

The Iconic City

Office Architecture is Alive and Well in the City of London

By Peter Murray

An exhibition entitled *New City Architecture – People, Places, Buildings*, to be held in Broadgate for six weeks this summer, will showcase the current glut of good architecture in the City of London, set in the context of development over the last 20 years. Exhibition Curator Peter Murray sets the scene.

The skyline of the City of London is changing. A series of new towers are proposed for the Square Mile which will update its central cluster of tall buildings. For thirty years the City's profile has been dominated by the NatWest building – now dubbed Tower 42 – a building that hardly reflects London's position as Europe's financial capital.

For years the Corporation's planners held out against building tall. They preferred groundscrapers to skyscrapers as a means of fighting off the growing competition of Canary Wharf. For a time it seemed that Frankfurt might challenge the City for its European crown and proposed a skyline packed with high buildings to boost its case. Then, along came an energetic Mayor of London who, to everyone's surprise, was an enthusiast for tall buildings and soon became the developers' best friend (see Anna Brown's article in this issue on skylines and urban planning). According to Ken Livingstone: 'Well-designed tall buildings can add to London's skyline and become new landmarks for the capital. Architectural quality is the key. Office space is at a premium in the City and as a result costs are soaring. If this continues there is a real danger that London will lose business to other European cities.'

A new face for London

Permission was given to the Swiss Re building – the Gherkin, designed by Foster and Partners – in July 2000. Its cigar shape and diagrid patterning proved a universally popular design and showed that tall buildings could enhance the skyline instead of detracting from it. The City Planners then gave permission to the Heron Tower on Bishopsgate in January 2001, but it was called in by John Prescott; at the ensuing Public Enquiry, English Heritage threw all they could into opposing the plan. Their loss gave heart to other developers who had plans for tall buildings in the drawer; as did the fact that a new Chief Executive, Simon Thurley, seemed to be more developer friendly than his predecessor. First came the 303 metre Shard of Glass by Renzo Piano at London Bridge, which received permission in November 2003, then the 49 storey Minerva Building by Grimshaw at Aldgate, a slender and elegant tower which received permission in January this year. Richard Rogers' wedge-shaped spire on Leadenhall Street for developer British Land is currently awaiting consent.



Swiss Re Tower, Nigel Young

By 2010 London will have a skyline of towers set in a central cluster, that it can be proud of. But as Ken Livingstone suggests, quality of design is the key if the skyline is not to be an eyesore. Luckily the architecture of office buildings is positively thriving at the moment.

'Commercial' architecture used to be a dirty word. In the post war period gimcrack office buildings of dubious aesthetic quality, providing mediocre working environments, did their best to destroy the soul of our cities. The more discerning architectural practices turned their noses up at such work, preferring more respectable sectors such as education, health and housing, thus compounding the paucity of design to be found in the office environment.

The driving forces

Things started to change in the City of London in the early 80s. One of the most significant developments, representing the start of a seismic shift in attitudes to architecture, was Greycourt Property's commissioning of Arup Associates to design a new building at 1 Finsbury Avenue, close to Liverpool Street and in effect, the first phase of the Broadgate development. The key figures in this change were Stuart Lipton (now Sir Stuart and Chairman of The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) – see James Alexander's article in this issue), Frank Duffy of consultants DEGW, who had carried out important research in to the future of the workplace, and Peter Foggo of Arup, whose architectural approach was the ideal interpretation of Lipton's ambitions. Developers not only faced the challenge of producing aesthetically acceptable buildings, they also had to cope with the fast changing requirements of international companies and the revolution in information technology.

1 Finsbury Avenue not only provided an acceptable contemporary architectural face to the street, but employed floor-to-ceiling heights, raised floors, and flexible layouts and efficient cores that provided the



Leadenhall Tower, courtesy of WORDSEARCH

sort of functionality and flexibility required by the modern financial occupier.

As London geared up for Big Bang in 1985, following deregulation of the financial markets by the Tory government, new office space was required that matched the demands of US banks who needed large floorplate buildings of a standard comparable to that back home. The development of Broadgate did just that, but also brought to the City a series of public spaces that hugely enhanced the experience of working in the area – at that time perceived to be on the fringe of the city. The design of Broadgate set a standard that raised the game for architecture in the Square Mile.

