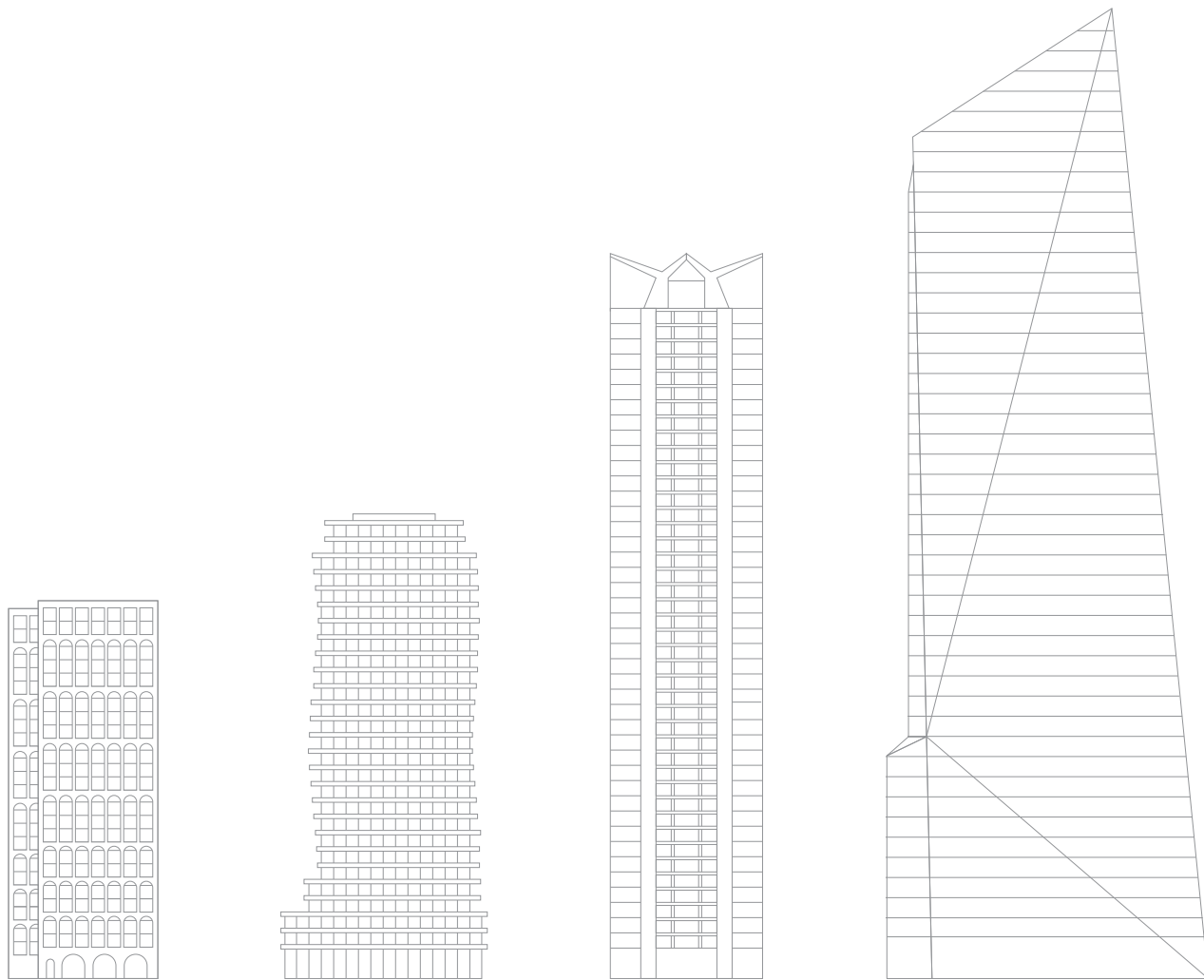


# VIEWPOINT

## What is the role of tall buildings in London?



**Kathrin Hersel**  
Property director,  
Almacantar

Despite being the most populated city in Europe, London is one of the least dense in comparison with other capital cities such as Paris, Barcelona and Athens. Ranked 27th in Europe for population density, London is spread out over 620 square miles, and our love for parks, gardens and views has ensured that postwar planning decisions are reinforced to ensure that we build out; rather than up. However, with the population of London expected to continue to grow, we have reached a critical point. We have debated for a couple of years now if we should sacrifice further green space; or do we now confidently embrace looking up?

Tall buildings play an essential role in our city. Historically, they have rarely been welcomed; but with the need to deliver more housing and the importance of protecting our public realm for our physical and mental wellbeing we should appreciate them more; in the right places, well designed and fully integrated into the wider area. With the trend of people now wishing to live closer to work (as well as the rise in co-living and co-working), thoughtful mixed-use developments, with clusters of tall buildings can provide the infrastructure and communities many desire. Tall buildings enable us to declutter the public realm, allowing better pedestrian flows, leading to more pleasant environments in which to live and work.

