



CITY HERITAGE SOCIETY

ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2002

Dangerous surfeit of office space as demand plummets

Our year was much taken up with pointing out to the world at large, and the City Corporation's Planning Committee in particular, the seeming folly of encouraging the building of still more large office blocks at a time of plummeting demand for such space.

This depressed property scene, resulting from collapse in the world's stock markets, echoes the events of the previous recession of 1987-1988 - but with one important difference.

The Corporation has argued that this recession like its predecessors is cyclical (that bust will be followed by boom) and that when the good days return the City will have ensured provision of all the big buildings that will be required.

The difference now, and in the years ahead, is surely that however strong the economic recovery the number of people engaged in the financial sector, the City's mainstay, is most unlikely ever to return to its earlier high level. The very substantial shake-out of employees by banks, dealing houses, insurers is irreversible since their future survival will be based on more realistic staff numbers, a process made increasingly easier by technological advances. And although the scope for mergers of big companies grows steadily less, some mergers there will continue to be - with, inevitably, further "rationalization" of employee numbers.

It is for these reasons, which are voiced also by every one of the financial editors, that City Heritage has advocated a change of direction away from skyscrapers, groundscrapers and other overblown office buildings.

The threat of a dangerous surfeit of office space is by no means confined to the City. London as a whole is awash with large buildings recently completed, nearing completion or in the pipeline. Not surprisingly owners/developers are struggling to find tenants while companies which optimistically committed themselves to 500,000 square feet of space are equally hunting for tenants to take up the odd 250,000 square feet they now find they no longer require.

The Heron tower - and others

In our report last year we recorded the objections we made at the Public Enquiry into the proposal for the 43-

storey Heron tower in Bishopsgate. In July Mr Prescott gave his approval for that scheme, the Evening Standard forecasting that "developers waiting in the wings expect the decision to open the floodgates for the 15 to 20 skyscrapers that Mayor Livingstone envisages for London". At least Mr Prescott did say that with other towers "economic benefits would not be sufficient to outweigh material harm to the setting of St Paul's Cathedral, the Tower of London or more local heritage buildings".

The test will come in 2003 when the City considers the proposed 50-storey Minerva tower at Aldgate, a project we have already condemned (see below), and when the "Shard of Glass" proposed at London Bridge Station is considered at yet another Public Enquiry which we joined with others in demanding for this most controversial of buildings.

The House of Commons report on tall buildings

The City's argument for towers is based on their economic necessity - that if towers are not provided major financial concerns would locate elsewhere. That argument was effectively demolished in the Report of the House of Commons Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee, when after consideration of its evidence from 55 organizations (City Heritage included) their two main conclusions were:

We are not convinced that tall buildings are essential for the future of London as a financial centre. We received no evidence that any company had left London or refused to come to London because of a shortage of tall buildings.

Tall buildings do not necessarily achieve higher densities than medium- or low-rise ones and, indeed, can be less efficient in their use of space.

Professor David Chipperfield of London Property Research underlined the above point in a memorandum to the House of Commons Report. He pointed out that the Swiss Re tower (the "erotic gherkin") now under construction with 825,000 square feet gross has only 460,000 square feet of net lettable space - that is 56 per cent of the whole. Similarly the Heron tower with 606,000 square feet gross has only 360,000 square feet of

lettable space (59 per cent of the whole). Developers and occupiers normally expect an efficiency of between 70-80 per cent. Equal amounts of lettable space could have been provided in buildings that were much less high. "Going high with a relatively thin floorplate is incredibly inefficient in terms of the relationship between gross permitted space and net usable space", said the Professor.

The better way ahead

Speaking at our Annual Dinner at Pewterers' Hall in November the Chairman said: "The City is, and always will be, chosen because it is at the centre of the nation's life and because of its environmental and architectural quality. That was why Merrill Lynch, having looked at 40 possible locations, chose to build its new (low-rise) headquarters opposite St Paul's with a splendid mix of new and refurbished buildings which rightly earned them this year's City Heritage Award."



City Heritage Award: The Lord Mayor is welcomed by the City Heritage Chairman and Master Painter-Stainer at Merrill Lynch's new headquarters.

The City Corporation might therefore find it profitable to spend less on research seeking to demonstrate the "sustainability" of towers and that employment in the financial sector will increase over the coming years and concentrate instead on ways of consolidating the City's unique quality as a location for the world's headquarter buildings and ways in which the City economy could become more diversified.

