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Urban design, central London and the ‘crisis’ 2007–2013: business as usual?

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ABSTRACT

London is changing, to a breathtaking extent. Beneath this fast paced activity, new patterns are forming and divisions that had been relatively unremarked before are now becoming increasingly visible. The ‘square mile’ of the City of London, which is now identified by some dramatically tall buildings, forms a contrast to the traditional urbanism of the City of Westminster, the majority of which is covered by conservation area legislation. This paper will consider this contrast from the perspective of urban design, examining both the wider development context for these changes and the separate design policies of these two historic organizations of local government. One of the key questions to be investigated is how these changes have impacted on the character of central London as a place. Moving on from the well-rehearsed debates about London’s skyline, the paper considers the significance of urban design in the context of a global urban spatial economy. It suggests that central London faces severe dilemmas about its future if the growth scenario continues.

Introduction

The UK first felt the impacts of what became the worst depression for nearly a century in September 2007, when a ‘run’ started on the Northern Rock bank. It was not until a year later that the world teetered on the precipice of a collapse in the global financial system. The City of London was heavily implicated in the crisis (Sorkin 2009). When the world’s banking system was saved, in the ‘correction’ that followed, it was anticipated that many construction projects would stall and that the economic cycle would lead to a downturn in planning and projects (Lovering 2010; Punter 2010). This was certainly the case for many states in the European Union and for a period, the USA, but after a pause, projects in central London resumed and were followed by a new inflow of capital, leading to new projects and plans.

This paper will review the changes experienced in central London during the period of the UK’s 2008–2014 downturn from the perspective of urban design. The paper will demonstrate that central London’s continued growth needs to be understood as a trajectory, reaching back to the 1980s in policy terms and within its context as a historic city.
will be argued that the ambition for economic growth and for pre-eminence in the global business hierarchy has set up a tension with the concomitant desire of residents and policy makers that central London should preserve its distinctive qualities of place. Further, in the period under question, the conditions driving decisions about urban form ‘fundamentally changed’ (Slavid 2009). It will examine Bowie’s (2010) observation that urban designers were somehow expected to reconcile these conflicting objectives for growth and place-based qualities through the lens of the two major authorities in central London. The paper will argue that even within this dilemma, there is a degree of agency with regard to urban design decisions. The paper concludes by outlining the dilemmas confronting central London with regard to maintaining its place-based qualities.

The question that the paper poses covers a large scope in that central London is not a single entity in administrative terms, but has complex arrangements for its governance, is the seat of the UK’s national government and many of its official offices of state, is a global financial centre, a prime entertainment and retail centre within a world hierarchy, is the third most visited city in the world and accommodates a substantial residential population (Arup 2014). Its central core, the Central Activities Zone (CAZ) has expanded continuously since it was first designated in 1984. The last iteration of the London Plan saw the CAZ cover the whole of the City of London, the majority of Westminster City Council’s jurisdiction and parts of the London Boroughs of Camden, Islington, Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Southwark, Lambeth and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (see Figures 1a and 1b). Each of these local authorities has distinct political histories, administration and has developed its own planning and urban design policies. To complicate matters further, the City of London has its own historic form of governance, which sets it apart from all the other local authorities in the UK. For these reasons the paper will focus on the area within the CAZ governed by Westminster City Council and the Corporation of the City of London. These two local authorities provide a sub-theme in that each has taken differing but complementary approaches to urban design. Their contrasting perspectives are explained by reference to their historical form and attitudes to development pressures. An exploration of these two factors provides a perspective on the impacts of a drive for economic growth and articulates the extent to which urban design policies can mediate outcomes.
Following a discussion of concepts and methods, the paper is written chronologically, with a very brief historical outline to set the scene. The period from the 1980s onwards is discussed in more detail, with a focus on the post-recession trajectory from 2008 to 2013. The paper concludes with a reflection on the main themes of urban design responses and a speculation on central London’s possible future course.

