. Douglas Woodward C.B.E.	Chairman
Norman Searle J.P.	Deputy Chairman
Desmond Fitzpatrick	Deputy Chairman
Ann Woodward	Membership and Events Secretary
Barbara Allan	Hon. Secretary
Sidney Morton	Hon. Treasurer
R.T.D. Wilmot C.C.	
Anthony Hemy ARIBA	
James Thomas BA Arch, Dip TP, FRIBA	

Mrs. Anne Thomas represents the Society on the City's Conservation Area Advisory Committee