

My London

The chief executive of the Royal Academy admires 1960s housing estates

I've always been greatly interested in London architecture. When I was teaching maths in Westminster Abbey Choir School, my older brother lent me a copy of Nairn's London (1966). I learned from Nairn not to judge architecture just as the works of famous architects, but to think of buildings in terms of character, general surroundings and views.

I value the neighbourhoods of London. My wife and I live on Mile End Road, near Spitalfields. I'm incredibly glad it has survived as well as it has, not just the market and Brick Lane, but the area north towards St Leonard's Church in Shoreditch and around Club Row.

My son has encouraged me to look at the architecture of the 1960s with more interest and sympathy. In Stepney, we're surrounded by pseudo Corbusier housing estates that we are urged to think of as a disaster. I think they are rather impressive.

The development of London benefits from a long process of organic change. Good planning can influence it but doesn't really determine it. I remember standing in David Chipperfield's offices by Waterloo station with a group of architects. They were all looking out of the windows and lamenting that the view was of an unplanned and random city, but I think that is the nature and character of London. We resisted Wren's attempts to impose architectural order on it and have done so ever since.

If one walks about the city now you still have a sense of the geography of the medieval city. Small alleyways and courtyards give it its character. After the Great Fire of London, Wren thought it was time to reform the streets, make them broader and make London more ordered, as Haussmann did in 19th century Paris. Property owners just wanted to get on with rebuilding their homes as soon as possible so the government and city authorities didn't have the power to make changes.

It's correct that politicians pay attention to bicycling. I don't bike to work because it's almost impossible to go from the East End to the centre of London on a sensible route.

I am in favour of a reduction of traffic in central London. I have to be cautious because we depend on deliveries of works of art into Mayfair! In the immediate neighbourhood, too much traffic goes around in circles. I had lunch with someone and it took them an hour to get from Notting Hill to St James's Street.

No city in the world can offer such a rich array of exhibitions. Constable at the V&A, Turner at the Tate, Rembrandt at the National Gallery, Rubens at the RA – it's amazing.

The City still has an influence on policy. I'm not convinced this government or the previous one understands the importance of the so-called creative industries to the economy. Now, quite a lot of growth and economic success lies in design, publishing, media and the arts. And it is certainly one of the reasons which makes London attractive as somewhere for people to move.

People aren't paying attention to the problem of the next generation acquiring property. A lot of the success of London in the arts in the last 20 years has been because artists have been able to find cheap studio space. There is a genuine risk of them migrating to Berlin.

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