

Towers of Power

Jean-Marie Huriot

Following on from Manuel Appert's contribution,¹ Jean-Marie Huriot discusses what is at stake in the skyscraper race. He believes the arguments presented in favour of building ever higher towers are biased, or even erroneous, and are a smokescreen for the true reason – something of an open secret – namely their role as a symbol of wealth and economic and financial power in the competitive context of declining global neocapitalism.

In Dubai, Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest tower, culminates at 828 m. Among the 54 towers² in the world that stand over 300 m tall (*Emporis* 2011), 37 are in Asia and 14 are in the United States. In London, the Shard should be completed in 2012 and will be the tallest tower in Europe. From the top of its 310 m, it will look down (literally and figuratively) upon St Paul's Cathedral (Appert 2008, Appert 2011¹). At La Défense in Paris, the renovated Tour First was inaugurated a few months ago, breaking the record for the highest office building in France. In the same district, plans have been approved for the Tour Phare, which will stand at 300 m. And to the south of Paris, the Tour Triangle, at 180 m, is set to dominate the area around the Porte de Versailles exhibition centre. Ever more vertiginous projects abound, including some spectacular plans and models, such as that of the TRY 2004 pyramid in Tokyo Bay, a veritable covered city whose summit would reach 2004 m, and which could accommodate up to 750,000 inhabitants and 800,000 workers...

Thierry Paquot (2008) talks about “*la folie des hauteurs*” (“the folly of heights”). Do these towers represent technical *tours de force*, architectural exploits, or simply a desire to build ever higher? Are they the only way to save the city, a rational response to urban growth (Glaeser 2011)? Are they part of the eternal, mythical quest to conquer the sky (embodied even in the very term “skyscraper”)? Utopia, delirium, fantasy, symbol of macho power, “thrusting phallic symbol” (Benoît 2009)? An “inverted horizon” (Allix 2008), a “vertical non-place” (ENSAPM 2009), an “upward dead end” (Virilio 2004, cited in Paquot 2011)? A desire to stand out, to impress or to fascinate; to assert technical, political or economic power? The debate is immense, with serious arguments brushing shoulders with the most fanciful of reasoning. A scientific smokescreen is accompanied by illusions of political rhetoric, the art of persuasion and coffee-bar sophistry. Globalisation exacerbates a vertical one-upmanship that is both costly and dehumanising. The competition for newer, more innovative shapes and forms makes cities more uniform, at the expense of their specificities. For what purpose – and for whom exactly – is this never-ending race for ever taller towers?

The question is not “to be or not to be” in favour of the construction of towers. The aim is not to condemn towers, but to dismantle the arguments used to defend them at all costs, and to

¹ See: Manuel Appert & translated by Oliver Waine, “Skyline policy: the Shard and London's high-rise debate”, *Metropolitiques*, 14 December 2011. URL : <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Skyline-policy-the-Shard-and.html>.

² Here, the term “tower” designates vertical constructions that are principally used to accommodate housing, offices or hotels. This definition excludes technical towers, such as the CN Tower in Toronto, or pure feats of architecture, such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

demonstrate that these arguments hide – unsuccessfully – their supporters’ desire to publicly proclaim their role in neocapitalist globalisation.

Vertical one-upmanship



Photo : J.-M. Huriot, 2011

Cover these motives which we cannot behold³

There are a number of arguments that are often repeated in the skyscraper debate. Most are incomplete, one-dimensional and questionable at best. The palatable and the *ex post facto* rationalisation often hide the unmentionable and the irrational. Most of the reasons cited in favour of towers can, in fact, be called into question. The arguments generally used act as a smokescreen for the powerful symbolism of vertical architecture.

Towers present an image of wealth, success, strength and power – real or otherwise. They symbolise power. They are the essence of power that seeks to assert itself – towers of power. They convey a clear, strong message of success, wealth, development and a dominant position on the global political or economic stage. This symbolism of power is no secret. However, it is in the interests of many decision-makers (politicians, architects, developers) to pretend it does not exist, as they use it to their advantage.

