

Introduction – Tall Tales or Three Short stories and an Afterword

Peter Carolin, David Emond and Kieran Perkins

[The numbers relate to the powerpoint slides.]

Peter Carolin (Chair, City's Design and Conservation Panel):

1 This talk is intended as a provocation – it neither makes a case for tall towers nor sets out a case against them. Rather, it identifies some of the issues and possibilities in the context of Cambridge.

Meredith Bowles of Mole Architects who devised the first of the 'tales' cannot be with us this evening so I shall present his slides as follows:

2 In order to consider the impact of tall buildings in Cambridge, we should think carefully about what the context for any proposal might be, and define what we mean by the Cambridge skyline

3 Central historic core: Of course the historic centre should remain protected, and views of the historic city skyline should be preserved

4 However, due to its topography, there are a few vantage points from which to see the central core once one leaves it. A slight incline to the west at Coton allows the first views back to the city.

5 Coton view with towers: From this distance, is the addition of taller buildings going to damage the sense of the city?

6 To the south-east, the rise at Gog Magog hill allows the only real panorama of Cambridge.

7 Again, with tall buildings built away from the centre, is the view of the city damaged?

8 Mostly the city is approached by car, and as an experience of Cambridge the skyline of the approaches is also relevant to the quality of the environment that Cambridge offers

9 Many of the approaches to the City are impoverished, with little sense of enclosure and no sense of arrival – this is the case in Newmarket Road, all the way from Marshalls to the retail park to the Elizabeth Way roundabout

10 This is East Central – and the Elizabeth way roundabout. These are terrible urban spaces with a scale that favours the car, no sense of enclosure, no pedestrian spaces, nothing of value. This is the Cambridge skyline also.

11 This is South Central – south of the station around the Cattle Market site: Cherry Hinton or Hills Road both offer pleasant routes into town, but the route between Hills Road Sixth Form College and Station Road is a poor urban space, again with a lack of enclosure and a poor sense of place and arrival, with too much space and a poor relationship between the buildings and the road junction.

12 It's worth considering Cambridge as a whole, and questioning whether a different kind of occupation and architecture might be appropriate to revitalise some parts of the city that currently are dominated by a lack of enclosure, an environment of poor quality and an architecture of little merit – much like the hinterlands of towns across the country.

David Emond of RH Partnership Architects:

13 So – what is tall for Cambridge and why might one build tall here?

14. Cambridge is generally seen as a low-rise city. The historic core is surrounded by 2 to 3 storey residential buildings, similar or lower in height to the tree line. Even in the city centre there are relatively few buildings over 4 storeys tall.

The buildings that rise above this general height line are important cultural and civic buildings, for example college chapels, church spires and the university library tower.

15. Should the 21st century add new buildings – like the one in the centre of this slide – which rise above the historic sky-line? Should we be concerned if these projecting buildings are for residential or commercial purposes with less cultural or civic significance for the city than their predecessors? Would we feel differently about this new building if its top two floors were a community arts facility rather than, as at present, a hotel?

16. Tall is a relative term. If you live in a street of 2 storey houses, a 4 storey neighbour is tall. There may be a site-specific justification for a tall building on a particular site ...

17. ... but because a tall building has set out to be different and more dominant than its neighbour it has a higher duty of care to deliver design quality and to consider the impact on its neighbours. Is this higher level of design care sufficiently defined or controlled by the planning system?

18. Taller buildings in the city which can be seen from afar range in height from King's College chapel at 45m ...

19. ... to the university library tower at 48m tall ...

20. ... and the Catholic Church at 65m

21. There are also sites in the city where relatively tall buildings have been inserted with a minimal impact on their neighbours or the overall Cambridge skyline. The 8 – 9 storey high William Stone building at Peterhouse is an example of a tall building which is hardly known to many Cambridge residents while ...

22. ... the 36 m towers on the New Museum site are another example.

23. Further out from the historic core, bigger buildings have been constructed during the 20th century, particularly at Addenbrookes where there are 14 storey residences and where the chimney is the tallest structure in the city.

24. Everything is relative. This slide shows the city's tall buildings set against a heavily compressed section of the city showing, on the left, Castle Hill, and, on the right, the Gogs.

25. The taller buildings in Cambridge are very different in scale to the taller buildings in many other cities – such as London's St Paul's Cathedral, 'Gherkin' and the proposed 'Shard'. I do not think that anyone is suggesting a building of the size and scale of the Gherkin in or around Cambridge. And no one is proposing buildings of this scale in the historic core of the city.

What might be considered are buildings of a similar scale to the existing taller structures in the city in the range of 10 to 16 storeys away from the centre. However, the definition of tall remains relative to context and this is open for discussion.