In the past, not enough consideration was given to the design, functionality or location of tall buildings in London. This is not the case now. Many of the recent additions to the London skyline are design masterpieces that are fully integrated into the local community and transport infrastructure. As architects and developers continue to follow this route, we will see London continue to grow; making efficient use of every square inch of its scarce land.



**Jo Negrini**  
Chief executive,  
LB Croydon

We're not shy of tall buildings in Croydon. Since the dawn of our 1960s metropolis, Croydon has always embraced a distinct skyline which sets it apart from the rest of outer London.

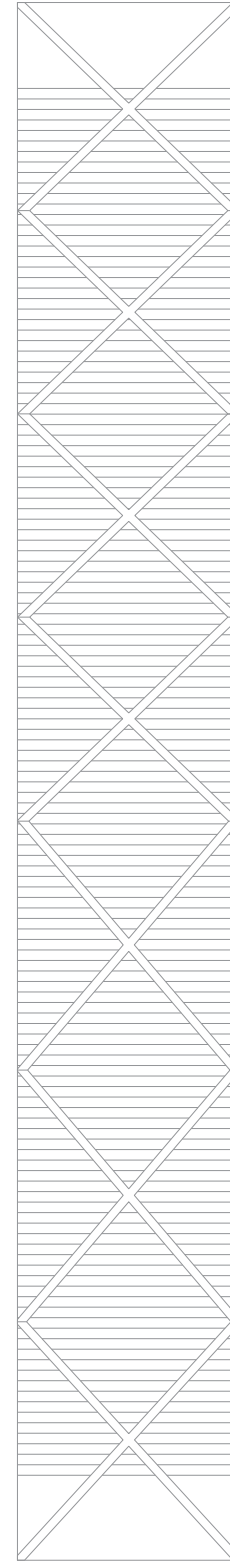
Buildings of 22, 28, 35, 43 and 44 storeys are currently under construction in Croydon. High-quality, slender towers that provide 100s of residential units, contributing to London's growth and addressing housing shortages in the capital.

But who are these homes for? The proliferation of build-to-rent schemes would have us believe that there has been a tidal change in housing choice. Home ownership is dead. Our future is renting units in blocks replete with gyms and communal barbecues, places you can socialise as a 'community'.

Of course, while these developments are a crucial part of the mix, they address only part of an ever-growing need. There needs to be a counterbalance, difference, an alternative offer. Affordable homes that can be bought or rented and where individuals, children, families can have their own room and space. Where people have security of tenure and can plan for the future.

Higher density doesn't have to mean high-rise. The mansion block, that most London of typologies, achieved density in manageable and enjoyable neighbourhoods. In great estates.

We the urban planners, designers, policy-makers, decision-takers are the pioneers of the future. Our job is to create choice, balance, beauty in our places and neighbourhoods that are relevant in the future. Croydon suffered greatly from a lack of flexibility and choice. Single land uses that stretched into the sky and became obsolete and, eventually, empty. Let's not make that mistake again.



**Karen Cook**

Founding partner,  
PLP Architecture

London's professional opportunities and varied cultural scene attract talented individuals, energised by the opportunity to participate in shaping a vibrant economy and character. Yet low population density and high land values make London one of the world's most expensive cities. Young people defer starting a family, emerging entrepreneurs face daunting leases, communities suffer from a resulting lack of commitment.

A tall building is an effective means of urban densification, inserted surgically into conservation areas or in larger redevelopment areas, achieving a critical mass of people who support effective public transport, frequent local shops and services, and belong to a community.

The tall building can contribute to a more pleasant public realm, with bicycle parking, delivery management strategies to reduce vehicles, wind mitigation, and public art.

Why not extend the public realm into the building? Not only to enjoy views from the top. A vertical village of functions along a vertical promenade can support individual occupants and surrounding inhabitants, to eat, to exercise, to go to the doctor; to encounter others with like and not-like minds, to learn, to exchange ideas. The tall building is an opportunity to support the way Londoners want to live and work.

**Sanna Wennberg**

Associate partner,  
SimpsonHaugh

From the moment this city was sown in the muddy foreshore and mire, drastic urban mutation has been intrinsic to London's genetics. At the cusp of balanced population and built form, London succumbs to its own muddy success, brought on by tumultuous events, be it the fire, the stink, the flood or the whims of globalisation. The latter, a catalyst for the influx of eye-catching giants rapidly changing the cityscape.

