

The towers of London, aesthetically considered

It's easy to be dismissive but towers have a stubbornly long tradition as highly prized symbols of energy, ambition and wealth. Nor, contrary to popular belief, are they only an infatuation of the male of the species, the current contender for the City's tallest tower is designed by a woman. A polemic by Bryan Avery.

Towers have been a hugely important part of the civic fabric since the dawn of civilisation. We still hold in awe the tower of Babylon; the towering lighthouse of Alexandria and the Great Pyramid of Giza. Even in London, albeit more modestly, we have had the gate towers of the Roman City, the white Tower at the Tower of London and all the towers and spires of medieval Christendom that made Canaletto's view of the Thames so indelibly memorable. Stretching a point we might even include all the factory chimneys, gasometers and monuments of the 19th Century too.

One could argue therefore that towers are quite the norm were it not for the fact that these historic towers differed fundamentally from modern towers - they weren't invasive of the public realm. Having no windows they had no eyes to intrude upon peoples' privacy and being quasi-public structures it was easier for them to achieve a neutrality that was unprovocative.

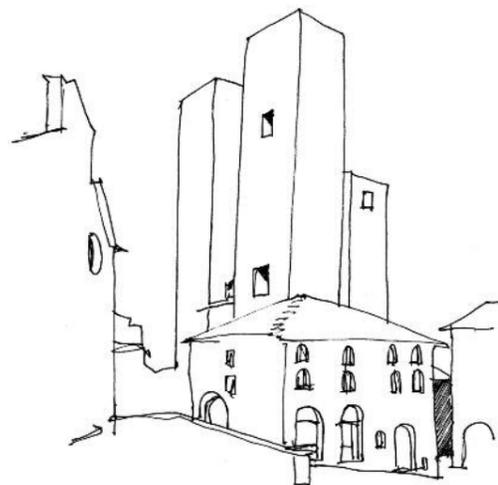
Thus whilst public squares and civic buildings could give expression to the body politic from within the city, the tower, steeple and chimney could give expression from afar and impressed more immediately and viscerally.

These quasi-public high-rise structures set a precedent that if you were to cause your building to rise above your neighbour's you needed, at least tacitly, a public sanction. At San Gimignano this could inspire individuals to a competitive but poetic expression of their standing in the community or, as in Siena, where there appears to have been a little too much self aggrandizement which unfortunately led to the sudden and catastrophic castration of all such towers by jealous Medici. This was a very harsh lesson in the greater civic sensitivities attaching to the vertical dimension rather than the horizontal and it causes all towers to be tendentious.

Thus most of the early commercial towers in London were cloaked in a quasi-public or civic guise to gain public acceptability e.g. London University's Senate House, the British Telecom Tower, New Zealand House and of course all the social housing towers expressive of the welfare state. Moreover where they weren't entirely 'civic' they were given a civic role by acting as 'beacons' in a modernist perversion of the Baroque city-plan. This had used obelisks to define a sequence of axial

ABOVE: Canaletto's view of London in 1747 shows the City's skyline full of towers

- Historic towers like the Giza pyramids weren't invasive of the public realm because they had no 'eyes'. One could look at them and they didn't look back
- Modern towers invade the public realm by putting eyes in the sky and change from being passive to active; they look back, they become watchtowers
- The towers at San Gimignano have eyes but they are few, small, and deep-set so that they avoid compromising the public realm



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LEFT: The Knightsbridge Barracks tower viewed from within Hyde Park. When too many towers ring a park as in Central Park, New York, it changes from a 'rus in urbe' to an urban atrium
 BELOW: Obelisks like this one in the Piazza del Popolo, Rome, were used to define a street axis and interlink widely separated parts of the city
 • Hyde Park: London. The modern tower as a gargantuan obelisk serves only to destroy the illusion of pastoral peacefulness within the park

routes but was now transmuted into a kind of gigantic billboard for a destination or, dread term, a 'gateway'.

Thus of the four towers placed around Hyde Park - the Knightsbridge Barracks, the Hilton Hotel, the Royal Garden Hotel and the Lancaster Hotel - three were placed there as 'beacons' to assist those unfortunates lost in the park and only one, the Lancaster Hotel, with its tube station, was both a gateway and a beacon.

