

A speech by HRH The Prince of Wales at the New Buildings in Old Places Conference, St James's Palace, London

31st January 2008

Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am enormously grateful to all of you for coming today, particularly to the Minister for giving up her precious time for what promises to be a lively and interesting gathering on the subject of New Buildings in Old Places. If I may say so, I am delighted to see so many familiar faces (dotted about in the audience - pepperpotted not in ghettos!) and very pleased indeed that The National Trust and Historic Royal Palaces have joined with my Regeneration Trust and my Foundation for the Built Environment to sponsor this timely event. And I must use this opportunity to apologise to poor Ros Kerlake and Hank Dittmar for constantly putting them under so much pressure to deal with so many issues that this conference seeks to review.

At present, our country looks to be in the midst of one of its periodic building booms, and in an ancient land such as our own, we cannot help but build the new amongst the old. I can only think of two times in our history where it was proposed to build homes, workplaces and shops on such a massive scale, and both times it changed the face of Britain. I am thinking of the Victorian era, when our predecessors built the face of the cities of industrial England, and of the post-war period through to the end of the 1960s when there was a rush to rebuild, knocking down much that was old in the process. In the first case, although there were the inevitable mistakes made, much that was built was of enduring value and at least acknowledged the historical patterns and identity of past generations. In the second, every time-tested principle and all reference to an accumulated inheritance in the “grammar”, if you like, of architecture and building were simply thrown out of the window and we have been living with the consequences of this enormously risky experiment ever since. And the gigantic experiment still goes on, with the same mistakes being repeated and with yet further consequences for people’s lives and for the long term future of this planet.

In the haste to build after the Second World War, many untested new design theories were put into practice, with the best of intentions but disastrous results. I am thinking particularly of the brave new world of housing estates – the system-built, deck access variety, and the tower block – which quickly became sink estates all across the country, unloved and relentlessly, depressingly ugly, with endless wasted acres of “public open space” and a dearth of private space. I know because I spent a lot of time in the 1980s trying to see what I could do to improve the inner cities. Many of these have been torn down after only 20 to 30 years of use. The builders of that era also ripped apart many town and city centres for enclosed shopping malls and parking structures, many of which have also been taken down.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the point about all this is that we simply cannot afford to repeat these mistakes, but this time in a twenty-first century guise. In fact, I would go so far as to say we must not repeat such mistakes. We owe it to the people of this country to do infinitely better and that is the purpose of today’s conference: to try to learn from the past, and take the best ideas forward as we build what will become tomorrow’s heritage today.

Now our current plans call for building three million new homes by 2020, which you all know better than I, which amounts to 240,000 new houses each year, at a time when the house builders currently only put up 185,000 houses per annum. And if that doesn’t seem like a challenge, The National Housing Planning and Advice Unit has said that 270,000 houses need to be built each year, arguing for a total by 2016 of 3.25 million!

Such ambitious housing targets will impact both the countryside and our cities, towns and suburbs, and groups ranging from The National Trust to the Campaign to Protect Rural England have, most

understandably, expressed deep concern about the potential consequences. A 2007 Housing Audit by the Government's design watchdog, the Commission on Architecture and the Built Environment, found that "the housing produced in the first few years of this new century is simply not up to the standard which the Government is demanding and which customers have a right to expect."

Requirements to build on brownfield land and an appropriate concern about building at densities that support public transport and mixed-use means that much of the new housing is being built within existing built-up areas, and provided in the form of flats in residential towers of nine to twenty stories. These towers are generally opposed by local residents, but loved by "buy to let" investors and planners to add a bit of the "wow" factor to their suburb or town. I therefore hope very much that this conference will address the issue of building housing at greater densities in a way that is harmonious with town and city scapes, with the existing heritage and with the needs and desires of local residents. We have endured for too long the prevailing lack of courtesy within the public realm and the time has come to reinvent "good manners" in the way we build. We should surely be asking whether it is a natural pre-requisite of "being modern" to display bad manners? Is it "being modern", for instance, to vandalize the few remaining relatively unspoilt, beautiful areas of our cities, any more than it would be "modern" to mug defenceless elderly people? Can it not be modern "to do to others as you would have them do to you?" That's the question.

Ever since I so rashly decided to get involved with these issues by writing "A Vision of Britain," I have been working on a series of principles for building better places. Together with my Trust, my Foundation and the Duchy of Cornwall, I have been trying to put these principles into practice at Poundbury and other smaller sites – although not without a bit of difficulty here and there!

So now, taking advantage of the fact that I am nearly sixty, I would like to share a few thoughts with you about the ways that we can build new buildings in old places, distilled from nearly twenty years of all this experience.

