



THE
CHANGING SKLINE of LONDON:
SKYSCRAPER'S BOOM

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1. Foreword

London, a vibrant city, full of life, history and where many cultures and architectural styles converge. But not especially characterized for being a high rise city. So as you may imagine it did really take me by surprise during my two trips to this unique city how many cranes and new tall buildings had emerged or were emerging from places I had never thought there would be. While I was travelling with the so called “Gatwick Express”, which takes you from Gatwick Airport to the centre of the city (on my second trip to the city), as we were arriving at the centre, there was one question I couldn’t get out of my head, and it was: what was going on?

As the days were passing by and visited more places around the city, other questions came: why is this happening? Was it a boom of skyscrapers? How did all start? Did somebody start it? Why were there almost everywhere? Was there any sort of restriction to them? Do Londoners like them, what is their opinion? Did the Monarchy have an opinion on it? Had any of them been stopped? And the list went on and on.

It was on my flight back to Catalonia during my second trip that I decided I wanted to find out the answers to all these questions I had asked myself, that I wanted to have knowledge of this theme. It was then that I decided that it would be my topic for this research work.

To conclude, the hypotheses from which this research work is based on are the following ones:

1. All this process of changes that the city is facing, is it just a result of the attractiveness that the city has itself?
2. Has London any restriction when it comes to skyscrapers’ construction?
3. Do Londoners accept skyscrapers as a part of the evolution that it is going on in their big city?
4. As the Monarchy maintains a neutral position in every aspect of the daily basis, there cannot be a positioning neither in favour nor against the matter.
5. Skyscrapers appeared spontaneously, no one introduced them to the city.
6. Brexit has affected in a negative way with the construction of new skyscrapers.
7. Critics are in large part on favour of skyscrapers.
8. All Mayors have had the same positioning when it came to this subject.

2. Introduction

The construction industry shapes our world, in no other place is this more pronounced than in our cities, where cultural and economic factors drive extreme development. Over centuries, our cities have grown, evolved, risen, and reformed to become the thriving hubs that billions of us call home today. But some have had more radical journeys than others, like London.

Through fire and war, the city has morphed constantly over the centuries. London is an evolving city, it has demonstrated through many decades, even centuries. Always reinventing and adapting itself again and again in response to the changing needs of the businesses and people who've made the city their home.

So the city and its famous skyline is changing again, and as it's been said, that's nothing new. From the fire of 1666 to the growth of the Victorian era, to the destruction of the Second World War, the concrete Brutalism of the 60's and the financial services boom of the 80's, things have rarely stayed the same for long. Now, it's changing again, and this might be the most dramatic change ever that the Skyline of London has suffered from its almost 2,000 years of architectural history under its belt. More than 510 skyscrapers in 2018 are under construction, approved, or proposed to be built in the near future. London's reputation of 'low-rise' city with just a few skyscrapers concentrated in clusters is about to change.



The Great Fire of London from the borough of Southwark, 1666. Photograph by Hulton Getty.



St. Paul's Cathedral after ceaseless German air raids during World War II. Photograph by Bettmann/Corbis

The structures are controversial, with many high-profile authors, architects, politicians coming out against them and more important, many citizens against them too. But even if all of them don't get built, change is coming for London's skyline and it will last for generations as studies show that for skyscrapers of above 150m in the UK, there is very little precedent for demolition and if you

increase that to 200m, virtually no skyscrapers have been demolished. A normal building might last for 60 years, but towers have to be extremely robust to stand up, and those above 40 storeys could easily last 100 to 200 years. To qualify as a skyscraper, a building needs to be more than 14 floors tall. Otherwise known as a high-rise (for residential properties mostly).



The constructions of skyscrapers seen from the borough of Southwark. Photograph by AFP

3. How did we get here?

3.1. Ken Livingstone (4 May 2000 - 4 May 2008): The Only Way Is Up

The then Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, welcomed the construction of skyscrapers in London, giving the approval to many during his Mayoralty, including 30 St Mary Axe (the Gherkin) and the Shard. This came as a surprised as many predicted the age of the skyscrapers was over all over the world after the terrorist attacks on the USA, arguing that office staff would refuse to work on them, no one would want to live in them...



The Gherkin. Photograph by Duncan

Ken Livingstone argued that it would be a terrible mistake to allow terrorism to dictate the future skyline in this case of London and prevent from creating the landmark buildings the city needed in order to remain a leading competitor for jobs and growth. He thought that the capital needed high-rise building to preserve its status as a world city.

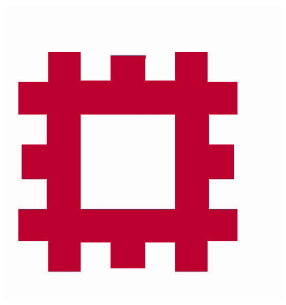
The Mayor said as well that high quality design or in other words the highest architectural quality, referring that if the building had the right appearance it could become a new landmark, an addition to London's skyline. They should also have the appropriate location, meaning that they wouldn't contravene not one of the protected views of St Paul's Cathedral and that they wouldn't be sprout out, only in economic clusters. These two were the basis on which



Ken Livingstone. Photography by Getty Images

proposed skyscrapers were judged, if they didn't obey these requirements he would tell the local authority were the skyscraper was supposed to be to refuse planning permission. This was possible because the Parliament had recognized the need to give additional powers to the Mayor, meaning that the Mayor would take over the strategic planning powers from all London's boroughs as well as the right to decide on planning applications for tall buildings.

