

Skyscraper as Symbol

The semiotics of skyscrapers

ASKYSCRAPER, unlike a sculpture or painting, cannot be the work of a single artist. It arises from numerous contingencies and collaborations among architects and CEOs, steelworkers and engineers, bankers and billionaires. Like the Great Pyramids of ancient Egypt, the skyscraper is—in our own time—perhaps the ultimate symbol of cultural production. The period since 9/11, thought by some likely to signal the demise of huge towers, has instead seen the biggest surge ever in their construction. Nearly half of the world's skyscrapers have been built since 2000.

There is “no artifact more synthetic and comprehensive in our contemporary world than the skyscraper,” writes Scott Johnson, M.Arch. ’75, in *Tall Building: Imagining the Skyscraper* (Balcony Press, \$34.95). As a principal of the California architectural firm Johnson Fain, he has designed more than a few tall buildings himself.

Expedience, transcendence, ambition, and dominance: these are the principal reasons why tall buildings emerged and why they continue to be built, says Johnson. Initially, land values in places like downtown Chicago and New York City drove expansion skyward, enabled by technological developments like elevators, curtain walls, and high-strength steel.

But today, “like so much in our lives, skyscrapers have become semiotic things,” Johnson said in an interview. From San Francisco’s Transamerica Pyramid (designed by Pereira Associates, Johnson Fain’s corporate predecessor), where the

final design was chosen by Transamerica’s then-CEO and ended up becoming the symbol of the company itself, to Dubai’s Burj Khalifa (formerly Burj Dubai), a national monument to modernity and global reach, tall buildings signal aspirations. Burj Khalifa, for example, at 2,717 feet, is taller than Chicago’s Sears Tower and Manhattan’s Empire State Building combined.

Johnson traces a number of the forces that have created skyscrapers, including the increasingly prosperous cities of Asia and the Middle East and the rise of mixed use. “In 1996,” he says, “eight of the 10 tallest buildings were in the United States, and only one was mixed use”—retail, recreational, office, and residential. Today, all 10 of the world’s tallest buildings are outside the United States and *all* of them are mixed use. “We are moving vertically to enact all the rituals and activities of our daily lives,” he explains. “Living on one floor, shopping on another, exercising, seeking open air, attending parties on others. It’s transformational.”

Bioclimatic concerns—air and light—have been another important shaping influence in modern buildings. English architect Norman Foster has found ways to



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Top: The National Commercial Bank, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, has shaded interior windows, an environmental response to its desert environment. Burj Khalifa, in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (at right and below), at 2,717 feet, is the world’s tallest tower.



channel natural light to the very center of his buildings, while the Malaysian architect Ken Yeang gouges out his buildings' skins to create profusely planted microclimates in sun or shade.

Just as in the 1950s and '60s there were clear resonances between the world of architecture—with its “pure, sleek” skyscrapers—and the minimalist creations of the fine arts world, says Johnson, today the influence of the information age has

Clockwise from left: Norman Foster designed the Swiss Re building in London to channel light and air throughout its astral form; a skyscraper in Doha, Qatar, advertises the 2006 Asian games; Peter Eisenmann's unbuilt design for the Max Reinhardt Haus rethinks the linearity of tall buildings.

reached tall buildings. In an extension of their semiotic role, their surfaces are being rethought to carry visual content and information. In certain places in city centers, their exteriors have become not only battle grounds, but also more valuable than the space within. Johnson recounts landlord struggles with residential neighbors bothered at night by illuminated signage, on the one hand, and with tenants angered by reduced daylight after an advertising scrim is suddenly hung on the building. Recently, a developer was offered more money for the exterior of a building than the residential units inside could generate.

The fight for the exterior of tall buildings, Johnson says, is clearly the next big conversation. If we are indeed on the cusp of a new reason for building skyscrapers, Johnson's view is that public art might play a role. “A tall building is de facto a potential work of art,” he argues. “It may be privately financed and occupied, but it is in the public realm—it is a wall of the public right of way.”

—JONATHAN SHAW



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COURTESY EISENMANN ARCHITECTS; PHOTOGRAPHER DICK FRANK (1:200 MODEL, WEST ELEVATION)

A Cautionary Tale

Inflation and Its Painful Aftermath

by DAVID WARSH

ROBERT J. SAMUELSON '67 had the bad luck to send *The Great Inflation and Its Aftermath: The Past and Future of American Affluence* to the printer the spring before the recent financial crisis became acute. The book reached stores just in time for the November 2008 election, and, even though it received respectful reviews, it was swept aside by events. Now Samuelson is back with a paperback edition, somewhat revised and updated, with a new introduction addressing the significance of the

financial cataclysm of the last couple of years.

Lucky Sam. It turns out that there's a double-barreled moral to his story. A little like Edward Gibbon, Samuelson started out to write a history and finished with a cautionary tale.

Anyone born after, say, 1965, might have been puzzled at the sudden prominence assigned to Paul Volcker this past January. The Democrats had just lost their super-majority. A little-known Massachusetts Republican state senator named Scott

Brown surprised everyone by winning the Senate seat that Edward M. Kennedy '54, LL.D. '08, had held for nearly 50 years.

Suddenly there was the 82-year-old Volcker, summoned to the White House to stand at President Barack Obama's side as he announced that “the Volcker rule” would guide the administration's efforts to reform the banking industry—federally insured banks should be barred from speculative activity unrelated to their business. Yet it had been more than 20 years since Volcker had retired as chairman of the Federal Reserve

Board. The banking lobby, and the Senate, quickly dismissed his rule. What could the old man add? In fact, under the circumstances, Volcker was

Robert J. Samuelson, *The Great Inflation and Its Aftermath: The Past and Future of American Affluence* (Random House, \$17 paper)