

Minutes – UDL Sub Regional Meeting: Central Area, 5 December 2006

MEETING MINUTES – 05.12.06

AGENDA: TALL BUILDINGS

1. Microclimatic Modelling
2. Public Access Issues
3. Tall Building Proposals
4. Modelling Clusters
5. Legibility and Permeability
6. Residential Tall Buildings
7. Demand for Tall Buildings
8. Quality
9. Local Policies

Hosted by the City

The meeting was attended by officers from Camden, City, Islington, Lambeth Southwalk, Westminster and Wandsworth. A representative from CABE was also present.

The meeting focused on tall buildings, with each Borough bringing examples of current proposals to share with the group. This proved fascinating and illuminating as a picture of tall building proposals across the central area started to emerge. Looking at individual proposals also led into discussions on policy, how to assess schemes, different tall building typologies and London's overall strategy, or lack of it. Here is a short synopsis of some of the points raised:

1. **Microclimatic modelling** was an issue for many. In particular wind issues, but there seemed to be no consistency in how wind was being modelled and what level of wind creation was acceptable. We are not seeing plinth and podium buildings where the lower plinth can protect the ground from eddies, which makes wind more of an issue for current proposals. Plinth and podiums seem to work best in cities with a clear grid and block street pattern, but are not so easy with the medieval street patterns and small sites seen in London. This has led, in some cases, to proposals for canopies over the streets to stop the wind, which has a knock on effect on the public realm, and in a way 'privatises' the street. This seemed to be happening particularly in the City.
2. **The issue of public access** and retail/activity on the ground floor was discussed. There seemed to be concern over how "active" places really would be in the future, and whether public access inside buildings was realistic. A public viewing platform meant another lift, entrance and lobby. With an extra lift needed for each 10 floors, then one for public access, the cores were just too big and expensive.
3. **Tall Building Proposals.** There was concern generally that no one was systematically thinking about the overall effect on areas where there was a lot of tall building proposals. This was particularly relevant in the City, but could affect other areas too. There was no real planning of ancillary services, from making sure there were enough sandwich bars and open spaces, to underground services, station capacity and even pavement widths! It was quite frightening to see the "picture" of all the tall buildings with planning permission, and consider the effect on the ground and underground environment in terms of the practical needs and comfort of people.

4. **The problem of modelling clusters** was discussed. They are seen from 360 degrees so any fixed view is relatively meaningless. Most applications seemed to come in with a very large number of visuals from different view points, but it was still not clear how views should be assessed. There was discussion over whether it was worth considering impact in views like that from St James Park, and whether visual impact should be considered alongside regeneration objectives. No consensus here I think, but people did say that if regeneration of places like Waterloo did not actually help local people, and ended with sterile environments, should they be used to justify altering the views?
5. **Legibility and permeability** on larger sites was seen as very important but hard to ensure with tall buildings sometimes. There were some odd proposals around, with ground scrapers designed by one architect, and a “tall bit” on top designed by another. Not the best receipt for quality!
6. The issue of **residential tall buildings** was discussed. No borough thought they were getting 50% affordable housing, much lower figures were being negotiated. There was also problems of blocks in ‘seas of open space’ to preserve views from residential units, not to create good places. These designs, using tall buildings, were not particularly high density. There was a bit of discussion on whether PPS3s focus on family housing and gardens would make life harder for tall residential building applications.
7. There seemed to be concern that the **current appetite for tall buildings**, and the GLAs policy on them, was giving developers the feeling that they could justify a tall building anywhere. Some were saying, look there is a 1970’s block over there, that means this is a place for a cluster, so how about it? The standard of some of these proposals was very poor.
8. There was also concern that the **quality** of almost all buildings along the Thames is very poor, and it is hard to justify better.
9. Overall the need for **good local policies** was stressed. Boroughs seemed to feel it was better to rely on these than GLA or national policies or guidelines.