Comments on 42 planning applications

In all during 2002 we have commented on 42 planning applications, compared with 30 the previous year, an

indication of pressures for development - particularly during the first nine months of the year. In the last quarter there was a marked falling off, finally reflecting the not-to-be ignored recession. Here is a digest.

St Botolphs House, Houndsditch (Minerva tower) If the Committee approve this 50-storey tower they will be telling the world they are happy for a large part of the City to become a "little Manhattan". Even the spurious talk of confining towers to a "cluster" goes by the board since this tower is well away from Tower 42 and the Gherkin. The new tower takes the amount of space on this site up from 18,000 m² to over 157,000 m². The applicants seek to justify their case on the basis of a substantially increased City workforce: "The site is accessible to the 550,000 employed in the City and its fringe - that figure is expected to grow to 695,000 by 2016". City Heritage sees a substantially diminishing

workforce. We are very concerned with the deleterious effect this tower and others would have on the City's public transport, already stretched to breaking point. A 50-storey tower cannot possibly improve the skyline or respect the local townscape. The tower would loom over and dominate everything around it, and would badly affect views to and from the Tower of London.

Bath House, Holborn Viaduct The best feature of this application is the reinstatement, in replica, of the former gatehouse.

51 Lime Street We were grateful to be consulted on this by Sir Stuart Lipton (Stanhope plc) and like the shape suggested by the

architects and the open space provided but our final verdict was that it was too high, another powerful architectural "statement" from the Foster practice, one we do not like very much. Its 27 storeys would loom aggressively over the church of St Andrew Undershaft and the pleasant buildings beneath it and would add to the visual chaos of the skyline.

1 Bartholomew Lane Full marks to the Planning Officers who have told the applicants that this building makes a positive contribution to the conservation area and that demolition of the main facade would be resisted. In fact the proposals do envisage substantial alterations

which would make the building far less interesting. (Pleased that the proposal was later revised leaving fenestration much as existing.)

37-41 Gracechurch Street The spectacularly fine facade has of course to be retained. We have doubts about the new attics and mansard proposed which are out of keeping with the main facade.

168 Fenchurch Street Having looked at the environmental statement we confirm our original objection to this 34-storey proposal which would loom forbiddingly over its surroundings, dwarfing neighbours and impacting adversely on conservation areas and listed buildings around it. Nothing is said about the increased danger in such a building from terrorist attack, the vast damage that could occur around it or the time to evacuate occupants.

25-32 Chancery Lane City Heritage applauds this proposal with retention of the important facades, the internal reconstruction producing good office accommodation.

Drapers Gardens Pleased to see the existing 30-storey tower removed but we ask that the applicants soften the impression of forbiddingly rectangular bulk of the 16-storey replacement.

Royex House With this proposal we see one slab being replaced by another with a vast increase in office space from 17,000 to 34,500 m².

31-32, 35-37 Cock Lane Wholly admirable proposals for residential development. Loss of existing facades more than offset by the greater interest of the new ones.

35 Basinghall Street Office content up from 7,000 to 17,000 m², the "planning statement" attempting to bulldoze us into believing that the new building is not only of exceptionally high architectural quality but that it fits supremely well into its surroundings. Suggest a reduction of at least one storey and a rethink of the topmost part. Good that it could suit a number of smaller users and we like the choice of limestone.

311-318 High Holborn Despite substantial demolition the scheme is conservation-orientated and welcomed. Replacement Dutch-style gables much better than existing "neo-Tudor".

111 Cannon Street Replacement of this 1960s block overdue but the interesting replacement should be seven instead of eight storeys. The "London Stone" would be adequately incorporated into the new retail frontage.

31 Jewry Street Welcome these proposals for new office use of the former Sir John Cass College. New elevational treatment for 1931 facade more in keeping with retained 1899 facade. A potential City Heritage Award entry.

36-39 Poultry Surprising that such good architects should have come up with these barrack-like facades -

clashes horribly with the listed Midland Bank on one side and the listed No 35 on the other. New elevations not a patch on those existing, which should be retained or rebuilt in replica.