However as all four are necessarily visible from within the park this had the unfortunate effect of undermining hugely the illusion of its pastoralism. It was a dangerous first move towards transforming Hyde Park from a 'rus in urbe' to the urban atrium that is Central Park.

Elsewhere the unintended consequences of tall buildings were occasionally more benign. The Euston Tower, fortuitously located on the axis of Tottenham Court Road, introduced a massive structure at the end of the street that has foreshortened its visual length and, like the campanile in the Piazza San Marco in Venice, its apparent 'roofing' of the street has helped make it a very much more agreeable and successful shopping street.

However, at the other end of the same street the principle of the tower as 'beacon' was also applied but the resultant tower, Centre Point, didn't have the advantage of a Medici's power to realign the streets so it still sits to this day uncomfortably off axis to both Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street.

Elsewhere other towers were sometimes 'paired' one on



either side of a road in an attempt to regain some civic order and symmetry in the classical manner but the modern tower wasn't a classical structure and it wasn't a civic structure anymore either.

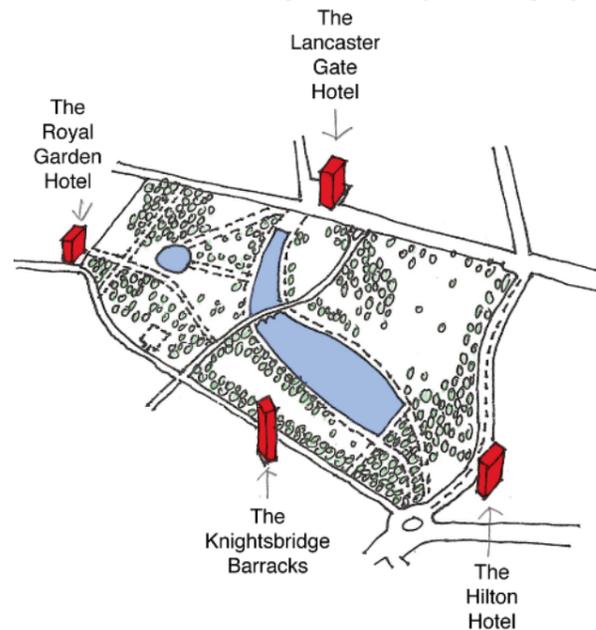
Thereafter it was pretty much a free-for-all. Towers could be built almost anywhere a developer deemed feasible and the local authorities, grateful for the revenue, would generally acquiesce. The results have been predictably disappointing for not all developers and their agents are generously civic-minded or aesthetically blessed.

This has ineluctably led to the skyline we have today; a skyline of opportunism where towers dot the city without any visible social or cultural reference, marking only a time and place where a deal was done and a developer, planner or politician got his or her own way.

How then, given that such structures now exist, can they be accommodated with some decorum, aside that is from demolition, albeit that was a notably successful solution for the three DoE towers in Marsham Street?

One option is to re-skin them in the hope that they will look less offensive as a result and it can work as the example of Neathouse Place shows, but if the problem is height and bulk then no amount of re-skinning can change that fundamental, indeed it can often exacerbate it as to pay for the face-lift a developer will almost certainly expect an uplift in area meaning a further increase in height and bulk.

Another option is to bury the eye-sores within a new context of more taller buildings such that they are no longer eye-



catching. It's a desperate measure but effective. Shanghai boasts more towers than the entire East Coast of America but all but two or three are irredeemably ugly. Even a brilliant and exquisitely detailed building like the HSBC tower in Hong Kong was robbed of its cachet in such a context, surrounded and then suffocated by bigger, brasher neighbours. How much easier then to ring round the ugly ones in the same way and drain them of their power to offend.

However if we would like the bad ones to go and the good ones to survive we have a difficulty. It would require the creation of special privileges for their protection in much the same way as for St Paul's or the Tower of London. Some are already suggesting these protections for the Shard and Gherkin but these aren't, in the eyes of the developer or owners that is, civic structures, they are a commercial crop and as a well known city planner once memorably quipped, they are there to be harvested. It would moreover stymie development around them as St Paul's etc does now and this wouldn't be good for business either.

