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DEVELOPMENT IN THE TOWN
TOWARDS A HIGH BUILDING POLICY

1970

"High buildings are not inevitable; on the other hand they can be a positive element in the townscape, if there is a correct understanding of their significance and principles of siting".

First I should like to question the commonly-held assumption that high density is synonymous with high rise. This supposition is responsible for much misleading comment and the cause of unnecessary high-rise development.

Up to a density of 70 habitable rooms per acre, it is possible to build detached and semi-detached houses, though this form of development is much better at lower densities. Given minimum standards for private gardens and no public open space other than roads, and a perfect site, it is possible to achieve a density of 110 habitable rooms per acre with terraced houses, though 80 is a practical maximum density for this kind of development.

To examine flat and maisonette development let us take the case of a regular site of 20,000 sq.ft. - say $\frac{1}{2}$ acre gross

At 100 habitable rooms per acre it could be developed to a maximum of four storeys with 10 family flats (5 persons each) If these were all at ground and first floor, there would remain about 15,000 sq.ft. of open space on the site, although about 4,000 sq.ft. would be taken up by access roads and parking.

It is on the larger sites that problems arise, and high buildings become an acceptable alternative to four storey ones. Moreover, because the costs of lifts and structure do not generally become justified below 10 storeys, the alternative is usually between a four-storey development, and one of 10 or more floors. It will be shown later why I believe that a building above 5 storeys can be described as "high" in the context of St. Helier.

For some time now the generally accepted maximum density in St. Helier has been 140 habitable rooms per acre, but only on fairly regular sites of an acre or more in area. Take the example of a site with a nett area of 50,00 sq.ft. and with a gross area which allows a development potential of 150 habitable rooms. Assume that each flat will have 3 habitable rooms, giving a development of 50 flats, and will require a floor area (including common circulation) of 300 sq.ft. The development will therefore have a total floor area of 35,000 sq.ft.

It is a condition of the higher densities in 'urban' areas that open space will be provided at the rate of 200 sq.ft. per habitable room. Thus, on our site of 50,000 sq.ft., 30,000 sq.ft. must be open space. This will nearly always be/

be provided at ground level, and would make a pleasant garden - if it were not for the car.

Each flat must have provision of a car space and there must be $\frac{1}{2}$ space per flat for 2 car families and visitors etc. So we need to provide 75 spaces - which is about 19,000 sq.ft. Our 'amenity' open space will often be further reduced by provision for drying clothes, storing dustbins and so on. If the 50 flats were contained in a high building of 12 storeys the site would be used as follows.

Building:	3,000 sq.ft.
Cars:	19,000 sq.ft.
Clothes drying etc:	2,000 sq.ft.
Gardens:	26,000 sq.ft.

Of course, only four flats will have direct access to the gardens and only 16 flats will be within "supervision distance" of children playing in the gardens.

What sacrifices would have to be made if it was decided to build no higher than four storeys, so that 12 or 13 flats had direct access to the gardens and all flats (or maisonettes in the case of the two top floors) were within supervision distance of the ground?

The site would be divided up as follows:

Building:	9,000 sq.ft.
Cars:	19,000 sq.ft.
Clothes drying etc:	2,000 sq.ft.
Gardens:	20,000 sq.ft.

The sacrifice is 6,000 sq.ft. of gardens. But low buildings have several advantages that alleviate this.

1. The roof can be used as open space - about 6,000 sq.ft. is available for drying areas and a play-space for children, a space moreover which is safe from traffic and where noise will seldom disturb inhabitants of the flats or neighbours. Only ball games are difficult to provide for.
2. Everyone is closer to the ground and is not dependent upon lifts.
3. The structure and servicing of the building is very much cheaper although internal circulation space is usually greater than in a point block.
4. The structure is much more flexible, allowing the designer to provide large balconies and terraces and to make the building an irregular shape and plan form to suit the site and the accommodation within.

5. The structure is often capable of change, so that the building can be altered in part at a future date to suit particular housing, economic or social circumstances and family needs.
6. The building will have a lesser effect upon the character, scale and appearance of the locality and of the town.