**Conceptual framework and methods**

In a paper on planning, urban design and the recession, Lovering (2010) accuses urban design as acting in alliance with private developers to promote an image of the city that is attractive to private interests, but which ignores the redistributive aims of post-war planners. This tendency, he argues, will be accentuated during the years of recession. From a similar political perspective, Cuthbert (2007, 2011) proposes that urban design should reconceptualize itself as ‘urban spatial economy’. He argues that, “For urban designers, the significance of the built environment is that it represents a unique form of capital which is fixed in space” (Cuthbert 2011: 90). Cuthbert’s analysis is more nuanced than Lovering’s as he moves beyond a simple association between urban form and capital investment. Developing his theorization, he notes the conflictual nature of the urban process and how urban form is symbolic of urban meaning, thereby suggesting that there is a degree of choice with regard to the specific articulation of particular urban forms and their signification. Moreover, these choices are mediated by the context within which urban designers are required to operate, which in the case of central London has a historical superimposition of different layers of urban form, symbolic expression and urban meanings. Of course, this is not a new observation and others have explained these processes in depth and precision with regard to other cities and spaces (see for example Gospodini 2002; Zukin 1995).

Carmona (2014a) offers a more comprehensive definition of urban design as a process. His formulation covers the complexity of the entire development process and place shaping, running from the historical context, through design intentions and resource gathering to management and the impact of the use of space and place. In this regard he criticizes Cuthbert’s theorization, suggesting that it eclipses urban design ‘as a free-standing field of inquiry’, relegating it instead to a sub-set of the larger narrative of spatial political economy (Carmona 2014b). This paper therefore offers the opportunity to investigate the difference between these two positions and the extent to which broader political economic issues permeate urban design as a place-making process.

This paper will draw on three of the four headlines Carmona (2014a) identifies, but not in full detail. These are the context for urban design – physical, social and economic, design policies and certain aspects of space in use. The sources for the investigation comprise a wealth of secondary sources in the form of journal articles, books, policy documents and ‘grey literature’ in the form of consultants’ reports, websites and newspaper articles. Direct observation of the spaces discussed has helped to frame the investigation. Insight into planning in the City has been offered via widespread publicity surrounding the retirement of the Corporation’s chief planner, Peter Rees. This latter source has been invaluable, because in a series of interviews and speeches he has been able to express his views on his 29 years in service with a much greater frankness than when he was in post. Another useful source comes from a national debate, conducted through the media and taken seriously by the professions on the impact of tall buildings in London as a whole.
Urban design and central London: historical legacy

While images of London are ubiquitous, its size and unplanned nature (Hebbert 1998) can give the appearance of a confusing and overwhelming jumble of buildings and spaces. For the purposes of this paper, key features of central London’s urban form will be highlighted as background for readers who are unfamiliar with the context. Administratively, London is divided into 33 boroughs, with London-wide development on strategic issues coming under the jurisdiction of a Mayor and Greater London Authority. The City has its unique arrangements for its governance, which lie outside the administrative arrangements for every other local authority in the UK (see Travers 2013 for a succinct explanation of its history and evolution). The City has its own Mayor and its own police force. Its main decision-making body is non-party political.

While the evolution of the City and Westminster in the last century offers a rich topic for study in itself, suffice to note here that currently the City Corporation (hereafter referred to as the City) operates primarily as a CBD or central business district and Westminster City Council (hereafter referred to as Westminster) as a mixed use area that also accommodates the functions of state (Parliament, ministries) and two royal palaces (Buckingham Palace, St James) as well as many other national functions and activities.

Bombing during World War II destroyed much of the City’s historic fabric around the docks. Westminster suffered less damage (Table 1).

With regard to urban design, the most iconic attributes within Westminster are the grids of streets and squares, famously admired by the Danish architect Rasmussen in his classic text London, the Unique City (Rasmussen 1982). Shane produced a powerful analytic diagram demonstrating how the clarity of their geometric layouts becomes fractured where the grids meet small streams, now hidden and built over (Rowe and Koetter 1979). In contrast to Cerda’s Barcelona, the gridded layout varies according to ownership, with the freeholds of the great ‘estates’ still remaining in private hands. These estates border a further exemplar of formal urban design layout, the procession of Regent Street from its origins in Piccadilly Circus through to Regent’s Park (Bacon 1978). The European renaissance first came to Britain via Westminster, with Inigo Jones’ St Paul’s church and the laying out of Covent Garden providing England’s first formal square.

Outside of the residential squares, Westminster also boasts the Royal Parks of St James, Green Park, Hyde Park and Regent’s Park. By contrast, the City has a paucity of public space. The largest is Finsbury Circus, formed in the nineteenth century. Other public spaces, such as Paternoster Square, a result of post-war reconstruction, have been the subject of controversy. The most impressive and atmospheric public space is only semi-public and forms part of the Inns of Court at the Temple.

