The conundrum of architecture in the City

Brian Waters, past Master Architect, was the guest speaker of the Clothworkers' Livery Company last month

Your master has kindly invited me to speak for a few minutes about architecture and the City of London.

Immediately I find myself faced with a conundrum.

The City retains its mediaeval street layout with all its charming qualities and many historic buildings but it has also evolved into a centre for modern commerce which is very demanding in its use of buildings. As the business editor of *The Times* wrote a few days ago: "Cities such as Paris have been beautifully preserved but at a huge cost to their prosperity. London is a capital city – not an architectural museum – and Londoners are better off as a result."

Big Bang saw a stampede for deep trading floors and the superseding of traditional cellular offices. Change is even more dramatic today, with its remote working, hot desking and unimaginably informal ways of doing business.

Looked at in real estate terms here is the conundrum:

The office stock, as it is so charmingly called, gets renewed well before the structures approach the end of their useful lives. So how does this square with the promotion and protection of high quality architecture?

I have spent several years recently working with very adventurous clients to find new uses for two redundant Grade I churches in the West End. One, Holy Trinity Marylebone, is now a successful exhibition and events venue branded One Marylebone. When built in 1823 by Sir John Soane there was no thought given to the notion that a church might become redundant, as this one did in the 1960s, and would need to find an altogether different use.

The buildings where your Master and, at a slightly different time, I both studied, St John's College Cambridge, have endured for centuries and are fortunate in today having much the same uses as when they were conceived. But these are an exception and a contrast to what happens in the City.

When Stuart Murphy rounded a few of us up to found the Worshipful Company of Chartered Architects he was the City Architect and Planning Officer. The mood of the time was for conservation. Large parts of the City were designated conservation areas, more and more buildings were protected by listing and change was heavily constrained.

The story goes that Maggie Thatcher called Michael Cassidy at Guildhall in the run-up to Big Bang to suggest that this trend had to be reversed. And indeed it was.

In the post war era of office development the City office market was dominated by what the profession terms "commercial" architects. [As it is said, 'There are two kinds of architect – the good ones and those who do what they're told!].

They built the sort of buildings, many of which are coming to their end of life now and which nobody is calling to be preserved. On prime plots, these buildings are obsolete in every respect, not just clapped out services but obsolete floor to ceiling heights, environmental quality and so forth.

In my own career I have seen dramatic change in the services requirements for office buildings. One of my earliest projects involved obtaining an office development permit (remember them?) to build a management services headquarters for Williams and Glyn's recently merged bank, just behind Bishopsgate in Spital Square. This was the first office permission for the whole of the Spitalfields development area.

The building was designed to contain not just the bank's bullion store and offices but also their mainframe computers for cheque clearing. In those days IBM machines were water cooled – the same technology as used in model T Fords!

When 30 years ago Peter Wyn Rees was appointed City Architect he worked hard and successfully to introduce good modern architecture into the City. He did this by being ruthless with the developers, pointing them in the direction of better architects, sometimes rewarding them with more floorspace for their trouble.

But 30 years is a tricky time scale for office buildings and we are now seeing controversy where leases fall in and new owners or tenants take on an interest and, guess what, they want to change things.

A well designed building will anticipate some need for change and adaptation but the qualities of the architecture have to be carefully respected, and this is where the trouble starts. There is a current fuss about alterations to Jim Stirling's Number 1 Poultry and a similar row with David King's award-winning Terry Farrell building Landmark House, which forms a hinge between Leadenhall Street and Fenchurch Street.

To what extent should such modern buildings be protected from architectural vandalism, that is alterations to the very character that allowed their development and won them respect in the first place?

David King, writing in *Planning in London* magazine (the last issue) about alterations proposed to the entrance to Landmark House quotes the *Daily Telegraph* in 1987: "This exceptional building ... has already made a dramatic contribution to the City street scene." The developer says he was thrilled with such approval but asks: "If the kind of tinkering now proposed is allowed what will come next? ... There is no point people in my business trying to show a higher duty of care – at a certain cost – if further down the line someone else is allowed to take a scalpel to the elevation."

There is of course no easy answer. Our planning system is amazingly discretionary. Most foreign planning regimes have to adhere to very fixed zoning and codes. We enjoy a "plan-led" system which has nevertheless allowed the tallest building in Europe –The Shard – to leap up where the plan showed no tall building whatsoever!

If developers are to continue to invest in and take care to >>>

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>>> produce high-quality architecture in the City then the qualities of at least the best of those buildings need to be respected and to some extent protected for their very character and their contribution to the streetscape.

Listing quite reasonably cannot not come into play till after the thirtieth year of the building so as to allow a little hindsight before it can be judged. But the City is quite free to introduce its own 'local list' of buildings of special interest and, by adoption as policy this 'local listing' would be a material consideration when alterations are contemplated. However, the policy should not rule out replacement of a good building with a better one.

The third Clothworkers' Hall was built in 1633 but totally destroyed in the Great Fire.

Pepys wrote in his diary – "Strange it is to see the Clothworkers' Hall on fire these days and nights in one body of flame, it being the cellars full of Oyle". There was a fourth Hall taken down in 1857 and a fifth reopened in 1860. The current hall of 1958 is its sixth reincarnation.

In putting this idea – local listing – forward I would add a plea for the City to appoint a champion for great architecture and townscape to fill the void recently vacated by Peter Rees.

There is an alternative: a more dogmatic policy could be driven by a more rigid and deterministic development plan. The demolition of buildings when they are only a few decades old is an enormous waste of resources and embodied energy. Developers will explain that it's uneconomic to demolish one of these buildings unless they can show an uplift in value in its replacement of up to 40 per cent which is normally achieved by going higher and adding to density.

If the City Plan were to put absolute limits on density (I can remember plot ratio policies!), then the pressure would be on to add value by upgrading existing structures internally while protecting still valued qualities.

And before people argue that the market demands the latest form of building without which London would fail as the world's financial centre, I would simply nod towards the West End where most of the hedge funds are happy to pay higher rents than are common in the City, and mainly in traditional medium-rise buildings.

Finally, I'm pleased to note that current and recent developments underway on land in the freehold of this Worshipful Company are being undertaken by distinguished architects, some, like Eric Parry, with a Cambridge connection!

This is as good a reason as any I can think of to ask the guests to join me in thanking you Master for your kind hospitality and to stand for the traditional Company toast:

"Prosperity to The Clothworkers' Company, root and branch, may it flourish for ever!". ■

TOP:
The Clothworkers Company has for many years owned property on the north side of Fenchurch Street and on Fenchurch Avenue. 120 Fenchurch Street is being developed by Generali to designs by Eric Parry. M & G, the fund management arm of Prudential, have signed a lease to take the space as their new head office

ABOVE:
Clothworkers' Hall, - the third hall was built in1633 but totally destroyed in the Great Fire. Pepys wrote in his diary – "Strange it is to see the Clothworkers' Hall on fire these days and nights in one body of flame, it being the cellars full of Oyle" There was a fourth Hall but taken down in 1857 and a fifth reopened in 1860 *(illustration by Howard Penton)*. The current hall is the sixth reincarnation opened by the late Princess Royal in 1958.