

Heightened Conversations: Impacts of Building Heights in Capital Cities

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National Archives – William McGowan Theater

Discussion Panel and Q &A

MR. HACK: Well, thank you to all of the speakers for inspiring us with some ideas, some ways of framing the discussion. Those of you who are in the audience, we value any questions you have on cards. They'll get collected. Everyone has a card, I hope. No? Does anyone have a card?

Well let's just get started. We have a limited amount of time. Maybe I'll start by just asking one question to each of the participants here while you're collecting these cards.

It strikes me that there are actually two different kinds of ways in which heights are being dealt with in European cities.

One is that, I think in the German case, where there is actually quite a lot of pre-determining of where they want height and how much height and where they want buildings that are going to be landmark buildings, etc. I'm told that, in fact, they have a city plan for Berlin, in which the city architect specifies basically the external envelop of all the buildings as they go forward.

Whereas in England, it seems to me, and probably also, I think, in Ireland, the tradition is much more that you have a debate, a discussion about tall buildings. And you have a

planning inquiry, it's called, in London. Out of that debate comes some logic about why, in this particular location, it's worth doing it.

I think, as Robert showed, though, that in fact there are some ground rules as well, a few corridors that won't be intruded upon and other kinds of things.

So in the US, the tradition is much more that of specifying but not quite as precisely as you do in Germany, and sometimes having discretionary view, but not as much discretion as you have in England. Do you think it's possible to have debates on heights on a building-by-building basis, or do you need all of those planning ground rules spelled out in advance?

MR. TAVERNOR: Well, in terms of London, the guidelines, as we use them rather as rules, set parameters, but what one doesn't want to arrive at is a uniform height of tall buildings, ultimately.

If there is an idea, then it's really up to individual architects and developers when they're looking at a site in a particular area to say, "Well, look. Okay, this building's had a consent for this height. This has had a consent for another. If we were to push this one a bit higher, than we could see emerging a different type of character that wasn't foreseen before."

So it's actually part of a creative process, rather than just saying no building should be above a particular datum, which actually ends up with very dull, wall-like experiences.

Part of the joy of a modern city is the diversity, potentially, of creating different characters, as John was talking about, and really developing those characters so that you get something quite different in different parts of the city, which helps way-finding and people's navigation through them.

MR. BRUNS-BERENTELG: I think, from the perspective of Germany, there are significant cultural differences within the major cities in Germany, I must say. Naturally, everyone who was seeing the picture of Frankfurt knows that it is, as a banking sector, a very vertically organized city.

So when one is talking about at which level to define cultural characteristics of a city, in terms of the height landscape which is to be developed, there are completely different histories within the cities.

Hamburg, for example, but also Berlin have very strong urban planning professionals, which are elected for a significant times, which are not based on basically the approval of the government, so they represent a continuity, in terms of actually establishing a view from what is, so to say, the core urban design in this city. It naturally is also part of a discussion, but it is that kind of continuity represented by a professional which is actually seen in this picture.

In the case of HafenCity, it is very specific. It has been predetermined via a master plan for a period of twenty or twenty-five years, and I would agree with you that that today is actually a period for which one can basically define a basic structure in terms of height for a city, and basically it develops, so to say, a future vision of the city, but not beyond that.

But I would also not go below that because that becomes a very incremental process, and vanity is only a market-driven process.

MR. HACK: Do we have questions on cards, or should we just open it up? Ok, we'll keep conversing then. John.

MR. WORTHINGTON: The first thing, actually, is it's very important to create the goal communally understood by that city. What sort of city do I want? That's absolutely critical.

And then actually the language. One of the key things is to actually try and get a common language. We're all talking the same way, because a lot of the discussion about these things is people actually using totally different terms. What they mean by density, what they mean by these things.

So different people are using different languages, become very emotive. So those two things are critical, and then actually I think the power of then having something you can respond against is a good way of moving forward.

MR. HACK: I was just going to add...I was thinking as I watched the presentations that in Paris at the moment, the debate that's going on as over whether to create several iconic buildings that sit within the fabric of the existing city.