Table 1. Historical assets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Listed building</th>
<th>Scheduled ancient monuments</th>
<th>Historic Parks and Gardens</th>
<th>World Heritage Sites</th>
<th>Cathedrals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City Westminster</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tower of London Complex around Houses of Parliament</td>
<td>St Paul’s Westminster Abbey Westminster Cathedral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Total)</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: City of London (2011); City of Westminster (2011).
The immediate post-war period had seen an ambitious attempt to reconfigure the morphology of the City, with the idea of separating traffic from pedestrians. The residue of this experiment can be seen today in the Barbican complex which is mainly residential but hosts an arts complex and exhibition space. The Barbican also took up the other feature of modernist urbanism, in the form of three residential towers, topping out at 43 storeys or 123 m in height. Although an office boom and a lifting of the height restriction imposed by the London Building Act in 1884 resulted in 300 towers being built of more than 50 m or 12 storeys across London in the 1960s and 1970s, the only notable skyscraper in the City, Tower 42, was opened in 1980, 183 m in height.

London as a global city

To understand the distinctive trajectory of the crisis and subsequent recession of 2007–2013 on central London, it is necessary to look back at the long-term changes that have been taking effect since the mid-1980s. The UK economy underwent two recessions in the 1980s, a ‘large’ recession between 1980 and 1981 and, after a recovery, a further ‘significant’ depression that started in 1989 (Hills, Thomas, and Dimsdale 2010: 285). These downturns were particularly important for the industrial cities of the north of England, but still had an impact on London and the south-east.

The selection of events from the recent past which are of particular importance in terms of the political and economic context for urban design comprise the 1984 greater London Plan, the ‘Big Bang’ or financial deregulation combined with the demise of the Greater London Council in 1986 and the decision of the European Central Bank to relocate in Frankfurt in 1994. As Savitch (1988) notes, the 1984 Plan proposed centres for growth throughout greater London and designated a Central Activities Zone (CAZ) covering the square mile of the City of London and the West End from the north bank of the River Thames to Piccadilly Circus. The Plan also designated ‘Community Areas’ (see figure 2) which protected residential areas from incursion from industrial and commercial uses. A number of these were located within or near to the CAZ. Community groups, residents and amenity societies in these areas have played a significant role within the development of central London, in calling local authorities to account and in proposing innovation as well as opposing development that would have a detrimental impact on the quality of their lives. Some examples of this include the work of the Covent Garden Community Association and the Soho Society who have *inter alia* promoted social housing, championed an early experiment in ‘shared space’ at Seven Dials and opposed the proliferation of licensed venues throughout the West End (Hamilton Baillie 2008; Roberts and Turner 2005).

The ‘Big Bang’ or financial deregulation of the London Stock Exchange in 1986 opened up the City to foreign traders and banks, leading to expansion and internationalization of London as a financial centre. Finally, the demise of the Greater London Council paved the way for London to be re-positioned as a ‘world city,’ ‘open to business,’ an ambition that has been re-stated and elaborated through a succession of plans, including those proposed by both Labour and Conservative Mayors, following the reconstitution of London’s regional government in 2000.

Kaika (2010) identifies the decision to locate the European Central Bank in Frankfurt as delivering a shock to the City. The subsequent re-positioning of London as a global financial centre has been a process taking place throughout two decades or more. This has
had an impact on the composition of London’s workforce and led to the phenomenon of super-gentrification. Gentrification led to the ramping up of residential property prices in central London in an inexorable rise until 2007. Following the financial crash there was a pause and then the recovery of the financial sector in 2008–2009, and external events led to further pressures. As London recovered its position in banking and other financial services, instability in the Middle East, the depression in the PIIGS countries (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain) and in the former Soviet Union led investors to see London as a safe haven for their money. Research by the high-end surveying company Savills found the key structural factors that contributed to the attraction of investing in London in 2014 were the sense of it being ‘open for business’, its advantageous time zone, political stability and a legal system giving security of tenure. London, in common with New York, has the cultural advantage of the English language (London Residential 2014).

