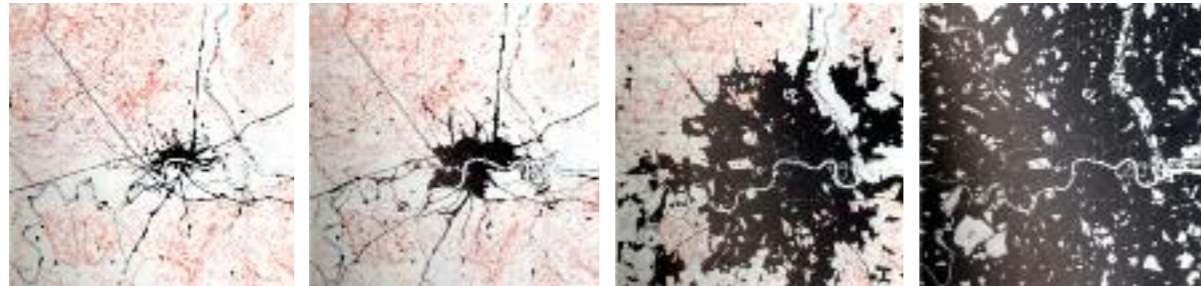


# A date with density

Planning in London's campaign to loosen the Use Classes corset was brought back to life by Eric Pickles' recent announcement enabling change of use from offices to residential. Here architect Philip Turner argues why it's a good idea for city buildings to be more flexible. Interview by Lee Mallett



LONDON in 1700, 1800, 1900 and 2000

**Philip Turner:** AHMM design buildings of all types and principally in London. But London is a city that has developed over four to five hundred years without needing to be specific about uses – at least in a legal planning way.

**Lee Mallett:** You can see that easily when you look at a map of the city from the 17th century to the 20th century - an enormous amount of growth before anybody even thought of the need to impose use classes.

**PT:** These buildings were built with a specific use in mind - most usually residential, but now the townhouses of Mayfair are developers' offices, the houses of Harley Street are doctors' surgeries and so on. Indeed the buildings we often work with were existing buildings perhaps designed as barracks that looked like temples and that are now art galleries. Or warehouses that now happen now to be private members' clubs or offices or restaurants. And what we find is that buildings most usually remain very flexible despite the fact that they were designed historically with a different purpose in mind. Indeed, before you needed to specific about the way that they would be used.

**LM:** You're still finding when dealing with historic buildings that the form and structure allows the same sort of flexibility today as preceding four centuries of different types of use.

**PT:** Architects become obsessed with building buildings to functions that are extremely specific whereas relatively basic buildings of the past were built very generously without being too specific. As a result they can be used in a range of unexpected ways.

**LM:** Well then what happened?

**PT:** Look at Erno Goldfinger's 1947 drawings for uses in London. There are two aspects to this. One was a new-found vogue for town planning which attempted to replace the model of old London with a carefully planned series of zones for housing, offices, industry, shops and so on, as well as a range of new streets, all intended to make life more palatable and cheerful - but ultimately would have resulted in a very dull zoned city. But also the 1947 plan was introduced with the Town and Country Planning Act. This introduced the idea of use classes and transferred the management of different uses from private individuals to the state.

**LM:** That represented a transfer of power don't you think? Which still resides in the planners hands?

**PT:** It does and it also represented another change in that you needed to be specific for the first time about how to use your own building and were legally obliged to do so. Whereas previously buildings had changed use frequently without anyone worrying.

**LM:** What you are saying is that it's too restrictive a practice on the flexibility a city needs to develop? Looking at the range of buildings AHMM have designed is that how you think clients also feel?

**PT:** I think it has just proved to be irrelevant. London is full of buildings designed before 1947 that remain very useful - often more useful than the very specific buildings that have been planned out since. And London's model remains a model of



The principles behind simple, flexible spaces



Philip Turner is associate director at AHMM. Lee Mallett is editorial director of PiL. This interview is based on a paper Turner presented at a PiL briefing seminar earlier this year which looked at accommodating more flexibility for changing uses.



private individuals deciding how best to use their buildings. If we are going to find a way of densifying the use and occupancy and enjoyment of London, we need to do so by returning to a model where buildings change use according to demand at different points in economic cycles or different points during the day.

This is a photograph of a school we have completed, alongside a more speculative design for an office space - called the 'White Collar Factory' that we have developed with Derwent London. The point is that both these designs - as built in Westminster Academy, and as proposed for a commercial office development are technically very similar.

