

THE “AMERICAN” SKYSCRAPER: PERCEPTIONS OF THE SKYSCRAPER IN BRITISH MEDIA DURING THE FIRST DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract

The absence of the skyscraper from the British skyline in the first decades of the twentieth century is notable. This paper contributes to an understanding of some of the reasons for this by analysing how perceptions of what was seen as an essentially “American” form of architecture within British contemporary media, influenced architectural practice in Britain at the time. It will be seen that apathy if not overt hostility met the calls for the skyscraper to be adopted to alleviate some of the pressing urban issues being faced in Britain, resulting in the skyscraper remaining absent from the British urban skyline.

Keywords: skyscraper; American and British architecture; urban design; media

Introduction

At a time when skyscraper construction was an ever-increasing phenomenon in the United States of America, the absence of similar constructions in Great Britain is notable. This paper examines how perceptions of the skyscraper, represented through contemporary media influenced architectural practice in Great Britain in the interwar period. This article illustrates how perceptions of the “American” skyscraper developed in Great Britain, in response to an apathetic narrative presented in the British media, resulting in, at best a reticence to adopt the architectural form and at worst, hostility towards what was seen as an alien building typology. As will be seen, debate concerning the skyscraper and its suitability, specifically to the London skyline, provided a context within which the adoption of the “American” skyscraper would have been seen as contentious. Yet, the relaxation of prevailing building height regulations becomes much more realistic.

American architecture and British attitudes

An awareness of American architecture was increasing within British architectural circles in the first decades of the twentieth century, through American Architectural technologies being tentatively employed in a limited number of buildings in England, reporting of architectural development in cities such as Chicago and New York in the national press, academic and professional presentations, and a number of influential architectural exhibitions. One such exhibition took place in 1921 with an exhibition of North American architecture held at the galleries of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). The exhibition was reviewed in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* (Hall, 1921, pp. 47-51) allowing a significant amount of exposure for exhibits of a new architectural tradition. The editorial of the *Journal* reviewed the exhibition favourably. Recognising that London was in a period of architectural redevelopment the *Journal* was keen to allay the fears of those who were uneasy about the form

the new developments were taking. Referring to the New York Municipal Building, by McKim, Mead and White, the *Journal* describes the building as a skyscraper of “great beauty, and probably the most successful of the tall buildings in America” (Hall, 1921, p. 48). This admiration for an American skyscraper falls short of a direct call for the adoption of skyscrapers in Britain’s cities. However, when reference is made to the Goram Building, the editorial gives a clearer indication of some of the prevailing British attitudes towards tall buildings and skyscrapers. This shop building in Fifth Avenue possessed the admirable qualities of simplicity and proportion, and as a result, was much imitated within the United States. The *Journal* called for its imitation within the streets of London:

It is 130 feet high to the top of the cornice, facing on a street 100 feet wide and a side street 60 feet wide. Such a building is impossible in London with the existing restrictions upon the height of buildings, and it is important that all who are interested in this subject should see this example of the proper use of freedom. Consider the eminently satisfactory shape it gives us – neither a “skyscraper” nor too low for good proportion. Is not the time ripe for some alteration in our own Buildings Acts whereby architects may arrive at the right height both for architectural treatment and for meeting the growing requirements of healthy commercial activity? (Hall, 1921, p. 48)

The exhibition also benefited from addresses given by two American architects, Bertram Goodhue and Donn Barber, in which the European antecedents of American architecture appear to have been offered as a form of palliative to those anxious about the implications of architectural innovation in America. These addresses reflected the content of the exhibition so far as the significance of the skyscraper within American architecture was subdued. A favourable review of the exhibition, based mostly upon the accompanying addresses given by American architects Goodhue and Barber,

was published in *The Architectural Review*. The review reproduced many of the photographs exhibited, none of which, however, were of skyscrapers (The Architectural Review, 1922, pp. 31-39).

