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Demolition of the Ringway Centre, Smallbrook Queensway and its redevelopment with three very tall towers.

Birmingham Friends of the Earth objects to the plan to demolish the 1960s Ringway Centre on Smallbrook Queensway, in front of New Street station, and replace it with 3 tower blocks of high-rise apartments, 44 to 53 storeys high.

This not just an aesthetic argument about architecture, because the overdevelopment as planned will have a major negative environmental impact and will open the way to many more such mega buildings in central Birmingham, as is envisaged in the Future City Plan.

Birmingham Friends of the Earth has objected to the Plan with its emphasis on very tall buildings. <https://birminghamfoe.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Our-Future-City-BFoE-response-2023.pdf>

Birmingham City Council, by welcoming such projects, is once again confusing expensive developments with beneficial ones and we believe it has not properly evaluated the negative impacts. In giving planning permission for this over-development, it has been remiss in not defending the interests of the city, its economy, and the wider environment, and not critically evaluated the claims and assumptions being made by the developers for this and other huge tower blocks.

“If all future approved, proposed and emergent projects come to fruition, Birmingham's skyline will comprise more than 500 tall buildings and structures, including eight skyscrapers above 150 metres and a further 27 habitable towers above 100 metres.” *List of tallest buildings and structures in the Birmingham Metropolitan Area*
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_tallest_buildings_and_structures_in_the_Birmingham_Metropolitan_Area,_West_Midlands

We believe that the trend to very tall buildings is driven by the needs of the international property industry and not the needs of our city. There is a massive overprovision of apartments around the world, especially in Chinese cities that is making them look for locations where they can inflate the asset value of their land holdings, so as to fend off the approaching property bubble and bust. https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/CCA_SCCEI_Roundtable%20Full%20Summary%20Report_Chinas%20Property%20Sector.pdf

Demand assumptions

We suggest that the anticipated demand to live and pay high rents by the 2,000 plus new occupants at Smallbrook Queensway is based on commuting to fill well paid jobs in London. These are the same assumptions that justified the High-Speed rail line and which have now been abandoned. The trend since COVID19 is to work from home, where people can stay in residential areas. Families may want a car, a garden, a children's playground, and not want to live in the sky. A likely market for the mega towers would be short lets through Airbnb, which would undermine existing hotel provision. The rents paid would go out of the city. Building upwards will not actually allow local people to get onto the housing ladder by becoming owner occupiers.

London is known for having high rise buildings that are underused investments or second/third properties of the wealthy; these have increased property prices creating a housing crisis that has pushed ordinary people out, and we do not want the same for central Birmingham.

The experience of tower blocks in British cities is that they become unpopular, rapidly reduce in value and are neglected, to the point of being unsafe, like Grenfell Tower in London. They are also vulnerable to terrorist attack.

Demolition and rebuild

The three tall towers are to be made from steel, concrete and glass; materials with a huge embodied energy and carbon in their manufacture. We would be importing a short-lived building form, seen in oil-rich countries, and just when the era of fossil fuels is ending. Claims that the new buildings will be "zero carbon" are not credible. The Royal Institute of British Architects has calculated that demolishing old buildings and replacing them with new ones is a huge expenditure of carbon, energy and resources, compared to re-purposing old buildings. The three towers would require huge concrete foundations to be sunk. We doubt if the geology of the city centre is suitable since the weight would be above the Birmingham Fault, this is a reason why Birmingham is low rise and does not have an underground rail system.

Operation of tall buildings

Tall glass buildings will attract huge amounts of solar gain in summer and cannot be adequately shaded, especially when summer heatwaves get hotter and more intense, producing a growing demand for cooling. Such towers will radiate heat in winter and will affect wind patterns creating vortexes, losing more heat. Movement by residents cannot be by walking, but by express elevators (to 56 storeys!). Supplying enough heat, power, water, waste collection, deliveries and other utilities to 2,000 people, where currently no one currently lives, and at such elevations will require far more energy than delivered on the ground. The huge blocks will be unsustainable, and that is foreseeable.

Better alternative

There is an alternative, since the existing Ringway Centre could be repurposed for apartments, as suggested by the 20th century Society and the The Save Smallbrook group.