

## Will skyscrapers sink to new depths in British cities?

Councils are under pressure to build higher, but campaigners say new towers will ruin historic skylines





Ryan Giggs and Gary Nevill's proposed St Michael's development in Manchester city centre. Photograph: Hodder + Partners

## Rowan Moore

Sat 4 Aug 2018 14.00 BST

**I**n Bristol, the city's mayor has announced that he wants its skyline to grow. In Norwich, the developers Weston Homes want to build a "beacon" of 20 storeys, in the face of fears that it will trash views of "one of Europe's great medieval cities", as Historic England put it. In Manchester, a city whose skyline has been changing for a while, the chairman of the city's civic society is running a crowdfunding campaign against a 40-storey tower that will, he says, "despoil" and "overbear" a historic area.

British cities are facing the development pressures that, all around the world, push for building high. The tsunamis of skyscrapers in the Gulf and south-east Asia send out waves that wash the banks of the Avon and even inland Norfolk. There are certain twists special to Britain: austerity means that local authorities are particularly keen to grab whatever financial benefits a tower might bring, while it also weakens the underfunded planning departments that might direct and manage development.

Planners, objectors and developers tend to agree that tall buildings can be intrinsically fine things. What matters, they all say, is that they are well designed and in the right place. The precise meaning of this bland statement is unfortunately also the thing on which no one can agree - it becomes an increasingly threadbare banner under which planning battles are fought. Projects with ever more vaporous claims to be well designed and in the right place end up getting approved and built.

If you've heard arguments like this before, it's because London, which has faced global development pressures earlier and more intensely than anywhere else in Britain, has already been down this road. Contentious planning applications have been made, some pushed back, and some controversially approved. Worthy promises have been made about location and design. "World-class architects" set the pace with Gherkins and Shards, but these turn out to be as good as it gets: new and ever-more mundane proposals keep on coming, and a new normality is established where the early promises lose all meaning. This history gives other cities the chance to learn from the capital's mistakes. There are also reasons why they will not.



A view of Norwich's summer skyline as it is today. Photograph: The Creative Wright/Getty Images/iStockphoto

Anglia Square in the centre of Norwich is a place that almost everyone thinks could do with improvement. It performs a useful service, in offering affordable services to local people - a butcher, a cafe, a charity shop, a sheltered piazza - but these benefits are wrapped in awkward and underused buildings, among them an abandoned car park. Bob Weston, chairman and chief executive of Weston Homes, says that his plans will “clear away 20 years of dereliction” by replacing them with 1,200 homes, 120 of them affordable, plus a cinema, retail space and hotel.

It will entail a tower of 20 storeys, recently downsized from 25 storeys, and two blocks of 10 storeys, in a somewhat generic architectural style. The “very firm view” of Historic England, says its chief executive Duncan Wilson, is that the bulk and height of the development will cause “significant harm” to classic views of Norwich cathedral’s famous spire and of the other towers and spires gathered around it. Weston retorts that, because of the costs of clearing Anglia Square, and notwithstanding a £12m government grant to help him do so, the numbers don’t add up if he can’t build at this scale.

“It’s a proper Marmite site,” he says. “If you’re a traditionalist or a medievalist, you’re going to hate it.” But if he can’t get the planning permission he’s seeking, “we will say thank you very much and walk away. That’s the hard economic reality.” Opponents say he should have factored these costs into the price he agreed with the site’s current owners, who will complete the sale to him if he gets planning permission. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise to him, either, that a tall building would be contentious in this city, whose ancient skyline, apart from one relatively minor 1960s intrusion, has remained intact.



An image of Weston Homes' Anglia Square proposal.

The long-gestated St Michael's development in Manchester, the project of footballers turned developers Gary Neville and Ryan Giggs, tries harder with the architecture, to the extent that the Stirling prize winner Stephen Hodder has been hired. Rather than the usual stacked cubes he has come up with a horizontally tapering profile that owes something to 1960s classics like the Pirelli Tower in Milan and Centre Point in London.

What his design doesn't do is assuage fears that the sheer scale of the project will overwhelm the conservation area in which it stands, and mess up views of the city's Albert Square and famous neogothic town hall. Although the project has planning permission, Save Britain's Heritage are still fighting what they have called the most damaging tower proposal since the 1970s Montparnasse Tower in Paris. Steve Speakman, a retired local government officer and teacher who now chairs the Manchester Civic Society, has crowdfunded £6,000 from like-minded citizens to challenge its permission in the courts.

