

# Planning and Environment Reference Guide

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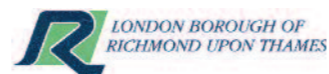
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# From Wrenaissance to Wregeneration



Sir Terry Farrell

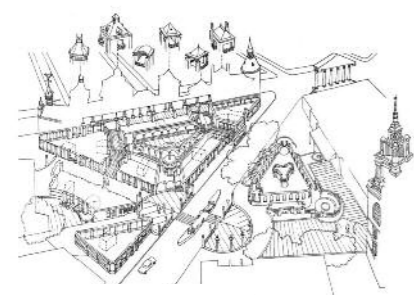
As part of the London Festival of Architecture I was invited to give the inaugural Wren Lecture in aid of the INSPIRE! Appeal which aims to raise £2.5 million for vital work to St Bride's Church, one of Wren's undisputed masterpieces.

Wren's contribution to London as an architect is unsurpassed and the inscription on his tomb "if you seek my monument, look around you" is as true today as it was in the 18th Century. Wren was of a generation of revolutionary thinkers the like of which had never been seen before and in all likelihood will never be seen again. The two cultures debate that emerged during this era of enlightenment was an incredibly powerful and in some respects uniquely British phenomena. When Blake depicted Newton he was lamenting the limitations of science through the medium of artistic expression.

This dichotomy between the rational, 'top down' approach which has pervaded architectural and planning theory ever since and the creative, artistic approach that celebrates complexity and diversity is still very much in evidence today.

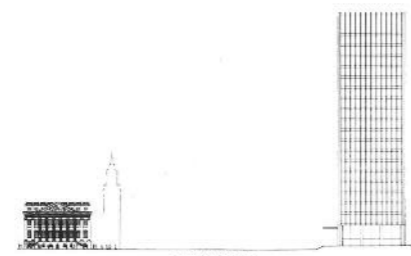
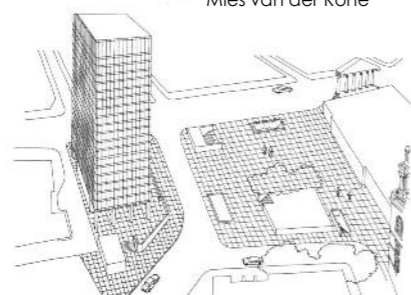
Wren's plan for London was thankfully never implemented and I think it was revealing how an architect of his stature approached a city wide plan. London, unlike Paris, was never rebuilt according to a grand plan and has a long history of adapting and making incremental changes that is more like the self ordering that we see in nature than anything Haussman would identify with. The closest Wren came to this was 'Haussmannising the skies' as a result of the peculiarly British and arbitrary legislation protecting views of St Pauls that have determined where all our tall buildings are.

## Mansion House



Farrell

Mies van der Rohe



**The most successful projects ... celebrate the key ingredients that make London the most liveable city in the world.**

Later attempts by Abercrombie to impose a plan that was civil engineering led were also rejected in favour of working with the grain and I believe we must learn lessons about this natural inclination to evolve organically and move away from the iconic and gestural planning that has been favoured even in recent years (as was evident at the South Bank and Paternoster Square) over what works and what manifestly does not work in the context of London.

One of the most extreme examples of this was the debate over Mansion House where the architectural community were almost unanimously in favour of Mies van der Rohe's plan (pictured here along with my alternative scheme produced for SAVE Britain's Heritage at the time). I believe the debate has moved in the right direction, albeit slowly and painfully, away from a Corbusian view of the world towards a paradigm that Jane Jacobs would be more familiar with. It is no coincidence that this has happened at the same time as most other industries have moved from a 'Fordist' model of mass production to a more open and bottom up model that celebrates diversity and consumer customization driven by the internet.

My work advising the Mayor in recent years on the importance of high streets and the public realm has manifested itself in projects that my practice has been working on such as Earsl Court, Holborn and Vauxhall. The imperative has been about placemaking and the subordinate role of the 'object' (as in buildings) over the surrounding streets, squares and public spaces. One of the early proponents of such an approach was John Nash who understood that working with the existing urban grain was vital as can be seen in his incremental and phaseable plans for Regents Street which I am still fighting today to reinstate and celebrate as the 'Nash Rambles'.

Throughout London major regeneration projects are stitching back together again black holes in the fabric many of which are situated along London's lost and industrialised rivers such as Counters Creek, The Fleet and The River Lea. the important thing is to really analyse these patterns and get under the skin of a city that has built up layer after layer over many hundreds of years.

The most successful projects that are moving forward these days are not trying to reinvent but instead celebrating the key ingredients that make London the most liveable city in the world. There is an old Irish saying that if you want to get there I wouldn't start from here. I suppose my appeal is that here is not such a bad place to start after all. ■