

Up and away!

Vertical Mixed-use

David Geddes

A wave of skyscraper building is sweeping across Britain. With hundreds of projects in construction or in the pipeline, high-rise building is in fashion like never before. David Geddes looks at how this will radically change the skylines of most of our larger cities.

Race to the Top

The most striking changes will affect London's skyline, where a succession of mixed-use tower blocks will soon be reaching for the sky.

Whilst city centre high-rise development has traditionally been predominantly for office use in the UK, residential, hotel and leisure uses have become increasingly important parts of the mix. Skyscraper residential and hotel mixed-use development is a more established trend overseas, particularly in Asia and North America, but it is now with us in force.

As has ever been the case, the impetus behind building tall does not arise entirely from rational economic or planning considerations. There is an element of competition and pride. Tall buildings are perceived to be signs of assertiveness and self-confidence, qualities that attract developers, architects and politicians in equal measure.

During the 1930s Depression, New York's Empire State Building and Chrysler Building grew higher out of the competition between the motor industrialists John Jakob Raskob and Walter Chrysler.

Today, emerging business centres such as Shanghai are leading the way. The ten tallest tower blocks built since 1990 are all located in Asian cities. Having held the trophy of the world's tallest building for a decade, Kuala Lumpur has lost it to Taipei, but it won't stay there for long.

London Grows Up

Proposals in the UK are not competing at world beating heights, but they are breaking previous UK benchmarks, especially in London.

The desire to conserve heritage and protect the character of London has long vied with the desire of developers to build tall. Development proposals are often constrained by the inviolable "strategic view" corridors that protect St. Paul's Cathedral and the Palace of Westminster.

Despite its world city status, London is only a moderately tall city by international standards. Emporis places it 11th in the world based on the number of high-rise buildings and 26th based on the number of floors.

This is changing. The relaxation of planning controls, the height of Canary Wharf tower and the audacity and popularity of Norman Foster's design for 30 St Mary's Axe have helped pave the way for ever more ambitious proposals.

Additions to the skyline will soon include Heron Tower, a 180 metre high office block granted approval by John Prescott despite the objections of English Heritage. The Renzo Piano designed "Shard of Glass" at London Bridge, and the proposed Bishopsgate Tower in the city, both reach to over 300 metres, far in excess of the 235-metre tower at Canary Wharf.

Residential and leisure is playing a large part in driving this upward trend. It is driven by the renaissance in fashion of inner-city living and the consequences for the price of residential property. This has tipped the balance of return from offices to residential. Height has a particular value in residential development, more so than in office development, because the views are such an important part of the appeal. Prices increase floor by floor in high buildings because people prefer the view higher up.

Residential is also more suited than offices to sites with a small footprint, hence the trend towards pencil-thin towers.

References

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www.skyscrapernews.co.uk

www.emporis.co.uk

Betham's Glass Blade

The Liverpool based Beetham Organisation is bringing to London a successful model of mixed residential and hotel high-rise development it has developed in the north. The formula is a hotel on the lower floors, signed over to a hotel company on a long term management contract with the ownership retained by the developer, while the upper floors are sold off for residential use. Flats in their 171-metre Deansgate tower in Manchester, now under construction, were so popular that the majority were sold even before receipt of planning permission.

Beetham's first completed tower was in Liverpool, and it is building another there, and its tower in Birmingham is nearing completion. The company recently submitted plans for a signature 227-metre tower block at the site of the former Sainsbury's headquarters at Blackfriars Bridge on the South Bank. The distinctive "Glass Blade" design is by Beetham favourite Ian Simpson. The plans comprise 220 residential units over a "6*" hotel with a public viewing gallery at the top.

Residential use in turn stimulates demand for related leisure and commercial uses in and around the towers. The new skyscrapers typically include green public spaces, cafés, galleries and community facilities. The design by architect m3 for the astoundingly tall 485-metre high Citygate Ecotower in Tower Hamlets features a mix of residential, office, retail uses plus a viewing area and a base zone directly integrated into the public transport system. It features a series of "Sky Parks" intended as a vertical interpretation of the traditional London Garden Square.

With high-rise proposals liable to be "called in" by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the precise balance of residential components can be the key difference. Vauxhall Tower, the controversial 180-metre residential skyscraper planned for St George's Wharf, was approved by John Prescott, overruling the planning inspector, on condition that the proportion of affordable homes was increased from 25% to 40%.

Of course, the profusion of development will soon slow down if market conditions change. Flats at 1 Blackfriars Road will start at £500,000 and rise to £2.5 million for the pent-house suite. As more and more residential skyscrapers dot the landscape, the market dynamic may change. There may simply not be enough people who can afford those prices. There have been signs of over supply of flats in the London Docklands.

There is no sign at the moment, however, that there is an imminent threat to city centre development. The underlying market dynamics are good. The number of single and two person households – the main customers for apartments – is on the rise. Demand to live in the big cities, especially London, is also on the rise and exceeds supply. Tolerance of the discomfort and inconvenience of commuting is in decline. And, interest rates remain relatively low.

Inevitably tall buildings will divide opinion. Vociferous debate about the aesthetic and social impact of the new mixed-use buildings will continue long into the future, but in the short-term the message is onwards and upwards.

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