Both Westminster and the City draw attention to the numbers of small businesses that operate within their jurisdiction and these fine-grained activities make up much of the vitality of central London (Westminster, City Council 2013). Nevertheless, major landowners in the form of the great estates and the Crown itself are embedded as an intrinsic part of the power brokerage within Westminster. The landed estates of, for example, Grosvenor, Howard de Walden and the Portman, look to safeguard and augment their property portfolios alongside other major owners. The Westminster Property Association according to its website, “champions Westminster’s built environment as a major driver for the economies of London and the UK” (WPA no date). It provides a voice for a diversity of landowners in Westminster, including the historic estates named above and Real Estate Investment Trusts such as the two largest developers in the UK, Land Securities and British Land.

Figure 2. CAZ & Community Areas.
Context: design policies in central London from the 1980s to the Task Force

In the 1980s, 70% of the buildings in the City of London were modernized or re-built (Heathcote 2008). Following financial deregulation in 1986, the headquarters of many international banks relocated to London and existing financial institutions, such as Lloyds of London, expanded. A new demand for large floor-plate office buildings that would accommodate trading floors with hundreds of screens became evident. This spawned a new style of development in the form of ‘groundscrapers’, medium height buildings with large footprints, which incorporated semi-public spaces in atriums and public squares (Carmona and Freeman 2005). Although sites were assembled and larger footprints were allowed, the pattern of streets and spaces largely remained intact. An exception to this was the Broadgate development, which attracted praise for setting out a new pattern of development with new public spaces, but also attracted criticism for their private management. The 26 conservation areas were tightly demarcated, allowing for this major set of changes.

Punter (1992) noted the madness of leaving central London to market processes and bemoaned a lack of design controls, cascading from a strategic plan to more detailed guidance at borough level. He identified density as a key issue, suggesting that the ramping up of densities in the City was a mistake. He argued for “…a thorough going contextualism which integrates morphology, social use and architecture…” (Punter 1992: 87). Such contextualism would respect the fine grain of the existing street pattern, create pleasant spaces at ground floor level with detailed attention to landscape design and micro-climate, introduce mixed uses for the wider community along the ground level of streets offering shops, small services, hospitality and leisure uses. It would also provide housing, in a mix of tenures.

The City of Westminster pursued the design policies outlined by Punter from the late-1980s onwards. The destruction of fine old buildings and the poor quality of much modern architecture in London had been a source of controversy during the 1960s (Nairn 2014). Westminster sought to protect its ‘living heritage’ (Darley 1985) through the application of conservation legislation. Conservation policies, published in the 1970s, were absorbed into local plans in the 1980s, so by 2015 75% of Westminster’s jurisdiction is designated within 56 conservation areas. The designation of conservation areas gave the authority greater controls over new developments and the opportunity to pursue its published aim to maintain and improve its ‘high townscape quality’ (City of Westminster 1988).

The authority took a restrictive stance against high buildings in its published plans (City of Westminster 1988, 1991, 1995, 2007), noting that high buildings were not in keeping with the established scale and character of its central areas and historic fabric. As the economy moved out of recession, there was more pressure on central London to provide office space, with competition from Canary Wharf in London’s Docklands, a development which included a 235 m high tower, completed in 1991. Central government took the opportunity to set out a strategic framework for a tall buildings policy in central London as a whole (LPAC 1991). The guidance was based on the idea of protecting views of key landmarks from a series of high points north and south of the river. These ‘viewing corridors’ protected St Paul’s Cathedral and the Palace of Westminster. Subsequent guidance developed this concept, adding important local views, panoramas or prospects in the 1999 framework (Roberts and Lloyd-Jones 2010).

During the 1990s, central London became more polluted, congested with traffic and people, and difficult to move around in. A new generation of architects and urban designers bemoaned the state of the public realm in general and of central London in particular (Rogers...
and Fisher 1992). The Urban Task Force Report (DETR 1999), edited by Rogers, on the one hand supported a contextual approach to urban design with its promotion of local neighbourhoods, mixed use, liveable urban spaces and a well-connected and human-scale public realm, but on the other also argued for higher densities and was neutral on the topic of high buildings. While the Report was not formally adopted by central government, its promotion of higher densities, subsequently taken up by the Mayor’s spatial strategy (Mayor of London 2004), necessitated a response. Westminster commissioned a report by consultants (EDAW with Buro Happold 2000) who supported the authority’s restrictive stance on high buildings, noting that within the CAZ, only Victoria presented an opportunity for building high. The authority further developed its contextual approach to townscape, whilst emphasizing its commitment to innovative, high quality architecture through the publication of a guidance document Design Matters in Westminster (City of Westminster 2001).