London has a multilayered planning system, in which borough councils make decisions and the Mayor and Minister can then overrule them. Bodies such as English Heritage (the government-funded body that protects the country's most important sites) and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (Cabe) advice and public inquiries can be held (like it happened when the Shard was proposed). Yet, these layers, while retaining the ability to complicate and slow things down, no longer do their job of revision and review. Willingly or not, they have been disempowered. English Heritage has opposed several tower proposals, but after many losing battles (which, due to the cost of planning lawyers, were also expensive) its objections are now reduced to demoralised bat-squeaks.



English Heritage Logotype

Ken Livingstone also had a planning regime that allowed high buildings to flourish and he was very permissive when it came to skyscrapers, meaning that he didn't turn down almost any and that he didn't mind the height as long as he could take a tithe of the proceeds to spend on such things as affordable housing. He also was overly persuaded by developers' claims of the economic or social benefits that they would bring and not so much about its appearance as he had said he would or also the need for affordable homes, which he didn't invest much nor intended to. Also developers are not interested because they don't make such profit as they do with luxury ones.

He furthermore produced a London Plan, which encouraged, among other things, building high around major transport interchanges, so as to encourage the users of these buildings to use public transport.



The Shard. Photograph by Getty Images

During his time as Mayor he won powerful friends and vocal enemies as well as many complaints from the conservation body English Heritage when it came to approved skyscrapers arguing that many of these would interfere with the protected views of St Paul's Cathedral mostly. Like the Shard, which was proposed and approved following a public inquiry and although it had substantial impact on St Paul's Cathedral, it didn't obstruct enough to make such a big construction stop.

3.2. Protected Views of St Paul's Cathedral

A protected view or sightline is the legal condition within urban planning to preserve the view of an explicit place or historic building from another location. The side effect of a protected view is to limit the height of new buildings within or bordering to the sightline between the two places so as to preserve the ability to see the landmark as a focus of the view. The protection can also cover the area behind the place or building concerned.

In London, views of St Paul's Cathedral are protected from various prominent locations around the city.

We have to go back to the London Building Acts of 1888 and 1894, which ruled that architects were not allowed to build structures in London higher than a fireman's ladder (roughly 10 stories) to safeguard the city's finest landmarks, specifically St Paul's Cathedral, were not overshadowed or obscured. This rule was not amended until 1956.



St. Paul's Cathedral
Photograph by Getty Images

But in the 1930s, skyscrapers higher than this began to shoot up in New York City, signalling a new era in architecture. Across the pond, in London, pressure started from developers to be allowed to build taller buildings, in 1938 the City of London Corporation introduced London's "protected views" a system to allow controlled construction that would not obscure views of St Paul's Cathedral.

Architect W. Godfrey Allen, an adviser to St Paul's on the structure and setting of the cathedral, plotted multiple views of the iconic building from various vantage points in the city.

Allen outlined eight "protected view corridors". These proposals were accepted by the City of Lon-

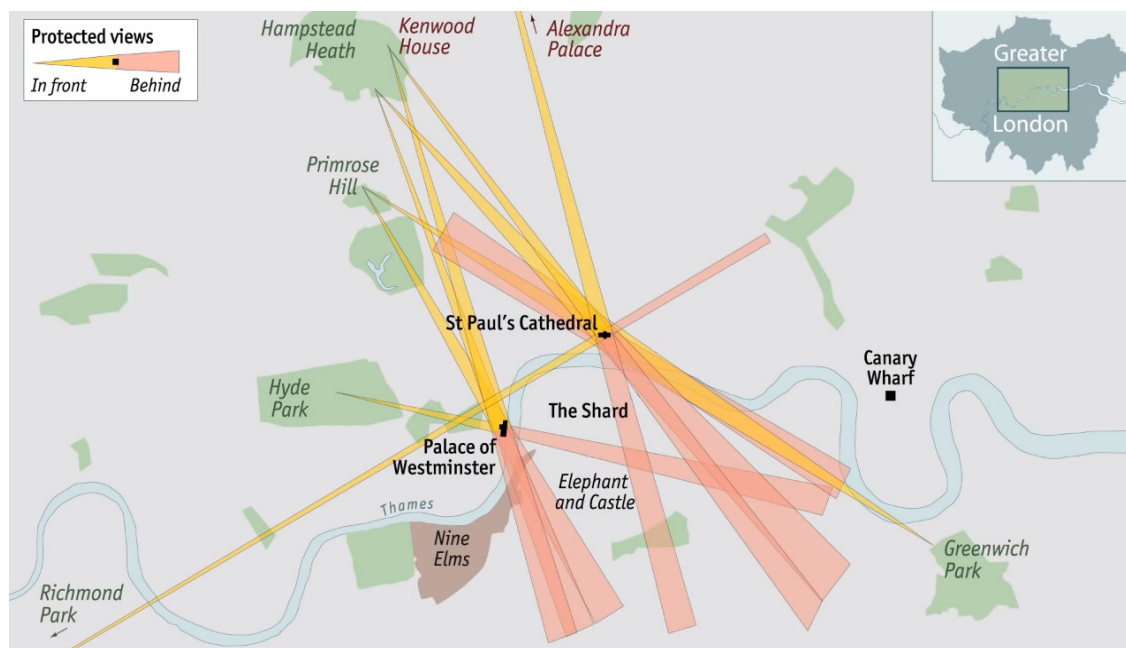
don Corporation, and implemented in 1938, upheld by a “gentleman’s agreement” (an arrangement or understanding based upon the trust of all parties, rather than being legally binding) between the City Corporation and developers.