The construction of towers and densification: implicit false premises

The arguments in defence of towers tend to link high-rise construction to market forces and the need to increase the density our cities. But the choice between densification and sprawl is based on an incomplete argument, namely that building towers is the best way to alleviate the effects of the uncontrolled urban sprawl that is so often decried. Glaeser (2011) develops this idea by referring to market forces. A century earlier, Alfred Marshall demonstrated that, on the most sought-after (i.e. central) urban territories, buildings need to be higher, so that the marginal cost of the top floor equals the savings made in terms of land costs. Urban growth means increasing demand for housing and office space, which pushes up prices in the most desirable central areas. Building higher would

³ Translator’s note: in the original French version of this article, this sub-heading is a pun on a quotation from the play *Tartuffe* by Molière: “*Couvrez ce sein que je ne saurais voir*” (“Cover this breast which I cannot behold”).

seem to increase the amount of floor space on offer for a given footprint, and so would appear to be the ideal way to reduce the demand for land in city centres and make such locations more affordable. This, consequently, would enable continued urban growth for minimum urban sprawl. By this logic, restricting the height of buildings would indeed appear to be tantamount to limiting urban growth.

However, this reasoning is too simplistic. It is linked to two implicit premises that are somewhat questionable. The first is that there is a need to densify cities, and particularly city centres – a fashionable view that provides its proponents with a clear conscience in the face of endless sprawl. But, to date, none of the serious studies on the issue of density versus sprawl have come to a single, clear conclusion on this matter (Huriot & Bourdeau-Lepage 2009a). Today, the high-density city is nothing more than a political buzzword with no solid scientific foundation.

The second false premise lies in the notion that densification automatically means building higher; and yet the link between the two is very poorly defined. A high average population density across a city, or even a neighbourhood, can mask significant internal variations: the same average density can be obtained with a few towers surrounded by low-rise constructions, or with a large number of buildings of more modest height (Fouchier 1994; Huriot & Bourdeau-Lepage 2009a; Humstone 2009). In the 13th *arrondissement* of Paris, the population density is higher in Les Gobelins, a Haussmann-style neighbourhood composed principally of six- or seven-storey apartment buildings, than in Les Olympiades, a nearby neighbourhood with a number of towers over 100 m tall. Furthermore, the construction of towers has not yet managed to halt urban sprawl: the two phenomena are concomitant (Paquot 2008). Density and sprawl simply do not concern the same categories of population or business activity.

The unspoken material and human costs

The issue of costs deserves particular attention. It should be noted that unit building costs rise in proportion to the number of floors, which means that the cost per square metre of floor space built increases rapidly as the tower gets higher.

Of course, significant advances have been made to minimise the energy consumption of very tall buildings. But first, this level of consumption is still much higher than in other types of construction, and very much in excess of the levels set down by the Grenelle de l'Environnement (the French government's environment round-table); indeed, most of the time, the actual environmental performance of skyscrapers fall some way short of achieving the levels announced at the planning stage. And secondly, the technological advances highlighted by supporters of towers is yet another disputable argument, as these advances could just as easily be applied to buildings of a more modest height and cost.⁴

Moreover, the security, maintenance and servicing costs of towers, as well as the cost of adapting these buildings to changing needs, remain much higher than average (Palisse 2008). As a result of these costs – and differing abilities to finance them – such high-rise constructions are the preserve of luxury hotels, apartments and offices; more modest businesses and households cannot afford them, thus exacerbating urban segregation.

Finally, the one element most notably absent from the debate, the human cost of high-rise buildings, is nonetheless a worrying reality. Some recent studies have shown that working in sky-high offices poses a number of problems for health and well-being: “sick building syndrome” is now well documented, although efforts have been made to make office blocks more liveable (in particular Paquot 2008, pp. 82–83).

⁴ On these points and other related issues, a great deal of information can be found on the *Contre les tours* website (in French): <http://contre-les-tours.ouvaton.org>.