Historically, tall buildings have been judged as a guilty pleasure for the privileged few that make or use them.

Yet for the many, a well-executed tall building with intelligently integrated groundscape brings enhanced visual variation to a relatively homogeneous wider townscape and breathes life into the building's hinterland. It lends a way to navigate and make legible millennia of London's layered history and concealed geography.

Reflecting on London's recent metamorphosis, we should consider upheavals resulting from the planet's environmental overload. The unpalatable reality is that the urban sprawl and associated infrastructure needs reversing. Tall buildings have long contributed to London's housing need for all. This suggests tall buildings' technological advancements can help shrink London's circumference and among other sustainable measures, jettison Londoners' reliance on non-essential car use, to meaningfully reduce our carbon footprint.

Lessons learned from the social outcome and environmental legacy of tall building hot spots ranging from Spa Green Estate to Elephant and Castle and Nine Elms will be essential reading.

**Carlin Fier**

Director of marketing  
and communications,  
Brookfield Properties

The role of tall buildings in London is to create more efficient and flexible space for a variety of businesses, but just as important as the space within, is the space at ground level.

These new, tall buildings should leave wider streets for better pedestrian flow and open up to the public and invite them in; almost opposite to many of the old buildings with courtyards that looked inwards and were designed to keep workers in and the public out.

When building tall, developers need to focus on the ground level in great detail and design open public spaces with vibrant retail that will enrich and activate the surrounding area, as well as service the employees and residents above.

**Cristina Garcia**

Principal, Kohn  
Pedersen Fox

As an architect, I love tall buildings and see them as the potential solution to many of London's problems, but often they're viewed with suspicion by people outside the profession. I believe that the role of tall buildings is to help create new nodes of infrastructure and human activity. This should always improve the quality of life for people who live and work in London, providing much-needed new homes and workplaces and allowing the city to grow without unnecessary urban sprawl.

On the outskirts of London, along the new Elizabeth line or at key transport hubs, tall buildings can form a critical mass, which will bring the benefits of city life to suburban areas. In these locations, tall buildings can provide workers with convenient homes without a long commute. But, tall buildings are only beneficial if they are responsibly designed: they should enhance the urban environment for the wider community, with improvements to the public realm and additional amenities supported by the increased density of population.

As architects, our role is to ensure that tall buildings improve the experience of Londoners, through the creation of well-designed, mixed-use developments that engage with the streetscape and the wider local area. The challenge is always to create high-density areas and convincingly communicate to local residents that tall buildings can benefit their neighbourhoods – to remove suspicion and replace it with admiration.

**Deirdra Armsby**

Director of place  
shaping and town  
planning, Westminster  
City Council

London is a short city. Are we unduly distracted by tall buildings when we should be primarily concerned with their functional role in a city of finite land? Place shaping is the objective and among the layers that go to make up our City we currently find tall buildings. They are a means to an end eliciting liking and loathing. Policy- and perception-wise, tall buildings are in a default category of negativity, perhaps requiring this typology to be more exemplary in design compared with other typologies.

Given this context we are right to examine tall and other substantial built forms through the lens of place rather than just site. The bigger challenge lies beyond going tall or short. We must look to how we build and add to our communities in a variety of forms, high density has a far greater integration job to do than simply being waylaid by the fact that it will sometimes come in the form of high-rise.

The role of tall buildings in London is to play a part, in the right places, in the evolution of the City, but the bigger debates about high density, intensification and integration should come first. In the meantime, I highly recommend the silent disco at the top of the Shard.

**Sarah Hiscutt**

Planning associate  
director, GL Hearn

In the fast-paced and ever-changing environment of a city, competing demands to deliver innovation and growth are always sought and can be increasingly challenging to deliver. In the urban context, high land values, coupled with constrained sites and the strict restrictions on Green Belt development, have seen London's skyline rapidly transform. Planning policies seek to unlock sustainable urban growth, and, importantly, housing supply through the use of transformational development. In this regard, the role of tall buildings is defined by the need to make efficient use of land in well-connected and sustainable locations, which can (and should) create regeneration benefits and opportunities for existing and new occupiers to live, work and stay in London.

London has, and continues to promote and deliver, tall buildings; with increasing interest in Greater London Borough growth areas. This growth indicates the direction of travel if London is to deliver on its targets. In this regard, a careful balance needs to be struck to ensure that the planning and delivery of tall buildings is not simply about height and density alone, but requires well-considered and sensitively designed buildings that deliver quality and high-functioning external/internal environments, supporting inclusive, vertical neighbourhoods.

GL Hearn will again be co-authoring the research with New London Architecture and, now in its sixth year, the London Tall Buildings Survey will be available in March 2019.