



HEIGHTS

A Policy for Tall Buildings in Central Norwich

“Cities and their skylines evolve. In the right place, tall buildings can make positive contributions to city life.... However, by virtue of their size and prominence, such buildings can also harm the qualities that people value about a place” – Guidance on Tall Buildings, published by English Heritage & the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), July 2007

Introduction

1.1. The City of Norwich Replacement Local Plan adopted in November 2004 recognises that there are particularly important viewpoints across the City, and that development which would “intrude unduly into the major views” needs to be controlled [3.36, p. 38]. By defining those viewpoints and views, and discussing the impact of tall buildings on our unique Cityscape, we hope that this study may contribute to the development of a more detailed policy on tall buildings in Norwich, together with more specific guidelines for any new development within the City. The present study can also be related to the specific maps of landmarks and views presented for ‘character areas’ in the *Norwich City Centre Conservation Area Appraisal* [September 2007] with its assessment (on pages 4, 5) of the scope of topography and landscape.

1.2. The need for such a policy is obvious and urgent. There are already tall buildings within and viewable from the City centre (eg Normandie tower, Westlegate tower [*see below*], Winchester tower), and planning permissions have already been granted for further high buildings (eg St Anne’s Wharf site, Football Club site) with more under discussion. As the Civic Trust points out in its Position Statement on Tall Buildings, “random peppercotting of tall office and residential building across London and other cities in the 60s and 70s wrought severe damage”. Norwich has its own damaging pepper pots – Norfolk, Normandie, Westlegate and Winchester Towers plus Sovereign House are the most notorious – and it seems the fashion for such “landmark” buildings is returning.

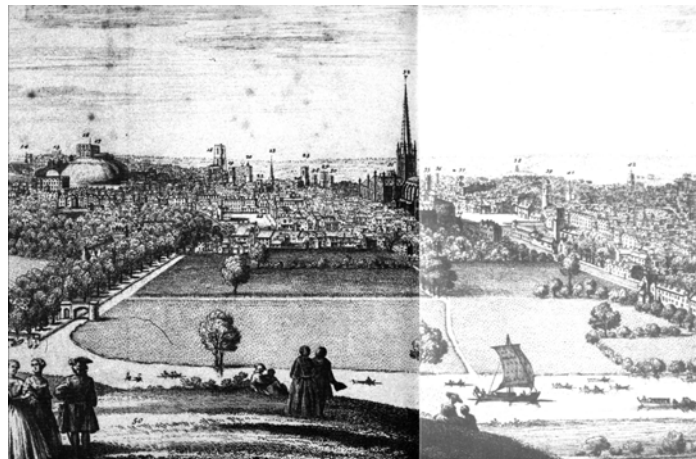


Context

2.1. Start with the central question. What is the character, the unique nature of our Cityscape that has developed over more than a millennium, the “qualities that people value” about Norwich? Only after that question has been answered, that nature defined, can it be determined whether tall buildings have any place in our skyline, and if so, where. [Cf CAA maps pages 4-17.]

2.2. The topography of the City is vital in this. Dramatic views across Norwich and into the valley floor floodplains are suddenly revealed from the tops of the high, steep bluffs on both sides of the curved elbow of the Wensum. The centre of the City is hilly too, with the Ber Street ridge, its continuation the Castle Mound, and the slow rise beyond to St Peter’s Street above the Market Place. Other views are uncovered more steadily as one crests the more gradual slopes surrounding the river basin to the North, South and West.

2.3. But the heights in view are already occupied. The City landscape bristles with ancient towers. Iconic verticals include the two Cathedrals, the City Hall, the Castle, and, on a more human, intimate scale, St Peter Mancroft, St Giles-on-the-Hill and the score-and-a-half of ancient mediaeval churches. Perhaps because of its dramatically *viewable* nature, Norwich was the first English City to be shown in prospect by a Cartographer (William Cunningham’s *Cosmographical Glasse*, 1559), and those viewable qualities were well illustrated in Samuel and Nathaniel Buck’s south-east prospect of Norwich of 1741 [*below*]. Astonishingly, after centuries of development and change, much of that low-rise skyline punctuated with towers is still recognisable. This general setting, at the wider scale, needs protection (including tree management) as much as any individual landmark building set within it.



