

# Create Streets

*We can help you make better places*

[contact@createstreets.com](mailto:contact@createstreets.com)

[www.createstreets.com](http://www.createstreets.com)

## ***London deserves better than this***

### **Why we're building the wrong buildings in the wrong places**

**Paul Murrain**

There is nothing that better illustrates the race to the bottom in London's development than the two 50 storey residential glass towers at the southern end of Blackfriars Bridge.

What's the rationale for that? Why 50 storeys? Where did that come from? Did some planner toss a coin? Perhaps I'm being unfair. If it was a result of careful wind, light and sun calculations to benefit the public space, I'm sure I will be told in no uncertain terms.



*Fig i - Blackfriars Tower*

Townscape reasons were expressed. Some form of arrival to the river and sense of entry across to the city. What rubbish. It just shows how London has completely lost its sense and essence of place and has merely defaulted to 'any place.'

An expression of wealth along urban waterfronts is hardly new of course. Paris is but one eminent example but not with the grotesque visual and spatial dominance we are witnessing at Blackfriars Bridge, unless of course it is proposed to build approximately 50 more 50 storey towers along the river such

that some form of uniformity results. Images of a canyon of glass towers have been produced and supported of course, so don't hold your breath.

Doubtless we will eventually have some high, some low, some medium. A total arbitrariness of scale is more than likely.

And what does two 50 storey towers really do as a contribution to the housing need in London? I recall someone in City Hall admitting to me that these two towers contributed little or nothing but London had enough uniqueness to absorb this sort of stuff. A perfect official justification for a race to the bottom.

London deserves better than that.

And of course we are well on our way. Go along the south bank in Lambeth and Wandsworth to find a series of towers with no relation to each other, all vying for river views, all hitting the ground in various unrelated ways with arguably the most fragmented poor quality public realm of any recent city form. London no longer builds 'places'; it merely builds 'things.' Density and urbanity are not the same.



*Fig ii - the future for Vauxhall*

These are not engineering questions or even economic ones, They are social and political questions. And not to be dismissed is the complex but increasingly valuable issue of uniqueness of place. Look at the desperate effort to give arbitrary distinction to the latest batch of office buildings in the City.

Buildings that create and define urban space are more than mere buildings. They are part of the fabric of the city. They shape, define and create a public realm. None dominates the other. And if and when they do, they are the buildings that resonate with public use and public meaning. They create streets and squares.

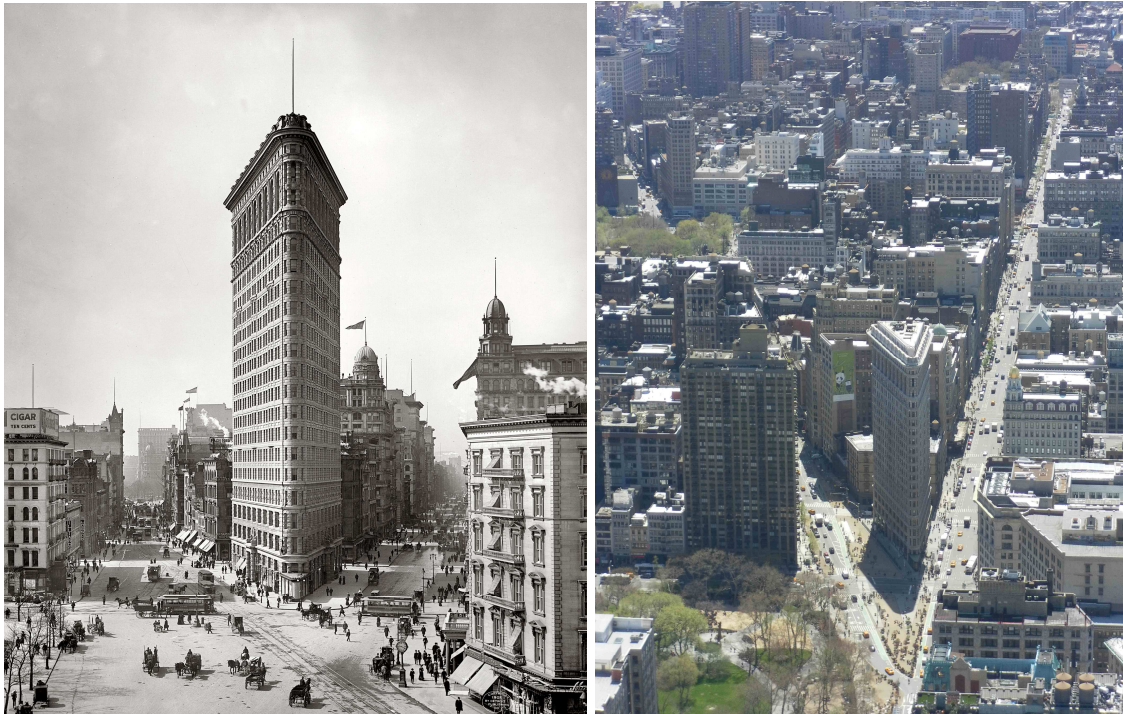
All great cities do that. Two 50 storey towers do nothing. Other than make a very small number of people a very great deal of money.

