

Re-discovering high-rise living

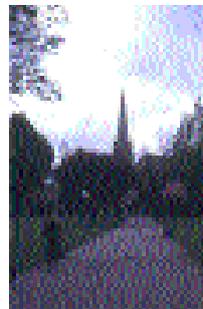
Lecture by Dickon Robinson, Director of Development & Technical services, Peabody Trust, given at the Design for Homes Intensive Flair conference, 14th June 2001. 30 mins CPD

My comments follow the context of Yolande's excellent introduction. We face a huge demand for new houses, particularly in the South East and London. That is not just houses for sale, there is huge demand for more affordable housing as well.

I have been given the opportunity to talk about high-rise and towers which must be the most interesting and contentious current planning issue. It is an issue which Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment has been discussing. Launched during the past week was some joint guidance between CABE and English Heritage on tall buildings. It is intended to demonstrate where there is common ground between CABE and English Heritage and also to ensure that we can disagree in a friendly fashion.

CABE talks about buildings which are substantially taller than their neighbours and which significantly change the skyline. I think there is a need to distinguish between towers and tall buildings. Towers are buildings that have attitude. I believe all buildings transmit messages, they say things about people. Build them so people can occupy them. Towers in particular, I think, transmit messages about power, power to command the resources in the first place and power to overcome gravity. Take two examples: The Tower of London built by William the Conqueror to dominate the City of London to show them that he was the boss, the City of London being a very independent and spirited place in those days, just as it is today (1). And of course the Telecom tower, still in my view one of the most elegant buildings of the 20th century, built literally to transmit messages (2).

This ability to use tall buildings to transmit messages has been understood by the establishment for generations. The church spire symbolises the power of the establishment, through the Church of England, which of course was the



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creation of another king, Henry the VIII (3). It is interesting that its modern counterpart in many of our urban areas, the minaret (4), is a reminder of how multicultural our cities have become and what a large community we now have within our cities following different faiths.

The Victorians, with their huge energy, weren't particularly interested in building towers for people to live in or even to work in. They used towers as punctuation marks - the Houses of Parliament and so on - but they didn't use them to provide accommodation. That was going on in north America and ideas about high-rise spilled out of Vienna as part of the modern movement.

It wasn't until the latter half of the last century that architects had been fascinated by the ideas in the UK and really had an opportunity to build some high-rise homes. This is a slide of Peabody Trust's Roscoe Street (5). It was built very close to the Barbican very shortly after the war on a bomb site. At the time, the tallest residential buildings in London for a brief period, completed in about 1952, this is a picture of those towers today (6).

Interestingly enough, that has always been a popular place to live and we have always had a list of people keen to move into this accommodation. So the idea that high-rise social housing is inherently unpopular is clearly not borne out by our own experience. Also, looking at it, you can see that



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very familiar sense of tower blocks and slab blocks which have become so common.

This tower block is on an estate in Hackney near Clissold Park (7, 8). There were two of them. One has already been demolished and this one is going to be demolished. Later I'm going to show you what we propose to put in its place, but these are very typical of local authority developments across the country, many of which have been out of favour for lots of the reasons you can see in this slide, all those awful problems of refuse disposal and a complete breakdown of management control.



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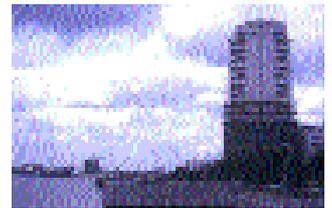
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they like and do not like about their homes, so that we have some objective feedback.

There is a particular point I want to make about tower blocks. It is the sense of confusion that has risen over the past 50 years: if tower blocks are about power, why were we putting the people with the least power into towers while those who can afford it were busy buying detached houses? It is not going to be possible to rehabilitate the tower block as a form of social housing until we can demonstrate that the wealthy are also interested in high-rise living.



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These two are more popular high-rise, reasonably high-rise, ex-local authority tower blocks (9, 10). Both are very close to Kings Cross Muriel House bought by the GLC, and the other Prospect House, built I think by Islington and transferred to Peabody Trust about two years ago. Again, very popular. There is no great demand from people to move out of these homes. In this particular case, Prospect House, the tenants have taken over the management of the building and have their own tenant management organisation.



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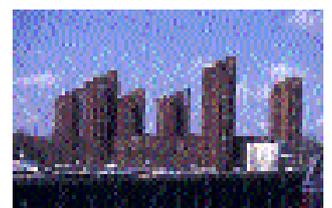


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As we know that is now very much the case. While local authorities are blowing up tower blocks, and while social housing organisations are building low rise housing schemes, the private sector has moved on. Here in central London we have Manhattan Lofts (11) and (12) Barratt in Docklands. Out west there is Montevetro and Chelsea Harbour beyond (13). That also applies increasingly to those flats in blocks which come up for sale. This is the World's End estate in Chelsea (14), very high density, very uncompromising, very clearly local estate, where flats are changing hands for increasing sums. Earlier this week I was in North Kensington where apartments in the Trellick Tower are reportedly changing hands for £300 000 a piece.