This voluntary approach proved to be surprisingly successful in protecting important views during the post-Second World War reconstruction of the City of London.

Similar rules protecting views of and from the 17th century Monument to the Great Fire of London, The Tower of London and Thames river vistas were implemented later in the 20th century.

While the eight protected views of St Paul’s have survived since the 1930s, some exceptions have been made. The Shard, the UK’s tallest building and the tallest in Western Europe, to name an example, is situated in the Kenwood House viewing corridor. The Shard exists in the background area of the Hampstead Hill viewing corridor. Developers and London officials had to make a judgment call as to whether or the Shard’s presence would impede views. After much debate, it was considered acceptable. So, The Shard dominates the vista from Parliament Hill and Kenwood House -- not blocking the view, but certainly changing it.

As it has been said there are other protected views in the city, but, St Paul’s are the most important of them all.



St. Paul’s Cathedral Protected Views, edited photo. Original image from The Economist.

3.3. Boris Johnson (4 May 2008 - 9 May 2016)



Boris Johnson
Photograph by Daniel Leal-Olivias

After Ken Livingstone came Boris Johnson (elected in 2008), his initial promise was to take a tougher stance on what his predecessor had started, but the dash for height increased rapidly and used the same powers as he had done.

Even UNESCO advised in 2012 to clamp down on high-rise developments over concerns about historic sites. The organization asked for a “review” of major projects

and to “regulate build-up of the area around the Shard” as well as to review major projects before an “irreversible commitment” was made.

Although UNESCO doesn’t have any regulatory authority, its control over World Heritage site designations carries great weight. The organization had been involved in several high-profile disputes in recent years over tall building developments, primarily citing concerns over view corridors. The answer from Town Hall was that they understood their concerns but had to balance them with the demands of an expanding city.



UNESCO’s logotype

A big difference with Ken Livingstone was that he most of the times, plans for buildings were widely publicised, provoked debate and were subject of public inquiries. With Boris developers and architects hold modest public exhibitions in the immediate neighbourhood of their proposals and after that the proposals were being waved to the next step before the approval, with no intervention from Town Hall at all, there was only intervention when for some reason skyscrapers got a problem with inquiry’s inspector that concluded that it should not be built or it was recommended

to not be built. In these cases the Mayor and his government used their powers to overrule the advices and approve them (they had more power in terms of strategic planning decisions than anybody else).

In 2013, UNESCO stomped its foot again to threaten that they would make a decision on whether to place London's Parliament Square on its "endangered list" due to the concerns that famous views of Westminster were threatened by increasing skyscraper development around it. However, following intense lobbying from the UK ambassador to UNESCO, the measure, which would have raised questions about government's regard for the country's most prestigious cultural assets, as well as London's skyscraper policy, was dropped.

The Borough of Westminster itself has difficulty on developing taller buildings as Palace of Westminster is a world heritage site and new structures must not impede sightlines to it or St Paul's Cathedral.

During this year as well, the British Airline Pilots Association laid some of the blame for the crash of an helicopter on the proliferation of tall buildings along the Thames. It claimed that over-development created a risky flight environment and for that they encouraged the city to update its safeguards. The responsible for limit height of buildings belongs to the Civil Aviation Authority.

In 2013 and 2014, skyscrapers were being built just in the City and Canary Wharf, London's two financial districts, but also in few other places, such as around Battersea "Power Station" in Nine Elms and Elephant and Castle. By then, 24 skyscrapers had been completed since 2000, and more were under construction. The London notion was that skyscrapers were clustered creating more coherent skyline that swelled and ebbed rather than a random array of spikes.



London Skyline 2014. Jason Hawkens

3.3.1. The Revelation

The fact that skyscrapers were clustered, turned to be false, as indeed by 2014, 230 skyscrapers were proposed, approved or under construction in London, according to an independent survey which also claimed that 80% of the planned skyscrapers would be for residential use. They were not just sprouting in the City of London and Canary Wharf, but also in places that had never seen skyscrapers before.

This independent survey results were made by think tank, NLA (an independent forum for discussion, debate and information about architecture, planning, development and construction in the capital of London). According to the survey which was researched by property consultants GL Hearn, 48 % of the 236 skyscrapers were already approved and 19% were under construction. Central and East London were the areas with the most future developments with 77% of the total planned tall buildings.



Out of the 236, 140 of these were planned for location in: Tower Hamlets, Lambeth, Greenwich, Newham, Southwark, as said before, places that had never seen skyscrapers. It took the privately funded organisation NLA to discover this number.

The Mayor argued that they couldn't impose some kind of freeze on the skyline and suspend the capital in stasis.

In the wake of NLA study, numerous prominent architects, including some who had designed tall buildings in London, joined the in-



Southwark developments underconstruction
Photograph by Getty Images

creasing uproar that had been discovered over tall building construction in the British capital. An editorial published by the Guardian¹ was made and in it they complained that too many towers of dubious architectural merit and social value were being erected as investments by the wealthy and for the wealthy, while a middle class housing crisis persisted in one of the most expensive cities. They also called for establishment of a “mayoral skyline commission”, a more structured policy for tall buildings, with transparency for the public and clarity for developers.

