

Heightened Conversations: Impacts of Building Heights in Capital Cities

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Well, thank you Preston and welcome to everyone here. It's an honor for me to moderate this first discussion of height limits here in Washington. It will be the first of many discussions I'm sure, but the purpose of tonight's session is to benefit from some European experiences.

Many European cities are going to have debates about these issues for a much longer period and come to their own accommodations about this issue. Washington remains the only large American city that has height limits that are consistent across the entire city. It's interesting to note that a century ago when Washington's height limits were created, in fact most American cities had height limits. Baltimore had a limit of 175 feet throughout the city, the Chicago had a limit of 200 feet, surely doesn't today obviously. Boston had a limit of 125 feet, San Francisco to 102 feet, and so on.

Most American cities had height limits and they were motivated by a mixture of things. The desire to preserve the scale of the city as it was growing quickly. To protect buildings from loss during fires with limited firefighting equipment that was available. To protect local landmarks from being over shadowed by the buildings around them. And other quite local issues.

In 1912 most European cities also had height limits. And they did it somewhat differently in many of those cities. In Paris the heights were limited to one or one and a half times the width of the street. Actually, not so different from what was the original formulation here in Washington.

In London, and that meant typically no more than about 66 feet in Paris. In London the heights were higher, typically 80 feet or the width of the street which is narrower. In Berlin they were limited to 72 feet over the street width. And so, in those European cities, many of them are preserved in some aspects of those height limits, and they've also looked to make other kinds of changes.

And one of the strategies in many European cities has been to find zones in which tall buildings would be allowed, like La Defense in Paris, or like Canary Warf in London, where there would be encouraged. And you actually have a bit of that here, if you go across the river, outside of the District as well.

In the US, most cities have either abandoned height limits or have only preserve them selectively. Philadelphia, where I spend a lot of time, had a very interesting situation. In Philadelphia, they had a height limit, but it was only a gentlemen's agreement. It was never codified into law. It lasted until 1986, when a developer proposed to build a building that was taller than the cap on William Penn on the top of City Hall, which had been the ruling figure in Philadelphia, of course.

The height was considerable of the cap, it was five hundred and forty eight feet, and so that's still left quite a lot of room for things to get build below that cap. But ultimately, it was abandoned and replaced by some view corridors, that were preserved so that the

view of the statue on the top of the city hall wouldn't be compromised from important directions in the city.

There are many American cities that have various kinds of height limits around their capitals. Madison, Wisconsin limits all heights within one mile of its capital. It's the second tallest capital building, they claim, in the United States.

Austin, Texas -- a place that we don't identify with stiff regulations -- in fact, they had twenty view corridors to state capital building, where heights are limited in order to preserve the views towards the capital.

In St. Louis, the area around the Jefferson Arch are limited so as to not to overshadow or ruin the view of archway against the sky. And so on. So there are many what I would say more surgical ways by which height limits have been adopted in American cities.

So tonight what we will hear about is how European cities have dealt with their issue of building heights. And let me introduce tonight's speakers, just briefly, because the longer biographies are in the materials that you've got at the door. And I'd commend you to read them. They all come with considerable experience in these kinds of these issues in Europe.

And I'll let you introduce them in the order that their speaking and then not have to introduce them just before they come on stage. So, our first speaker would be Robert Tavernor, who is an emeritus professor of architecture and urban design at London school of Economics and Political Science, and founder of the Tavernor consultancy in London in England.

Robert has had a lot of experience dealing with buildings, controversial buildings, that in terms of their building heights in London. He will speak largely about the London experience, how's it's been dealt with and what lessons they have learned in course of getting through those projects.

Our second speaker is Jurgen Bruns-Berentelg. He is the CEO of Hafen City in Hamburg, Germany. Perhaps the largest European development that's going on today. A remarkable development in the docklands of Hamburg. Prior to that he worked in Berlin and confronted many of the issues of heights in his capacity as head of Tishman Speyer's European development operations.

He had oversight over the Sony Center at Potsdamer Platz and the Berlin Central Station project, both of which had significant height limits that had to be dealt with.

And our third speaker is John Worthington, a co-founder of DEGW, I actually know what that means, the Desire Environmental Group. The W, I think, worthington, probably, on it. Director of the Academy of Urbanism in London. And he will speak on how Rotterdam, Dublin and London have addressed the issues of height. And particularly, because, John is also an expert on the functionality of office building or he will speak from the stand point of how the height and floorplate of office buildings affect their functionality as spaces for this contemporary world.

Unfortunately, our fourth speaker, Mr. François Dagnaud from Paris, wasn't able to join us, a political issue came up, that, that first call on his time. It's unfortunate because in fact Paris is going through an almost identical debate to what you are going through

here. Having been occasioned by the fact that there are several proposals for tall buildings within the historic areas of Paris.

Each of the speakers will speak for about fifteen minutes, after which we will entertain questions from the audience. When you came in, I believe all of you got cards. Please write your questions on those cards so that we can be as efficient as possible in seeing what the main themes of questions are and getting the speakers to address those.

So let's start with Robert. Robert Tavernor, please.