The protection and promotion of its ‘stable residential communities’ has been a core planning objective for Westminster in its planning documents from the 1980s onwards. This has been extended from residential districts to specialist areas of trade and use such as the theatre district, Chinatown, the entertainment districts of Soho and Covent Garden, the ‘medical area’ around Harley Street and the fashion wholesalers north of Oxford Street which have all been given special protection.

The protection of housing for lower-income residents, that is council housing provided by local authorities themselves, has proved to be more controversial, particularly in Westminster. There is insufficient space here to explore this complex topic, particularly as the majority of Westminster’s estates are located outside the CAZ and therefore it is outside the scope of this paper. However, it is noteworthy that Westminster’s promotion of council house sales in the late-1980s caused a national scandal with legal action pursued by the District Auditor and the High Court, which continued until a final resolution was achieved in 2004 (Dimoldenburg 2006). The City, lacking any large sites following the Barbican development, built council housing outside its boundaries in neighbouring poorer boroughs during the 1960s and 1970s. The construction of new social housing units in the period 1983–2014 was extremely limited across England and Wales and neither the City nor Westminster resisted this trend.

**Beyond the urban renaissance: Westminster’s CAZ**

As stated at the beginning of this paper, development pressures resumed in central London after a pause in 2007–2008. The benefits of this pressure have been articulated in streetscape schemes across the West End, offering handsome makeovers to restyled streets and squares, with high standards of materials and design (Figure 3 and Figure 4). The authority’s support for public realm improvements post-recession were published in the document, the ‘Westminster Way’, a public realm strategy which was formally adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document in 2011.

New development has continued. Within the CAZ, the area surrounding Victoria national rail station is undergoing virtually wholesale demolition and rebuilding, in a series of steel and glass buildings, with one tower 16 storeys high. These anonymous buildings have been grouped around a remodelled street layout that includes a new public square. A major 3 ha site in Fitzrovia, the site of the former Middlesex Hospital, appeared to stall when the Icelandic Bank Kaupthing crashed in 2008. Fortunately, the overly simplistic scheme proposed by the Candy brothers was withdrawn and replaced by a more contextual masterplanned
development, which also includes a small public space. This is a mixed use scheme, with offices, retail, apartments and community facilities. The apartments are overwhelmingly luxury or ‘super-prime’ with only one-fifth (19%) ‘affordable’. While the 10-storey buildings might seem to be modestly scaled by international standards, they nevertheless represent an increase in height and density to the surrounding townscape of Fitzrovia. While not referring specifically to this development, commentary from the local amenity society newsletter records hostility from local residents to “design that cram as much floorspace into brash, bulky developments”, with “derisory amounts of public open space” and little or no housing for low-income tenants (Rees 2015).

There are further developments following this pattern associated with the construction of CrossRail at Tottenham Court Road Station. Here, as a new east–west rail link across London is inserted, the existing underground station will be re-modelled 25 m below the surface and four new city blocks will be constructed, again with an increase in density and height, off-set by a new public square.

Development pressures are also altering Westminster’s communities. The core of London’s West End (the wards of St James’s, West End, Holborn and Covent Garden) accommodates 27,500 residents with a further 30,000 in the wider West End (Arup 2014). In accordance with urban renaissance policies, the City Council has been attempting to increase this population since the 1990s. The issues are not only about super-gentrification. Residential property prices ‘bottomed out’ in 2009 and have been rising in London ever since. Property prices in Westminster have eluded middle-class professionals for a long period and those residents whose incomes lie outside the super-rich either are social housing tenants or bought their flats before the end of the 1990s (Glancey 2001). One of the oldest housing associations to operate in London, Peabody, which has estates throughout central Westminster, changed
its legislative covenants in 2005, by an Act of Parliament, to allow it to sell flats on the open market, thereby further diminishing the supply of social housing. Nevertheless, social housing is still found in all the neighbourhoods in Westminster, including Belgravia. The census returns of 2011 recorded a decline in the numbers of residents from lower-income social groups in the central wards in Westminster.