Londoners were divided, a survey made by NLA showed that 32% wanted fewer skyscrapers while 26% had good eyes for them and were keen on the idea of more being built. The rest that were consulted didn’t have an opinion on it.

A majority of skyscrapers were about to be built by the Thames, more specific in Southwark and Battersea (a district of south west London, within the Borough of Wandsworth).

These developments were criticised for only offering few affordable housing and for its location and architecture by English Heritage, who also warned that increasingly crowded skyline could threaten the value of London as a place to come and visit and that it would end up losing its traditional character.

One of the many skyscrapers was the highest residential in London, which would be in Canary Wharf.



How Battersea will look like when all developments are finished. Photograph by Getty Images



How Battersea will look like when all developments are finished. Photograph by BBC



Tallest residential tower under construction in Canary Wharf. Photograph by Getty Images

1. **The Guardian.** London skyline statement: 200 towers that threaten to destroy city’s character.

Another campaign was created, it was led by an architect called Barbara Weiss. The campaign was named the Skyline Campaign and sought to collate the views of a diverse group of the city's civic leaders and designers. The aim was to place some context and rationale around what many perceived to be an irresponsible pace of high building development, which was characterized by speculative construction that could wind up mooring the historic city skyline for generations.

With all this happening, Boris Johnson continued arguing that the London skyline wasn't out of control and that the city had planning apparatus that were working well (these were settled by Ken Livingstone).

3.3.2. More Skyscrapers on Their Way

The following year (2015), NLA showed that 263 skyscrapers (proposed, approved or under construction) were in the cards for London. Of the 70 skyscrapers that were under construction, 64 were residential and largely unaffordable.

The borough of Nine Elms had the most planned and under construction ones, but others like, Stratford, Croydon, Tower Hamlets, Southwark and the clusters situated on the City of London, (the ones in them had to be especially careful with St Paul's protected views, and in consequence, many had to adapt to the views, like the Cheesegrater which leans back to the north specifically to dodge the views) and Canary Wharf had also many developments. But again, most of them provided luxury flats and they didn't tackle affordable housing crisis.

With all this happening, the Mayor rejected call for more scrutiny over tall buildings, overruling London assembly members. He insisted that the city didn't need more scrutiny saying that his London Plan provided sufficiently robust framework for ensuring that new high buildings were constructed in appropriate locations.

The principal reasons why these was happening was that:

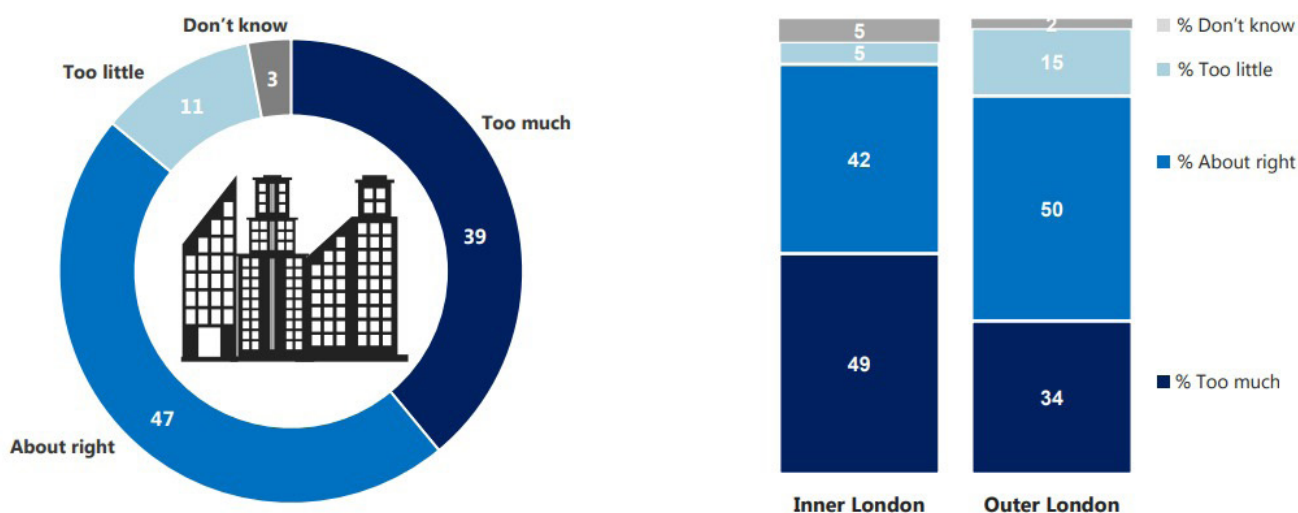
1. Wealthy people from the troubled or unstable bits of the world saw London as a safe place to park their money in and buy or invest.

2. Property developers were itching to make some cash. Ken Livingstone and then Boris Johnson wanted to show that he was attracting investment and tackling the housing shortage, and there were significant political points to be scored for supplying a large number of housing units irrespective of whether these were luxury penthouses or places affordable for ordinary Londoners.

So with Boris Johnson second mandate coming to an end (2016), what could be extracted from it is that he released some public land for development (affordable housing) but mostly prioritized foreign investment, skyscrapers over housing for Londoners.