2.4. The City’s other recognisable historic quality is its *greenness*. Our parks and pleasure gardens grew up within the deliberately ample space allowed by the City Walls, and Norwich has been known for centuries as “a City in a Garden” – though the original description was “A City in a Wood”. A glance from any of the panoramic viewpoints across the City (*see photos below*) shows that we are still rich in trees and green spaces - as clearly demonstrated in the CAA’s detailed Appraisal Maps.



2.5. So the answer to our first question (what is the character of the City?) is that Norwich is a low-rise, green city. It has a skyline punctuated by towers of a quality and historic significance that equal those of any heritage site in Northern Europe. With the notable exceptions of the Roman Catholic Cathedral and the City Hall, there have been no tall buildings of any high architectural merit or significance completed in the Twentieth or Twenty-First Centuries. We take it as read that the *quality* of the remaining cityscape needs to be retained and, when possible, enhanced by any detailed planning policy relating to tall buildings.

Definitions

3.1. The next question is whether there is any place for tall buildings within the urban context defined above. To answer that we need to determine more closely:

- what we mean by tall buildings;
- what the reasons are for their erection and how they could be justified;
- the nature and number of the views and viewpoints within and across the City centre that tall buildings would affect.

3.2. What is a tall building? English Heritage and CABI say quite rightly that it depends a lot on context: “It is clearly the case that a 10-storey building in a mainly two-storey neighbourhood will be thought of as a tall building by those affected, whereas in a large city it may not”. Their definition is “buildings which are substantially taller than their neighbours and/or which significantly change the skyline” [EH & CABI Guidance on Tall Buildings 2007].

Our context is Norwich City Centre. This we would generally define as the area within the Inner Ring Road, with the exception of the stretch between the Barn Road and Silver Street junctions, where the line of the old City Wall should be followed. [This is as the current City Centre Conservation Area – see CAA map p.31.]

3.3. Given that “tall” depends on context, arguments may well be put forward to go above our trigger point. We need, therefore, to develop a functional and effective policy – a standard - for tall buildings in Norwich that limits the influence of subjective judgements as far as is possible. Some people just like tall buildings: others loathe them. Subjectivity in these matters is unavoidable, but it is the enemy of rational policy.

3.4. Examples of tall structures exist already that are most obviously and easily justified, including the City’s existing and indisputable Landmark Buildings, as determined by their height, architectural quality and historical significance. For instance the Castle, the Castle Mound and both Cathedrals are major national architectural and historic monuments. The thirty-two surviving mediaeval church towers originally had a very functional role, marking the parishes which formed the bedrock of local government for many centuries, and now distinguish the most important single group of mediaeval religious buildings in Northern Europe. The 1938 City Hall tower – controversial locally in its time – is now a nationally celebrated architectural icon (quoted by Pevsner as “the foremost English public building of between the wars”). Listed Grade II*, it provides a civic focus, and the main signifier of Norwich’s status as an independent, self-governing community.

3.5. In such company, what arguments can be made for building tall now and in the future?

A. Office blocks: height can be used to establish a prestige image for the client. It also brings the advantage of quick access within a large workforce. The cost of land is minimised.

B. Private residential: height adds prestige and brings high commercial return. Again, land costs are minimised.

C. “Marker” or “Landmark”: tall buildings can signal the whereabouts of a particular place or functional area – for example, an educational centre such as the University of London in Bloomsbury, or a financial centre like the City of London. The city of Birmingham has a deliberate policy of building high in the centre to give its sprawling suburbs a better focus.

