

Summing up - by John Worthington

Tall buildings are a shorthand to talk about all the things we hate or like. So what I heard in the group discussions and subsequent feedback was a wide range of issues that weren't primarily about tall buildings but were about planning. What is it we want to do? What kind of place do we want? These are the key issues. As many of you quite rightly pointed out, it is about relativity compared with the surrounding context: what is this compared with something else around? As you begin to keep it lower whilst still wanting to increase the density, it is obvious you get into bulk. Classically, for instance, universities were faced with the uncomfortable conflict, as they shifted from the Humanities to Technology, of requiring bigger and more bulky buildings, often resulting in conflict between the university and its surrounding local community. The big issue becomes not just how tall – but height and bulk together.

Consistently the themes I heard in the feedback were quality of design, context and character. Peter Carolin in his introduction talked about the importance of the quality of the spaces and places a tall building creates around it. The question to be addressed is what sort of place does Cambridge want to be? And, as Peter asked, what sort of place do we want Cambridge to be in thirty years time?

It will not be the same place. We are talking about changing values, aspirations and expectations. Articulating the city's values will then define what kind of place? The reason I am standing here, is because I have been involved with developing the high-rise strategies for both the city of Rotterdam, and the city of Dublin, and later the view corridors for London.

Rotterdam celebrates tall buildings. Tall buildings reflected the city's desire to be modern and innovative. Rotterdam was flattened in the war; building tall gave the city a pride in being new, a sense of purpose and power – they were the first European city to build tall. The trouble was that their image was Manhattan – but their buildings were Lilliputians in global comparison – they had little tiny floor plates to give them the slenderness in height, totally uneconomic. I had to temper their enthusiasm for towers.. They wanted to build a 250m high building; I was asked the question where would you put such a building? It was framed as an aesthetic problem. My response was that this was the wrong question. There were more interesting problems and we could dispose of the original problem rapidly: if you are to build the proposed building it would be a year and a half of your total market demand. Do you honestly want to suck all the energy you have spent 40 years, since the last war, in building up away from the street into this private world in the sky?, And, more importantly, by phasing construction if there is a recession you can't stop. We quickly got rid of that problem. Then we got down to addressing what sort of city we wanted. The issue was about how to manage growth, change and innovation. Building the tallest building for prestige and power is a fools' paradise – building a taller building than the last one means somebody else comes along next and builds an even taller one.

Rotterdam decided to be more concerned with innovation than height in reflecting its values. It went back to its pre-war 1930's heritage of innovative building typologies, to remind itself of its values. Should we be more concerned about what are the new typologies and places we might want for our new kind of city? So turn the question around. I like the person in one

group who said: we scrapped all the questions. It was interesting as I was walking around over-hearing one group where I could sense unease with the prescribed process. The technique prescribed of the post-its was tackling what Horst Rittel would call a “wicked problem” – one that has blurred edges, is loose, a fluid problem. You were trying to tame and control the issues without allowing time to assess and, if appropriate, reframe the question. Let the conversation flow into uncharted waters and don’t worry too much. Tall buildings are only a starting point for identifying more interesting issues, and asking what kind of place we want the future Cambridge to be.

In my mind the central question is “what sort of place we aspire to?” and “what should the City Council do to set the appropriate policy?”. Now I also heard “well actually let’s not worry too much about that, let’s say no tall buildings” That’s an interesting concept. You basically say that there is a limit to height, we want to be a city something like Copenhagen – brilliantly achieved – with a statement that there are no tall buildings, apart from, if appropriate, when they can be an exception to the rule. To achieve this simplicity of planning and stop “developer creep” requires community awareness, a firm voice and a clear commonly agreed vision. If you are firm about what kind of city you want, then you can say what you are prepared to allow for appropriate exceptions. This is a classic British way of doing things, to have rules and then break them by precedent on what happened last time; this is not a bad way to do it. So perhaps what the City Council should be doing is to think less about formulating guidelines and codifying good practice and put resources into building understanding and awareness and changing perceptions and cultures.

I am more and more convinced that the way planning is going will be more pro-active, collaborative and focused on programmes of awareness-building events which slowly instigate change from the bottom up. It will be interesting to see how many people walk away from this event saying “I have changed my perspective a little, I thought this and now I think about that”.

So I am going to leave you with an opportunity: the opportunity through continual events such as this with different interests groups to explore what is possible and allow individuals to reframe their expectations, to build up to a community-held understanding of what should be aimed for. Tonight could be the beginning of a journey in rethinking what planning is and how it is implemented? I believe planning will be less confrontational – “we know the answers they don’t”. It will be about coming together and doing it together and thinking in a different way. And of course places like Cambridge can do it. Every time I come here, I am aware of the abundance of bright minds, and a desire to think laterally and metaphorically break the rules. It is wonderful – I heard this spirit on several tables “why am I finding this is crazy ... why am I constrained by this ... I want to make a difference”. Great – that is what it is about. Good luck.