

# It's no fun in the shadow of a city skyscraper

**Semi-Detached** The battle for London's skyline is about to commence, says **Max Davidson**

HOW many more skyscrapers can London take? Are we skyscrapered out or is there room for a few more? Would another 20-storey hotel look good on Park Lane? Is the City looking thin on top? Does the view from Primrose Hill need sexing up? Or should we all be thinking small is beautiful and reverting to thatched cottages?

These are not questions that normally get asked. In a successful, congested city, the obvious place to build is up. One high-rise building begets another high-rise building, like characters in the Old Testament.

Parts of the London skyline may look like a set of cheap dentures, but what is the alternative? More and more suburbia? If we want to rival thriving cities such as New York

and Tokyo, we have to look like New York and Tokyo. QED. The case for the skyscraper is formidable.

At least this year we are in for a proper debate. In one of his first moves as mayor, Boris Johnson announced that he would review the London Plan, which includes provisions on building heights. Ken Livingstone was rather keen on skyscrapers. Boris is not so sure.

He has appointed a critic of tall buildings, Sir Simon Milton, leader of Westminster City Council, as his senior planning adviser. There will not be a revolution. Boris is more Restoration fop than Robespierre. But there could well be a sea change.

Some developers, naturally, are twitchy about the turn of events. Size matters in



property: the higher you build, the more money you make, so a presumption against high-rise buildings would hit developers where it hurts. There will be some battles royal at local level, particularly in affluent western boroughs such as Kensington & Chelsea, where there are some high-density planning applications pending.

But it is good that battle has been joined, and it is also good, judging from the noises emanating from City Hall, that the battlefields will be local, with the mayor signalling that he is likely to leave most planning issues to individual boroughs, and

not act as cheerleader for developers. It cannot be said often enough that it is

residents – the people who have to wake up in the morning and see skyscrapers shooting up outside their bedroom windows – whose opinions should be regarded as paramount. Someone working on the 15th floor of a high-rise building just thinks: “What fun! A view to enjoy when I’m feeling bored!” It is a different story when you are looking up, not down.

There are skyscrapers and skyscrapers, of course. I will never warm to Canary Wharf, but the Gherkin brings a smile to my face every time I see it. Parts of the City exude the sort of excitement – shiny new structures soaring into the sky – that one associates with New York.

But we shouldn't ignore the other side of the equation: how intimidating high-rise buildings can be for those who have to live in their shadow.

Skyscrapers are the architectural equivalent of loud music – fine from a distance, not so fine if you are standing right next to the speakers.