

Living in Tall Buildings – what can we learn from the rest of the world?

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What kind of lessons can London learn from other cities in the world where living in tall buildings is more the norm?

A special teleconference session co-hosted by NLA, Social Life and Cisco, connecting London practitioners with experts in Hong Kong, Singapore and Copenhagen last week sought to find out.

Sketching the background to London's relatively new-found interest in building tall, Gerald Maccreeanor of Maccreeanor Lavington Architects said that most people today feel that London is becoming more dense. But in fact levels have decreased 'enormously' since the 1880s and 'we've forgotten how busy our cities used to be.' Our urban footprint – the amount of public space each inhabitant uses – has also increased from 20 sqm per inhabitant in the 1650s to over 160 sqm per inhabitant today, partly because activities in the public realm have changed from 'necessary' to recreational. London's heritage has 'moulded' the places in which tall buildings are allowed in London and makes it feel a 'unique' place. But, said Maccreeanor, the way that tall buildings meet the street is perhaps their most important feature, with buildings like New York's 1930s Rockefeller Center being good examples of where the public realm has formed a key part.

Adviser and former Peabody Trust development director Dickon Robinson questioned whether we in the UK have learnt from the mistakes of the 1960s in building tall for housing, and that we need to move away from the 'emotional baggage that surrounds the whole area' toward a more rational approach. Part of the problem in the 1960s, added architect Fred Pilbrow, was that the quality of public realm was very poor, with 'abject public spaces' and a lack of investment in the worst examples. Robinson agreed, saying that the architect often got blamed for problems caused from other sources. But building tall is inherently more expensive, which 'bites hard' when it comes to 30-year refurbishment costs and fuels Robinson's big fear that this 'is not a model for providing affordable housing'. With five million people on UK local authority waiting lists wanting affordable housing, 'It's hard to see how the current programme of high-rise development in London is going to contribute to solving that', said Robinson. 'We're going to end up with social exclusiveness highlighted in this place as never before.'

In Hong Kong, the attitude to building tall residential towers is a necessarily pragmatic, rather than an emotional one. 'It's the only way we can do it with seven million people' said

Albert Tsang, Operations manager, HKDI DESIS Lab for Social Design Research. 'It's not emotional or a struggle. It's just the way that we do it.'

Dave Hoggard, partner at Paul Davis + Partners' Hong Kong office agreed, saying that tall buildings are not an issue in Hong Kong, and in fact many prefer it. People live differently there in smaller apartments, spending more time at work or out meeting friends and family, so the home becomes 'a storage device' - and living in a house is anyway out of the question financially for many.

In Singapore, too, living in high-rise is not really a matter of choice, said Theodore Chan, president of Singapore Institute of Architects. 'Because you (in London) have a choice, it makes your problem more difficult.' One of the new design trends there is to include more public space at higher levels in tall buildings, said Chan, with 'vertical greening' also set to become a bigger feature in schemes over the next five years, he predicted. But because of the rapid pace of Singapore's progress from being a 'colonial backwater', it has often sacrificed a sense of identity and of home, said Chan. A strong leader and a 'lost' people willing to cooperate with government lay at the heart of the country's successes, however, with the city becoming more dense and people demanding better housing. Today, many schemes in Singapore seek to build 'environmental decks' over car parks or create 'villages in the sky' with others concentrating on shared facilities, blending high rise with other nearby facilities such as gyms, child care centres or nursing homes to cater for the 'Silver Tsunami' of an ageing population. 'I predict you will begin to see a lot of this – dual uses in buildings' said Chan. How people use their spaces varies from country to country, culturally, and it is important to continue to create housing estates with 'character' and 'identity'. Yes, it *is* very expensive to do high rise, said Chan, 'but what is the opportunity cost of having urban sprawl?'

In London, the economics of creating towers tends to drive it toward a mono-tenure or even mono-typological solution, said Steve Newman, partner at HTA. 'I don't think people think of that as a particularly sustainable way of making places.' Management is key to the longevity of these places and needs to be built into the schemes from the start, he added, with community trusts one potential way of creating a 'self-managed' solution.

In Copenhagen, said Åsa Bjerndel, architect at White arkitekter, the environment is less pressured but there has been discussion about creating tall buildings as a positive symbol of regeneration. One of the key stresses of the work of Jan Gehl, she added, is to attend to the microclimate created at the base of tall buildings.

Back in Hong Kong, architect Martin Fung said that communal life in Hong Kong's public housing is much more 'vibrant' than in the private housing blocks. But he stressed the need to create visual connections across lightwells, for example, to increase the sense of a neighbourhood in tall buildings and cut the common problem of segregation. Connections, he said, are crucial. 'Social fabric matters a lot more for high rise'. Housing is seen very much as a commodity, too, said Albert Tsang, with many empty units 'just in the hands of money'. Dr Yanki Lee, director of HKDI DESIS Lab for Social Design Research said the contradiction between Hong Kong's often tiny apartments and the city being voted

the most liveable city by *the Economist* was driving a cultural mapping project on 200 flats, the different typologies and the way the owners live. Sometimes these units can be as small as 28.8 sqm flats for four people. A new project investigating a new town for 400,000 people called Tseung Kwan O investigates the notion of the street since much of the housing is connected to other facilities by high level walkways.

London is wrestling with the fact of increasing house prices encouraging higher density developments and how to transition from a medium to a high-density city, said Robert Maguire, project director, Wood Wharf, Canary Wharf Group, about which it could learn from Hong Kong. 'London hasn't got to grips with how you identify clusters of tall buildings and clusters of density which optimise public transport systems in a way that really works', he said. And because there is no zoning system here the planning system is not fit for making such a transition smoothly, he added. Colin Wilson, senior manager, planning decisions, GLA rejected that accusation, saying that the policies as regards tall buildings were working well, with opportunity areas identified as the sites for the majority, and that a zoning system would be 'inappropriate and wrong' for London. 'The British system is not zoning', he said, 'it's thinking'.

David Taylor, Editor, NLQ