In addition, architectural developments in America were reported in the national press. As the skyscrapers of New York and Chicago reached ever higher, their construction was reported to the British public. It was frequently the case that the reporting of each new building proposal merely noted building specifications and costs. Rarely was there any comment upon the architectural merits of the skyscraper. Evidence for this is shown in a number of articles in *The Times*, including *The largest “skyscraper”* (The Times, 1924, p. 9), *Another new skyscraper for New York* (The Times, 1926, p. 12), *New York’s tallest skyscraper* (The Times, 1928, p. 15) and *Tallest skyscraper in the World* (The Times, 1929, p. 16). However, when American architecture was the subject of evaluation, the perception of the skyscraper and its role in defining twentieth-century American architecture is pronounced. In an article entitled *Architecture in New York, the beauty of the skyscraper* which appeared in *The Times* in 1925 there is evidence that the skyscraper had become a more familiar and accepted architectural form (The Times, 1925, p. 13). However careful interpretation of the perception of the skyscraper represented in such reports is required to assess the extent to which there remained the presence of a prejudicial subtext. It is reported that the aesthetic inadequacies of earlier designs, which failed to disguise successfully the steel-frame construction of the earliest skyscrapers, had been overcome. According to *The Times* correspondent, no beauty was to be found in these engineered constructions whose only merit lay in their size. These opinions, which dismissed the aesthetic qualities of the visual articulation of construction methods, provide an interesting insight into the aesthetic thinking which remained and dominated within Britain. It is reported that “the skyscraper, from one of the ugliest things, has grown into one of the most beautiful” and that “it is in the skyscraper that native talent found its most original expression” (The Times, 1925,

p. 13). The zoning laws of 1916 are credited with alleviating many of the problems of overcrowding associated with skyscraper development, however, in charting the development of the skyscraper, the article succeeds in detailing these problems, together with all the others which were being employed by those opposed to the introduction of the skyscraper in British cities. The coverage in the British press of the continuing development of the American skyscraper emphasised and, it could be argued, sought to maintain the geographical distance between the skyscraper and Britain. What was suitable for American cities would appear for many, not to have been suitable closer to home. This point is emphasised in a *Times* article of 1929 which provided an illustrated account of the "modern treatment of the skyscraper" (The Times, 1929, p. 13; 19). Photographs of a number of the more recent skyscrapers constructed in America were provided to support the claim that the design of American skyscraper had improved to the extent that it more adequately served the requirements of a modern American city. The Tribune Tower at Chicago was considered to be of a far superior design to the "old type" of skyscraper. However, support for the skyscraper was not unequivocal. The question remained "whether in the growth of the modern metropolis, the skyscraper's undoubted advantages have been outweighed by, or have outweighed, the congestion of the streets and the public transport which has resulted" (The Times, 1929, p. 13). The zoning laws were once again held responsible for encouraging improvements in skyscraper design, but nevertheless, the article addresses issues of architectural practice and proportion conceived with the aid of unprecedented economic prosperity and in response to problems of which "the Old World had no conception" (The Times, 1929, p. 13). Great architecture, it was argued, was formulated to meet the specific requirements of its age. In other words, the skyscraper was seen as an American solution to an American problem.

Debates within RIBA

The favourable perceptions of the American skyscraper contained in the reviews of the exhibition of American architecture were made within the context of the more specific debate that was ongoing within the RIBA concerning building height regulations. Increasing economic pressure to allow the construction of taller, and as it was argued more profitable, buildings was accompanied by an increasing, if sometimes sporadic, faltering and ultimately ineffectual call for a legislative change. It was reported that in the years after the end of World War One, as the economy improved, there was a significant increase in demand for commercial property. This was evidenced in London by sharp increases in the volume of leasehold and freehold transactions, together with a rise in the value of the properties involved (The Times, 1920, p. 7). As a result, it was reported that “there may be so great a demand for central properties that in time a new type of building may be sanctioned in London – new to London, and probably peculiar to it – something intermediate between the larger structures, such as those in Kingsway, and the ‘skyscraper’” (The Times, 1920, p. 7.) In a paper titled *Higher buildings for London* presented to the RIBA in 1920, the architect Delissa Joseph called for provision within the building regulations to be made for the erection of buildings of increased height (The Times, 1920, p. 4). It was reported that the matter was the subject of a lively debate notable for the contribution of Sir Martin Conway. Whilst he claimed not to be calling for the introduction of the “skyscraper,” wishing that the word could be left out of the discussion, he lamented the fact, that in his opinion, the maximum use of London’s finite number of building plots would not be possible within the framework of current building height restrictions. Conway “did not care what the height of the new order of buildings might be – 200 ft., 500 ft., or 5000 ft., - but there must be ascertainable what might be called an ‘economic height’” (The Times, 1920, p. 4). This call for the introduction of taller buildings for economic reasons followed an earlier call for their construction for residential purposes when he addressed the

London Society. He delivered a speech titled “London As I Should Like to See It,” in which he argued for a city of giant towers allowing for the clearance of the “mean streets” of the East End whilst retaining the same levels of accommodation (Conway, 1920 as quoted in Gilbert, 2004). In the same year, Conway addressed a meeting at the Lyceum Club where he “returned to his pet contention ‘that London should stretch up, not out’” (*The Architectural Review*, 1920). Once again, it was claimed that Conway was not calling for skyscrapers. Instead, he asserted the pressing need for tall buildings to house London’s rapidly expanding population.

