



Marks Barfield's icon for the capital:
the London Eye

Upwardly mobile

The Skyhouse project being pioneered by Marks Barfield Architects is seeking new heights in design for sustainable urban living. It is not MBA's first foray skywards – the company was responsible for conceiving and designing the London Eye. *Locum Destination Review* talked to MBA's Managing Director, David Marks, to learn more about Skyhouse and why the only way is up.

The approaching millennium inspired architects David Marks and Julia Barfield to conceive a new landmark for London, which would both change the skyline and change the way the city could be viewed. As David Marks recalls, 'We were looking to the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, the Sydney Opera House, and other national symbols for our inspiration.' The landmark symbol they designed was the London Eye.

Against the clock and against all odds, an international project team, enthused by MBA's vision, delivered the British Airways-sponsored London Eye to an intrigued and excited public early in 2000. Here, contrasting with the Lottery-funded nightmare unfolding against a

sea of negative publicity down the Thames at Greenwich, was an example of cutting-edge design and construction, succeeding instantly on its own merits: a new must-do attraction for London. Commenting at the time of the opening, David Marks was quick to pay tribute to the achievement of the myriad contributors to the project's success: 'Everyone who has worked on this project has brought so much passion and commitment and sheer energy to make it happen, and in such an impossibly short space of time.' When asked just why the London Eye has, in his opinion, succeeded, Marks notes: 'We always believed in it, and I think part of the reason that people admire it now is that it was impossible, it has been created against the odds, and I think people like it when that happens.'

So what would the public's reaction be to Marks Barfield's newest proposed development: the Skyhouse?

The Skyhouse is a proposal to provide very high density housing and basic social infrastructure in futuristic skyscrapers.

Traditionally, tower blocks of all kinds – work and residential – have enjoyed a dire press in the UK, with the eyesores of the 1960s and 1970s still very much a blot on the landscape of many inner city areas today. As Hugh Pearman observed, however, in the *Sunday Times* (16/07/00), it has been

recognised recently that 'towers are fine to live in, so long as someone looks after them. Once that lesson was learned, they became positively fashionable and people started to like the look of them again. This new-found modishness has come just in time for towers to meet the next challenge: how to encourage lots more people to live in cities, especially cities such as London that are under huge pressure to provide more homes.'

The two biggest challenges for the Skyhouse project could not be clearer: how do you physically create a skyscraper that people genuinely want to live in, and how can this be done in a way that is both affordable to the would-be residents and in line with policy for inner-city regeneration?

Dealing firstly with the aesthetic issue, Skyhouse would break the mould of traditional skyscrapers in a number of ways. For a start, it would not be a single tower but a cluster of three independent slender towers that are structurally connected vertically, so that each tower derives structural support from the other two. Each tower in the cluster would be a different height (72, 48 and 36 storeys respectively), with the idea of adding visual interest and accentuating the overall leanness of construction. The design of Skyhouse involves an innovative engineering solution, which would enable it to be built

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higher and with less structural material than would normally be possible. In major cities world-wide, New York being the most obvious example, we are used to seeing monumental construction, packed into the very heart of cityscapes. Skyscrapers have always had the ability to captivate the eye, excite the imagination and inspire awe. Clearly, Skyhouse has been designed to continue the tradition of creating breathtakingly designed tall structures.

So, what about the hard economics of the project? Can the design aspirations and the cost implications realistically sit alongside sustainable financial plans supporting the social aspirations of residential inner city regeneration? According to Marks, 'Not all the flats would be for sale; a significant proportion would be set aside for affordable housing for key workers, for live-work spaces, student accommodation and fair-rent apartments, as well as shared ownership and other innovative schemes to help public-sector workers in particular, such as teachers and nurses, onto the housing ladder.' With five units on each floor, a total of 720 units would be available throughout the three towers.

The idea is that market-value flats for sale and rent would make Skyhouse commercially viable, but in such proportion as to ensure a good social mix. Shops, crèches, restaurants, health clubs, gardens and community-use sky lobbies are also proposed in Skyhouse, making it a complete community in itself, with basic infrastructure built in around residential units. 'We call it cohesive living', says Marks. 'We don't want to have ghettos. People are more willing today to live in flats than at any time in British history. The key to the idea is to have a real mixed society.'

And so to the biggest question of all: where will Skyhouse be built? The site would not need to be very big – around two and a half acres, enough for a base that would include parking. Marks acknowledges that you cannot part people from their cars at home so easily as you can when they go to work, but still suggests only one parking space for every two or three flats, well below normal levels. But, as Hugh Pearman points out, 'It does need to be plugged into a public transport network, and be somewhere where overshadowing is not a problem. One of the "gateways" to London, such as Archway, with its existing low-grade 1960s office tower and drab parade of shops over a tube station, springs to mind. Or, of course, the East London River corridor, where the government is already planning to cram as much housing as it can so as to spare the countryside elsewhere.' Marks is quietly confident that the right partner can be found in the near future: 'We are looking for partners who want to share Skyhouse with us, on a site which has been previously developed, or underused, somewhere close to a public transport node, such that mixed-use derives from its development and its immediate surroundings, where there is the potential for urban regeneration and mixed-use to be stimulated, where people would choose to live, and where it can deliver the strategic benefits of more efficient use of urban land and sustainable development.'

From the world's biggest observation wheel to sustainable residential destinations of the future, Marks Barfield could not be accused of having anything less than sky-high architectural and social ambition. If they succeed in making Skyhouse a reality, of course, they will be treading totally different

ground to that of the London Eye, providing not the visitor experience of a lifetime but rather the *residential* experience for a lifetime. The technical achievements of the London Eye must be replicated, with the aim of satisfying not tourists but full-time residents. On the basis of past success and current planning, however, only a committed pessimist could have anything less than genuine expectation that the Skyhouse will indeed soon be leading the creation of the next generation of high-rise urban residential solutions.

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Skyhouse aims to reverse the British trend of high-rise disasters. The Skyhouse vision foresees whole communities living among the clouds