Now, it seems to me that the following ideas might conceivably be worth following up:-

- Firstly, recognition that sustainability actually means building for the long-term – one hundred years, rather than twenty years;
- Secondly, because of this, it is worth building in an adaptable and flexible manner, reassessing and re-using existing buildings wherever possible;
- Thirdly, it is worth building in a manner that fits the place, in terms of materials used, proportion and layouts and climate, ecology and building practices;
- Fourthly, it is worth building beautifully, in a manner that builds upon tradition, evolving it in response to present challenges and utilising present day resources and techniques;
- And, finally, it is worth understanding the purpose of a building, or group of buildings, within the hierarchy of the buildings around it and responding with an appropriate building type and design. Doing this often implies the composition of a harmonious whole, rather than the erection of singular objects of architectural or corporate will which merely panders to ego-centric imperatives.

Such principles, in my experience, tend to create added social and environmental value, as well as commercial value. They apply whether building anew or adapting existing buildings. We all need to consider the meaning of heritage and recognize that sustainability is achieved by creating buildings that people will both want to use, and be able to use efficiently, a hundred years hence. Local distinctiveness should flourish and traditional craft skills should be re-discovered and incorporated in new buildings as well as old; so that true and timeless methods of building are exploited for not only the beauty they create, but also the environmental benefits they offer. You may possibly, ladies and gentlemen, have heard of the Slow Food Movement which has emerged as a direct reaction to the overall destructiveness of fast food (and incidentally, as probably you may have read, we waste a third of all food in this country too)... What we need is a "Slow Architecture Movement" as well. This is not mere romanticism, for after 32 years of The Prince's Trust I have come to see just how

many young lives are wasted; how much potential talent and technical craft skill is lost because people are not able to follow their true calling and thus become psychologically frustrated and alienated. I have seen an awful lot of such young people. We never seem to think about this aspect of the whole built environment equation – the fact that we are actively discouraging young people from putting their souls, yes their souls, into buildings through the skills they acquire...

So in those places where more ambitious urban development is appropriate, there are principles of planning which, again, can make sure new development is adding value to communities in this country. Such principles include well-designed public spaces, a mix of shops and services within walking distance, values of hierarchy, legibility and proportion, integration of high-quality private, social and affordable housing – and by incorporating these qualities we are applying the lessons tradition teaches us about how better neighbourhood design improves the lives of those who live in new developments.

And while we are talking about principles, let's just consider for a moment, if we may, the issue of taller buildings in our historic towns and cities, and especially in and around the United Kingdom's twenty-seven World Heritage sites. In this area I very much fear we are repeating the mistakes of the 1960s, but doing so with even greater hubris and efficiency!

Corporate and residential towers are being proposed across London, and overshadowing World Heritage sites from Edinburgh to Bath – this audience will not need reminding of the fact that the World Heritage status of sites such as Edinburgh's old city, the Tower of London and Westminster have all been challenged by U.N.E.S.C.O. due to new construction in recent years. And so they should be, as there is no point at all in having a World Heritage site unless it retains its unique integrity. There are, after all, other areas where such tall buildings could be accommodated within their own context. The French have managed it quite well up to now in La Défense, in Paris (but I hear there are even current threats to the integrity of the historic quarters of Paris from ever taller, deconstructed glass monoliths). For some unaccountable reason we seem to be determined to vandalize these few remaining sites which retain the kind of human scale and timeless character that so attract people to them and which increase in value as time goes by. What is it, Ladies and Gentlemen, about our outlook which perpetuates desire deliberately to desecrate such places? You would think, wouldn't you, that we might have outgrown this kind of attitude by now...?

Thus, in chasing the corporate tenant or the buy-to-let investor, we may not only be destroying our heritage, but killing the goose that lays the golden egg for we will destroy what makes our cities and towns so attractive to tourists in the process. Interestingly, London currently holds almost a two per cent share of world tourism and London tourists spent £7.5 billion here in 2006, according to Visit London, with visitor surveys attesting to the fact that the Tower of London and St. Paul's Cathedral are Britain's top paid attractions. Nevertheless, speculative towers are currently proposed in the environs of both the Tower and St. Paul's...

Many people believe, erroneously, that the only way to achieve environmental efficiencies in development is by building very tall buildings. Indeed, improving the average density of building in England is critical to achieving "location efficiency," which reduces automobile use and greenhouse gas emissions, as well as minimizing land-take. But these efficiencies only begin to occur at 17 units to the hectare, when public transport becomes feasible, and begin to tail off at densities above 70 units to the hectare, according to a definitive research study from the United States which has recently been applied by my Foundation in a London project. This is because achieving environmental gains is a function of density, access to public transport and walkable, connected streets. Pedestrian street access becomes more difficult at higher density. Indeed, there is also a question about whether London's overstressed public transport network can actually handle greater density at the centre. Creating visual pollution is not the answer to achieving greater efficiency.

