

Planning for Tall Buildings

Michael J. Short

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PLANNING FOR TALL BUILDINGS

In a time of recession, the challenge of building and planning for tall buildings has become even more complex; the economics of development, legislative and planning frameworks, and the local politics of development must be navigated by those wishing to design and construct new tall buildings which fit within the fabric of their host cities.

This book is a timely contribution to the debate about new tall buildings and their role and effect on our cities. In the first part of the book, the relationship between tall buildings and planning is outlined, followed by an exploration of the impacts that construction of tall buildings can have. It focuses in particular on the conservation debates that proposals for new tall buildings raise. The first part ends with an analysis of the way in which planning strategies have evolved to deal with the unique consequences of tall buildings on their urban locations. The second part of the book focuses on seven examples of medium-sized cities dealing with planning and conservation issues, and the implications that arise from tall buildings. These have been chosen to reflect a wide range of methods to either encourage or control tall buildings that cities are deploying. The case studies come from across the western world, covering the UK (Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and Birmingham), Norway (Oslo), Ireland (Dublin) and Canada (Vancouver) and represent a broad spectrum of approaches to dealing with this issue.

In drawing together the experiences of these varied cities, the book contributes to the ongoing debate about the role of the tall buildings in our cities, their potential impacts and the experiences of those who use and inhabit them. The conclusions outline how cities should approach the strategic planning of tall buildings, as well as how they should deal with the consequences of individual buildings, particularly on the built heritage.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been increasing concern amongst built environment professionals internationally about development proposals for tall buildings and their potential impact on the fabric of our cities. Booming cities in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed significant numbers of tall buildings being proposed, in part fuelled by cities' inter-urban competition (Pløger, 2010; Sklair, 2006). In many instances, planners have had to respond to these proposals using out-of-date or inadequate planning frameworks and have often worked under pressure from politicians to approve tangible symbols of economic growth. At the heart of the debate about the appropriateness of specific tall building proposals is their impact and effect on existing townscapes in general, and more specifically, protected buildings and areas; should planning frameworks encourage the siting of towers in appropriate locations, and if so, how do we decide where these locations should be? Should proposals be actively discouraged through such frameworks where they might harm the character, or distinctiveness, of a specific place, area or monument? Cities are responding to the tall building challenge on a spectrum that ranges from outright opposition to wholehearted embrace with planning as the basis for negotiation over specific proposals.

This book attempts to reflect on planning approaches to tall buildings in this time of recession, drawing on a number of cases to outline how cities are responding to this challenge. In essence it is a book about good planning: how to develop planning frameworks which encourage both a deep understanding of the character of place and how, if at all, this might be improved through the construction of tall buildings.

Planning is a multi-dimensional, multi-objective forum for the management of change in the built and natural environment that is both regulatory, in the sense that it is enshrined within a statutory system, and visionary, in the sense that future visions are promoted and implemented through it (Carmona et al., 2003). Additionally, this book reflects on instances where cities have sought to attract tall buildings with little

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or no attempt at good planning. It shows the broad spectrum of approaches to planning for tall buildings from outright laissez-faire un-regulated cities, to those that positively attract tall buildings as part of a coherent planning strategy.

New tall buildings assert the vision of a city that is modern, prestigious, forward-looking and open to business. They are powerful advertising tools for tourism and economic regeneration, and can project an image of the building's occupiers to the world (Abel, 2003; Strelitz, 2005; Namier, 1931). Tall buildings are being proposed and built across a wide range of cities; from Tallinn to Taipei, Santiago to St Petersburg, Bahrain to Budapest, Cairo to Chicago, Dubai to Dallas and Manchester to Melbourne. They have been defining twenty-first century urban growth by their sheer size and numbers: ". . . no other building type incorporates so many forces of the modern world, or has been so expressive of changing belief systems and so responsive to changing tastes and practices" (Huxtable, 1992: 11).

The central contention of this book is that tall buildings can "give cities identity through 'skyline', an identifiable array of icons that provide orientation" (McNeill, 2005: 46), but only if they are planned as part of a coherent strategy involving the full breadth of stakeholders and resulting from consensus. The converse, of course, is that if tall buildings are approved and built in a planning policy vacuum, their location and design being decided by the market alone, we can witness illegible, incoherent townscapes of decreasing aesthetic, physical and cultural value which show little consideration for effects on that townscape or on the people who experience it. Huxtable (1984) explains the tall building eloquently: ". . . its role in the life of the city and the individual is vexing, and its impact shattering . . ." (p. 11).

A key theme of the book is, therefore, to investigate the role and function of emerging planning frameworks and tools in dealing with the challenges of tall buildings in particular places. What can planning practice tell us about how to deal with tall buildings and their impacts? Should cities proactively plan for tall buildings and if so, how? Upon what sorts of plans should these strategies be based and how can planning authorities make effective and relevant decisions about tall buildings? Finally, what can this analysis of tall building developments and planning strategies tell us about the wider practice of planning? Using a range of case studies, including individual cities and in some instances, particular buildings, this book will seek to address these questions.