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Because we are thinking of building more tower blocks, we are currently engaging on a programme of research, to talk to tenants and to find what it is

Have attitudes changes? Not necessarily. Not all schemes have been successful. This is a scheme on Caledonian Road which Peabody put forward. This was one appeal that didn't work (15). We were told

it was overdevelopment, that there were some two-storey railway cottages next door to it (which were due for demolition in due course). It was ahead of its time, I suspect. We also had real trouble with this scheme, a high-rise scheme in Kilburn High Road (16). We wanted to use the height to make the point that urban regeneration was happening, and where. Through the protracted planning process we had to take some floors off the building.



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There are five factors we have to nail down if we are to succeed with the next generation of towers. They are: prejudice; lots of issues around management and maintenance; sustainability; the potential for towers to contribute to regeneration; and last, but not least, cost.

What is the case for high-rise? One aspect of the case are the fantastic and stunning views. This is the view from the Kilburn tower down over Kilburn towards the City of Westminster (17). My personal view is that one of the great pleasures about living in urban locations is to get up above the roofscape and to look out over the roofscape. It is a continually changing but yet stable view which gives huge satisfaction.



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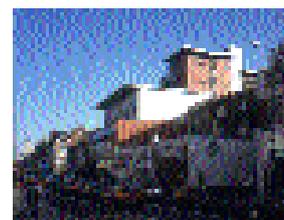
It is not just the view that encourages us to build high. Security is a key issue. Residents tell us that they feel safer in tower blocks very often, particularly if there is controlled access at the bottom.

Obviously the point about locating high-rise in areas of transport interchanges means that they are often extremely convenient locations. For society as a whole there is no doubt towers add visual interest to the environment. I am sure most of you will have been up in the London Eye. I think if it wasn't for the towers it would be a bloody boring view from up there. The towers enable you to pick out the different locations across London's skyline.

There are some significant issues around sustainability and towers and I shall say a bit more about that in a minute. Towers give us an opportunity of meeting housing demands in very high housing demand areas. I was very taken by Yolande's slide of the hot spots. It seems to me that from an affordable housing point of view, we need to increase the supply of new homes in such a way that it would cap house price rises. That would do more for affordability than building more homes. The only way to do that is to really increase the supply in such areas. Towers would be an excellent way of achieving that.



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This is the tower where we just saw the view from the window (18). You can just see it poking above the tree tops. I would like to see two or three more floors on that. This is the building here itself (19). I want to talk a little about management and maintenance. Basically, high rise towers in future will be much more complex to manage because they are going to see mixed tenure and mixed use. Social housing tenants will have a right to buy but owner-occupiers increasingly will be given different forms of private investment and they will actually be renting their homes. So we will have a much bigger mixture.

Mixed use brings its own challenge. In this particular building what you can see at the top is housing for sale but a bit lower down is a health centre and running across the health centre is a big neon sign which says transport and theatre. We actually built round the back some additional space for the theatre. We are trying to hit all the targets in terms of urban regeneration and build some exciting architecture. But it is more complicated.

I mentioned sustainability. There are some interesting issues about sustainability and high-rise. I should say the previous scheme was designed for us by Robert O'Hara. And the tower I showed earlier (15) was designed by HTA for us. This is designed by ECD (20,21). It is in the Old Kent Road and it is an attempt to demonstrate things are changing in that area. It is quite a low value area. What you see on the far side there is the south of the site and on this side facing up towards the City you see winter gardens. One of the interesting things about sustainable design is that I think there are high-rise buildings where the facades will be differentiated in a way that hasn't existed in towers previously. Think about all those towers out there. They look the same from whichever side you look at them. Seriously sustainable buildings will not be like that in future.

I mentioned earlier using towers to contribute to urban regeneration and estate regeneration. We are very active in estate regeneration. The far side over there, the triangular area is the Kings Crescent estate (24). To the north is Clissold Park, a very attractive park if you are not familiar with it.



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This is one of the second generation (25). So all the money we want to invest in improving social housing on this estate will have to be serviced by cross subsidy from building housing for sale. I showed you the tower earlier which residents are determined should come down. We have been through a competitive process for what replaces it and we were selected in partnership with others, and we asked the Dutch planners West 8 to work with us. You will notice that that one tower has been replaced by three new ones.

So I think we are beginning to see that residents can be won over to the idea of high-rise. We have not determined which of the buildings will be for sale, which will be for low cost home ownership and which will be social housing. A good proportion of the tower space overlooking the park will be for sale to create cross subsidies, but there will be social housing in those towers as well.