As for the preferences of residents regarding the form their cities should take, these are discreetly but efficiently considered as being irrelevant and inopportune. Residents often hold towers in low esteem, but the reality is that high-rise constructions remain a matter solely in the hands of those who possess the technical, political and – above all – economic power.

Towers are not necessarily conducive to interaction

According to Glaeser (2011), towers encourage interaction because they increase population density. If this were true, towers would be cities' key assets. But it is not as simple as that... Let us examine the delicate relationship between proximity and interaction. Here, virtual interactions (via information and communication technologies) are excluded, as they require no physical proximity whatsoever. In order for direct, face-to-face interactions to occur, there needs to be a combination of geographical proximity, whether permanent (in the same location) or temporary (following journeys between distant locations) *and* an "organised" proximity characterising the relevant parties' *ability and desire to interact* (Bourdeau-Lepage & Huriot 2009b). Population density can only contribute to permanent geographical proximity, provided that it is accompanied by efficiently organised mobility. *Being in a tower is, in itself, neither necessary nor sufficient for interaction*, even in a face-to-face context. Despite (or perhaps thanks to) its horizontality, Silicon Valley is one of the most interactive places on earth in scientific and technological terms. And it is far from certain that interactions are more intense in the towers of the Université Paris-I's Tolbiac site than on horizontal campuses. On the contrary, stacking university departments one on top of the other in towers is often seen as a source of isolation rather than interaction. Interactions are without doubt more intense between occupants of towers and the outside world than between the occupants themselves. We know that these occupants (in particular in advanced services firms and company head offices) operate more in terms of globalised networks (Taylor 2004) than in terms of interactions with immediate neighbours. The reasons for the existence of office blocks lie elsewhere.

The race for performance, prestige and power: Paris!

Behind all the attempts to rationalise and justify towers lies the most powerful motive for the race for height: the intimately linked symbolisms of *performance*, *prestige* and *power*.

The desire for ever greater technical performance has been obvious ever since the first skyscrapers were built. It is thanks to technical innovations (steel frameworks, lifts, etc.) that high-rise towers took off in the first place, in New York and Chicago. Height is limited only by technical capability; whatever technology allows is put into practice. Towers are therefore, first and foremost, a symbol of technical prowess. Technical *tours de force* in the field of vertical construction generate admiration and are a source of prestige, for the architects as well as for the politicians that support them.

In Paris, city politicians want to enter this race for performance. This seems a particularly pathetic ambition given that Paris is far from being first. This is partly for historic reasons, of course, and also because of regulations that have only recently been scrapped so that the city can enter the race. However, the City of Light is at something of a disadvantage, given that the tallest tower in France (named "First"...) scrapes in at 331st place in the world!

A city that defines itself through such competition and which wants to build towers "so as not to be left behind" will only ever define itself in terms of a rank in a league table – which, for all but the leaders, amounts to blending in with the crowd and its bland uniformity. There is no escaping the fact that many other cities are building higher than Paris much more quickly; so why bother joining the competition? The prestige that comes with height is fragile and fleeting: the tallest tower today will be knocked off the top spot tomorrow. More seriously, the physical sustainability of these towers needs to be taken into consideration. Most are destined to fall into disrepair quickly or be

renovated at prohibitive expense. Their environmental characteristics are set to become rapidly obsolete. Even their appearance is doomed to fall out of fashion. And, lastly, we have seen real and dramatic proof of their extreme vulnerability. All these points are completely absent from a debate dominated by decision-makers who are all too sure of themselves and concerned only by the immediate future.

Illusions of modernity

Prestige is also conferred by all that is “modern”. Here, the skyscraper debate takes the form of a simplistic *opposition between the Ancients and the Moderns*. Those in favour of towers claim to be the representatives of modernity, fighting against the conservatism of those who defend heritage. The double equation asserted here (modernity = contemporary architecture = towers) is, however, rather shaky. Fortunately, contemporary architecture, like modernity, is not essentially defined by a race for height. Even more caricatural is the argument put forward by Glaeser (2011) whereby all opponents of towers are lumped together and dismissed as “anti-growth activists” and “enemies of change”.