You may wonder why architects ever design high-rise residential buildings. It is partly because of the Utopian ideals of the 1920's - Le Corbusier - and the exciting new technology that was available from the beginning of the century - the elevator and the steel frame - and partly because it is so much simpler to design a tower block when confronted with a high-density situation. But simple solutions are not necessarily the best, and the ideals of the twenties are now largely discredited while we can no longer be sure that electricity will always be available 24 hours a day to power Mr. Otis' wonderful invention.

As far as commercial development is concerned, our 50,000 sq.ft. site would provide 125,000 sq.ft. floor area at the normal plot ratio of 1/2.5 and if this took the form of a five-storey building, half the site would be free for servicing, parking and amenity open space.

It is certainly true that where one is faced with a site like that on the Esplanade: 107,000 sq.ft. upon which to fit 415 habitable rooms, 20,000 sq.ft. of showrooms and with all the extra servicing required for them, building lines that effectively reduce the "working area" of the site by as much as 10 - 15% and so on, the design problem is not a simple one. But even here I have shown in my preliminary studies that there is an alternative to high-rise tower development.

The choice then, as far as it is exercised by a planning authority in the early stages, between a high-rise development and something lower, depends very largely on how the proposed development will fit into the fabric of the existing town and the plans for the town's future.

I will concentrate on three factors that will influence this choice, (though there are many more): History and geography; climate; and townscape.

1. HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

St. Helier is contained by the sea on the south-west and by the hills around. Only in the gap between Fort Regent and Victoria College has early development spread, towards the south-east. The scale of the town as a whole is very much determined by the height of the surrounding hills, and the back cloth of green that these have provided has always been part of St. Helier's charm.

For the most part, the buildings have been domestic in scale, with narrow frontages and of three or four storeys in height. Specially important buildings have been larger - the Victorian terraces that grace the outer edges of the old town and Almorah Crescent with its four storeys relieved by a continuous balcony at first floor level. The high rise buildings of the period are the church towers and spires - and note how carefully they and the Methodist chapels with their lofty porticos are sited - usually to close a vista or punctuate a terrace.

"Modern high buildings tend to be more rectilinear, more solidly cubical, more bulky and less attractive in silhouette than the domes, spires and towers of the past".

Much of our legacy of town planning is medieval - the irregular pattern of streets in the oldest parts of towns - overlaid by the classical designs of the Renaissance and later periods - the grid plans, wide straight streets and elegant facades that we associate with "Georgian" architecture. Both the medieval and renaissance planners recognised, in different ways, that man is the measure of all things; and when they forgot it - mannerist and baroque design - their limited technology held the worst excesses in check and the exuberance of the style lightened the effect of the too large structure, something that often did not happen in respect of Victorian buildings. The twentieth century has seen the measure of money and technology for its own sake replace the measure of man, so that many buildings bear little relation to their surroundings, the history of the place or the requirements of the inhabitants of the town. The situation is worsened in that so much building is undertaken for a general purpose rather than a specific one. Worst of all in many respects has been the result of the belief that if one removes slums one removes poverty. The people who now inhabit modern tenements are just as poor and the environment is a great deal poorer. Planners learn from their mistakes; or should do.

2. CLIMATE

There is an aspect of Jersey's climate that tends to be played down. While the Island's sunshine is given all the publicity that can be afforded, its winds are seldom mentioned. Yet the comfort of a town depends even more on shelter than it does on sunshine. If by building high we hope to gain open space, it will be no benefit if the open space is windswept and bleak, and in the shadow of the tall surrounding buildings as well. Much of the life of a town goes on during periods of the year when cold winds are blowing and the sun is low in the sky, if it is not actually raining. The kind of open space that is needed is small and sheltered, intimate

and quiet - a cloister rather than a piazza. High buildings tend to be set in the middle of an open space; the opportunity exists to provide lower buildings surrounding an open space - a Venice environment rather than a Rome one.

