



Spatial Economics Research Centre

Thursday, 28 April 2011

(English) Heritage and Cities

A couple of weeks ago I wrote about the need for [new \(tall\) developments](#) in our more successful cities.

I was reflecting on this issue while reading about the history of London (specifically Peter Ackroyd's entertaining "London: The biography"). Both expansion and redevelopment appear to have been crucial in explaining the continued success of London. When London became increasingly constrained by the physical boundary of the city wall, living conditions deteriorated rapidly (as illustrated in nauseating detail by the recent BBC series [Filthy Cities](#)). Expanding beyond the walls was thus crucial for the continued expansion of London. The parallels with the modern green belt are obvious.

Redevelopment has also been important, perhaps best exemplified by the transformation of the Docklands and Canary Wharf. But London's long history throws up an important tension - how do we balance the needs of the changing city against a desire to preserve the heritage that makes London special?

I don't yet have a good answer, but the more I read of debates around redevelopment in London the more convinced I am that the current system may not provide a satisfactory one. To take just one example [M&S's proposed redevelopment scheme at Broadgate](#) just received planning permission despite the possibility that English Heritage were about to list (i.e. protect from redevelopment) the entire Broadgate office campus. The new scheme will double the amount of floor space previously provided on this central London site. It's conceivable that London would actually benefit from an even larger new building on the site but the controversy around the development has focused almost exclusively on the aesthetics of the new and existing building. If English Heritage had listed the whole campus even this limited increase in central London floor space would have been blocked.

Many economists, this one included, may not have much to contribute on the aesthetic debates (my personal opinion, for what it is worth, is that the scheme will replace one fairly ugly looking set of buildings with a new bigger building that's still pretty ugly). But it does raise the question of the right institutional set up for balancing the need for change against the importance of preservation. The danger of our current set up is that it is unclear whether the constraints imposed on the listing system for buildings achieve this balance. Ed Glaeser suggests imposing a strict limit on the number of buildings that could be protected. Adding a new one would mean removing something else from the list. There are clearly other solutions, but the importance of change and growth in cities suggests this is an area which would benefit from further debate and analysis.

Posted by [Prof Henry G. Overman](#) on [Thursday, April 28, 2011](#)

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