

**Endstop**

# LEVEL THINKING

With the search for development space in London battling against the constraints set in place by the Unitary Development Plan, Michael Howe of Mae Architects argues that the approach to planning in the capital is outdated

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A couple of years ago my teaching partner and I were sitting on Tate Modern's terrace, looking over the north bank of the Thames. This is supposed to be one of the best views of the capital's skyline, which is a depressing thought, because as far as we could see London does not possess a skyline. Compared to central Paris's unified parapet height or the soaring grandeur of Manhattan; London's skyline resembles nothing so much as the mouth of a gap-toothed hag, with idiotic lumps of developed and under developed cityscape.

This unsatisfactory mess is no accident. The City of London Unitary Development Plan contains a number of sections rightly devoted to the protection of City monuments, the most influential, from the point of view of London's sky-line being the Strategic Viewing Corridors to St. Paul's Cathedral. For those of you not familiar with this particular planning wease, which was penned between WW1 and WW2, it sets out various protected viewing corridors, (usually from Royal Parks, through the City to St. Paul's), in which buildings over certain heights are not to be generally permitted.

The object at the time presumably being to unify the fast sprawling Metro land of Greater London, by giving the oiks in the suburbs a view of Wren's great building, These glimpses of local, historical "high culture" would, it was hoped galvanise Londoners in the

aftermath of the socially disruptive mess of the Somme, nudging them towards a resumption of their pre-war, hat doffing lives, without recourse to the new social models of Mechanistic American Commercialism or the internationalist aspirations of Soviet Style Communism. London's existing skyline would be rigorously policed, her institutions would remain unchanged and the Empire would be safe.

Back on the terrace it seemed to us that the plan has failed; rather than unifying the City it seems to have cut it into disorientating lumps and stumps. One can see were the action is at in the average American town for miles around, the dense downtown is taller than the suburbs, in Paris one can orientate oneself using the axial boulevards which link institutions of power and culture.

One of our students sat down with a pocket calculator and worked out that if three stories were added to the building stock blighted by these viewing corridors the enclosed area would equal that of Leeds, (bless the little swot), I didn't check his figures in detail at the time, however the principle remains that this creaky planning diagram generates a lot of wasted commercial and residential potential. If this situation is planned, perhaps now would be a good time to ask the question "Why do we need planning legislation at all?" The Architect's Legal Handbook says that the Act was brought about... "for the simple reason that in England

and Wales there is a limited amount of land for an increasing number of people who wish to live and work upon it. ....thus the pressure on a limited acreage of land is great and getting greater.” This argument seems compelling until one considers that only 11.4% of the country is currently developed.

Most architects, (especially small practitioners and especially small practitioners given a drink or two), will happily bang on about the perceived idiocies of their local planning department, whining about delays and eccentric requirements which slow work and add cost to perfectly reasonable building proposals. While these anecdotal sob stories are legion, they are not necessarily always the result of incompetence or architectural ignorance on the part of Planners themselves. The problem seems systemic, given that so many Planners seem to prefer buildings that were erected prior to the Town and Country Planning act of 1947, at a time with little or no Planning Legislation and therefore no Planning Officers.

This island’s ‘developer led’ planning system, in which you tell them what you would like to build and they see if they like it or not, forces Planners into the reactive position of development controllers. There seems to be little Planning, a word implying forethought, involved. As one might expect the unfortunate by-products of this case by case situation are conservative decision-making, muddled thinking; because of the number of local area restrictions and delay resulting from the volume of required Planning Applications submitted.

The current boom in individual householder development, (72% of planning decisions in 2002), and our government’s efforts to address the shortage of affordable housing in many of our major cities, ensures that over-worked Planning departments will have less time to inspect an increasing volume of applications in future. It is hardly surprising that the illuminati at RIBA and CABE have been rushing reports about suggesting the easing of Planning restrictions, to areas such as the rear of domestic buildings where they are perceived to have little impact on the Public Realm, and Big John Prescott will undoubtedly think that this approach to resource reallocation is quite the full biscuit.

Given the current incoherent system, which translates into incoherent places, perhaps it is time we stopped fiddling around with Planning and got our selves a simple workable plan, with perhaps, in the interest of quality cities no Planning at all.