The public of course see this rather differently. By virtue of their impact upon the skyline they become de facto very much a public concern. This leads inevitably to planning controls and then ultimately to considerations of how such towers are to be considered en-masse.

In North America this was, initially at least, self-controlled. The regular rectangular grids of the American context allowed small sites to be aggregated into city blocks and for these to be developed skywards subject only to zoning laws which required them to be stepped back as they rose to preserve their neighbours' air rights and light.

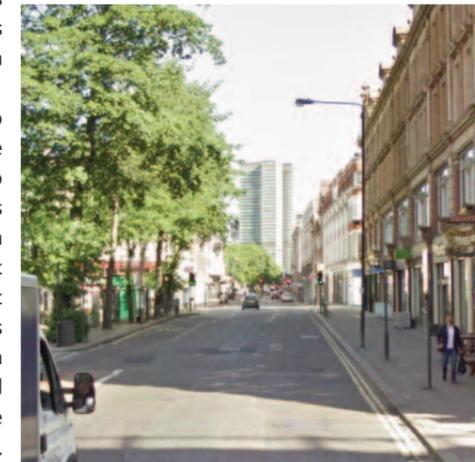
Thus developed the characteristic bar-chart profile of American cities, with each tower in a physical contiguity with its neighbours forming a geometric cubic mass that, give or take a flourish at the top or the rare diagonal slice that produced the Flat Iron building, they all shared the same genetic gene pool and appeared harmonious.

And thus to Canary Wharf. Developed in the 1980's by Canadians as a commercial outpost in the wilderness of London's East End, it was designed to provide cheap, no-frills, large floor plate buildings in the typical American manner. As a result in just 24 years it has already established the characteristic silhouette of an American city and this speaks more eloquently than any company brochure of London's enthusiasm for the new world's corporate values.

In London proper however the grid was absent and the labyrinthine medieval street plan, skewed further by renaissance set-pieces and modernist experiments, created a bewildering variety of small scale asymmetric sites from which London's characteristic complexity of architectural periods, styles and forms has developed. As there was no strong geo-

RIGHT: Tottenham Court Road: London. The road without the Euston Tower appeared dispiritingly long and was a discouragement to shoppers

- The same road with the tower foreshortens its length and makes it appear more intimate
- The Piazza San Marco: Venice. The campanile here is very largely civic and unseeing (it has a small public viewing gallery at the top) but its height and bulk provides a virtual ceiling to the square which makes it famously intimate.
- The square without the campanile



metric structure unifying adjacent plots, other contextual considerations took over, such as important local buildings and the genius loci, the views to St Paul's and the Tower, which constrained tall buildings to a central cluster, and the flight paths into the Heathrow and City airports which defined the heights to which buildings could go.

Thus in the City the plan was to designate one tall building in the central cluster as the 'summit' and to graduate the height of all others down from that as a cone to create a hill-like mass. The problem was that the cone was never a pure form, it was already compromised by various view corridors, and for some reason the cone was subsequently pierced by two rather too tall outliers, the Heron Tower and the 'Walkie Talkie'. These now stand apart as singular towers and not being a part of the 'hill', they retained the heightened power of all towers to please or to offend.

To re-balance this composition it would now necessitate either the demolition of these two buildings or more realistically a re-adjustment of the 'cone' to a 'dome'. Such a dome would need ravines cut through it to accommodate the view corridors but that might make it more visually complex - and interesting.

This aberration apart, within the square mile, things are or were until recently aesthetically sophisticated and ambitious. Arguably it began with the elegant, unfeasibly slim logo-plan of the National Westminster bank tower, then came Lloyds, the Gherkin and the Cheesegrater, all superb examples of exemplary patronage and courageous world-class design. Each of these garnered huge returns for their investors and it's not just from the uplift in rental values that such high profile schemes bring. The Gherkin is self evidently not maximizing its site's potential and has very inflexible floor plans but it's probably already paid for itself sev-





eral times over solely in the world-wide positive publicity it generated for its owner Swiss Re and its promoter the City Corporation.