And one of arguments that's being made for that is that Paris has so much consistent fabric in the city, so many streets that are consistent, that it can afford to have a few exceptions. It makes a richer city for having those exceptions, rather than all streets, all sections of the existing city, conforming to the same set of rules.

Would you agree with that?

MR. WORTHINGTON: There's two sorts of exceptions in Paris at the moment.

One would be the Montparnasse tower which was a total failure and does nothing when it comes to the ground, and the other would be Centre Pompidou, which actually if you look at a photograph - I think I had a rather bad one up there of it, actually - is a big building, not very tall, but a very big building in terms of mass, but it actually fits beautifully at the groundscape.

MR. HACK: Ok, good. If you lift the height limit, how do you preserve property values with more allowable development rights being put on the market? What's the impact?

In London, what's the impact been of all the tall buildings - has it in fact eroded the property values of existing buildings, or not?

MR. TAVERNOR: Well, London has been going through - as I said in my introduction - it's been expanding as a city. There is a shortage of residential there already, and actually therefore property prices are continuing to increase even through the recessionary period. The prices are continuing to increase.

The problem that we've experienced in London is that a lot of new residential developments have been built in very desirable locations, which has made it very difficult to get the mix in terms of locals who want to live there, as opposed to those who are investing in the city.

And so the blight, if you like, that has been created in London is in a sense through inward investment. A lot of property is being sold in Malaysia, the Far East and so on, by people who then don't live there.

So we're building whole areas of city which are not being properly inhabited. So it's not the land value - it's a small city, and by going for a compact approach, land values are increasing. And I guess that's both a positive and a negative, depending which way you look at it.

MR. BRUNS-BERENTELG: Maybe I should add, from our experience, the danger of the land values in the medium term to decrease is not very high.

We have some underlying trends. I think in Washington to a certain degree it is also the case we have the inflow of new inhabitants. We have the renaissance of the city core to a very significant degree. Or that we had de-industrializations in the 70s and the 60s already.

A lot of these spaces have been taken up. And actually there is a constant pressure on the market that the values of land increases. So by varying at least the height and increasing the height, at least for the residential market segment, which also is important that people can live in a city.

That might have at least a little bit of a dampening effect which is also very much desirable in terms of development.

MR. HACK: And in terms of creating better access to the city for people to live in it, yes.

So this question here asks, what does Robert think of as tall, and how do other people on the panel think of things as tall? What's tall?

MR. TAVERNOR: Tall in London isn't very tall by the American example. The tallest buildings, as I showed you, are the Shard, and the so-called Pinnacle in the City of London, are only 300 meters, so 1000 feet.

Now that's considered to be very tall in Britain, indeed in Europe at the moment. It's regulated by the Civil Aviation authority. So it has to do with the height restrictions for aircraft flying over London, and to the airports around there. So it's restricted in that sense and only by that sense.

The footprints of these buildings vary a lot. So in the historic part of London, the City of London, they're very small footprints. When you go out to Canary Wharf -- the old docklands area, they're American style footprints. But because they haven't got the height, they look a bit squat as forms. And that's an important issue.

So there's that balance. In terms of height what you want is a well-proportioned tall building. One that is slender, ideally. One that has a clear top, and actually meets the ground. It doesn't hit a podium, but has a clear relationship with the ground.

So it's not just height per se, it's actually how that height is read as something that is an elegant form. And how it contributes then not only to the skyline and skyscape experience, but to the townscape/street experience for the pedestrians as they move through the city.

MR. HACK: John, what's tall?

MR. WORTHINGTON: We defined it as actually low-rise, up to about five stories, mid-rise, the one I talked about there, which is twelve, fourteen maybe. Then you got high-rise.

When we got super high-rise, super high-rise, in our terms, starts at about 150 meters. Robert's absolutely right, you see. The problem is, actually, that the footprints were getting American style, much deeper plates. And became very chunky when we were just doing high-rise. And especially at the lower end.

MR. HACK: Jurgen, in Germany?

MR. BRUNS-BERENTELG: I think high-rise is a very relative term, as I have been trying to show.