2016 brought another incredible number of skyscrapers (discovered by the NLA). 436 skyscrapers were planned and yet again many of these were located on the southern side of the Thames. Meanwhile, other boroughs with important increase on skyscrapers like in the City of London (although they were for office use) were proposing a significant expansion of the area where high buildings were allowed to be built, called the eastern cluster.

A survey was made during 2016 by Ipsos MORI survey for the Skyline Campaign, and what could be extracted from it is that most Londoners thought that high buildings should only be built in areas like the City and Canary Wharf, and that there should be limits on how high they could get. This survey which was done to more than 500 Londoners found almost half (49%) of residents of inner London boroughs thought that 270 high buildings planned, proposed, or under construction in London were too many. This contrasts with 34% of people in outer boroughs who said the same. Latest data released after the research was conducted indicates more than 400 new tall buildings are planned, proposed or under construction.



People in inner London were also more likely to say they are worried about how many high buildings were being built – 43% say this compared to 33% of outer London residents. They are more concerned that tall buildings were damaging what made London special (43% say this) and less likely than outer London residents to think they made a valuable contribution to the Capital’s vibrancy and skyline.

Additionally, the study found Londoners were unconvinced about the role of tall buildings in meeting the Capital’s housing needs; terraced houses (24%) and low-rise purpose built flats (21%) were thought to be the most suitable buildings to meet the needs of Londoners. Just 8% said that what was needed were to built high rise blocks (of 20 storeys or more) were what was needed, although this is higher among inner London residents (11%). Although people in inner London were most cynical about who benefits from tall developments with 60% saying they were mainly for wealthy foreigners, with 46% of outer London residents saying the same.



Ipsos Mori Survey For The Skyline Campaign

The same survey found out that there was greater consensus among inner and outer London residents when it came to how new developments should be regulated. A majority (59%) of all Londoners supported controls on the number of very high buildings (with 50 or more floors) which could be built, and the same proportion (59%) thought limits should be imposed on the height of new developments – contrasted with one in six (16%) saying there should be no limit on the height of potential new buildings. Over half (56%) thought tall buildings should only be permitted in particular areas such as the City or Canary Wharf.

When they were asked about what attributes should influence planning decisions on new developments, nearly one in three said it was important the building looked right in its surroundings (28%) and was well designed (27%). The single most important attribute is whether it provided affordable housing, particularly among inner city respondents (59% of whom agreed this should be given high priority.)

Overwhelmingly, however, Londoners agreed they should be consulted more on proposals for new buildings, with 73% agreeing or strongly agreeing with this. Many Londoners could even change how they vote based on the issue- some 27% say they would be less likely to vote for a political candidate who supports a new tall building development in their area.

3.4. The Cost of Building Skyscrapers in London

Building new skyscrapers in the centre of London costs more than anywhere else in the world. Construction of a normal skyscraper costs roughly 1/5 more than in New York or Hong Kong. Leasing skyscraper base in the West End costs roughly double what it does on Madison Avenue, what makes London so expensive is:

1. Foundations first, London's are littered with tube tunnels, government tunnels, sewers and oddities like the Royal Mail railway running under Oxford Street.
2. Unexploded bombs dropped by the Luftwaffe still turn up surprisingly often.
3. Discoveries of important Roman artefacts.
4. On some construction sites space is so tight that cranes are custom built.
5. The city's medieval street pattern means that few buildings can have clean 90-degree corners, necessitating expensive design.
6. The planning system then adds all sorts of expensive complexities, in Westminster, over three-quarters of land is covered by 56 conservation areas protecting the historic appearances of streets, right down to the colour of their doors. And of course the protect views of Saint Paul's Cathedral.

London success continues regardless, firms are keen enough to be in the city that they will pay sky-high rents for the privilege that gives developers the incentive to get over the many hurdles London puts in their way.

3.5. Sadiq Khan (9 May 2016 - Now)

In 2016, two important things happened: Brexit and the election of a new Mayor.

Sadiq Khan, the new Mayor, promised in terms of skyscrapers that while he was Mayor he wouldn't allow new ones to block St Paul's Cathedral, as many organizations urged him. But what he couldn't stop was the developments that were already under construction.

In 2017, Sadiq warned that new high buildings should enhance the capital's skyline rather than blight it and that new residential skyscraper criteria should be that they helped to tackle the city's housing crisis and not simply providing investment opportunities for the wealthy. He also believed that skyscrapers had a role to play in London, although they had to be first-class designed standard and built in suitable areas, contributes positively to the skyline and their locality and, if they were residential, should help to ease the capital's affordable housing crisis. In other words, high rise would be subjected to the highest scrutiny. The Mayor made it very clear saying that he wouldn't always say yes when it came to skyscrapers.



Manhattan Loft Gardens
Photograph by The Wup

According to the annual survey provided by NLA, in 2017 there were 455 skyscrapers in the pipeline (108 in the planning system, 256 already had granted permission and 91 were under construction), of which 420 were marked out for residential use. But as always, many of these wouldn't be affordable for regular Londoners, who year after year have more problems to find a place to live in central London and feel expelled from the city.

These were focused particularly in the boroughs of Tower Hamlets (77) and Greenwich (68). Although Southwark (37), Hammersmith (33) and many others were not far behind. While the major part of London was having a boom in residential skyscrapers, in the City of London they had it with office ones.