At the same time, the elite who are able to afford to buy in the central areas are not necessarily replacing the existing population. Since 2012 onwards, concern has been increasingly voiced that homes in central London are being bought by overseas investors as assets and that they are being kept empty (Heywood 2012). The case of One Hyde Park, completed in 2011 and then billed as the most expensive address in London, for which the architect was the author of the ‘urban renaissance’ report, Rogers Stirk Harbour, provoked press and media comment when a journalist discovered that not only were most of the flats owned by overseas investors and appeared to be unoccupied, but the buyers had been able to avoid paying UK property taxes.

Paris (2013) notes that the investment decisions of the super-rich have re-shaped property markets on a global scale. This point is given added depth by recent research which makes the point that the prime London residential market has not been clearly defined. In taking £2 m per dwelling as its definition of ‘prime’ and tracking residential property prices, it was found that the rises and falls mapped closely onto fluctuations in the gold market. The same piece of research found that 80% of the new-build homes in the ‘prime areas’ of Westminster are bought by overseas clients. This suggests that the most expensive properties in central London are now part of a global network of prime spaces, separated from the city itself.

The evidence of the impacts on Westminster’s residential communities is limited. Two reports bring forward anecdotal evidence to suggest that many properties are standing empty. The report by consultants Ramidus attempted to quantify the lack of habitation through a case study of a mansion block (historic apartment property) in Mayfair and calculated that it was only occupied at a level of 44% throughout the year. When, as the researchers observe, elite owners do come to London they contribute substantially to the economy through luxury purchases and, in some cases, are accompanied by a retinue of staff. Nevertheless, the ‘hollowing out’ of the diversity and numbers of Westminster’s residential population, if it continues at its current rate of acceleration, will inevitably reduce its diversity and the commercial and community activities that can be sustained, from providing staff for hairdressers and dry cleaners, to supporting local associations and interest groups.

One further impact of the operation of rapid increases in value of the super-prime residential market is job losses as offices are converted to flats. The entire City of Westminster has 14% of London’s total jobs, 590,000 in total (City of Westminster 2011: s2.2). It also has the largest quantity of office floorspace in the UK, 9 million m² compared to the City’s 7.54 million m² (Westminster, 2013: 84). The proportion of this contained within the CAZ fell from 48% in 2008 to 46% in 2011 (Westminster, 2013: 85). Conversions from offices to residential lost 30,000 workplaces (Ramidus Consulting Ltd 2014). The pressure for residential development can be illustrated by a proposed development near Cork Street, an area in Mayfair renowned for its art galleries. The redevelopment of 30 Old Burlington Street will accommodate eight floors of flats, over new space reserved for galleries, with a linking arcade to Cork Street (Native Land 2014). The development aroused fears amongst gallery owners in Cork Street that they would be forced out of the area, as seven galleries were given notice to leave prior to the proposal, with a further proposal by a different developer on the opposite
London had the second highest office rents in the world in 2012, running at £110/sq. ft. for the financial business sector (Savills 2012). Within the central London property market, rents in historic Mayfair are the highest, followed by prime new developments in the City with Canary Wharf following.

**The City following the banking crisis**

Parallel to Westminster’s partial renaissance, the City adopted a different strategy in the last decade. As the Corporation’s Chief Planner explained, during this period more office space had to be accommodated to maintain the square mile’s leading position as a world business centre. Competition came from within London, from Docklands where Canary Wharf was attracting new tenants such as Merrill Lynch as well as the other global financial centres. Rees’s view was that by the turn of millennium the City had run out of land for groundscrapers and tall buildings had to be allowed as a ‘last resort’ in tight clusters (Allen 2014). Following the decision of the Labour government to reinstate a regional democratically elected tier of government for Greater London as whole in 2000, a spatial strategy was drawn up at the regional scale. This retained the high building policies and the concept of ‘view management’, but in accordance with Mayor’s liking of high buildings and a desire to promote and maintain London’s position in the global financial hierarchy, the viewing corridors were narrowed. The City Corporation’s planning framework was revised to be more permissive. Numerous high buildings were proposed, with the Heron Tower being most controversial. The determination of a planning appeal in favour of this skyscraper ‘opened’ the floodgates for high buildings in the City (Tavernor 2007; Tavernor and Gassner 2010).