Joseph returned to the subject of taller buildings, skyscrapers and buildings of “economic height” in another address to the RIBA the following year, 1921. He received criticism within the national press for promoting the introduction of skyscrapers into London and felt it necessary to defend himself and clarify his position (Joseph, 1921). It had been suggested that the introduction of the skyscraper for economic reasons would have been mistaken. The increased cost of foundations and of building above a certain height, it was claimed, would not show an economic return. Joseph insisted that there had been “no serious talk of introducing the ‘skyscraper’ into London,” and that in his paper he had suggested the selective use of taller buildings of up to 200 ft in height, and not the construction of “‘skyscrapers’ which are anything up to 750 ft in height” (Joseph, 1921). In buildings of up to 200 ft the question of “economic height” does not arise. It becomes clear that the type of tall building proposed by Joseph was different from that proposed by Conway, who as we have seen, championed the economic benefits of taller buildings.

The architect Oswald P. Milne provided one of the more strident calls for the adoption of taller buildings within the future architecture of London. Writing in *The London Mercury* Milne outlined his reasons why he believed the prospect of the future adoption of skyscrapers should excite every Londoner (Milne, 1923, pp. 33-34). Milne was keen to emphasise the

merits of the existing architecture in London. He was well aware of the city’s attraction, describing it as a “great city that one can live in under pleasant conditions” (Milne, 1923, p. 34). He refrained from criticising the city in the way Hall had done in the same year (Hall, 1921, p. 48). Both were aware of the major changes ahead for a city in the middle of a phase of rebuilding, yet the reasons for promoting taller buildings adopted by each man differed. Hall saw a London of staleness and endless repetition, where the imposition of building height restrictions, unrelated to architectural design or street width mitigated against the creation of fine street architecture (Hall, 1921, p. 48). Hall’s call for the awareness of and in certain cases the adoption of American forms of architecture was born out of a concern for the aesthetic qualities of the architecture constructed in London during the period of rebuilding after World War One. Warning against aesthetic stagnation he lambasted his contemporaries for “deliberately creating banality on every hand by which future generations will remember us, and the only chance of escape is by realising it in time” (Hall, 1921, p. 51).

Milne, on the other hand, had other motives for his calls for a relaxation of the building height regulations. His call for taller buildings was in response to the perceived requirements of business for increased accommodation. The pressure for change outlined by Milne was not grounded in aesthetics, instead, he refers to pressure being applied by bodies such as the Incorporated Association of Retail Distributors, the City Lands Committee, and the Medical Officers’ Association, all hoping for a relaxation of the existing Act. All agreed that extra accommodation, particularly within the square mile of the City must be found. Unless taller buildings were allowed to be constructed, creating much-needed extra accommodation, it was claimed that the great national businesses of banking, insurance and shipping, amongst others, would be irrevocably damaged. The unfairness of a system which indiscriminately applied the same building height restrictions to buildings proposed for commercial and residential areas was called into question by Milne, who also pointed out that having imposed a building height restriction of 80 feet,

the authorities had no power to stop a developer using his full allowance even for a building proposed in the narrowest of streets.

Milne’s suggestions remained pragmatic. He was mindful of London’s unique architectural heritage and the heterogeneous nature of London’s constituent parts. For Milne, the blanket imposition of building height regulations had not worked, and the blanket relaxation of these restrictions would also not work. An acceptable building height in the commercial districts of the City would not necessarily have been acceptable in the then residential areas of the West End. Milne was calling for a selective relaxation of the building height regulations that would have allowed for the creation of taller buildings, in certain commercial areas, which would have, in his opinion, benefited those businesses occupying those areas.