What we see here is an obstinate refusal to deviate from a series of erroneous, partisan and pernicious shortcut arguments. This opposition is built on two false premises: first, that “modern” equates with all that is made possible by the latest techniques; and secondly, that the preservation of heritage necessarily equates to opposition to anything new.

Heritage is not a fixed entity, and its content evolves as society evolves. For example, we might well consider that New York’s skyscrapers form part of the city’s heritage; there is therefore no obvious opposition between tower developers and those who wish to safeguard heritage. The real debate should focus on the way architectural heritage is developed and the way in which citizens’ preferences are reconciled with the demands of sustainable urban development.

Oppressive modernity



Photo : J.-M. Huriot, 2011

The age-old fantasy surrounding towers and the deplorable effects of Le Corbusier’s projects and of vertical urban development in the second half of the 20th century make references to modernity in

the quest for height somewhat surprising. This leads to a number of questions: are skyscrapers a form of “retro urban development” (Jamawat, Fortin, Halbur and Negrete 2011)? In a world that consumes too much energy, is it not the case that modernity lies in eco-construction rather than in building higher at all costs?

The idea of the tower as a mark of modernity is one that has spread without any imagination and at the risk of uniformity. You must be modern; to achieve this, you must imitate other “modern” cities and build towers everywhere; you must do as everyone else does – or even better than everyone else – and take care not to be left out of the race for prestige; you must display your rank through the verticality of your urban fabric. This sort of competition homogenises our cities at the expense of their originality. Is it modern (or postmodern) to continue the millennia-old tradition of making yet more sacrifices on the altar of ever increasing height? Which is the better choice: taking part in a race for technical performance or promoting carefully considered, democratic urban planning and development?

Height: the mark of power

Better hidden – but nonetheless flagrant – is the symbolism of height, which in turn brings with it the symbolism of power. “Up” means sky and heaven and all that is good, clean, beautiful and positive. “Down” means all that is evil, ugly, bad and negative. All that elevates is desirable. Elevating oneself means improving oneself, seeking out the best, exceeding one’s expectations: reach for the sky, be inspired. The builders of the Tower of Babel paid dearly for their ambition to climb higher and higher in order to reach their god. But height also represents the peak of a hierarchy; it is therefore the symbol of command, control and power. *The higher the tower, the more effectively it symbolises a second form of prestige: the prestige of power.* Expressions such as “high rank”, “high authority” and “high court” all convey this message. The relationship between towers and power has a long history. Churches, cathedrals and other places of worship reach upwards towards heaven, and for centuries were the tallest structures in our cities – dual symbols of elevation towards celestial power and of the strength of religious power on the ground. With the secularisation of municipal power, belfries started to compete with church towers and spires, rivalling each other in terms of height. Since the construction of the first skyscrapers at the end of the 19th century, another form of domination has gradually developed. This time, a different type of power has come to the fore: economic power, supported by political power. Indeed, at this time of economic globalisation, economic power is increasingly taking the place of political power – with the politicians’ consent. As Manuel Appert (2011) writes, towers “are powerful vehicles for speculation and communication for developers, investors and architects”. And, at the same time, of course, some of the prestige of these towers also rubs off on the politicians that defend them.

Arrogant expression of power



Photo : J.-M. Huriot, 2011

The tower – an ode to capitalist globalisation

Globalisation manifests itself in the form of economic power across a worldwide network, and more specifically the network of global cities that accommodate the core activities of economic power: the coordination of the globalised economy, i.e. conception, decision-making and decision-making assistance activities with a global reach. Here, finance, company headquarters and advanced services play an essential role (Castells 1998; Sassen 2000; Taylor 2004; Bourdeau-Lepage & Huriot 2005). The tallest towers are, for the most part, office towers that primarily house globalised activities, as in Manhattan or La Défense; it is no accident that one of the first occupants of the Tour First was the professional services firm Ernst & Young. Moreover, how better to symbolise economic power than to take the name of one of the biggest firms in the world? The Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur (452 m, fifth highest in the world) are not just home to the Malaysian oil giant, they also bear its name and symbolise the country's economic power.