There were a smattering of good buildings put up during the boom in the 80s, but it was not until the late 90s that quality became the norm rather than the exception.

To celebrate the quality of new architecture in the City the current Lord Mayor, Alderman Robert Finch, a property lawyer who has been intimately involved with many of the area's major developments, is sponsoring an exhibition entitled *New City Architecture – People, Places, Buildings*, to be held in Broadgate for six weeks this summer to show new and proposed commercial buildings and public spaces in the City of London, set into the context of the development of London over the last 20 years. The exhibition, curated by the author, has an international selection committee made up of the City Architect of Barcelona, the Editor of Italy's *Domus Magazine* and the director of the National Architecture Institute of the Netherlands. Some 82 buildings were presented to the selection Committee, from which they selected 21 of particular quality for the exhibition.

A model of the whole of the City of London will form the



Heron Tower, courtesy of WORDSEARCH

centre piece of the show, supported by individual architectural models, drawings, computer generated images and films.

The exhibition will be launched at a glittering dinner at the Mansion House hosted by the Lord Mayor, while a simultaneous series of debates on architectural issues is being organised by the Architecture Foundation.

An accompanying publication - *Architecture and Commerce* - will describe not only the quality buildings in the City of London itself, but the burgeoning satellite developments that are meeting the needs of major international occupiers outside the Square Mile and literally changing the shape of London. This move away from one centralised business area for financial institutions started with Canary Wharf and has continued with the success of new development areas such as Regents Place, More London and

Paddington, while the redevelopment of King's Cross and Stratford City – not due for completion until 2020 – will provide space for London's expected population growth. This policy of diverse centres is supported by the Mayor's recently published London Plan (see Anna Brown's article in this issue for more on the London Plan).

One cannot discuss the improving quality of architecture in the City without giving recognition to the role of Foster and Partners. It is remarkable to note that in 1997 Norman Foster had not one City building to his name. The closest he got was the ITN Building in Grays Inn Road in Holborn. Today the practice is by far the busiest in the Square Mile. There is no



London skyline with the planned 'Shard of Glass', courtesy of WORDSEARCH

City view today that is not decorated by a Foster building whether it be 1 London Wall, Moor House, Spitalfields, Tower Place, Gresham Street, 100 Wood Street, More London, City Hall or, of course, The Gherkin.

That other architectural Lord, Richard Rogers, while not matching Foster in volume, has designed a highly coherent series of buildings reflecting his bold constructivist style that had its first outing in the iconic Lloyd's of London building. But the practice's work can also accommodate the historic character of the City. The clever solution for Lloyd's Registry where Rogers' characteristic primary coloured structure sits harmoniously with the retained listed facades of the existing buildings is a model of its kind.

In the same vein the Merrill Lynch building near St Paul's successfully combines the massive trading floorplates required by the international banker with a building that respects the grain of the surrounding city.

Nearing completion is the massive Plantation Place, its design, by Arup Associates, carefully disguising its bulk at street level.

Such schemes represent a confident approach to history, a confidence that is also characterised by a burgeoning cluster of tall buildings. The planners like to put the buildings in clusters; not only are they out of the way of the carefully controlled views of St Paul's Cathedral, they avoid the unfortunate environmental effects of the tall buildings of the 60s which stand like lonely sore thumbs in Earls Court, Lambeth, London Bridge and Notting Hill. Over the next few years the Minerva Building, the Leadenhall Building and Heron Tower will join The Gherkin to create a bold new profile for the capital. Buildings designed by the leading architects in the land, buildings that provide the functionality required by the global operators that occupy the Square Mile – and lift the spirit too. The new skyline will become the outward and visible sign of the City of London's continuing dominance of Europe's financial markets and its role as a global business centre.

References

New City Architecture – People Places and Buildings, Finsbury Avenue Square, Broadgate, London EC2, June 19-July 2, 2004. *Architecture and Commerce*, 192pp hard cover, from Wordsearch, 5 Old Street, London EC1V 9HL. www.wordsearch.co.uk

Peter Murray's own book, (*The Saga of the Sydney Opera House*), published in February 2004, is reviewed in this issue of LDR.

Peter Murray is Chairman of Wordsearch, the specialist design and communications consultancy for architecture, property and the built environment. He is also Curator of the New City Architecture Exhibition and Director of the London Architecture Biennale 2004 in Clerkenwell 19-28 June.

