

## 'Skyline has hit a raw nerve'

Skyline activist Barbara Weiss on her life as a campaigning architect, how Skyline came about and the changing social role of architects



### Why is the Skyline campaign important?

The skyline is the most universally visible part of London. We've reached a moment where it faces a big threat. The situation could become irreversible if we do not act now. It is not just about the skyline – badly conceived buildings affect ground level, too.

### What role have you played in the Skyline campaign?

I was dismayed by the realisation that too many beautiful historic buildings were being demolished in the name of regeneration, only to be replaced by ones consistently inferior in terms of design, materials and craftsmanship.

As I watched with great consternation, a grey army of lift cores started morphing into

enormous incarnations, drastically and permanently altering the city's skyline.

It is against this background that I started wondering whether I was alone in feeling a great sense of outrage; not against new developments or regeneration, not against towers, but for the total disregard for context, and the poor quality and 'bling' crassness of the majority of tall buildings.

A turning point occurred with the debate on tall buildings held at the RIBA in March 2013 with Rowan Moore, Simon Jenkins, Julia Barfield and Peter Rees. However, it took a chance encounter between my husband, developer Alan Leibowitz, and *Observer* critic Rowan Moore, very appropriately at Francis Golding's memorial service, to spur us on to 'give it a go'.

### What impact do you think Skyline is having?

The campaign has hit a common nerve which is obviously very raw. Few people have spoken about the effect of towers on London's skyline before. There's a guilty unease about what is going on among industry professionals. We're channelling and exposing this unease. The mayor's response to the campaign has been defensive – proof in itself that our point is important.

### What do you hope the outcomes of the campaign will be?

It is about raising awareness. This has been achieved beyond

my expectations. Now we are campaigning for meaningful and lasting change. It is about developing a positive vision for how London's density can be raised. We want a clear planning framework identifying where height is not acceptable, for example in areas where there are well-loved views, historic monuments, or where the urban fabric makes it inappropriate for such a jump in scale. It is also about much greater transparency. We need a digital model which will enable Londoners understand what is planned for the city.

### What other campaigns have you been involved in and why?

The AJ Women in Architecture campaign has been hugely successful. As a woman in practice I understand the profession is still very difficult for women and the campaign was born out of frustration. I'm also very involved in campaigning for social mobility – helping children from underprivileged backgrounds go to university. There are many other deserving causes but never enough time. Individuals need to take responsibility. We owe a lot to society and to future generations. There is no room for complacency.

### What size is your practice, Barbara Weiss Architects, and what sectors do you work in?

The practice is 16-strong – along with an office dog. We've been going for 27 years and the majority of our work is on private residential projects.

### How does your campaigning role fit in with the day to day workings of your architectural practice?

With difficulty. Campaigning

takes a lot of time. I work all hours of the day and night. It involves a lot of meetings and juggling of diaries.

### Has campaigning by architects declined?

When I first decided to study architecture in the '70s I was attracted by the way the subject combined social and political concerns with practical areas. The architect was at the forefront of change. This has now taken a back seat. Architecture is now all too much about making money. I can understand it – a profession has to survive. Architects now work in very difficult circumstances and politics has shifted to the right. The emphasis is now more on individual gains rather than the collective. This has a negative effect on cities, communities and architecture.

### What are the issues that you think the profession should be trying to change and influence?

Skyline and the Women In Architecture campaigns were both reactive, generated by a deep frustration. But I've always wanted to tackle homelessness. The profession should be doing a lot more.

### What are the best ways to begin a campaign?

They all start from conversations with others. If the issues awaken a similar outrage and enthusiasm, then they should be pursued. There are two key aspects of any campaign. Firstly you need a very small, dedicated and agile group driving the campaign forward. Secondly, the media is very important. There needs to be a way of publicising the campaign. Without media support from the AJ and the *Observer*, the skyline campaign would never have taken off. It is about connections.