## New York

I know of no city that has got better as a result of spraying towers all over the place and I include New York in that. New York has got denser over the years. But there are a few iconic tall buildings in New York built in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century; The Woolworth Building, Manhattan Municipal, The Chrysler, The Empire State and 40 Wall Street. And all designed to be far more responsive urban buildings than anything we have seen in London over the past 30 years

And look at the base of the Empire State, five storeys to the street and then set back to allow light and sun to the avenue.

Sadly the fate of the World Trade Centre is still fresh in our minds, but great buildings they were not and did you ever try walking by them on a windy winters day! I've seen people literally blown off their feet.

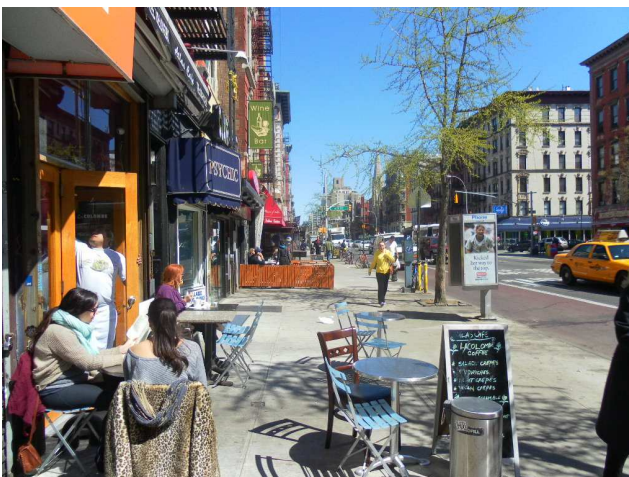


*Figs iii & iv - the 'Flat Iron' building, New York 100 years ago and now. That Manhattan is high rise throughout is a myth. The 20 storey Flat Iron still dominates almost every other building. Note the sun on the streets and squares. Note the width of the Avenues. Note where people are congregating*

Is the vibrancy of New York because of tall buildings at the southern end and in mid-town. No. It was a vibrant amazing city long before that because of its role as the place where the immigrants landed to build new multi cultural lives with unparalleled spirit and enterprise that remains to this day.



New York has far better and far more buildings of a mid sized range that define and create the urbanism. Many are truly fantastic but rarely make the text books. One of the ones that does is the magnificent 'Flat Iron' designed by Daniel Burnham in 1902. It is 20 storeys. Not only its size *but the urbanity of the building* in that it responded to three scales. It had the classic bottom middle and top, with appropriate attention being paid to all three. The Flat iron building is tall *even today when compared with the vast majority of buildings that surround it*. Added to that many of these buildings are on streets far wider than the vast majority of London's streets. And New York is a similar latitude to Madrid and Naples; a fact not to be overlooked. London is further north than Chicago, Vancouver and Toronto.



*Figs v, vi & vii - Manhattan is mid rise city in many ways and streets*

Of course 20 storeys for me is too tall a building in this latitude in this city on the vast majority of London's scale of streets. But a case can be made in some places if all criteria are assessed in a truly holistic urban sense. But less than 20 storeys is the true New York to say nothing of the scale of Greenwich Village,

Soho, NoHo and the magnificent brownstone streets of 5-6 storeys. Given the choice that's where most New Yorkers choose to be. And that's without even mentioning the fact that only 19 per cent of New Yorkers live in Manhattan and that the other boroughs are almost exclusively low and medium rise.

London is a grey city a lot of the time. The sky and light and sun, when it decides to shine are crucial to the quality of life. And rarely is it too hot to enjoy the sun directly. These tall buildings increase the wind and decrease everything else.

Natural light is severely overlooked as a contributor to the evaluation of the public realm in this city today.

After the 60-storey Trump Tower was built in New York City, leaflets were sent to the Mayor and included the caption "do you want to continue to parade in the sun?" How much sun will the public of London get on the burgeoning south bank if the projected series of towers are built on the south and south-eastern sides.

Of course, Manhattan already had a predetermined grid of East West streets and North South Avenues - albeit a pretty relentless orthogonal grid, at least a public realm was prescribed in advance. The 1916 zoning resolution required a series of set backs to allow light and air to reach the street, often set back after a five storey base. It was called "set back philanthropy" by some commentators.

### **San Francisco: another city with a climate they wish was far better.**

The University of California at Berkley did a great piece of work years ago in San Francisco. There was a community resistance to tall buildings arguing their negative effects on the quality of the environment for the vast majority of citizens (save perhaps the few who happened to work in the tall buildings). They spoke against the 'Manhattanisation' of their City. Many felt, and rightly so, that the new taller buildings worsened the microclimate, producing additional shadows, making streets and open spaces colder and windier. And, worthy of note, San Francisco is not a tiny Island in the north Atlantic. We are.