They are tall, well-lit generous spaces with simple servicing, concrete structures, generally exposed ceilings that can be divided and used in different ways according to the needs of the moment. So a school has six classrooms that can be knocked together to form an exam room, or larger hall an office that isn't a "Cat'A" state-of-the-art office that in five years time needs to be ripped out and replaced. It is instead a very simple space with simple servicing, natural ventilation and day-lighting that will not become the victim of a moving market.

**LM:** Your image (next page) shows the growth of Conservation Areas?

**PT:** Legislation seems to confirm that a rapidly increasing proportion of London and of the rest of the country is effectively complete, to everyone's satisfaction. Buildings are listed and whole areas are conserved and change in those areas is resisted.

The growth of conservation areas is extremely rapid and it seems to rule out methods of urbanism in architecture that were previously identified as models for densification. These relied on significant increases in height or wholesale changes in the planning of an area that are now resisted, perhaps quite rightly, by many people. But this precludes the change of use of most of central London. 80% of Westminster is a Conservation Area - then you are increasingly forced to use existing buildings and existing envelopes if not the fabric.

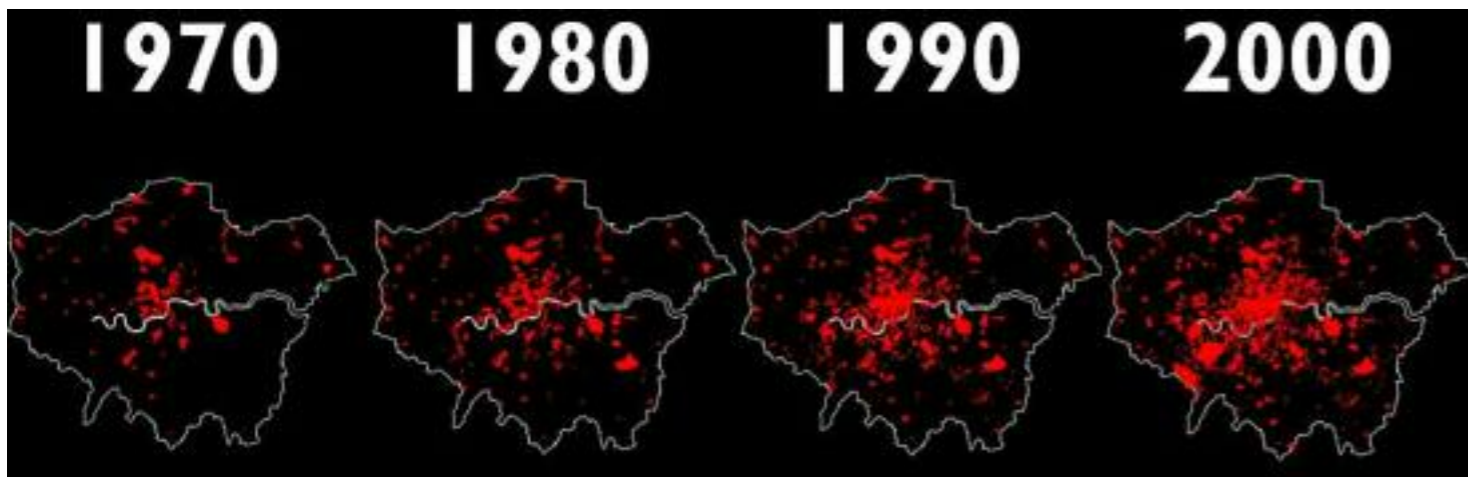
**LM:** What we're saying is there have been historic models that densified the city (we're now looking at these extraordinary images of the replication of office buildings, Corbusier-style in and around St Paul's or Seifert's iconic Centre Point building that replicate in waves out to the horizon as sort of abstract exemplars of how modernism might have thought of extending the City (see Corbusian image overpage). What's that about? Previous ways of thinking about these issues?

**PT:** Yes. And they were developed at a time when a great deal of

ABOVE: Erno Goldfinger's proposed use-zoning plans for Hoxton



FAR LEFT: New, flexible workspace - 'White Collar factories' and LEFT: existing offices converted to student housing at King's Cross (AHMM)



TOP: Conservation Areas: a growth industry  
ABOVE: Manhattan and Greater London to scale



Corbusian concept of repetition to increase density

London was destroyed by the Luftwaffe. They relied on an American model of development which is that if you want more space, build higher. And they have proved unsuccessful. Though I might like Centre Point as a development deal (where Camden got a roundabout and Harry Hyams got a very tall building out of it) we find it very difficult to build very tall buildings anywhere except the most clearly identified positions. The Shard took however long in planning, it was almost a unique deal and we need to find a way of progressing that is less reliant on wholesale change.