In the case of **Local Authority/Social Residential:** height, once valued for a combination of prestige and cheapness, has been discarded in recent decades because of the unsatisfactory social patterns produced. We will therefore assume this category is ruled out as a candidate for building high in the foreseeable future.

For any tall building accepted under a heights policy, there is a further requirement: high architectural merit, what one might call the “Gherkin Factor”. But not every architect is a Norman Foster. Unfortunately, with the best will in the world, good design cannot be guaranteed under present planning law and practice. Quality and creativity must, therefore, be demanded of all involved.

The City’s experience of post-War tower building, whether public or private, has been uniformly dismal. None of the towers or blocks built since 1945 qualify under our criteria for Landmark Buildings (i.e. architectural quality or historic

significance). Most recent planning applications fail to inspire confidence in any improvement. Another risk is that planning permission once granted may be subject to considerable variations when a site is sold on from one developer to another before building starts.

In any case, good design should not become a factor in judging whether a tall building should be allowed in a particular location. The presumption *ought* to be that if tall buildings are allowed within the policy guidelines they would have to be both architecturally excellent *and* part of a well-identified policy initiative (for instance relating groups of tall buildings to a specific transport node). Good or bad design is irrelevant to the application of a coherent Heights Policy, which must be concerned solely with the impact of any new building on the Cityscape as a whole, and views above, around and within it in particular.

3.6. What are the arguments *against* building tall? In the case of Norwich there are two main ones:

A. The need to maintain the “perception”, the overall impression given by the general setting of the Cityscape. This is in part a unique historic image, and in part an entirely distinctive urban image. The two combine, as we have said earlier, to make a low-rise, green city punctuated by towers and monuments of great historical and architectural value.

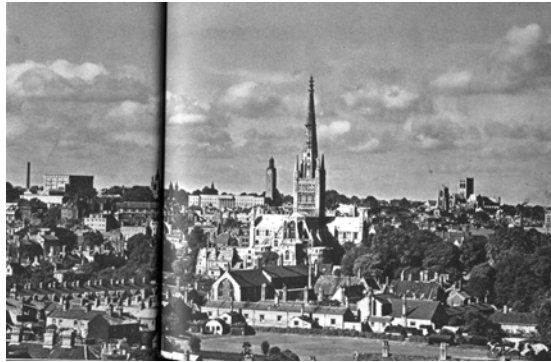
B. The need to maintain views across the wide profile of the City, undistracted by a random scatter of tall buildings – what the Civic Trust calls “pepperpotting”. At present the architectural fabric of Norwich, its *built topography*, so to speak, hugs the hilly contours of the river valley and its surrounding heights fairly closely. So far, with a few unfortunate exceptions (such as the Winchester, or Westlegate towers, or the Anglia Square roofline), this historic skyline is recognisable and rescueable. Even the main Norwich Union blocks are fairly unobtrusive, forming, for example, a barely noticeable hump on the built horizon seen from Mousehold.

It is noticeable that the main arguments *for* building tall revolve around the apparent commercial advantage to private developers and owners. Any satisfactory Heights Policy for Norwich would see such considerations as secondary, if not irrelevant. The unique quality of the Cityscape built up over many centuries is too precious to be destroyed for the sake of merely sectional interests.

3.7. The next step must be to quantify as far as possible the three-dimensional matrix of views and viewpoints that covers the City and its Landmark Buildings. We can define a list of Viewpoints fairly easily, but what constitutes a View or even a view worth saving? The Norwich School of painters have been here before us, of course, and their work will give greater historic significance to many of the views we distinguish below but for planning purposes, some more systematic definitions are needed.

We would distinguish five main types of views of Norwich, each one of which may include more than one characteristic from the others; for instance the fifth and last one (**E** the River Views) involves aspects of three of the others. The more characteristics identified for a particular view the more important it becomes.

Four types of view below are the result of steadily narrowing arcs of vision:



A. Panoramic Views: Views from a number of high points round the City, encompassing most of the Centre. Example, the breathtaking views from Kett's Heights [*above in 1951*] and the Mottram memorial on St James's Hill.