26. So why build tall in Cambridge?

27. A common argument used to justify tall buildings is that they allow a high density to be achieved whilst maintaining open space and an attractive public realm. Building at high density on our existing brown field sites and urban extensions might reduce pressure for the city to spread. Big buildings relating to the big spaces of the surrounding landscape could form the edge of the city.

Tall, it is argued, creates benefits for the users of the building in terms of views out, good day lighting etc, and tall is often cited as good for creating developments which retain open space and vitality in the public realm at ground level.

28. High density, it is argued, will be better for public transport and has a chance to create a vitality and street life that lower density developments often fail to deliver.

29. Tall buildings are argued as being sustainable. This is largely related to the density, the central facilities they can provide and public transport.

30. Tall buildings, with their head above the parapet, can be a stimulus for regeneration and form new cultural and civic landmarks for the city.

31. Tall buildings can provide an identity for new developments and urban extensions, as seen here in Malmo in Sweden.

32. If we allow some buildings in the right locations to go taller would we provide more elegant solutions? This is the Belvedere by the Hills Road railway bridge as built ...

33. ... and this is it raised in height by another 15m.

34. But perhaps size is not the key issue – it should be *what* you build, *why* you build and *with what quality*.

Kieran Perkins of 5th Studio architects:

35. I propose – with the help of four ‘what if?’ scenarios – to consider where tall buildings might be located in Cambridge. These loose propositions have not been worked through with any degree of rigour. I hope, however, that they will serve to generate debate.

36. One possibility is similar to the La Défense quarter of Paris – concentrating all tall buildings in a single area away from the historic core.

37. This is a view from Castle Hill looking back towards the centre of Cambridge. Over on the left, you can see a cluster of tall buildings, approximately on the airport site.

38. Another possibility is for tall buildings to mark local centres in much the same way as church towers and spires once did.

39. This is an idea for a big ‘yellow’ building at the junction of Cherry Hinton Road and Perne Way.

40. Yet another possibility is for tall buildings to mark entrances into cities – very much as the Addenbrookes’ chimney acts as a landmark when you arrive on the train.

41. This is a visualisation of the guided busway looking from the south with two towers on the edge of the CUP site marking the station area with its offices and transport interchange.

42. My final possibility draws on the example of New York’s Central Park where tall buildings enclose and define a great urban space.

43. The parallel in Cambridge are the edges of the Green Fingers that penetrate the city ...

44. ... and new sites such as Cambridge East (the airport) abutting open countryside and commons.

45. So what do you think might be appropriate? One of these – none of these – or a little bit of each?

Peter Carolin:

46. Almost 50 years ago, Denys Lasdun, later to be the architect of the National Theatre, designed some science buildings on the New Museums site. The lower buildings respected the street pattern or 'grain' of the city. The towers reflected the perpendicular architecture of Kings Chapel. And the cluster of towers located Cambridge in the fen – just as the towers and lantern of Ely Cathedral do. Although granted planning consent, it was never built.

47. Today, our gestures are not as grand. This is a view of the Cambridge Leisure Square off Cherry Hinton Road. Despite its significance in the city, it's an undistinguished space, lacking any sense of enclosure at its southern end.

48. A residential development is planned on the former car showroom site at the southern end. Part of this will take the form of a tower with a distinctive façade designed as a form of living theatre facing the square.

49. The tower lies at the intersection of Cherry Hinton and Hills Roads – and will mark one of the 'gateways' into the city from the suburbs. Thus a tower of modest height will serve several 'place-making' and 'place-marking' functions at a city scale. It is a good demonstration of the way in which a tall building can contribute to a city. By contrast, the nearby Belvedere tower fails in almost every respect – fatally undermined by its ambiguous relation to ground level, the public realm and the approach to the city.

50. But how can one evaluate such proposals in the context of their setting? In future, one important way will be by the computer model recently acquired by the local authorities' Joint Urban Design Team. This will enable us to evaluate both ground level and distant views of all tall building proposals.

51. However, as you can see from this panorama from Castle Hill, it needs an immense amount of refinement before it becomes truly useful. (This is because each building is currently presented at a single height – that of its highest point.)

52. Unlike Oxford which is so often represented as a distant cluster of towers, spires and dome, Cambridge is invariably represented as a sequence of spaces seen from within. From outside, it's an almost hidden city surrounded by extensive low-rise housing areas lacking any sense of place.

Towers are just one option – and our intention in this joint contribution has been to demonstrate a few of the issues relating to this particular building form. Other issues and alternatives follow. **But, whatever route we adopt, our shared objective must be to make both good places and a good city.**