That brings us to what I proposed in the talk at the use classes event which is to say that: it should be possible within regulation - legally possibly - to alter the use of your building without applying for planning permission unless of course you're going to do something that is completely objectionable within, like run a glue factory, or a nightclub. Ultimately there's very little difference between an office and a loft apartment and a school or a shop.

Then in addition to this change in regulation we should define a building type that we can put up that is simple and generous enough to stand the test of time to change from one use to another without being replaced which is an environmentally a silly thing to do. That is the direction a lot of our proposals for buildings are heading in. We try increasingly to recreate Victorian warehouses albeit it within the confines of the new Part L.

**LM:** And is this architecture about giving freedom back to the owner for that reason alone or is it more to do with what the city needs?

**PT:** Well for me it's more to do with what London needs. London appears stifled by a lack of supply. Central London offices are expensive, central London houses are even more expensive and this isn't just because central London is a pleasant place to live. In fact until recently it wasn't a very sought-after location. It is instead due to lack of supply.

So we need to find ways of densifying use that don't rely on simply densifying the quantity of space. And it means that you make space that will be in use all the time, unlike my house which is empty all day and our offices which are empty all weekend. And you try and build buildings that are multi-use, multi-occupancy layered, which brings us to this slide which is a proposal we produced for a sketch competition about the *Guardian* site in Farringdon several years ago [2004] attempting

to reinvent that as a super dense multi-use, but legally appropriate new kind of building

**LM:** More appropriate in urban design terms as a way of repopulating an area that was deserted in the evening and only inhabited in the day time. It would bring life back to that part of the city because of the mix of uses you introduced to it. But you're not really suggesting that office and residential space are interchangeable within 24 hours?

**PT:** It's the logical conclusion of the conversation, but it's not fail-safe.

**LM:** It's more about a change of use over a longer period of time isn't it?

**PT:** It's about defunct factories taking decades to be included in a new local plan. They are then zoned as housing and another five years have gone by before you've got consent and then another three years have gone by before you've cleared the site and built the building. So 15 years later you need a factory again rather than a house but the tough luck is that you've just ended up with a house, and it kills areas of London as a result.

**LM:** So what you are proposing is?

**PT:** London ultimately needs the legal power to use buildings returned to the building owner - ie, to abandon use classes. In giving the buildings back you should try to encourage them in some way to build buildings that are flexible over time. It doesn't need to be a building that physically changes, it's a building that stays the same but it can become occupiable in different ways.

Residential developers in particular should be encouraged not to build to the minimum space standards and height but instead to build buildings that are slightly more generous and can therefore switch from C3 to B1, when in fact at the moment were all talking about B1 to C3 [offices to resi] - except for the City of London who are obviously desperately worried about it. There's not a lot of point if you can't build a housing block that one day could also be an office building.

**LM:** What do you think that would do for London?

**PT:** London has benefited as other large cities have done in the last 50 years from the re-use of vacant buildings that happen to be quite generous.

There is the well known regeneration cycle of artists, followed by creative industries, and all of a sudden you have British Land developing in Shoreditch. These cycles have relied on the warehouses of Clerkenwell or Lea Valley in order to carry that cycle through.

**LM:** There is something about the power of the architecture which contains the spaces as well isn't there? There's a robust, appealing materiality about them and a functionality. What do you think a modern interpretation of that would have to do aesthetically to provide the same sort of appeal? And maintain that appeal?

**PT:** It's an interesting question because 50 years ago we relied on technology which brought with it its own aesthetic to allow for change. So all of the ideas of Jean Prouvé or Cedric Price, of buildings that adapt, have pieces un-bolted and bolted back on, which led to Grimshaw and Foster and everyone else producing amazing high-tech buildings, has in a sense taken us in the



LEFT: Rooftop pool at Shoreditch House in the Tea Building, Hackney. From warehouse to luxury club

wrong direction. We should really be building buildings that have no technology that are inhabitable in a very simple way at different points in the cycle. What they will look like ultimately depends on taste, or the area in which they are built.

**LM:** So planning needs to be thinking about new building models for urban development?

**PT:** Well in fairness planners are trained to follow rules. And at the moment the rules they have got are too tight in terms of how a building should be used, the planning system is also grossly under-funded and therefore we have almost no time to think further than the next application that just landed. ■