B. Wide Sector Views: More limited panoramas. Example, any view from the plateau around City Hall or from the Castle Mound [*below*].



C. Gateway Views: Views from any arrival point, both historic and modern, at which part of the City opens out in front of the viewer, including the traditional approach routes to the City Gates and the bus and rail stations. Examples, views of the Cathedral and Castle when looking South from the Aylsham Road above St Augustine's, or views of St Peter Mancroft and the City Hall when looking West from the bottom of the Bus Station on Surrey Street [*below*].



D. Framed and Townscape Views: Views at a much closer and more local scale, normally of landmark buildings glimpsed in passing and framed by the built fabric of the City. Example, the Church of St Giles seen along St Giles Street [*below*].



E. River Views: Views from and along the Wensum, normally from bridges. These can partake of any or all of the qualities of **B, C and D**. Examples, the Cathedral spire from Novi Sad Bridge [*below*], or New Mills from Coslany Bridge.



3.8. We provide a list below [Appendix 2] of Types of Viewpoint with key locations, as a basis for future case studies illustrating the application of a Heights Policy for Norwich. We also attach [Appendix 1] a list of Landmark Buildings both positive and negative. For negative items there is an opportunity for the removal or modification of existing eyesores (e.g. the *actual* demolition of the old Norfolk and Norwich hospital tower blocks; the *potential* demolition or amendment/recladding of Westlegate tower; the replacement of local authority housing towers with more acceptable low to medium rise, high site coverage design at equivalent or greater density).

Where Could Tall Buildings Be Located?

4.1. As we have indicated above, our analysis reinforces strongly that there is no scope for new tall buildings within the primary central area of the City. But the topography of Norwich, which determines that so much of the historic Cityscape needs to be protected *against* high structures, may also, paradoxically, provide a site where they could be permitted.

4.2. The deep contours of the river valley to the South-East of the City Centre around and beyond the Riverside/Carrow Road zone could provide a site to assess for tall buildings - protecting the dominant Panoramic Views looking West and South from Mousehold and Telegraph Hill and East from the Ber Street ridge. It is noticeable, for instance, that the Normandie Tower, sheltered by the Ber Street ridge, though architecturally undistinguished and *locally* obtrusive, intrudes far less on the *wider* Cityscape and topography than its almost exact copy, the Winchester Tower, in plain sight near the Roman Catholic Cathedral.

River Views up and down the Wensum (already compromised by the tall bankside developments around and South of Carrow Bridge) would need to be protected, but the Wide Sector View from the Castle Mound would remain uncompromised by carefully-placed construction to the South-East of the River, provided it remains lower than the horizon line at Crown Point. On the same basis, when it is redeveloped, the Riverside Development zone might also be suitable for taller structures – its closeness to the rail station would lessen the problem of transport access for the large numbers of people using such developments.

4.3. Further out, there is more scope for height, although again this needs to be related to transport considerations. It is noticeable, for instance, how relatively unobtrusively County Hall sits beneath the heights of Bracondale. When the major new development envisaged in the Joint Core Strategy unrolls, it is both likely and desirable that the work-opportunity area to the South and West of the City should grow. This sector, therefore, might well allow, indeed call for, some high density building – but again, care would need to be taken to ensure that there was no back profile conflict with City Landmark Buildings when seen from the Eastern Heights or the Castle Mound (as happened with the now-demolished Norfolk & Norwich Hospital tower/slab blocks).

Conclusions

5.1. The network of views over, in and around Norwich produced by applying our suggested criteria of Viewpoints and Landmark Buildings to the City's topography will be disrupted even further by permitting the erection of more tall buildings within the primary central area. [This we have defined (p.2) as an area within the Inner Ring Road, with an addition between the Barn Road and Silver Street junctions, up to the line of the old City Wall].