The question at issue had been one concerning an amendment to building height regulations that would have allowed for the erection, under certain circumstances, of taller buildings. Milne’s choice of language is quite particular and echoes the reticence of Conway in using the word “skyscraper.” This avoidance is indicative of the sensibilities involved in the discussion of these matters at this time; reference is made predominantly to the provision of taller buildings or to the removal of the 80 feet building height restriction. Where mention is made of the word “skyscraper” it is done so within a context of reassurance: for instance, Milne acknowledges the word’s association with American architecture, and then assures his readers that that form of architecture was not what was intended for London. Indeed, Milne’s only overt praise of the “skyscraper” occurs with its first mention, referred to above. Milne was at pains to disassociate the relaxation of the building height regulations from an imminent adoption of American-style skyscrapers. He acknowledged the association of the skyscraper with New York and mentioned the period of seemingly uncontrollable skyscraper development within that city, but maintained that such development had been discredited and would therefore never be allowed in London:

The day of the uncontrolled skyscraper in New York is past, and whatever evils it may have had in the past, no-one who has visited the city will deny that some of them are magnificent in architectural effect and that they give a romantic gesture to the capital. We may not want buildings 500 feet high – we certainly do not – but buildings considerably higher than our 80 feet of today, in the proper places and properly managed, would add valuable accommodation to the town. (Milne, 1923, pp. 40-41)

Milne called for the adoption in London of a zoning plan, similar to the one implemented in New York, which regulated the development of their skyscrapers in accordance with the principles of *setting back*. Such a zoning plan would identify and differentiate London’s districts and each would then have a maximum building height imposed in accordance with their individual requirements. In outlining these plans Milne was once again careful not to use the word “skyscraper,” despite the fact that his proposals had their origins in New York, the city then seen as the home of the skyscraper.

Decorum and legislation as hindrances

For the adoption of the skyscraper within London the two major obstacles of decorum and legislation remained. During the years after World War One, the Royal Institute of British Architects examined the possibilities of a relaxation of the building height regulations. Perhaps following the precedents set by the construction of the Selfridges building, which resulted in an increase in the permitted cubic capacity of buildings, this call for a possible increase in the permitted height of building construction could have resulted in a legislative change that would have legally allowed for the construction of skyscrapers in London. This examination of the planning legislation came at a time when the planning authorities had been faced with legislating for the construction possibilities afforded by the implementation

of new technologies. The result was that in the years after World War One planning legislation was subject to a certain amount of interpretation. Philip Booth details how the role of the British planner had changed (Booth, 1999, pp. 277-289). He shows how twentieth-century development control arose from the experience of nineteenth-century public health standards in new buildings and from leasehold control, indicating how planning control emerged as an *ad hoc* administrative response to a particular problem. Local government planning policy is seen as one of discretionary control, where planning regulations were open to subjective interpretation. However, as we have seen there is little evidence to support the view that there was much that was discretionary about the building height restrictions. An indication that a reliance upon the subjective view of individual planners or planning offices was not viewed as a reliable method to ensure innovative architectural development was given by the time spent by the RIBA in considering the question of a relaxation of the building height regulations. The period of building activity that had followed the architectural inactivity of the war years had prompted building regulations to come under increased scrutiny. As has been mentioned, lobbying for the relaxation of the building height regulations came from a number of quarters, usually from those commercial property owners with a vested interest. In addition to these in 1921, the Royal Institute of British Architects appointed a committee to address the issue.

As an outcome of papers read before a committee meeting of the RIBA in March 1920 by Austen Hall on American department stores and the architect Delissa Joseph on Higher Buildings for London, the RIBA created a committee, known as the Building Act Committee to consider and report upon the reform of the London Building Acts. A deputation from that committee attended the Building Act Committee of the London County Council and submitted certain suggestions for the amendments of the Act and to gauge the opinions of the Council on the matter. These suggestions included:

1. In the case of a building in a street of greater width than 80 feet, an increased height should be permitted, equal to the greater width of the street, with two fire-resisting roof storeys above the same, but in no case a greater height than 150 feet, exclusive of the two storeys in the roof.
2. That in the case of buildings opposite parks, squares and public gardens not less than 150 feet wide, or facing commons, open spaces and the riverside, or when facing down the length of a street, such buildings should be permitted to a height of 150 feet exclusive of two storeys in the roof. (*Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 1921, p. 334)

The committee had an area of enquiry concerning primarily the question of building height but also the additional question of cubic capacity in an attempt to find satisfactory solutions to the problems created by the unsatisfied demands for commercial and residential accommodation. The deliberations of the committee, lasting some eighteen months and concerning the pragmatic rather than aesthetic issues at question resulted in the publishing of an interim report, in which it recommended that a general increase to 120 feet should be allowed in the City, and that the LCC should be asked to grant their discretionary powers more freely for buildings up to 150 feet, both in the City and in London as a whole.