Another example of trying to use towers to send out very strong signals. This is the Pembury Estate, also in Hackney, a very large estate, 1300 homes, transferred to Peabody a couple of years ago. Two-thirds LCC housing, one-third GLC low-rise radburn terraces, as in not successful (26, 27). We have big programmes of repair and modernisation going on.



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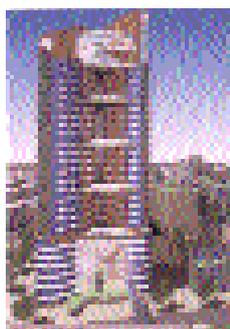
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Here you have an array at the top and its mixture is all that brown bit down the bottom, I think key worker housing, housing for sale and some social housing in the tower itself and employment uses on the ground floor. I'm really trying to push this idea really hard and build up the design.

Bill Dunster is trying to take those zero CO2/zero energy/net energy producer design guidelines and reinterpret them in a tower (22, 23). At the centre of these four petals - you can see there are four petals at the top of the building on the far side - is a wind turbine with the form of the petals funneling the wind into the building. Bill uses this wonderful phrase - "harvesting the wind". This is also to me a visually stimulating and exciting idea. Of course, this could be a block of apartments for outright sale or social housing, or a mixture.



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We want to find a way of signaling to the wider world that that estate has changed, that area has moved on and what is seen locally as a rather challenging place is becoming a desirable place to live. One idea is that we would build a tower on the corner of what people call Dalston Circus, right by the train station there, primarily for sale, so that we can demonstrate that people with their own money are interested in spending that money in buying a home in this location.

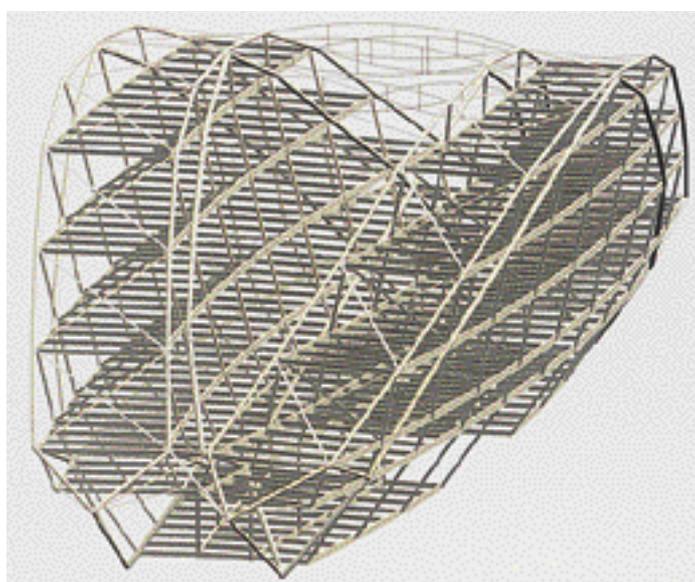
We will have considerable difficulty with high-rise if we can't get the costs down, because it is more expensive to build, lifts and so on, although interestingly if you think of the lift as a piece of public transport as opposed to private transport, it is an interesting way of getting people to their homes. We therefore have been looking at ways in which we can drive down costs and some of you will be familiar with the work we have done with Cartwright Pickard at Murray Grove in exploring prefabricated steel volumetric construction. I have been fascinated for some time by the idea that if you bolt all those boxes together laterally it would create some incredibly strong structures which could be capable of spanning. We do have locations where spanning structures would be interesting.

We have taken a site which is actually the mouth of the River Lee and returned to an idea which Peabody was interested in about eight years ago of a inhabited bridge spanning the Thames. We have now returned to that in relation to the River Lee. The idea has been drawn up by these companies for an inhabited bridge structure in that location. It will be ten storeys high.

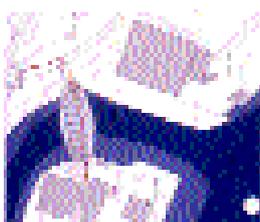
Using steel volumetric construction, this is an image of the work Whitby Bird have done, trying to make sense of this new kind of steel structure (30). I'm told that they could save something like 50% on the structure.

So here we are, a major urban regeneration statement, a hugely exciting intervention at the mouth of the River Lee signalling that something is happening there. It is Egan compliant, cost effective, mixed use, sustainable and most of all, in relation to this project and a fundamental objective for all of us in our projects, it's beautiful.

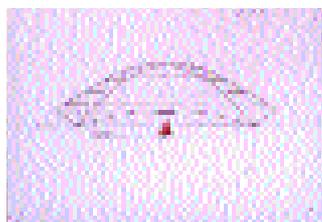
Thank you very much.



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Here we are trying to put it all together (28). That is a section through the bridge (29). There would be a road running through the middle so that pedestrians can hop on a bus. The apartments, mixed tenure, would be stacked up on both sides, cantilevered out to get daylight reflected off the river and into their rooms.