5.2. Arguments in favour of tall buildings refer overwhelmingly to the benefit to private, sectional interests. Any Heights Policy must protect the general good. In the context of Norwich we would affirm that the maintenance, protection and (where possible) restoration of the city's essential nature as an historic, low-level green built environment punctuated by existing Landmark Buildings of architectural and historic distinction must be the *only* concern of such a Policy. Planning permissions sought for any tall buildings as defined above, within the area defined above, should be refused.

5.3. The City's Heights Policy should be applied *retrospectively* when occasion allows. Sovereign House, for instance, at eight stories, already disrupts the Panoramic View looking West from Mousehold, the Townscape View North from the Castle Mound and the Gateway View South from the Aylsham Road. Any new development on the site should take account of such factors. As another example, any replacement

for Norfolk House should be built at a height which restores the Panoramic View from Mousehold and the Townscape View from the Castle Mound.

5.4. In relation to this, great care should be taken to prevent Height Creep, the tendency for developers and architects to gradually increase roof heights and roof structures (and therefore profitability), building by building as new permissions are sought in an area. All applications above the height ‘trigger point’ (para 3.2 above) should, therefore, be accompanied by special submission details and an assessment related to the tests set out in the EH/CABE guidance (section 3).

5.5. New tall buildings may be possible if placed carefully in the one area of the City Centre we have defined, or on selected sites on the outskirts. New centres of high-tech employment centred on the Science Park or near the A11 Norwich-Cambridge Corridor might justify their own clusters of high-quality design Landmark Buildings.

Alec Hartley and Jeremy Taylor
Strategic Planning and Transport Committee
The Norwich Society, November 2008

REFERENCES

City of London Unitary Development Plan, 2002, Supplementary Guidance – Heights policy
 City of Norwich Replacement Local Plan, 2004, p.37 (HBE12), Fig 3.1
 Civic Trust, Tall Buildings – policy statement
 English Heritage and CABE, Guidance on tall buildings, July 2007, 7pp.
 Norwich City Centre Conservation Area Appraisal [CAA], September 2007, 137pp., illus.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Prospect of Norwich 1741 from *Norwich Discovery Walks*, Norwich Society 1983; view from Kett’s Heights 1951 from *Norwich Festival Guide 1951*; photos by Jeremy Taylor.

APPENDIX 1 – Landmark Buildings [*sample list*]*Positive Landmarks*

Castle
Anglican Cathedral
RC Cathedral
City Hall

St Giles on the Hill
St Helen (Great Hospital)
St John de Sepulchre
St Peter Mancroft
St Peter, Parmentergate

St Andrew's Hall

Nat West Bank building, London Street

Negative landmarks

Norfolk Tower, Surrey Street
Normandie Tower
Sovereign House, Anglia Square
Prince of Wales Road, Grosvenor House office block
Vantage House, Pottergate
Westlegate tower
Winchester tower

APPENDIX 2 – Types of Viewpoint with key locations

A. Panoramic Views [cf. diagram on page 4]

Kett's Hill
 Mousehold, Britannia Road
 Thorpe Ridge

B. Wide sector views

Plateau around City Hall
 Castle Mound
 Bridges along the river
 Riverside walk and meadows

C. Gateway views

St Augustine's Road
 Surrey Street at bus station
 The Foundry Bridge/Prince of Wales Road
 St Stephen's Road

D. Framed and Townscape views

Upper St Giles to RC Cathedral
 St Giles to Guildhall and Castle
 Colegate to St George's
 St Andrews Hill and Plain
 Riverside [section Station to Novi Sad Bridge] to Ber Street Ridge
 Gentleman's Walk
 Davey Place to City Hall
 Castle Meadow
 Whitefriars

E. River views

Novi Sad Bridge to Cathedral spire
 Foundry Bridge to Ber Street Ridge
 Bishopgate Bridge to Heights above
 White Friars Bridge towards St Giles and City Hall
 Riverside (Whitefriars to Pulls Ferry) views to Cathedral, Gt Hospital