

The planners' obsession with height

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Here are three questions one could ask about a new building:

1. Does it provide useful accommodation?
2. Is it well proportioned and pleasing to the eye?
3. How high is it?

To many people, the third of these questions might seem rather less important than the first two. Unfortunately, the importance attributed to an issue by the planning system in this country is quite often inversely proportional to how much it actually matters (partly, of course, because the things that matter most are the hardest to measure). So it proves in this case: the third question is likely to be considerably more important than the first two when it comes to getting planning permission.

The Government promotes densification, applying pressure to the *x* and *y* axes; local authorities don't want higher buildings, squeezing the *z* axis. The result of this pressure can be seen everywhere. When planning authorities insist that buildings should not be too high, developers will cram the maximum number of floors in under whatever limit they are given, building at the lowest floor-to-ceiling dimension that the market will bear. Some of those developers would otherwise build homes or offices with decent storey heights - because they would realise that people, who for the most part can distinguish between cost per square metre and cost per cubic metre, will pay a bit more for better space, as they do when they buy Georgian houses rather than noddy-boxes.

The result of building up to a height limit is usually squashed proportions, low ceilings and mean windows. Height limits, unthinkingly

applied, give us buildings that not only look wrong, but also contain accommodation that is not as good as it should be.

The requirement to keep buildings as low as possible is not limited to the schemes of rapacious developers. The rules are applied without fear or favour. Architects who design local authority schools in residential areas will find planners from that same authority asking that their new building 'fit in with the scale of' the surrounding semis. That is, it should be two (pygmy) storeys high ('scale' usually turns out in to mean 'height'). And that sports hall will have to be dug into the ground a bit - it's too tall.

The designers of the Board Schools didn't have to put up with this kind of thing. Then, a school was understood to be different from a house, and people took pride in civic buildings they could see. Today, confidence seems to have collapsed. Partly, of course, on the basis of sound evidence: many new buildings aren't very attractive. So perhaps it's better if they are not too tall. A standard battle of many planning applications is the development control officer's wish to get, say, a couple of storeys removed from the scheme that has been submitted. A deal is done - a single storey is knocked off. Honour is satisfied. The result is still pig ugly, though. Why didn't they ask for it to be more beautiful, rather than lower?

If the Government is serious about compact, walkable mixed-use neighbourhoods with well-designed new buildings, it would be a good idea to eliminate the competing pressures identified above.

I have a suggestion - which also deals with your objection that we can find ugly new buildings with low ceilings where there are no height restrictions. Why not recognise that questions 1 and 2 above are actually more important than question 3, and reverse the current priorities (just as the planning system has flipped other rules, such as housing densities and parking

standards, from maxima to minima and vice versa respectively). If you are prepared to make the floor-to-ceiling heights more generous, you can have one more storey, not one fewer - and the more beautiful your building is, the taller it can be.

We could once again be allowed rooms with high windows. And we might stand a better chance of persuading the public that today's architects are just as capable of giving us beautiful, well-proportioned buildings as those of the past - if only the lid were to be taken off.