Just like Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson, Sadiq Khan had a London Plan, and it was pretty different from his predecessors. In it he suggested that 65% of new homes should be affordable, potentially crunching house builders' margins and making sites financially unviable. This turned out to be what it is called an empty threat, as in the end, it was set fixed thresholds for affordable housing: 50% on public land and in certain areas, and 35% for private developers. Developers wouldn't get planning permission if they did not provide enough affordable housing.

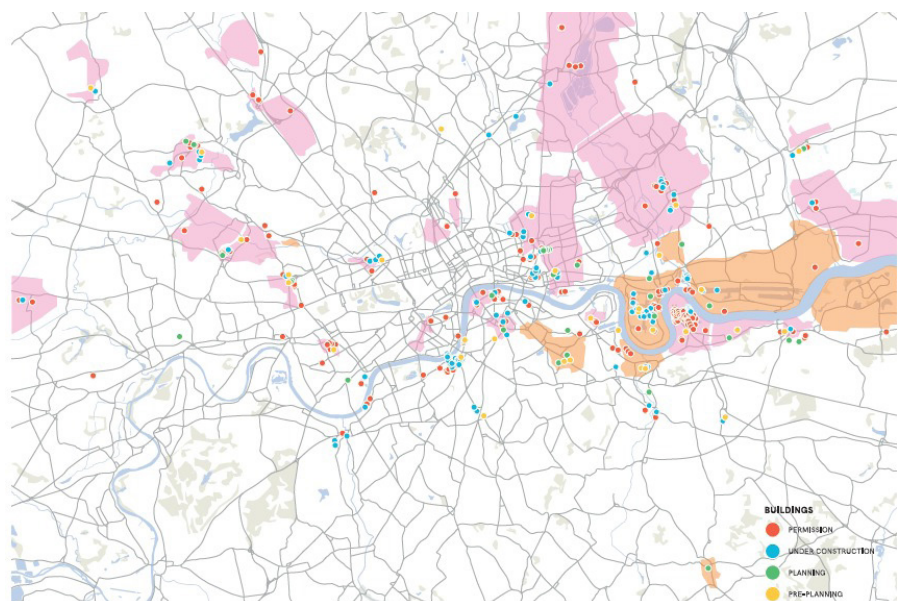
It ended up working and in consequence the number of applications to build affordable homes was higher than previous years, but still it wasn't enough. Despite this huge change in terms of affordable homes, little changed in terms of skyscrapers as the capital would still have a staggering amount of new skyscrapers almost everywhere and currently under construction.

The new plan also emphasised the importance of good design that would be applicable not to just skyscrapers, but in all types of buildings.

One of the most noticeable strength that this London Plan brought was the approach to offer private developers a fast track route to planning permission if they reached a minimum of 35% affordable.



The Diamond, the skyscraper that has caused trouble with St Paul's Protected Views. Photograph by SKIDMORE/OWINGS & MERRILL



London map 2018 by NLA

In 2018, London went from 455 to 510 planned, proposed or under construction according to NLA. Construction started on 115 skyscrapers.

Since the first report made back in 2014, 122 are completed and further 96 expected to be over the next two years. The trend is once again residential buildings.

Greenwich and Tower Hamlets still the boroughs with the highest number of tall buildings in the pipeline, 70 and 85 respectively, while the number in Southwark increased from 37 in 2016 to 48 in 2018.

During these years, English Heritage and others kept complaining about the high rise in the city, but it was this year that St Paul's cathedral itself had to warn about certain views in danger following permission for a new skyscraper on the City of London.



How the Eastern Cluster of the City of London will look like in a few years. Photograph by Dezeen.

4. Brexit

After the UK decided via referendum to leave European Union, many were concerned with what would that mean to the boom of skyscrapers that has been going on in London for few years now.

Investments for skyscrapers have not stop going in the city. Experts say that these developments (skyscrapers) show the high levels of investors confidence in London's status as a global city following the decision to leave.



Flags of UK and EU. Photograph by EFE

International investors purchasing commercial property in London have been largely undeterred by the Brexit vote, and remain attracted by the high demand, long leases, and strong yields in the capital.

Office rents in London's skyscrapers are the most expensive ones in Europe as companies continue to pay a premium for space in the city's highest buildings despite Brexit uncertainty.

So, London still commands the highest skyscraper office rents in Europe, despite Brexit uncertainty, that is a statement of its resilience and popularity as a business location. Firms are willing to pay more to be in London skyscrapers because they view UK capital as one of the most important international hubs.

Indeed, the impending Britain and EU divorce, so far, hasn't stopped a continuing building boom in London. The borough of the City of London growth has also continued through this year's indecisive British election that is Brexit, which left the country with a minority government and a weaker negotiating hand in the talks to quit the EU. Brexit related uncertainties have not impacted on office high-rise projects

5. Prince Charles' Views on Skyscrapers

The Prince of Wales is known for his support on traditional architecture and he is not a big fan of skyscrapers, as he has said. So when skyscrapers started to rise in London with Ken Livingstone as Mayor he had a few things to say.

In 2001 he said that he was not against high buildings 'purely because they are high buildings'. His concern was that they should be considered in their context - in other words, they should be put where they fit properly. He thought that the consequences of making this vision a reality (referring to skyscrapers), was disastrous, producing the shattered urban wastelands that desolated entire communities and disembowelled cities. Prince Charles cited the City of London as an example, saying it was deserted at night because of its 'bleak towers'. So with saying this he launched an attack on skyscrapers and the architects and heads of corporations who built them at a conference of experts on high buildings. Prince Charles said that modern skyscrapers were usually built to make a statement rather than for the benefit of the community. He even conceded that the building of skyscrapers would probably continue after atrocities of September 11th.



