

London vs Seoul: Life After FAR

Rowan Moore, The Guardian

The most successful London architect of the 1960s and 70s was Colonel Seifert, of whom it was said that he had changed the city more than anyone since Christopher Wren, which is possibly an understatement. His works included the NatWest Tower, for more than a decade the city's tallest building. He was criticised in his time for his commercialism, but some of his works, in particular Centre Point at the eastern end of Oxford Street, have since benefited from the effects of retro re-evaluation.

Seifert's success was based on his ability to combine the equations of commercial floorspace with those of planning restrictions, in particular the London version of FAR, in order to extract the maximum value for his clients. He was a consummate player of the FAR game. He would not, however, be able to operate in the same way now as FAR was abolished in the 1980s in the Thatcherite spirit of deregulation. As important as FAR is in so many Asian cities, London plays by different, more mysterious rules.

In my book on London, *Slow Burn City*, I include, at some risk of losing whatever readers I have, a summary of the main elements of the city's planning system. I won't repeat it in full here because it would clog up the available space, but it is in short a system of considerable complexity, expense and alleged sophistication, whose outcomes – the new fabric of the city, can appear to be the result of no thought whatsoever. The processes are like the protocols of a courtly dance; the results are like toys thrown around by a petulant child. It is a diagram of the shifting balance of power, away from elected authorities towards private business.

It wasn't always like this. London was a pioneer of the types of building laws that set well-defined and comprehensible parameters for construction, and generate a unified and consistent aesthetic. There is an appeal to such laws, which at their best reconcile an expression of a city as a whole with scope for individual adventure. They are simple. They exclude discussions of opinion and taste. They set a framework for negotiation and making decisions.

The best known is the Manhattan Zoning Resolution of 1916, which in the interests of maintaining daylight in the streets specified the stepped-back profile that became the basic component of the Manhattan skyline, but which could also be radically reinterpreted by, for example, Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building. In London the decisive laws were the Building Acts that followed the Great Fire of 1666 and required such things as brick or stone construction, parapets to stop the spread of fire and a minimum distance between the windows in one property and another. Later refinements include the recession of timber, for example in window frames, behind the front plane of a building. Further development came with the Building Act of 1774, concerned more generally with quality of construction rather than with fire spread alone, which established ratios of

house size to street width, and specified categories of quality and size, from “first rate” to “fourth rate.”

All these enactments are concerned primarily with practical more than aesthetic issues – daylight, fire, construction quality – but they carry with them inherent or presumed ideas about the structure of cities. The houses made by the London Building Acts tend, though it is not inevitable that they should be like this, towards a classical proportion, and line up in streets whose main qualities are respectable regularity and a sense of urban order. It is also possible to detect the social values of a layered, class-based society, in the classification of 1st to 4th rate.

These laws shaped the huge areas of streets and squares that were the built form of London’s expansion in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and which make up the default fabric of the modern city. They helped generate a basic domestic chassis to which could be added variations and refinements to suit changing tastes and decorative techniques – different treatments of brick, the popularity of stucco in the nineteenth century, the addition of bay windows to formerly flat fronts. Genius, for example that of John Soane, could find its place within the system.

The results were not always admired – the nineteenth century politician Benjamin Disraeli called them “flat, dull, spiritless streets all resembling each other, like a large family of plain children” – but in the twentieth century they were recognised by the historian Dan Cruickshank as “England’s most consistent contribution to European architecture.” The Danish architect and writer Steen Eiler Rasmussen called this type of housing, generated by government rules and the taste of its consumers, “a refined industrial product brought to perfection through constant selection during repeated serial construction”. Examples of this kind of housing, in certain areas, can now sell for millions or tens of millions of pounds.

The twentieth century, as well as bringing appreciation to the architecture of the London Building Acts, also brought new challenges, in the form of types of construction not imagined by them. If the cohesion had partly been due to building techniques that changed relatively little over centuries – mostly brick, with timber joists and beams – concrete and steel frames enabled new forms, surfaces and scales while still adhering to the letter of the Acts. This new pressure prompted an increasing desire for controls with no technical purpose, but purely concerned with aesthetic effect, historic significance and/or notions of what the city as a whole should be.