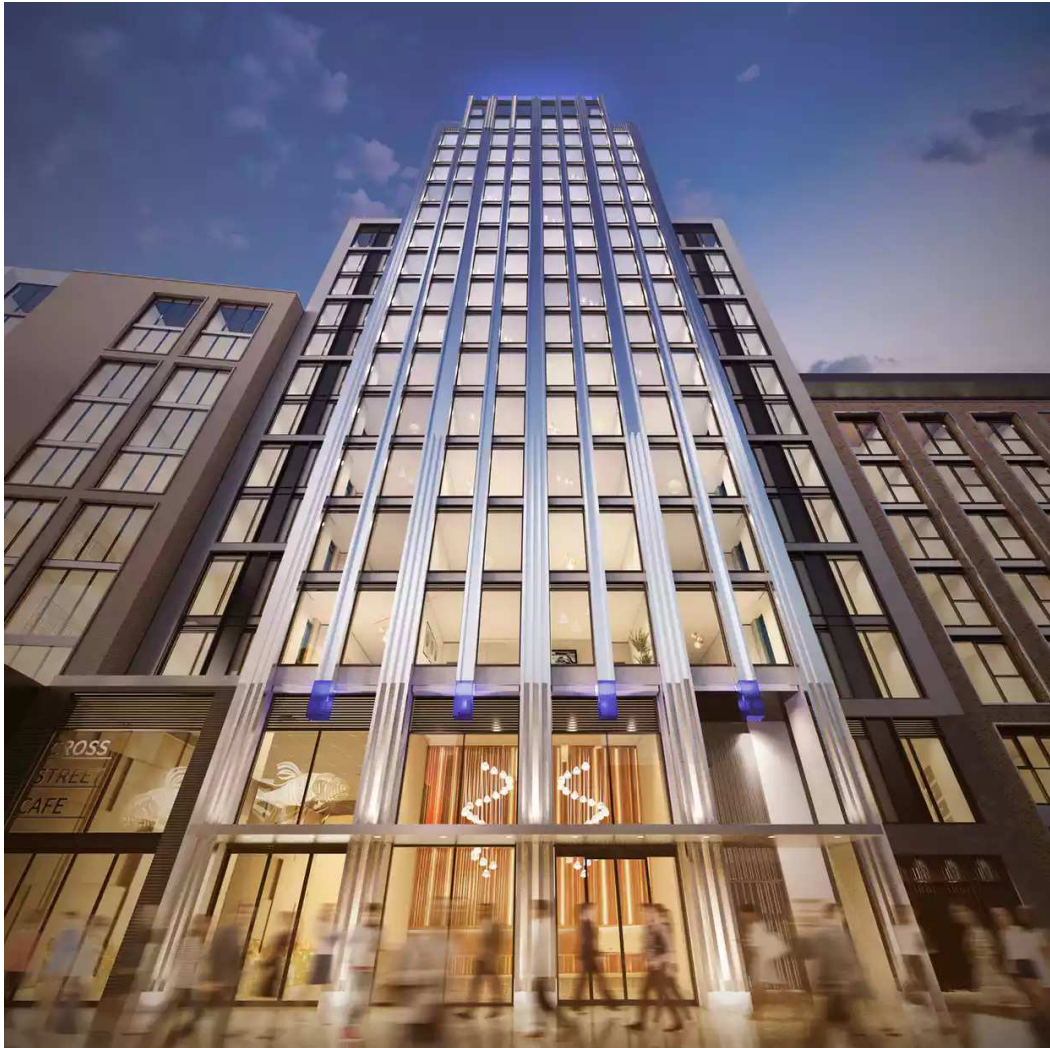
"The key thing," he says, "is the precedents it will set for conservation areas everywhere, not just in Manchester." This is a fundamental point: what matters with tall buildings is not so much single projects but the cumulative effect of several together. It is the reason for the common and commonsense plea made, for example, by Joel Baillie-Lane of the Bristol Civic Society, that a framework should be set out that establishes what is and is not a good location, and what defines "good design". This would give clarity, which developers always claim to want.