3. TOWNSCAPE

This is the art which can transform a group of three or four buildings from meaningless muddle into a meaningful composition; or a complete town from a workable diagram on paper into a three-dimensional living environment for human beings, satisfying to those who live in it, work in it, or simply look at it. The Townscape is appreciated visually, aurally and tactically - even with the nose. A walk through Edinburgh, York, Stockholm - or a host of European and British Market towns, including St. Peter Port - will do more to explain the meaning of a good townscape than mere words. These are some of the elements that go to make up townscape: movement, contrast of spaces, views, activities, details, proportions, scale, planting, trees, age, enclosure, shelter, enclaves, focal points, precincts, stops, changes of level, silhouette, vistas, deflection, punctuation, inclinations, angles, anticipation, infinity, mystery, satisfaction, and so on. High-rise development and tall buildings have their part to play in all these.

CONCLUSION

In the context of St. Helier it is necessary to define a high building. It is suggested that any building more than 5 storeys, or about 50' 0", is high, because the existing fabric of the town is seldom higher than this. But even a 50' 0" building will tower over certain residential buildings and it is better not to adopt rules before a detailed study of the whole town and the particular locality is made.

A High Buildings Policy will first set out a number of principles for the siting of large or tall buildings with the aim of maintaining or emphasising existing skylines and sometimes creating positive new ones. Secondly, it will safeguard local views within the town, where either the scale or the skyline warrant protection. Because tall buildings are landmarks, points of interest, direction signs, where new ones are to dominate the skyline they should, wherever possible, represent local civic interests: not the interests of one commercial firm competing with another.

RECOMMENDATION

It has been demonstrated that in the great majority of cases, where normal density standards are applied, there is a choice between high-rise and lower forms of development.

It is hoped that by 1975, if this office has the advantage of consultation with an outside group of Planners, a review of the Island Development Plan will be well under way and particular attention will have been paid to the future development of the town.

It is recommended therefore, that a moratorium be declared on all high-rise development for a period of two years. This will prevent decisions on the siting of tall buildings being made in advance of a town plan being agreed.



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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Among the many books on architecture and town planning there is a wealth of information and guidance on planning in respect of high-rise development.

Of particular value is the report "High Building Policy" prepared for the Corporation of The City and Royal Burgh of Edinburgh by William Holford and Associates.

The quotations in the foregoing notes are from this report and any member of the Committee wishing to study the subject further is most welcome to borrow it.

Edinburgh is unique and one of the finest cities in Europe, but it can be argued that St. Helier is as important to Jersey as Edinburgh is to the United Kingdom, and so a policy for the development of the town is as important.

"Control of high buildings is part of conservation policy. From studying current methods of control in this and other countries, it has been concluded that it is very often possible to meet the planning requirements of plot ratio or density without building high".

On the subject of Townscape two books are of particular value:

- 'Townscape' by Gordon Cullen and
- 'The Character of Towns' by Roy Worskett.

Extracts from these are contained in the appendix.

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APPENDIX

██████████ has supplied a paper prepared by the London Borough of Wandsworth in 1967 which lists twelve criteria by which high buildings should be judged. As development control tools these are very useful.

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES AFFECTING THE DESIGN AND SITING OF HIGH BUILDINGS

1. They should relate satisfactorily to the form of the city.
2. They should not mar important views.
3. Their use should be a matter of choice between horizontal or vertical development of a site in the light of all planning considerations.
4. The site should be of sufficient size to permit high buildings to be designed so as to free a reasonable portion of the plot for open space.
5. They should be carefully related to each other, and arranged in ordered groups. They should not be scattered in random fashion over the city.
6. High buildings near parks and open spaces should be considered only when they will not detract from the character of the landscape.
7. They should not be used merely as density raisers, and the use of high buildings should not result in a density higher than would normally follow from development at traditional height.
8. Bulky forms should be avoided.
9. They should preferably have some civic significance, or should relate to key sites.
10. They should not cause excessive overshadowing of adjoining development.
11. They should not prejudice the redevelopment of adjoining sites.
12. Their design and finishes should be of the highest possible standard.