Prince Charles
Photograph by Getty Images

Prince Charles claimed that Renaissance, Georgian and Victorian contributions to the skyline were balanced with lower buildings surrounding them. He, as well, said that this was because towers were almost entirely reserved for monuments with a special ecclesiastical or civic status.

Prince Charles dismissed arguments that those who objected to high buildings were driven by nostalgia and were uniquely English. He pointed out that Paris had preserved its skyline and so, despite its rapid recent redevelopment, had Berlin. In other European cities, leaders imposed rigorous limits on the heights of new buildings.

In 2008, Prince Charles took aim at skyscrapers for going up in historic British cities, saying developers and planners were giving the cities "a pockmarked skyline."

He compared British planning unfavourably to that in France, where the historic core of Paris retained its low skyline.

He even suggested skyscrapers in London should be confined to Canary Wharf, a place far enough to have any sort of general impact "rather than overshadowing Wren's and Hawksmoor's churches".

These Prince Charles' comments echoed his famous 1984 speech when he described a planned extension of the National Gallery as "a monstrous carbuncle" - shredding confidence in modern architecture - and said the skyscraper boom would result in "not just one carbuncle on the face of a much-loved friend, but a positive rash of them that will disfigure precious views and disinherit future generations of Londoners".

He also attacked on Ken Livingstone's liberal policy towards buildings in the capital. Insisting that these wouldn't solve housing problem, besides it would make the prices go up.

Prince Charles thought that architects were determined to vandalise these few remaining sites (Westminster, Tower of London, St Paul's views) which retained the kind of human scale and timeless character that so attracted people to them.

In 2013, it was known that Prince Charles' influence over major construction projects had become so great that developers sought prior approval from Clarence House (Prince's Foundation for Building Community) before making any commitment. Developers had to square projects with Prince Charles to avoid the financial risk of a major undertaking being scuppered by a direct intervention from the great opponent of architectural novelty, who has succeeded in blocking several building plans. Even when Prince Charles did not succeed in getting a development dropped, his intervention could prompt expensive delays, sometimes for years.

The following year, Prince Charles called for a restoration of London's long-standing mid-rise housing legacy and a re-investment in small infill sites, intensification of neighbourhoods along key transport routes, and the regeneration of social-housing schemes.

Since 2018, Prince Charles is fighting tooth and nail to save the Tower of London from losing its World Heritage status, which is being threatened by the height of buildings in the east of the City that are ruining the Tower of London's view.

UNESCO has expressed concern about the views of Tower of London, and about any build-up of further higher buildings in the vicinity of the Shard which could put the Tower of London's World Heritage status at risk." Prince Charles is understood to be personally involved in trying to protect the Tower of London.



Tower of London
Photograph by Duncan

6. For and Against the City's New Skyline: Critics Consensus

Much has been said and it still does about this subject, critics have always been very outspoken about it. So when it comes to split their opinions into a for and against consensus, we could extract that:

Critics against:

1. They are not surprised, therefore, that the number of towers in the pipeline has jumped in 2018 up to 510. They think most Londoners do not object to skyscrapers per se, the issues at stake relate to appropriateness of location, visibility, affordability and quality of architecture.
2. Think that London deserves better than what its turning to nowadays in terms of architecture.
3. That new skyscrapers are a collection of monstrous steel and glass lumps on the skyline, many of mediocre architectural quality, each participating in a competition for the most incongruous 'iconic' shape imaginable.
4. Moreover that the number of high buildings, and their choice of shiny materials, has the effect of drowning all small-scale, delicate historic architecture, altering our perception of London's best neighbourhoods and heritage assets, and 'bombing' many favourite vistas, ones that managed to survive centuries of wars, change and growth.
5. They insist that London has been forever evolving, but what many have called an "army of towers" that is appearing on the skyline is threatening its unique character, never to be restored. Whether this is the permanent destruction of London, or normal evolution, our world-class metropolis is in danger of becoming a shadow of itself, just like many other world cities, large and small, where greed and over-development have been allowed to take over.
6. They argue that London is becoming a bad version of Dubai or New York.

Critics for:

1. They think London wouldn't be the same and wouldn't have the status that has now if it wasn't for the Shard, the London Eye, the Walkie-Talkie (a skyscraper) and more.
2. They claim that building towers might not be the solution to the lack of space in London. Skyscrapers transform the landscape and put pressure on their surroundings. And when they are not carefully planned, they can also unbalance communities. But in the end, many think London is making a significant effort in trying to provide people with the space they need. In parallel to transport infrastructure, most boroughs are allowing higher densities, not always skyscrapers, close to transport hubs, providing residential opportunities and a life experience.
3. They address affordability. New skyscrapers are mostly residential and increase the options to get onto the property ladder. Vertical student residences and co-living experiments are also on their way and technology allows for much safer buildings.
4. They insist on public is more aware of the identity these towers confer to their boroughs and the demand for good design has increased.
5. They argue that London is a city of the future, with spires combined with vertical architecture and green space.

7. Interesting Cases

Out of the hundreds of skyscrapers in London, some of them caused more controversy than others, and some of them are these three:

7.1. Paddington Skyscraper (2016)



Paddington Skyscraper
Photograph by Getty Images

Irvine Stellar, which was also the developer behind the Shard, chose Renzo Piano, one of the best architects in the world, to design what it would be a new skyscraper in Paddington.