From the nineteenth century there been movements to protect historic buildings from destruction, inappropriate alteration, or unsympathetic neighbours, which would gather force throughout the twentieth. The number of buildings formally protected – “listed” is the official term – for their architectural or historic interest, a concept introduced in 1947, would continuously grow towards the century’s end. There would also be an ever-widening definition of types thought worthy of protection. In the nineteenth century William Morris and John Ruskin had mostly been concerned with guarding medieval – centuries old - churches; eventually

industrial buildings, railway structures and indeed Seifert's office blocks would be considered. In the 1960s the concept of conservation areas was introduced – the idea of protecting not only individual buildings but also whole areas felt to have historic integrity and character.

There was concern about the effects of the tall buildings made possible by new techniques on the views of historic monuments, which led to some of the most precise and detailed rules in the British planning system – the St Pauls Heights, which places a ceiling on the height of buildings around the city's cathedral, and the geometric definition of the “strategic views”, or viewing corridors, to be had of St Pauls and the Houses of Parliament from significant points around the capital, such as parks and hills. These strategic views, apparently neutral, have a social load: views from better-off parts of the city are more likely to be protected than those from poorer places.

Apart from these rules about views, the growing panoply of aesthetic and historic guidance relied on judgment and opinion as to what was or was not good or valuable. It required committees, institutions and experts to make these judgments. In 1924 the Royal Fine Art Commission was set up to give opinions on particularly significant projects, which was replaced in 1999 by Tony Blair's government with the more modern-sounding Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. A weakness of these committees was that they would almost inevitably include practising architects, and eventually property developers – players on the field they were supposed to referee – which would give rise to doubts whether they could be truly impartial.

The role of opinion in turn gives rise to consultancies with an expertise in arguing the case for this or that project, and with an understanding of the preferences of the decision makers. Enormous commercial value can be realised by winning a favourable permission and ability to play the system effectively – as much as skill in creating desirable products - is a central part of any developers' success. Architects' role was often to give the imprimatur of quality to a proposal, to support the argument that a given project should be allowed because its design was – according to criteria ever more loosely stated – somehow good enough.

The system therefore became a mixture of vagueness and precision whose inconsistencies and contradictions have become more apparent in this century, as the pressures of development have increased. On the one hand there is the prescriptiveness of the viewing corridors, on the other the zones outside them where there is relative anarchy, guided only by the officials and advisors of the London's multi-layered planning authorities. Since the ending of FARs in the 1980s, for example, the allowable density on a given site might in theory be infinite, with the result that areas with some of the highest densities in the world are beginning to grow up. Expert guidance has become weaker as the imbalance grows between the resources of developers and those supposed to control their projects.

It has also been weakened by the actions of central government. The authority of CABI was weakened. The finances of local authorities such as the 33 London

boroughs – key institutions in granting permission to developments – have been weakened such that they now have a strong incentive to approve projects that might bring them financial benefit. The boroughs' ability to pay for the administration and expertise necessary to handle the planning system has been reduced. Central government has also imposed the increased use of commercial viability assessments, which enable developers to argue that the requirements of boroughs would make their projects unviable and so should be reduced. It is another field in which highly paid consultants – in this case working to prove the arguments about viability – are useful to developers.

The result is that the pressure of development expresses itself, often as towers, in the gaps allowed by the planning system. The effect of the viewing corridors is like that of a splayed hand pressed onto mud, which rises up between the fingers. Insistence on architectural quality has become more and more tenuous. Until recently it was possible to describe new building in London as the physical form of a haggle or a negotiation between private developers and public authority. Increasingly it is the realisation of speculation that is almost pure and unfettered.

London likes to pride itself on its creative energy and talent, on the sophistication of its development and planning, on its current desirability and success, its general glittering brilliance. Yet few of these qualities are evident in the current processes of shaping buildings and urban spaces, and in the structures that result. Increasingly, they look primitive, destructive and crude. They do nothing to support London's claim to be "world class".

The St Paul's Heights and strategic views do give architects some opportunity to game. Jean Nouvel's office and retail complex at One New Change, for example, derives its faceted profile from the envelope required when building close to the cathedral, but in general different techniques are required: diplomacy, networking, reputation-building, adaptability, persuasiveness. Working with FAR may have its frustrations, but the recent London experience makes it look very attractive indeed.