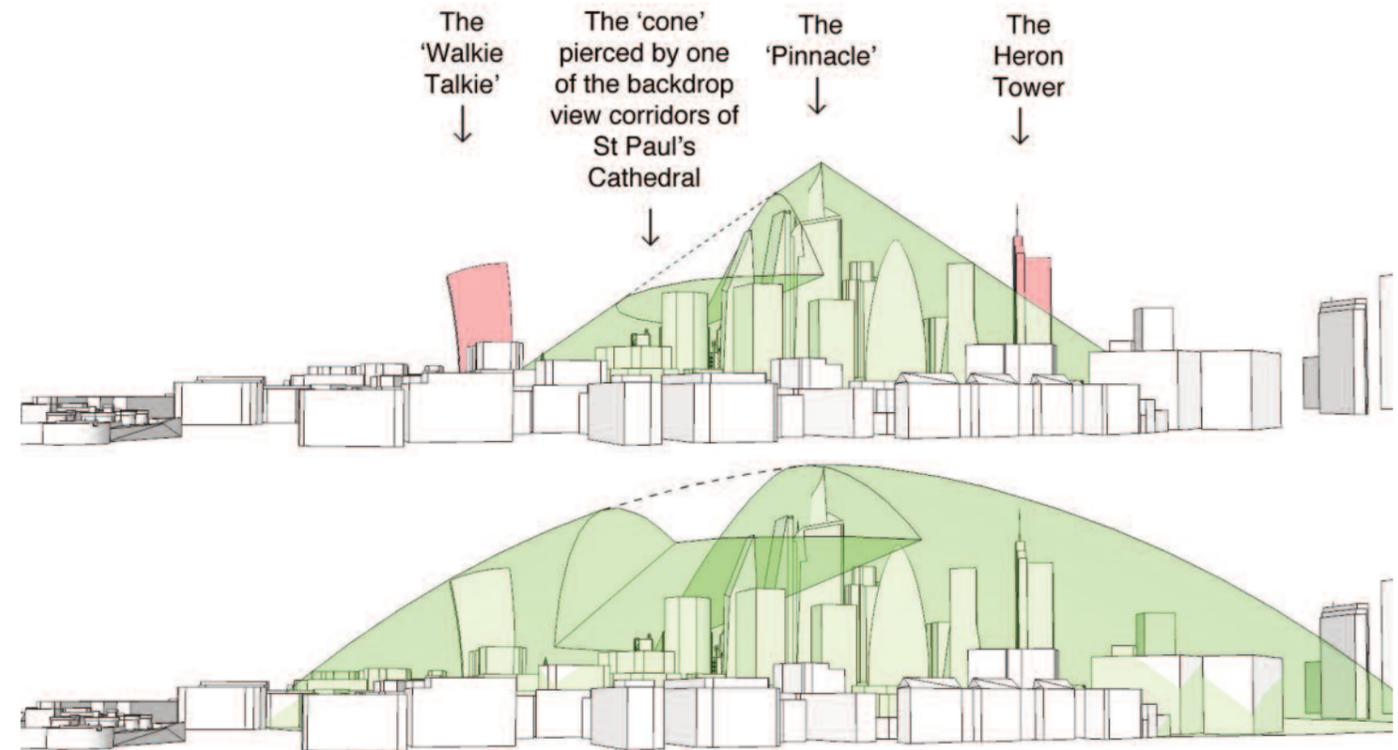
Like the Lloyds Building before it the Gherkin replaced the hitherto arch-conservative image of the City (of the Tower and Tower Bridge) with a symbol of a re-invigorated, innovative and forward-looking enterprise and thereby helped it to become the world's most famous financial centre.

And now the City is redeveloping again with a new generation of tall buildings and the prize this time is the City's tallest tower. First up was the Pinnacle, recently resurrected as Pinnacle (2). The 'old' Pinnacle was always a bit too big for its site but this Pinnacle (2) looks positively elephantine. Does it matter? Not if you're the developer; that's the game. The site is hugely expensive and is already constrained in height by the City Airports' flight path so if you're not adding value by design it makes sense to try and go as high and as wide as possible in the knowledge that it can always be knocked down a bit if the negotiations get difficult.