If you build a higher building which is an important icon for the neighborhood, 12 stories may be a high-rise building. If you look at the city scale it is definitely something which is closer to 150 meters. And in most European cities at least, but it could also be the case in Washington, high-rise is also an economic term.

I think the building cost, and when we're talking about sustainability issues, very high buildings, super high-rises, become prohibitive in terms of sustainability issues. Which has also some relationship with economics, naturally, and also in terms of income generating possibilities.

So, actually, it's not only a design question, or so to say a question of overlays and how you feel in view of high buildings. But it is also that it is necessary that there is an economic base for very high or high buildings.

Not every horizontal city has the capacity to develop, for example, a cluster of high-rise buildings or very, very high buildings. So it's also very much an economic issue.

MR. HACK: This is a question that Jurgen did address a little bit before, but I'd like the others too as well. It's about building heights and affordable housing. Have any of the cities you've seen addressed affordable housing through allowing greater heights?

MR. TAVENOR: In London there is a policy that all developments, that's all developments wherever they're located, should have a provision of affordable housing within them. Now that target, in realistic terms, around 25 percent of any residential development should have affordable units within it.

The reality is that developers can offset that by saying, "Well, look. In this particular location, it's a very high land value area." Say in Knightsbridge, or in relation to the River Thames, it would be much better to provide that cost and provide that provision elsewhere and pay a sum of money for something to be located elsewhere.

But there's always this struggle, and I know councilors and planning committees in London get infuriated about it, because every time a developer comes forward, they say, "We can't make this development work if we provide 25 percent affordable units."

And they say, "As you know that that's the regulation, why don't you start on the basis of making a scheme that's viable with 25 percent." And of course, how a developer makes these things stack up is one of these black arts really. They make it work when it suits them but not when it doesn't.

They know the answer to that. So there isn't a simple answer to that. So yes, in principle, one should be able to do it. That's what the London plan was directed towards, was creating a balanced city, where rich and poor could effectively live together, but the fact is that the rich don't want to live with the poor, and they don't want to share the same elevators. They want to have separation.

So there is this constant debate, where you can make it work, where you can't make it work. But I wouldn't say that the situation in London has succeeded.

MR. HACK: And in the German cases, has it actually lowered the cost of housing by allowing more units to be put on the market?

MR. BRUNS-BERENTELG: We have had complete shifts, so to say, in the occupancy when high buildings are built, when I think the case has been in London and a lot of places also in the United States.

In the '60s and the '70s, basically affordable housing of one kind or the other has been put in high rises. And these spaces have actually become stigmatized. They have been torn down, whether in Chicago or other places. That has also been happening in Germany.

Actually, due to the fact that people have been moving into the core of the city again, voluntarily, and that they are, so to say, often called the creative class people. The high-rise buildings built in the inner-city are, today, the concentrations of the wealthy within the city.

When we are discussing how to develop an appropriate mixture of people in a location, then we cannot produce a high rise, for example, next to a high rise next to a high rise because then we create, what is called, in academic terms, a nouveau gentrification within the city center, a very homogenous social structure.

So what we are doing, is for example in HafenCity, integrate those tower buildings and buildings which are five to six stories high, so that you can have entrances of completely different types of uses within the same building block. That creates a physical basis for a mixture of different uses.

MR. WORTHINGTON: I mean, it's very interesting. If you go back and think about London. London, if high-rises are 100 meters high, 120 meters high, has always been a high-rise city, pepper-potted.

But what it's had, of course, is social housing, because that's what was built. It was a sort of Corbusian blocks or whatever, huge amounts. And so actually a photograph of London shows a high-rise city in that sense. Not in the commercial sense, but in the residential sense.

That was found to be wanting, although that's still a legacy that we have, and we're re-digging quite a lot of that. But actually it's the five-story which is interesting, up to, which is the European, up to about seven or eight story, the sense that, from the top floor, you have some connection to the ground.

I think we haven't talked much about that, but that also defines height. What can you do? What's the livability of these different layers of heights I'm talking about? Quite interesting to understand.

MR. HACK: Well thank you. Well please join me in thanking all of the panelists tonight.