San Francisco's tall buildings propositions were modelled on an environmental simulator (far easier today than 30 years ago). What they did was model the loss of sunlight and decreases of overhead sky above those streets and key public squares that would be impacted by tall buildings. The study, led by Professor Peter Bosselmann, demonstrated conclusively that the new city plan would cast shadows and increase wind in many key areas.

As long ago as 1916 US Zoning rules have responded to the need for sun and light on inner city streets. We haven't in the UK because we have never built to those heights. Natural light is one of the most important amenities to insure a vital dynamic and inhabitable city. And it is as important to the public realm as it is to private property.

San Francisco superimposed sun-path diagrams on key public spaces at key times of the day and the season. That produced what they called a Comfort Model for the public realm. Is this unique to the USA? Seemingly not. The

Ancient Greeks and Romans both mandated minimum light standards for their cities.

The British Law of Ancient Lights apparently dates back to 1189 and was embodied into law in 1832, buildings that had windows with uninterrupted access to natural light for at least a 20 year period were protected from a new adjacent building encroaching upon that light. Imagine London under that stipulation over the last 50 years!

As long ago as 1892, Boston Massachusetts had a zoning law that limited the height of buildings to 1.5 times the width of the street up to a maximum height limit just short of 40 metres.

Once you got to the street wall height, you didn't have to stop, but you did have to set back in order to satisfy a 'sky exposure plane.' That of course gave the characteristic form to so many buildings in US downtowns and by no means just the tallest buildings. This did not last and the darkest coldest windiest cross-town streets in Manhattan give testimony to that today.

But the San Francisco research also addressed the issue of visual continuity and acknowledged that whilst a complex debate, a buildings' disruption to the visual continuity of a street or skyline can be measured just as well as its contribution to climate. Scale, shape, street character and view affect a population's image of its city and itself. The work elicited some interesting responses on street continuity from the public in their simulation work. On a six storey street an additional two was received without complaint. With a ten storey street two to four additional storeys seemed acceptable. If a six storey street suddenly had a much taller building inserted in it, the base of the building needed to be separated from the upper storeys.

Visual qualities convey powerful emotional messages as to who dominates the city's environment. All too often, the number crunching planning profession and their political masters considers this as either trivial or too subjective in comparison with other economic criteria. Evidence of modern city form gives testimony to this in so many places and London is fast approaching the worst of them if future propositions are realised.

### **Can London go denser?**

Yes of course it can. It's a suburban sprawl city in truth with miles and miles of 2.5 to 4 storey suburban streets and houses (and very elegant many of them are) with 4-6 storey primary and secondary streets that pass through them. But if we destroy quality to achieve quantity, yet again we have a race to the bottom.

I know of few other world cities that fall in height so close to the centre and particularly along, and in the immediate vicinity of, so many radial streets that support local mixed use and carry fantastic public transport above and below ground.

And finally of course we hear the facile argument that tall buildings solve a housing crisis. If that were so, presumably every high-rise city in the world is free from housing need. Rubbish.

But if I'm wrong and height in and of itself guarantees housing supply of the right kind in the right place, then let's build 500 Shards and put them at every cross road, roundabout and Tube station in London. That should do it and think how happy I've just made some members of the RIBA. But I'm not sure the consumers who genuinely need housing will thank me for being up in the clouds particularly if there are three more Shards on the other three corners.

At the very least let's build another six Shards but immediately encircling the current one, ten storeys taller, shading the sun and obscuring the light and the views as much as possible from the current one. And then sit back and see the value fall.

Build towers and the super rich will come. The nature of towers and their related security invites it. Build medium rise in the locations it is needed and they won't invest quite so willingly but are still welcome under conditions that add to the street qualities of this remarkably liveable city. But if not, others will, in the local places they want to be. Housing is not a commodity particularly when it ruins the uniqueness of this magnificent city. Just because there is pressure on this great city, we must not create a situation where dark, shadowed, canyon-like streets become the expectation. We almost have already and are on the brink of no return.

What we are seeing in London is that the cost of increased density of development may be far greater than is measurable in immediate conventional economic terms. Those governing London should take a version of the Hippocratic Oath of the medical profession. "First, do no harm"

### ***About the author***

Paul Murrain is a leading urban designer with 30 years global experience. He has been a Senior Lecturer at the Joint Centre for Urban Design in Oxford, Visiting Professor at the at the University of Greenwich and Senior Design Director at the Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment. Paul introduced the Enquiry by Design process to the UK and was a member of the Deputy Prime Minister's Design Coding Advisory Panel. Paul has led several urban design projects for Create Streets.

© Create Streets Ltd / Paul Murrain 2015

Published by Creates Streets Ltd, London

Company no: 08332263

[www.createstreets.com](http://www.createstreets.com)