If this was New York such machinations probably wouldn't matter so much as the whole island of Manhattan is automatically constrained by its geography and zoning laws, hence its organic appeal, but the City is a very much more sensitive and delicate structure. Furthermore London isn't just about the City. It has a broader cultural responsibility in the life of the capital and it has to preserve the visibility of key structures and to conserve not just St Paul's and the Tower but a mediaeval street pattern with its labyrinthine alleyways and a multitude of small churches and precious buildings spanning many hundreds of years too. In short, the City is bedded into the physical and spiritual culture of London and in this context the buildings need to speak to an engaged and cultured audience. Thus the Lloyds building, the Gherkin, the Cheesegrater, and even the Walkie-Talkie, are important parts of this cultural conversation.

So is it possible then to place a taller tower against others in the City without devaluing them, preferably even enhancing them? Is it possible to bed a tower within its context as one would be required to do in say a conservation area and at the same time raise the cultural debate about the design of tall buildings generally?

About five years ago now we were asked to look at the site known as No1 Undershaft on the east side of the Cheesegrater, between it and the Gherkin. It was in a different ownership then but the development issues probably remain much the same today. The site had, at the front,



on the south side, a small public plaza alongside the Cheesegrater which had to be retained. At the back, on the north side, the site abutted some very much smaller buildings and just across the road to the East is the Gherkin.

In the early studies the design took shape as a fairly conventional centre-core tower with either circular, square or

FAR LEFT TOP: This 1988 sketch of the HSBC tower in Hongkong would not be possible today because it's been dwarfed by the towers around it

FAR LEFT: These paired towers on Vauxhall Bridge were probably intended as pylons to mark the crossing of the Thames and the entrance to the central city but they should have been a matching pair and more obviously civic. Also at the head of the vista No 1 Neathouse Place was never high enough to be an 'obelisk' and make the composition legible

- The St Paul's Bridge with Twin Pylons as proposed in 1914 by Sir Albert Edward Richardson and Charles Lovett Gill

- These three towers were built for the Department of the Environment in 1971 and were demolished in 2003 primarily because of their visual impact upon the nearby Westminster World Heritage Site

- No1 Neathouse Place was built in 1962 as a typical 'gateway' tower of its period spanning the road from Vauxhall Bridge

- In 1997, Neathouse Place was re-built and re-clad to improve its performance and appearance and subsequently won many awards including the prestigious BCO 'Best Urban Workplace' Award. It was designated Landmark status in 2010

LEFT: Canary Wharf expresses the characteristic bar-chart profile of an American city

- The Lloyds Building 1986

- The National Westminster Bank Tower 1980

- No 122 Leadenhall St ('the Cheesegrater') 2014



trapezoidal options tapering to the top but whatever plan form it had, if it rose vertically it was always destined to be in the Cheesegrater's shadow. It would have wonderful views of the latter's external lift banks but the wider vistas of the river and the City would always be denied it.

Eventually we realized that if the building was made to lean very slightly to the south it would quickly meet the point >>>

ABOVE: The 'Pinnacle' tower in the City was conceived as the apex of a cone under which all other towers in the central area would be subservient. It was always a difficult form to realize as it was compromised by various view corridors and it has also since been breached by the Heron Tower and 'Walkie Talkie'