In addition to the interim report of the Building Acts Committee, there followed a report from the Art Standing Committee of the RIBA, which articulated their concerns arising out of that report. This report maintained the precedent set by the interim report by not mentioning by name “skyscrapers.” The report objected in the strongest possible terms to the proposals and recommendations of the Building Act Committee. Despite an expressed admiration for the architecture of New York, where tall build-

ings had vied for prominence in conditions of superior sunlight and atmosphere, the Art Standing Committee expressed the concern that should higher buildings be permitted throughout the city without regard to even the width of the street or regard for the character of the neighbourhood, neighbouring buildings, and the general appearance of the back of these buildings, a preposterous situation would be created which would turn the city streets into badly lighted, badly ventilated areas (Journal of the Royal Institute of Architects, 1921, p. 221). The Art Standing Committee did express the opinion that in certain cases exceptions could be made and a relaxation of building height regulations could be made to allow for the construction of the occasional taller building relieving the monotony of a long stretch of buildings of equal height. The Art Standing Committee had not been persuaded by the opinions of the Building Act Committee. The council or main body of the Royal Institute of British Architects did not accept the findings of the Building Act Committee, and as a result, they did not formally press for any legislative change that would have permitted the erection of a skyscraper. The proceedings and reports of both committees had been reported by the Journal of the RIBA, and within these official accounts of their deliberations, little mention was made of the word skyscraper. Indeed, for the most part, both committees concerned themselves with incremental changes to the building height restrictions; describing the height of a building in quantitative terms rather than through the employment of emotive terminology. However, the minutes of a General Business Meeting of the RIBA, held on the 20 February 1922, and reported in their journal, (Journal of the Royal Institute of Architects, 1921, p. 221) provide an insight into the deliberations of the Institute and the way in which the term “skyscraper” had become so emotive.

The meeting was convened to discuss the question of higher buildings and in particular, the two motions; firstly “That ... [the RIBA] approves the action taken by the Council in connection with the Report of the London Building Act Committee,” a discussion of council procedure appertaining

to the council’s procedures and deliberations on the Building Act, moved by Maurice Webb and seconded by Raymond Unwin. Secondly “That this meeting approves the general principle allowing buildings to be erected in certain positions of a greater height than is the present practice, subject to proper safeguards as to construction, fire escape, and fire attack,” moved by Delissa Joseph. Interestingly, it should be noted that Delissa Joseph objected to the discussion of the first motion. This meeting had originally been scheduled for the sole discussion of building height regulations within the framework of the second motion, however a further motion was introduced by Webb and Unwin which called for approval of council procedures, which would link the discussion to the prevailing pragmatic nature of a wider range of building regulations. Joseph perceived to be a tactic designed to attract attention away from the issue of building height deregulation. Despite this, the minutes remain as interesting documentation of varying opinions of the skyscraper.

Responding to criticism from those who were opposed to any increase in allowable building heights that they had employed the term skyscraper in an emotive fashion, forewarning against an influx of American scale architecture, Maurice Webb discussed his opposition to the relaxation of building height regulations without specific use of the term skyscraper. However, by highlighting those criticisms of Delissa Joseph, the question of taller buildings had already been raised within a framework and ongoing discourse concerning the Americanization of British cities. In seconding the motion, the eminent planner Raymond Unwin was not so reticent about associating taller buildings with American architecture. Frequent references to the architecture of New York were made in an attempt to persuade those in attendance that any relaxation of building height regulations would lead to a London skyline dominated by New York style skyscrapers, obscuring and in many cases destroying the existing architecture of the city.

Conclusion

As the introduction of the skyscraper continued to shape the skylines of America's expanding cities, the prospect of their introduction into Britain's cities at the beginning of the twentieth century, although subject to a certain amount of speculation, remained a distant prospect. The building techniques that would have facilitated their construction had made their way across the Atlantic. However, the principles of architectural decorum and the practical considerations concerning the impact skyscrapers would have upon the British urban infrastructure meant that, in London, the most probable location for their construction, there remained a reluctance to relax the building height regulations, which would have allowed for their introduction. For the time being, the skyscraper remained an American phenomenon. The word "skyscraper" was symbolic of an American form of architecture, responsible for creating the towering skylines of Chicago and New York. Despite evidence of some favourable perceptions of the skyscrapers of New York, seen by some as proof of aesthetic and technical advancement upon the earlier and to some "uglier" examples found in Chicago, (The Times, 1921, p. 145) they were still regarded as unsuitable for Britain's narrower streets.

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