27 Poultry Lutyens' Midland Bank is one of the finest and most impressive of the City's commercial buildings, its elevations matched by its interiors. While we regret HSBC's moving their headquarters away from the City we applaud their decision to retain a substantial part of the building as a branch bank. The rest would be high-grade shops and restaurants with public access right through to the banking area. A conservation proposal for which we feel an unusual degree of enthusiasm.

201 Bishopgate Assuming the need for yet another large office block (some 95,000 m²), little to object to in this proposal for development on a derelict area over railway tracks on the City's easternmost edge.

46-50 St Mary Axe No objection to replacement of No 50 but strongly urge retention of the facade of No 46, an interesting Victorian survival.

2-14 St Martins-le-Grand This very large development is architecturally acceptable, limits itself to eight storeys and manages to suggest externally that it is not a single block. Doubling of retail space welcome as is the improved open space.

54-66 Gresham Street Proposals for new buildings on Gresham Street and Old Jewry are as sullenly unattractive as the buildings they would replace. Proposals for the old City Police headquarters at 26 Old Jewry promise a thoughtful and acceptable treatment with retention and refurbishment of early 18th-century features.

20 St Mary-at-Hill Existing 1970s building of no special value and proposals an improvement with architects getting 5,200 m² of office space where there is now 3,600 m².

1 Seething Lane Scant respect shown for its neighbours in this 10-storey glass slab which overtops adjacent St Olave's Church and clashes horribly with the London brick and stone elevation next door.

London Stock Exchange We had looked forward to a replacement for this exemplar of 1960s "brutalism". Thankfully the applicants have dismissed either skyscraper or groundscraper solutions and propose recladding the tower and adding two flanking buildings with a welcome increase in retail space from 230 m² to 7,000 m². We dislike, however, the cladding materials which would make the tower stick out like a sore thumb, and would make the proposed new "east" building a particularly ugly addition to the Threadneedle Street/Old Broad Street corner. We would like to see a little more in the way of public open space to compensate for this intense development.

New "listings" suggested

We asked the Department for Culture, Media and Sport that consideration should be given to the listing of New Change Buildings bounded by New Change, Cheapside, Bread Street and Watling Street - the large group of brick and Portland stone buildings constructed 1953-1960 by Victor Heal for the Bank of England. This group is the only surviving part of the original post-war plan for the City of London drawn up by Holden and Holford for the Corporation of London. Although our request was submitted in November 2001 and that advice on our request has been given to the Department by English Heritage, a decision is still awaited.

SAVE Britain's Heritage has sought the listing of two groups of former meat market buildings on the western edge of Smithfield. City Heritage has collaborated by supplying a statement supporting such listing.

Events during 2002

- February: Annual General Meeting at Pewterers' Hall
- April: Conducted tour of Eltham Palace
- May: Talk about Paternoster Square at the Little Ship Club, followed by dinner
- June: Conducted tour of Croydon Palace
- July: Tour of buildings entered for the City Heritage Award culminating with refreshments on the roof of Merrill Lynch, this year's recipient of the Award
- September: Visit to Abbey Mills pumping station
- October: Tour conducted by the Archivist of the new Haberdashers' Hall
- November: The Annual Dinner at Pewterers' Hall this year, with the Chief Commoner as our principal guest

Awards 2002

The City Heritage Award for outstanding excellence in building conservation presented each year by City Heritage and the Worshipful Company of Painter-Stainers was given this 25th year for the creation along Newgate Street, opposite St Paul's, of the impressive new headquarters buildings for investment bank Merrill Lynch.

The scheme provides trading floors of 6,000 m² within a state-of-the-art building but was judged by the Assessors as conservation-orientated in turning a run-down backwater of the City into a vibrant new working area combining new building with old and providing generous new public space.

We welcomed the way in which the low-rise scheme comprises a number of quite separate elements including buildings skilfully refurbished, rather than the all too common single entity favoured by developers. The colonnaded hall of the former Post Office in King Edward Street has been handsomely refurbished as conference and entertainment space. The ruins of Christ Church Greyfriars and an enlarged landscaped churchyard provide the historical background.

Owner: Merrill Lynch PLC

Architect: Swanke Hayden Connell International Ltd

Contractor: Mace Ltd

The year's New Architecture Award, in which we collaborate with the Worshipful Company of Chartered Architects, had few potentially acceptable entries this year but we found a most worthy recipient in the new hall of the Haberdashers Company in West Smithfield.

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