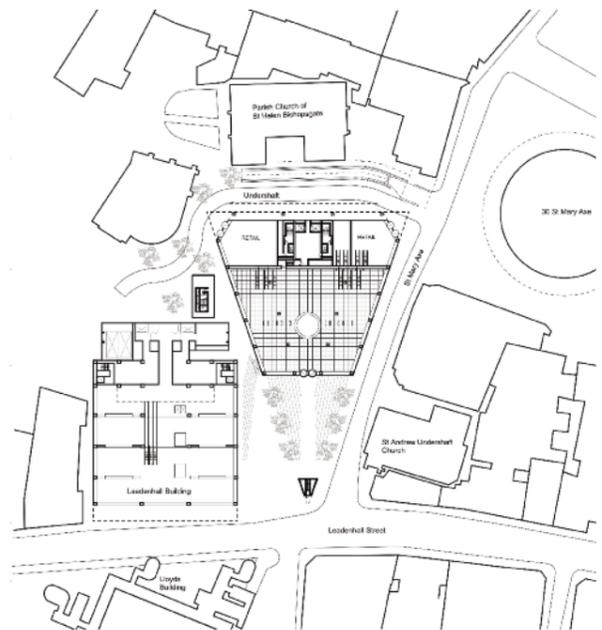
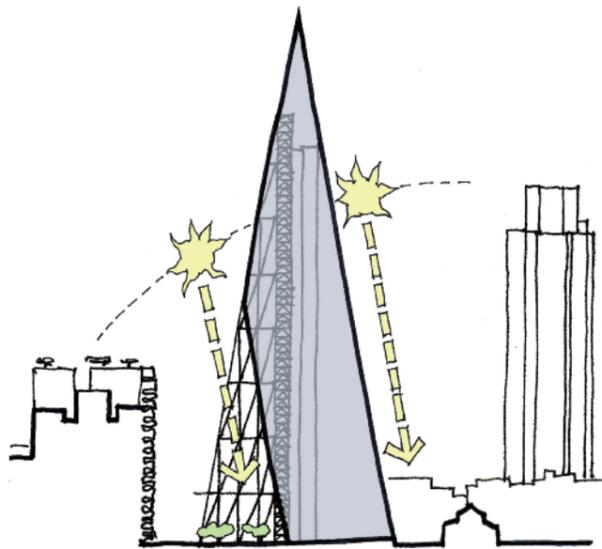
- Aside from demolition, the only way to rescue the vision now would appear to be to expand the cone to a dome and infill the interstices

LEFT: The Pinnacle (No 1)



COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

- The Pinnacle (No 2)
- The 'Walkie Talkie'
- The Contiguous Tower: Geometrical relationship to the 'Cheesegrater'
- Ground Floor Plan
- Level 4 Plan
- Section
- The Contiguous Tower: View West from China Wharf
- The Contiguous Tower: View East from Waterloo Bridge showing the 'finial' effect on the 'Cheesegrater'
- The Contiguous Tower: From Fleet Street the full trompe l'oeil effect comes into play with the 'Cheesegrater' mirrored by the new structure

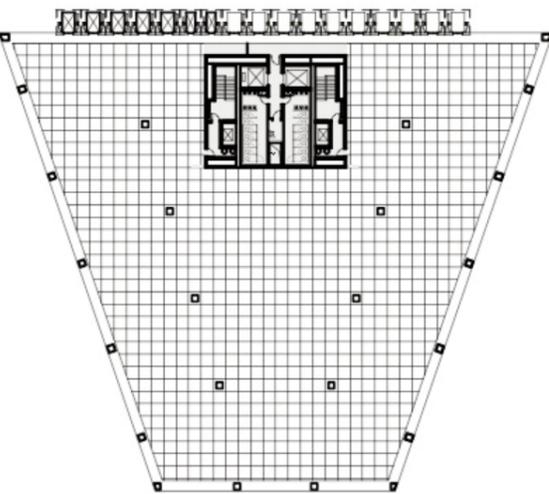


where it aligned with the Cheesegrater leaning the other way and not only would this reduce the effect of shading and any overpowering visual impact on the low buildings to the north, it would still allow sunlight onto the plaza at the front.

Furthermore, by using the reciprocal angle of the Cheesegrater and reversing it where the two aligned, it prevented the new building from interfering with the strategic view of St Paul's from Fleet Street and brought the uppermost offices out onto the same plane as the Cheesegrater thereby to enjoy the same views.