Bristol is actually trying harder than many cities to give order to the wave of towers that Nicola Beech, the council cabinet member for spatial planning and city design, thinks is inevitable and that mayor Marvin Rees has publicly welcomed. A draft policy called Urban

Living calls for many reasonable things, such as a “high quality public-realm” and “urban greening”, as the city tries to respond to a population that is growing by 4,000 a year. Tall buildings should, among other things, “have a positive impact on the socioeconomic health of the wider neighbourhood”. They should not “have a detrimental impact on the city’s historic environment”.

This is much better than nothing, but it is not detailed planning strategy. If the principles are seriously enforced, Bristol could conceivably show everyone else how to build tall in a city with a large number of listed buildings. But its general statements recall those that appeared in the early years of London’s tower boom, which in the event proved flimsy defenders of quality. Plans already in the pipeline are not encouraging: blocks of 22 storeys in the Redcliff Quarter, 26 storeys on the site of a former ambulance station and 21 storeys at St Catherine’s Place in the district of Bedminster. They are “of little merit”, says Baillie-Lane, “purely commercial” and looking at the blocky, seen-them-before designs, it’s hard to disagree.

In all these struggles certain arguments recur, one of which needs to be nailed for good and all. It is said that tall buildings bring prestige and identity, that they express energy and ambition. There is almost no evidence for this alleged glamour: if it was true of 1920s Manhattan, the sight of yet another city signing up for middling towers speaks more of lack of imagination. Whatever the other points of the Anglia Square debate, Norwich does not need a “beacon” in the form of a ho-hum block. It already has a landmark, in its cathedral.



A proposed tower in Redcliff Quarter, Bristol, where planning permission has been given for blocks up to 22 storeys. Photograph: Lyons+Sleeman+Hoare Architects

It's also said that tall buildings are needed to meet housing need. It is indeed hard to deny people homes in the name of scenery, but there is abundant evidence that high densities can be achieved with lower heights, along with more pleasant and livable environments. Building tall is expensive, which means higher prices have to be charged by developers and percentages of affordable housing get squeezed. Again, the London experience is cautionary - former mayor Boris Johnson rushed for numbers by permitting tall buildings, without troubling too much whether he was encouraging the types of homes that were most needed.

Not that local authorities, atrociously squeezed by austerity, are necessarily villains of the piece. New developments come with attractions like the community infrastructure levy, which is money councils receive to spend on goodies in their area. They are under pressure to meet housing targets. So they are susceptible to pressure from investors, many of them overseas, for whom building a tower is standard practice, without much reference to its appropriateness to a given area.

The same austerity is one reason why the frameworks that campaigners call for almost never happen. Although the cost of such work is tiny in relation to the scale of development it might influence, its chances of getting funding under current arrangements are vanishingly small.

In the absence of such frameworks, visual chaos will descend on cities that have grown over centuries, for the sake of temporary fixes to temporary problems. There is, it can't be said too often, nothing absolutely wrong with towers. They can be fine, noble and useful. Some cities might be able to imagine futures for themselves where new and beautiful skylines live well with the old. But without meaningful planning, it's not going to happen. In its absence, when some intended skyscraper pops up where none has been before, the only sane response is, almost always, to just say no.

## Since you're here...

... we have a small favour to ask. More people are reading the Guardian than ever but advertising revenues across the media are falling fast. And unlike many news organisations, we haven't put up a paywall - we want to keep our journalism as open as we can. So you can see why we need to ask for your help. The Guardian's independent, investigative journalism takes a lot of time, money and hard work to produce. But we do it because we believe our perspective matters - because it might well be your perspective, too.

The Guardian is editorially independent, meaning we set our own agenda. Our journalism is free from commercial bias and not influenced by billionaire owners, politicians or shareholders. No one edits our Editor. No one steers our opinion. This is important because it enables us to give a voice to the voiceless, challenge the powerful and hold them to account. It's what makes us different to so many others in the media, at a time when factual, honest reporting is critical.

If everyone who reads our reporting, who likes it, helps to support it, our future would be much more secure. **For as little as £1, you can support the Guardian - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support The Guardian



Topics

- Skyscrapers
- The Observer
- Architecture

- Manchester
- Bristol
- Norwich
- features