

Alan Shingler of Sheppard Robson on why towers must work from the ground up

By ... Alan Shingler | 02 Apr 2025

There is an inherent responsibility when building tall; these buildings leave a mark on the skyline, forming a silhouette that adds to many people's experiences of a city. The vertical expression is often the heroic element of a tall building, earning its own headline-grabbing nickname from public opinion.



Alan Shingler is a partner at Sheppard Robson

However, does this focus on the skyline limit the conversation about the quality of our tall buildings? And how do we ensure that there is an intrinsic quality and thoughtfulness that runs from top to bottom of high-rise developments?

These questions can be answered, in part, by looking to the work we have done with the Earls Court Development Company. In the case of the Earls Court scheme in west London, there is both intense responsibility and great opportunities.

With our design for the tallest building in the Earls Court masterplan, we have to grapple with questions such as: how can a residential building be civic-minded, blurring the hard lines between resident and public spaces, and how can a building be part of a park and not just located near or in it?

Tall buildings often enable the landscape below to flourish and can facilitate a mix of spaces

Why are these questions important when creating a desirable place to live? The form and wide impact of buildings are, of course, important. However, with so many tall buildings being planned, especially in London, we need to have a broader conversation about what makes an excellent tall building.

The grounding of the building in its cultural and social setting offers the greatest opportunity to have an impact on a neighbourhood and ensure, when building tall, it is done with care and consideration. Tall buildings often enable the landscape below to flourish and can facilitate a mix of spaces for all to enjoy.



Water feature: plans for Earls Court include public terraces called 'Cascades'

At Earls Court, our 42-storey residential building includes a generous podium base that connects into the 'Cascades', a series of new public spaces linked by the movement of water. This overarching expression is reflected back in the cascading waterfall concept of the building. References to water are created through glazed bays and reflective metal tubes, giving the building an iridescent quality in different light conditions, and furthering the sense of its grounding in situ.

While Earls Court has unique characteristics, there are ideas from the project that we can take to many other sites, in particular how the lower floors of tall buildings can help create a public realm that people want to visit through inspiring architecture, inviting landscape and a mix of uses.

Offering a range of spaces

A tall building can be generous to its neighbours, grounded with cafés, restaurants, co-working space and even healthcare and education facilities, all designed to complement the experience of arriving at the building. This range of spaces can be stitched together through the public realm strategy, creating a human scale and openness that erodes the common perceived intimidating nature of tall buildings.

The social and community benefits of opening up the base of tall buildings are clear, and also make commercial sense. Whether people work in a City of London office building or live in a residential building in Earls Court, they increasingly want to feel part of the city and communities in which they are located. The right mix of private and public amenities can create an experience that is bustling and significantly affects a development's identity and desirability. Every site for a tall building comes with its own urban challenges, opportunities and responsibilities. While engaging with these, we should keep in mind that all levels of a building have potential for innovation. By considering the impact of tall buildings, not just on their residents but on the public too, we will achieve a new genre of tall buildings: ones with carefully layered urban identities and that create meaningful connections to their local settings and people.

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