

Nostalgic Planners in Millennial London

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By Tom Bishop – BA (Hons.) MCIQB MAPM
Project Manager

Nostalgic - adjective

1. feeling, evoking, or characterized by nostalgia.
"he remained nostalgic about the good old days"

Millennial - noun

1. a person reaching young adulthood around the year 2000.
"the industry brims with theories on what makes millennials tick"

Great cities of the world are built, torn down and rebuilt again. They must revitalise themselves all the time. Is this getting out of hand, a skyline of cranes? Construction is back to peak levels but how much of the latest building boom is affected by London's metropolitan governance issues, diplomatic relations with London Boroughs and will it actually improve the life of Londoners in this "global city"? This article attempts to explore some millennial character traits and how London Planners and Architects are reacting to this new generation.

London is such a great city because it combines beauty and history with state of the art modern living. Millennials put off significant milestones like marriage and children and prefer ownership in a city where you can enjoy the modern with the historical. Some would argue that this is the most unique and greatest quality of modern Britain and true British character – the progressive yet historically rooted approach NOT just in urban planning but in most aspects of life and the arts.

Architects and Developers have worked through the challenges of building in this historic city, even if they have had to spend more (time and money). Is it worth every penny to preserve history in contemporary urban living? That is how London outplays other cities. Or is it?

As the capital expands, it goes through waves of rebuilding, each purporting to address a dominant issue. In the late 19th century it was slum clearance; after the Second World War it was the rebuilding of a city devastated by bombing as a physical expression of a new welfare state; in the 1980s the rebuilding was an effort to revitalise the city as a global financial centre. In modern architecture and town planning we sometimes find that the best results are when Architects and Developers creatively problem solve existing obstacles and relate what they are building to its surroundings by providing the new context for it to exist socially and architecturally.

Nostalgia is an easy emotion and Planners are guilty by too easily declaring that anything built on the site must resemble the existing building or incorporate the heritage elements of the structure. Now in millennial London we should be building for a generation that don't believe in being shackled to tradition or location, for those that don't believe in the inherent value of face time and believe in the "here and now".

We should consider turning the entire planning system on its head and using it to help the market deliver the homes and offices people want to see built in their communities, rather than continuously frustrating the communities by the results. Architects and Planners could make Londoners not just accept but love new buildings and neighbourhoods. The public consultation process can be improved by casting the net more widely, ensuring that it is not just the best-resourced or most vocal stakeholders putting their views across. Should there be a better pre-consultation platform for those people too intimidated to put across their views? The planning process should therefore seek to identify the entire range of stakeholders that might be affected by or have an interest in developments. There needs to be practical support and encouragement for community and voluntary groups that might not normally participate in consultation processes.

2016 celebrated the 350-year anniversary of the Great Fire and many people feel that it was a great mistake not to allow Christopher Wren to rebuild London on a more open and geometric plan after 1666. At present there are more than 400 towers of 20 storeys or more, either under construction or in the planning process. Entire new strata are being carved out beneath the pavements to emerge and reshape a city that once revelled in its low-rise silhouette of slate rooftops and chimneys. Wren's plans are not being seen in the modern sense, he imagined large Paris-style avenues while we are keeping to medieval streets, just with higher densities.

There are many poorly-designed "ghost town" Residential towers scattered inconsistently across the city and along The River Thames resulting in Architects putting their name to the launch of the Skyline Campaign back in 2014, protesting at the quality of the build and design of these 20 storey + towers. A glance at the criteria of architectural prizes is not reassuring. Planners need to protect Designer's skills and will do so to correlate design and wellbeing. Local Authorities should be more vigilant against Developers cutting out good design elements that are not necessary or fail to bring financial value.

Some of the capital's new buildings are sophisticated, elegant and create stimulating spaces for inspiring workplaces. The Shard for example is an award winning ground-breaking design. One could compare it with some of the other towers rising across the city — buildings as objects that seem to have nothing to do with the sites on which they sit or the contexts they will so drastically alter. Take the vast ground scraper on Farringdon Street, a new building for Goldman Sachs, a crushing piece of visual branding that will dominate a neighbourhood that once accommodated everything from printing to pianos and clockmaking.

The design of tall buildings must be managed in such a way that a balanced landscape is created i.e. towers need to complement each other rather than jar with the city's backdrop. There is a sense of "nimbyism" however there are very serious points that need to be respected over what people believe constitutes quality and this is proving to be a huge challenge for the design community.