At the time of the crisis in 2008 relatively few tall buildings had been completed in the City, with only the towers at New Street Square and the Broadgate Tower joining Tower 42 and the ‘Gherkin’ (St Mary’s Axe) as punctuations to the skyline. Others had been given planning permission, but as these projects stalled it seemed that construction would not proceed. As London came out of recession, not only did planned schemes, such as the ‘Walkie Talkie’ tower and the ‘Leadenhall’, proceed to construction but a new set of tall buildings in adjacent boroughs came on stream. Across London as a whole, 236 towers of over 20 storeys were either planned, under construction or completed. The most notable of these is the ‘Shard’, currently the tallest building in London, across the river from the City.

The changes in London’s skyline generated a considerable amount of controversy, from architectural critics to UNESCO, who warned the British government about damage to World Heritage sites. (Moore 2012). In March 2014 a campaign was set up to demand a ‘skyline commission’, coinciding with an exhibition and a public debate. While only a very small proportion of the controversial towers are located in the City, it was the images of these aspirant iconic buildings that were used to illustrate the numerous web pages, blogs and newspaper articles on the subject (Figure 5a and 5b).

The stance of the City’s planners had been to encourage ‘star architects’ to produce visually striking and unusual tall buildings. This approach might not have been predicted from such a traditional authority, who conceivably might have preferred a more measured, master-planned approach with a focus on carefully graded clusters of skyscrapers. In formal urban design terms this is explained by Rees’s background training as an architect and through his early apprenticeship in Gordon Cullen’s office. Rees explained his preference for arresting buildings as related to townscape and the picturesque. The City’s medieval street layout...
affords many twists, turns and juxtapositions, with unusual tall towers thereby presenting surprising new vistas and endpoints. Furthermore, Rees was determined that proposals put forward should be distinct and site specific, not repeating a formula used elsewhere, claiming he was ‘easily bored’. Masterplans were specifically eschewed, for the same reason. The references to townscape and architectural quality provided a formal set of justifications for the adoption of this urban design approach. Of course, this aspiration to giving the City’s new buildings ‘iconic’ status in architectural terms has an appeal, as Sklair (2006) noted, to a transnational global capitalist class, seeking a safe haven for their investment. Kaika (2010) develops Sklair’s argument further, but rather than suggesting the unprecedented move to encourage tall buildings as a sign of the City’s success, casts it as a response to the series of challenges regarding London’s status as a financial centre, the most recent of which was the 2008 crisis. Certainly the charge of encouraging a re-branding the City’s image
holds purchase, as evidenced by Rees’s enthusiasm for the marketing ploy of giving the new skyscrapers nicknames, such as the ‘Gherkin’, the ‘Cheesegrater’ and the ‘Helter Skelter’.

While the skyline was treated with exuberance, development gains were used to continue the City’s streetscene improvements. Here masterplans, frameworks and a comprehensive design guide have been used to secure a high quality of renovated spaces (City of London 2006). The carefully attuned contextual quality of these spaces, many of which have won design awards, form a contrast to the newly created towers overhead. One of the most striking juxtapositions between the street improvements and iconic building is provided by the new headquarters for Rothschild’s bank, designed by OMA and completed in 2011. The building is in St Swithin’s Lane, a small passage at the rear of the church of St Stephen’s Walbrook. The tower, which includes two storeys of transparent ‘cube’ at high level, is raised on pilotis, thereby affording a publicly accessible view to the rear of the church and its garden, a perspective that was previously unavailable (see Figure 6).

While growth in the number of workplaces has continued to be encouraged post-recession, to the extent that the City’s increase in GVA is now outstripping Westminster (Arup 2014), the Corporation’s plans have resisted any significant increase in its residential population. Rees has asserted that he did not want families or households who might stay for a long time to move into the City, preferring instead a more transient population of staff working in the business sector who would stay for one or two years. In an intriguing turn of events, residents in the City have become more vocal following changes in the governance of the Corporation. Portsoken Ward has elected the City’s first councillor from an opposition party, who has taken it as his brief to represent his constituents. Rees, at a public lecture, made it quite explicit that it was this type of public intervention that he wished to avoid, seeing it as standing in the way of the drive for growth.