After the releasing new high building's scheme, the Skyline Campaign opposed to the proposal because of the impact it would have on views in the capital. Many residents opposed to the construction of this skyscraper as well. The Skyline Campaign organization thought that the new skyscraper would shatter London's historic skyline.

After putting pressure from more independent organizations such as Historic England (UK's statutory adviser on heritage) and locals, Westminster Council reconsidered the plans and scrapped them. The project didn't disappear but transformed into a much lower building.

7.2. The Beacon Tower (2016)

When the plans were released for a skyscraper in the borough of Lambeth, it caused an immediate wave of submissions to the council from that borough, arguing that the skyscraper didn't quite fit in the area and would wreck the area's character. It would also block the views of Big Ben and would lack of affordable units, just like the rest of new high developments in the city.

More than 250 letters were sent to planners of the building and the council. After a contentious debate, the plans were refused.



The Beacon Tower
Photograph by Dezeen

7.3. Manhattan Loft Gardens (2016)

While the skyscraper named Manhattan Loft Gardens was in the process of being built in Stratford, east London, it was discovered during the construction that it would change an important and celebrated view of St Paul's from King Henry's Mound in Richmond Park. This view had existed since 1710, when an avenue of trees was planted to frame the vista of Cathedral's dome.

Campaigners of Friends of Richmond Park proved with photos that despite being more than four miles from the Cathedral, the skyscraper appeared directly behind it. The campaigners thought the skyscraper also obliterated the clear sky background, which was an essential part of the view which had been cherished for more than 300 years.



Manhattan Loft Gardens
Photograph by The Wup

Conservationist and other organizations when found that about it, started to urge Mayor Sadiq Khan to block the plan, amid claims the process had breached planning rules. An investigation was demanded by Sadiq Khan to discover what had happened.

It was found that the skyscraper was approved in 2011, while Boris Johnson was Mayor. During his time as Mayor many irregularities were committed and although the answer is not clear, it looks like this skyscraper was another of many that it was approved under strange circumstances and with no much policies for it.

8. Conclusions

After this long and exciting journey that has been making the research work, I have learnt so many interesting things that I am sure will stick to me for years to come.

With that being said, going back to the questions and statements I asked or said at the foreword I would say that:

1. All this process of changes that the city is facing, it is not a result of the attractiveness that the city has itself, in fact it was Mayor Ken Livingstone who started it all and then Boris Johnson who brought it to the extreme during his two mandates as Mayor. Then Sadiq Khan came and, although he is not like his predecessors, he stills continues permitting the boom, but with more real restrictions.
2. London does in fact have restrictions when it comes to skyscrapers' construction, they must not be built in any of protected views of Saint Paul's Cathedral, as it was agreed on the 1888 and 1894 London Building Acts, that the Cathedral should not be overshadowed by any kind of building to preserve its history.
3. About Londoners accepting skyscrapers as a part of the evolution that it is going on in their big city, one of the few surveys made in 2016, it can be extracted that most Londoners thought that high buildings should only be built in areas like the City and Canary Wharf, and that there should be limits on how high they could get.
4. Monarchy was thought that maintained a neutral position in every aspect of the daily basis, there cannot be a positioning neither in favour nor against the matter. It turned out that Prince Charles' has been very outspoken about the matter and made very clear in a many times he is against skyscrapers in London. From the moment the boom started back in Ken Livingstone Mayoralty he has said and done quite few things to stop them or discredit them.
5. Skyscrapers did not appear spontaneously, Ken Livingstone, as said before, introduced them saying that London need them to preserve its status as a world city. Skyscrapers started to appear from the moment he entered into Town Hall, and through the years and Mayors this

number has escalated to an impressive 510 planned, proposed or under construction according to NLA. And many of them are in boroughs that had never seen skyscrapers before. And most of them are residential and not affordable for ordinary people.

6. Brexit was anticipated that it would affect in a negative way the construction of new skyscrapers. But it turned out to be favourable as the resistance London has shown as a city in economic aspects, while going through hard times negotiating the divorce from the EU, developers of skyscrapers and international investors in general have put faith and trust in the city. As well as, London has the highest skyscraper office rents in Europe.
7. Critics are very divided on skyscrapers. While many think they are good for the city and that they enhance it, others think they are destroying London and making it just for the rich people, who are the only ones who can afford the flats in them.
8. All Mayors have not had the same positioning when it came to this subject, while Ken Livingstone and Boris did have much in common when it came to this, although Boris Johnson said he wouldn't. Sadiq Khan has brought a new way of seeing and resolving it, making new rules and controlling the places where they are built and that affordable housing is built.

8.1. Personal Advice

The main recommendation that I would make is that every single new high rise building that was set to be constructed, should at least bring with 50% affordable housing and control that developers do it so. Also boroughs and Town Hall of London should work together when it came to a skyscraper issue by deciding if the skyscraper is necessary and the location is appropriate, and let citizens speak their mind on the fact and decide if they like it or not.

Last but no least, from my point of view, evolving is something really important in many aspects, and so it is for our cities. If we do not evolve and reinvent ourselves we do not improve, we do not get better, it happens with everything. But London has crossed the line when it comes to it and comparing it to other cities has let skyscrapers spread all over the place and in consequence the city has not maintained what made it special, its unique style that make cities special.

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