It is crucial to stress before it is all too late, and before people are persuaded otherwise by clever marketing, that these location efficiencies can be achieved easily by traditional English building types, including the four to five storey terrace and the six to ten storey mansion block. It is worth

remembering this. In fact, Kensington and Chelsea, which so far lacks tower blocks, is the densest London borough. It is worth noting that the Urban Renaissance report showed how densities of 75 units to the hectare can be achieved by mansion blocks and terraces, both of which can provide family housing, and can include gardens, unlike the typical one to two bedroom tower blocks being built all over London today.

And, if we look at London's skyline, and compare it, say, to Paris where, up to now, building heights are regulated far more precisely, we are immediately struck by how much less is protected here than abroad. The current debates about tall buildings here in London would have been unnecessary and superfluous in Paris – where tall buildings have been concentrated, as I have mentioned earlier, in the urban quarter of La Défense – outside the historic area which, of course, continues to attract tourists and their spending power.

And, in Berlin, too, where an immense programme of reconstruction and regeneration has gone on – larger than in any other European city – the city leaders have insisted upon rigorous limitations to the height of new buildings. These kinds of approaches can help to achieve a far more coherent sense of harmony and civic self-confidence than the alternative “free-for-all” that will leave London and our other cities with a pockmarked skyline. Not just one carbuncle, ladies and gentlemen, on the face of a much-loved old friend, but a positive rash of them that will disfigure precious views and disinherit future generations of Londoners.

To seek to protect historic views and vantage points, and oppose the planning of random new towers – for perhaps they would be better described as “vertical Cul-de-Sacs” or “Network Congestors”! – is not, I believe, synonymous with supporting what some have rather disparagingly called a “museum city.” It is certainly legitimate to ask, I would have thought, how it can be considered sensible, or indeed rational, to implant such “congestors” into a network of streets which were designed to function with two to three storey buildings... You might think, too, mightn't you, that in today's world there would be a whole series of health and safety issues that needed to be considered!

The argument has been made that London must build tall buildings in order to protect its place as a global financial centre. While this argument doesn't in any way apply to the dozens of undistinguished blocks of one and two bedroom flats being built all over the city, surely business seeks glamorous buildings? If this is so, then Canary Wharf already provides, like La Défense, a place for those statements of corporate aspiration to be made. Why can they not be concentrated there, rather than overshadowing Wren's and Hawksmoor's churches? My concern is that London will become just like everywhere else with the same homogenized buildings that express nothing but outdated unsustainability. It may be very surprising to some that the preferred location for many hedge funds and the new private equity firms is neither the City or Canary Wharf, but Mayfair, St. James's and Belgravia, thus demonstrating the enduring appeal of the mixed-use, mid-rise, human scale city quarter.

So, the key point I want to make is that I am not opposed to all tall buildings. My concern is that they should be considered in their context; in other words, they should be put where they fit properly. If new vertical cul-de-sacs are to be built, then it seems self-evident to me that they should stand together to establish a new skyline, and not compete with or confuse what is currently there – as has already happened to a depressing and disastrous extent.

If clustered, then the virtue of height becomes something that can, in the hands of creative architects, be truly celebrated. This solution, so clearly the case in Manhattan or La Défense in Paris, requires locations where intrusion into historically protected views, either at height or at street level, can be avoided, and is, therefore, difficult to justify in places such as the City of London where the pressure to build at height is often greatest.

There is a very real and urgent risk looming over us that in the drive to make historic cities like London and Edinburgh “world cities” in the commercial sense, we simply make them more like

every other city in the world and in so doing dishonour and discredit their status, character and local distinctiveness. In “A Vision of Britain,” I suggested that the impact of new buildings could be softened by an acceptance of the existing street rhythms and plot sizes and that the buildings in a city such as London, Edinburgh or even Bath or Ealing are the individual brushstrokes of a grand composition, which works because all the participants understood the basic rules and “grammar,” with harmony being the pleasing result. This lesson is, I believe, still as relevant today as it was in the Enlightenment, when builders sought to remake their cities to compete on a new stage. For the past sixty years or so we have been conducting an experiment in social and environmental engineering that has gone disastrously wrong.

Is it not time to say, ladies and gentlemen, in the words of William Cowper – that “Here the heart may give a useful lesson to the head, and learning wiser grow without his books?”

<http://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/speechesandarticles/index.html>