Figure 6. Garden to rear of St Stephen Walbrook Church. Source: Photograph taken by the author.
Discussion

Many of the demands spelt out by Punter for design policies have indeed been achieved. London has a central strategic framework and the City and Westminster both have detailed design policies for their central areas. This has not ensured that a humane, sustainable central area has evolved. The figure ground plan of the City has hardly changed, but its three-dimensional morphology has rendered it unrecognizable from the City of the 1940s. Nevertheless, Fraser’s comment that the city has lost its character and that contextualism no longer has any meaning in the face of radical and irrevocable change (Fraser 2012) is too severe. The retention of the street layout and the imposition of restrictions on tall buildings have resulted in the preservation of many views and vistas along winding streets bordered by buildings with a humane scale. As some commentators have argued, their juxtaposition with tall buildings has led to a disconnection and incoherence in the urban scene. For example, Woodman commented that the lack of relationship between the remodelled Paternoster Square, with its stone clad solemn buildings, and Jean Nouvel’s adjacent shopping centre at One New Change, a creation featuring an internal atrium and much transparency, “represents a failure of the urban imagination” (Woodman 2010) (Figure 7a and 7b).

A further criticism is related to the impact of tall buildings on the former labyrinthine quality of the City. It is true that some courtyards, such as Exchange Square, have now become absorbed into corporate plazas, surrounded by chain store coffee shops (Long 2010). On the other hand, the attention to streetscene has helped to enhance many of the City’s small urban spaces, which are accessible to the public.

As noted above, Westminster City Council has paid a similar level of attention to its public realm, with work continuing post-recession, funded by major developers and landowners. Meanwhile, the symbolic power of Westminster’s streets and squares have left these set pieces of elegance as toys for the super-rich, played as though they were tokens on a global Monopoly board. The trajectory of central London has bifurcated between two strands of conservatism, each prey to market forces. The recognizable London that remains, which has its own community, rests in its ceremonial and specialist functions, in the royal palaces and parks, the Inns of Court and in its local neighbourhoods.

With regard to urban design, Cuthbert’s foregrounding of spatial political economy is amply demonstrated by the case of central London. In comparison to Hong Kong, which has also built high due to a shortage of land, the City has made no serious attempt to incorporate...
social housing within the square mile (La Grange and Pretorius 2013). Meanwhile, Westminster
has refused to take the modest measure, allowed by central government, of imposing a 150%
increase on the council tax for properties left empty for two years (Davey 2014). To return
to Lovering’s (2010) point about redistribution, the millions of pounds of investment in this
portion of the CAZ have not yielded any appreciable increase in social housing.

This is not to imply that the detail of design and planning guidance has no significance,
either in economic, aesthetic or experiential terms. Broadly speaking, post-recession,
Westminster and the City both adopted contextual approaches, placing an emphasis on
‘townscape’. The nuanced distinction between exploiting Cullen’s advocacy for ‘surprise’
and ‘contrast’ and a more rigid analysis based on existing morphologies and typologies
has resulted in dramatically different skylines, experiences and economic outcomes. In
this instance the application of normative approaches to urban design, to paraphrase
Westminster’s document, does really matter.

Conclusions

This paper has reviewed central London’s surprising growth and development since the bank-
ing crisis of 2007–2008. It has pursued an argument that the current tensions in the experiential
qualities of place within the core CAZ can be traced back to the period following the demise of
the GLC and the adoption of an ambition to make London the business and financial capital of
the world. It has tracked, in broad outline, the influences of this ambition on the urban form and
place qualities of the central area. In doing this, Cuthbert’s assertion of the importance of a spa-
tial political economy to an understanding of urban design is demonstrated. Nevertheless, the
significance of and limitations of design policies can also be traced in the contrasting responses
of the Corporation of London and Westminster City Council to development pressures. While
the City is now in danger of becoming an incoherent ‘bricolage’ of parts, the central areas of
Westminster are equally at risk of becoming hollowed out stage sets. This emphasizes the need
to extend urban design inquiry beyond policies and intentions into actual uses and recorded
occupation. It also highlights the significance of the application of theory to practice.

There is much scope for further research on central London, including the stories of its
residential communities. There was insufficient space in this paper to consider the complex-
ity of social housing provision in central London and its role in creating qualities of place.
There is more work to be done in tracing and assessing the influence of Cullen (1971) and
townscape on the urban qualities of the City of London. Political economy and architectural
history spell out only part of the continuing narrative of central London. It is hoped that more
scholars of urban design will document and analyze the specific influences and, crucially,
the outcomes in use, of different urban design philosophies and policies.

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References