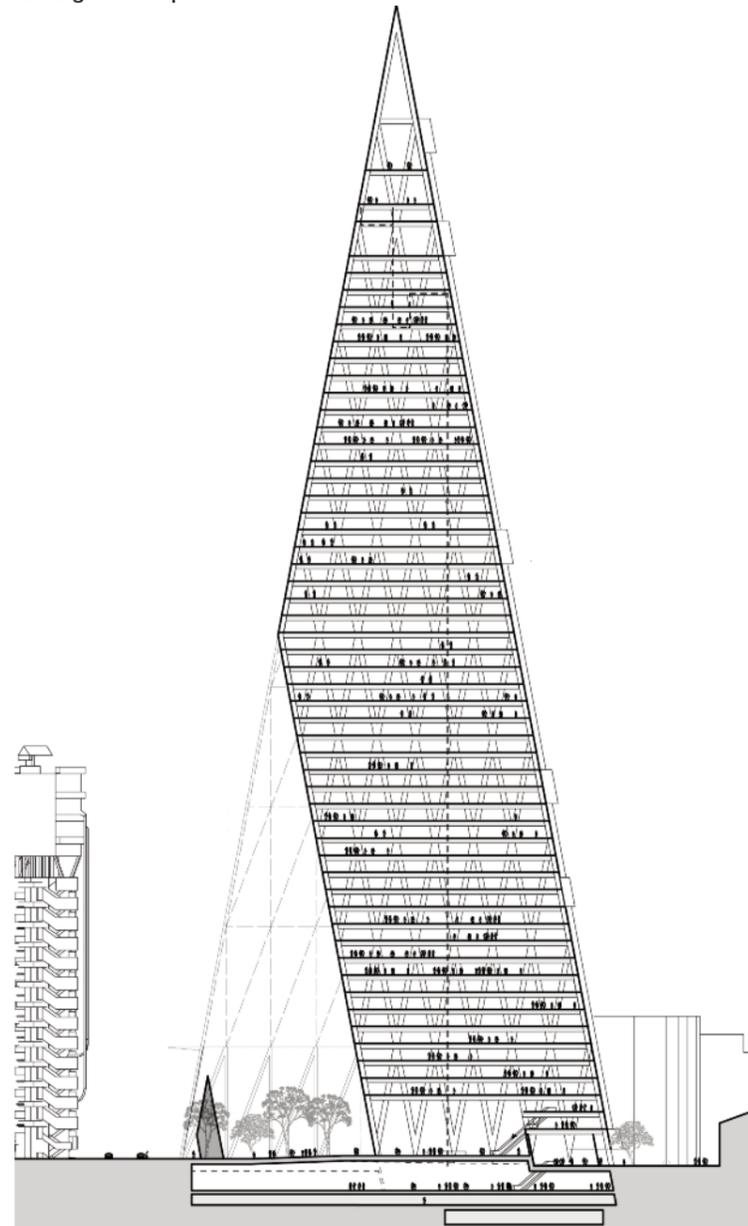
Of course none of this was developed in isolation of the contiguity of the site. The external lifts resonated aesthetically with the Cheesegrater as did the glazing and external diagonal framing with the Gherkin too. The floor to floor heights were the same also as in the Cheesegrater so that, although No 1 Undershaft was 12 floors higher and 25 per cent larger in lettable office area than its neighbour, the two buildings worked in visual harmony one with the other.

Indeed, whereas from some angles the Cheesegrater could appear to be a rather blunt instrument, the addition of the new building allowed a re-balancing of the skyline with the creation of a trompe l'oeil spire-like finial. The effect of this on the total



composition was to add another layer of complexity and subtlety to the City's silhouette whereby to give London what all other cities envy, another exciting tower that would add lustre to its reputation as the world's foremost creative, commercial, and cultural centre. ■

CREDITS: Architects: Avery Associates Architects
Structural Engineers: WSP
Lift Engineers: Arup.





ABOVE:
The Contiguous Tower:
This view shows how the new tower joins the 'Cheesegrater' to enjoy the same views at the top whilst keeping the base clear

RIGHT: The Contiguous Tower: At the rear the diagonal bracing and external lifts forge a continuity with both the 'Cheesegrater' and the 'Gherkin'

FAR RIGHT: The Contiguous Tower: When isolated from its context the basic stability of the form can be seen for whilst it leans, the great bulk of its weight is low down creating a very low centre of gravity.

