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Opinion British Land's 'Cheesegrater' decision was a missed opportunity to bring life to the City of London, says *Piers Taylor*

When Mitchell Taylor Workshop was asked to take part in a competition to find a temporary use for the infamous 'Cheesegrater' site, I wanted to address the fact that there appeared to be almost no living thing in the City of London. It's a shame that British Land ultimately thought that, if our resulting scheme were to go ahead, it would give out the wrong messages to the City and forestall an economic recovery (*see page 9*).

I know that, practising in Bath and teaching in Cambridge, I am in some ways the country cousin, but I'm not sure why cultivation must be banished from the City. Studying in Sydney in the early 1990s, I was conditioned by how immediate the natural world was – the screech of birds, the scent of bougainvillea, the burst of colour in spring

from wisteria and the flame trees, let alone the physical landscape of ocean and bush coming into the heart of the central business district.

As well as the visceral pleasure of things growing being sorely lacking from the City, there's also the pressing issue of food production. A huge percentage of our pollution (up to 50 per cent of CO₂ emissions in some cities) comes from activities associ-

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ated with the distribution of food. We've also seen the rise of the workspace as a sterile and joyless box, designed to keep the seasons out. It seems astonishing that even in 2010, most buildings in the City are hermetically sealed. Yes, I know that papers will blow around and the temperature will fluctuate, but hell, let the sunshine in. Let's make our City of London environment responsive and accommodating to more than the monoculture of big business.

Our scheme for the Cheesegrater site tackled issues of urban agriculture head on.

Occupants of the surrounding buildings – the Lloyd's building, the Gherkin – would be exposed to the seasons and look down on an abundant, verdant and productive garden. We designed a scheme (with SEED Landscape) where you could pick blackberries as you walked down Leadenhall Street, tend an allotment at lunchtime, eat soup made with fresh ingredients grown on site, picnic on a wild flower bank and collect your vegetable box on the way home. There would be black chickens on red soil laying brown eggs, a fungi garden, radishes, strawberries, rhubarb, seasons, weather and, well, life.

It would spark a revolution, and people wouldn't go back to work after lunch into a sealed, airless box – they would demand change. What's more, all of this could have been had for £125,000. In 50 years' time, this sort of scheme will be commonplace in all cities – as is the case in Havana, Cuba.

Sadly, it seems that the City of London will remain barren. This is a missed opportunity to have added real value to this site. *Piers Taylor is a director at Mitchell Taylor Workshop and design fellow at the University of Cambridge*