There is a young generation of professionals that don't want to be working in a traditional office. Developers and Planners need to meet in the middle to provide something that the next generation of workers want. They need to give people the opportunity to enjoy stimulating workplaces, while surrounding themselves by inspiring people and companies to promote encounters and unplanned collaborations. British Land are focusing on creating "Places People Prefer" and wellbeing is steadily rising the agenda for the modern office worker with office space, amenities, location and connectivity a deciding factor when top candidates accept a job offer.

Other examples include Google's new 11-storey office in Kings Cross, offering social and event programmes as part of their workspace packages along with inspiring and ergonomically designed space. The developments of the next few years will all be designed to maximise productivity, agility and cost-effectiveness and will move away from the cookie cutter approach. Workspaces need to adapt to the worker not the other way around. Traditional offices can be fragmented – they don't encourage interaction.

Millennials have come of age during a time of technological change, globalisation and economic disruption which has given them a different set of behaviours and experiences. They don't believe in being tied to history. They do not want to reminisce and do not see the point in hindsight or nostalgia like some Planners. This generation believes in efficiency of effort for maximum impact.

The perception of Planners in a new millennial economy is not helped by Developers who are already frustrated by the speed at which the system works, both pre-application and post-application. They would like a greater appreciation from the system that 'time is money'.

Developers say they appreciate the flexibility displayed by most local authorities when proposals are considered. However, several local authorities have idiosyncratic policies which thwart development viability – for example the lack of flexibility on the affordable housing policy, s106 terms and demands for potentially un-lettable employment spaces.

Developers fought for the requirement that local authorities decide planning applications swiftly. But all this did was force planning departments to demand extensive documents in support of planning applications and to elongate the pre-application period.

It would not be foolish to think that with the way the system is working Planners consider 'time' to be their main negotiating tool. It's also common knowledge that planning departments are considered to be under staffed.

There is also evidence of what we would prefer to call 'questionable' local authority behaviour. For an outside observer the behaviour of a minority of Planning Officers may seem, at best, bullying. Developers are loath to take a confrontational stance against such behaviour as they are aware they need to continue working with the boroughs in the medium and long term. The situation is reminiscent of the kid in the playground being bullied and not telling anyone – because if they do they are concerned the bullying will get worse.

Planners will say that design and development is built on the belief that is a need for variety and choice, a sense of belonging, the chance for delight and surprise. Urban design should be built around a robust framework with the aim to harness the value of heritage and community assets but not at the cost of engaging and inspiring the environment for those who live and work in the area.

Why are Planners ideologically & historically bound and not practically bound? Do they welcome innovative, progressive development proposals? Why do Planners hold up much-needed modern developments while championing the cause of nostalgia? While it is considered appropriate for Planners to ask for the historic context to be considered say in height or materiality and I agree in-part that a historic element is a great asset and in fact does create engaging and inspiring space, it should not open the door for nostalgia where new job creation is put at risk.

We have timid politicians refusing to reform the planning system. It could be argued that planning constraints are one of the most important breaks on British economic growth. Governments of all political hues have attempted to loosen the constraints of the planning system. However, with a brutal irony they have largely done so not by ripping up the development control system but by increasing the targets and pressure to build. With one hand the government makes it challenging to build, along with erecting barriers to entry through high capital costs and complex regulatory unpredictability. With the other it now insists that local authorities get lots built.

The consequence is missed targets and bad buildings that lack: character, continuity & enclosure, quality of the public realm, ease of movement, legibility, adaptability, diversity, environmental sustainability and community inclusiveness. In one corner, we have the approval of Planners and the compliance with a bible of codes and regulations (some which are completely necessary e.g. people will want sunlight and cycle parking) and in the other historic values which are not set in codes but in subjective planning policies.

Planners, Developers, Project Managers, Cost Managers and Marketing Agents value different attributes and (probably) prefer different types of buildings to most people. Developers that do not have shareholders willing to defer immediate profit in exchange for extra value later through good positive design or which do not have the capital to carry higher initial costs, may not see the benefit of investing in good design.

Current large projects have several common features. To start with they normally need rapid returns from the early sale of many units or pre-let floor spaces. This is for a range of reasons: firstly, land values are very high, driven by constrained supply of sites as we have seen. Secondly, there is an increasing expectation that uber-densities will be permissible which in itself drives up values further. Thirdly, a cumbersome and lengthy planning process pushes up costs even more. Promoting large developments in London is difficult and above all, expensive. The approach of maximising density on any given site often leads to slow, confrontational and unpopular development.

It is time to stop asking 'how do we build more homes and offices?' and to start asking 'how do we make new homes and offices more popular for the people using them?' If one could differentiate between setting the planning parameters for a blank canvas and designing buildings and public realm within those set parameters, we can then create the streets, homes, offices and walkable neighbourhoods in which millennials want to live and work.

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Project Manager