The jungle of towers in Dubai, dominated by Burj Khalifa, offers a trade-based variation on the symbolism of economic power: Dubai's ambition is to be the largest trade centre in the world, and makes it known through the vertical nature of the city. China has already overtaken the United States in terms of the number of super-tall towers, and in 2016 will have four times as many as the US. In this way, it expresses its growing economic power and its desire to outperform America. Similarly, the other key emerging countries, well-stocked with tall towers, make these buildings the emblem of their new wealth and their growing economic power – here, too, in a bid to outdo the United States, by anticipating their potential status as the “New Old World”. Of course, this sort of anticipation has the same weaknesses as any anticipation of an unpredictable long term. Furthermore, the expression of one's economic power through the height of one's towers is completely artificial; indeed, there is something derisory about this race for height – everyone wants to *appear* to be the best, and so it is impossible to avoid entering the race. One *must* build higher, ever higher... But with what aims for society? To sell, to speculate, to generate profit at the expense

of truly urgent social issues? These towers are nothing but deplorable symbols... Decision-makers, get your feet back on the ground and desecrate these towers and all that they symbolise!

Urban identity, not cloning

It is sometimes claimed that towers give a city an identity, through their quality and architectural originality. Does establishing an identity mean doing the same as everyone else? If presented with a randomly selected photo of one of the 200 tallest towers in the world, how many people could honestly say which city it was taken in? We are forgetting here that establishing an identity means, above all, standing out from the crowd. Identifying oneself with a tower means identifying with global uniformity. Identifying oneself through the symbolism of a tower means identifying with liberal globalisation and market domination, instead of being oneself and assuming one's individuality.

We should perhaps think more seriously about developing a differentiated and human world where complementarity replaces homogenising competition, and where it is people who come first and who pull the strings, rather than being the markets' playthings. If Paris wishes to resemble Shanghai, it runs the risk of no longer resembling anything at all – not even a global metropolis. Beware of urban cloning...

Fragile symbols

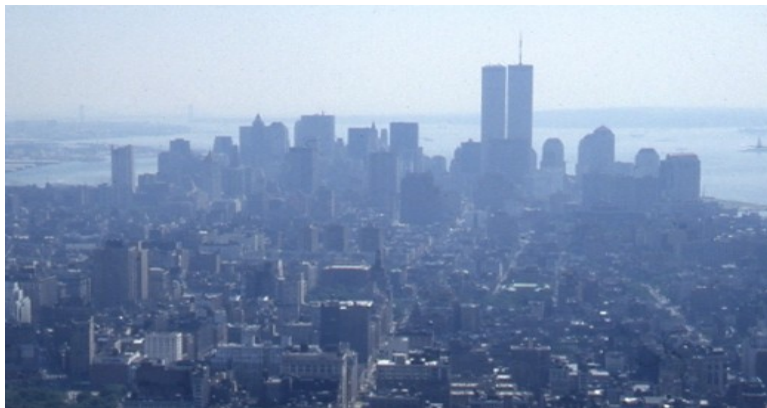


Photo : J.-M. Huriot, 2011

This paper is not about being radically against towers, any more than it is about being unquestioningly in favour of them. The moral of this article is that we must not enter blindly into a race for height, nor defend the development of verticality at all costs – especially the human costs, which are most often forgotten. The other key lesson to bear in mind is that towers do not seem essential to a city's success; they are simply very large billboards, more or less convincing, sometimes cumbersome, and always fragile.

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Jean-Marie Huriot is emeritus professor in economics at the Université de Bourgogne (University of Burgundy, Dijon). He collaborates regularly with geographers and also has affinities with the world of sociology. His latest published work, *Économie des villes contemporaines*, was co-written with Lise Bourdeau-Lepage.

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