In particular the book focuses on the problems of managing proposals for tall buildings in cities where the built form reflects a palimpsest of development over time: what can be termed hybrid heritage (While and Short, 2006). In these cities the outcomes of planning decision-making processes reflect that there is little consensus over the type and value of the built heritage. The notion of hybridity can be used to explain the fluidity and multiplicity of "space-times generated in/by the movements and rhythms of heterogeneous associations" (Whatmore, 2002: 6). Many cities can be described as hybrid heritage cities; different ages in the evolution of those cities are reflected in their character yet there are competing values attached to those elements. This value is reflected in, amongst other things, the protection

of particular built heritages. In “historic” cities with a clear and identifiable heritage – York, Amsterdam, Bruges and Krakow, for example – the character and skyline of the city often reflects consensus about the significance of that heritage amongst a wide range of interest groups, and thereby remains relatively intact through established planning frameworks. Cohen (1999) argues that the regulation of building height is critical for the conservation of the built heritage of such cities. In those cities where there is more willingness to trade conservation off against change – in Manchester, Berlin, Tokyo and Moscow, for example – judgement about the impact of tall building proposals on the built environment is less clear, especially as tall buildings might be said to improve the urban fabric. The determination of tall building proposals within such hybrid heritage contexts reflects the values attributed to different elements of the townscape, to political struggles over the future of the built heritage, its economic value and the importance of new development to cities eager to regenerate and re-image.

It is necessary to define what is meant by “tall buildings”. Tall buildings are defined most readily by their height. Höweler (2003) suggests that a tall building can be one in which there is a proportional relationship of height to width. A tall building can however, be defined by “. . . some aspects of ‘tallness’ . . . It is a building whose height creates different conditions in the design, construction, and operation from those that exist in ‘common’ buildings of a certain region and period” (Beedle, 1986: 3). In other words, what may constitute tall is relational and depends upon the urban, cultural and societal context. Something tall is either “of more than average height” or “higher than surrounding objects”¹. The dictionary definition of “tall” reflects this relational view, but it is also helpful to define what “tall” is not: “big” meaning “large in size” is unhelpful as it omits that relational view; “large” meaning “relatively great in size” reflects a relational perspective, but omits the proportional element suggested by Höweler. Height can be measured in a variety of ways. It may be expressed as height in metres (or feet), or by number of storeys. For the purposes of this book, the relational view will be adopted, and the measurement of height in either metres or storeys will depend on individual context.

Summary of book content

The book is divided into two main parts. Firstly, the relationship between tall buildings, planning and conservation is outlined focusing, in Chapter 1, on an examination of the tall building typology from the origins of the modern skyscraper in late nineteenth century North America through to the wave of tall buildings that have characterised recent urban development and growth across the world. This is followed by Chapter 2, which explores the types of impacts that construction of tall buildings might lead to. The potential impacts of a tall building can be many and may relate to the unique characteristics of the city where it is proposed, the site and the individual design of the building. Chapter 3 analyses the way in which planning strategies have evolved to deal with the impacts of tall buildings. Chapter 4 completes the first part of the book through a more detailed examination of the role

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of the built heritage in the evolution of our cities; its contribution to character and distinctiveness, and how decisions about impacts upon heritage are determined.

The second part of the book focuses on seven examples of medium-sized cities dealing with the planning issues and impacts that arise from tall buildings. These have been chosen to reflect the wide range of methods to either encourage or to control tall buildings that cities are deploying. They have been chosen from across the western world, covering England (Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and Birmingham), Norway (Oslo), Ireland (Dublin) and Canada (Vancouver) and represent a broad spectrum of approaches to dealing with this issue from a so-called *laissez-faire* strategy adopted by the planning authority in Manchester, to much more comprehensive strategies for encouraging tall building development in appropriate locations in both Vancouver and Newcastle. The remaining examples represent approaches to planning for tall buildings that fall somewhere between the two extremes above.

The concluding chapters will seek to draw together these experiences contributing to the ongoing debate about the role of tall buildings in our cities, their potential impact upon those cities and the experience of people that inhabit them. From this analysis, the conclusions will outline how cities should approach the strategic planning of tall buildings, as well as how they should deal with the impacts of individual buildings, particularly on the built heritage. It is hoped, therefore, that this book can demonstrate the utility of effective and robust planning frameworks in this complex area of development. Finally, the book will reflect on whether there are wider conclusions for planning practice: what do strategies for tall buildings tell us about planning complex urban systems, as well as the management of specific building projects?

1

THE TALL BUILDING TYPOLOGY

The confluence of a number of economic, social and technological innovations at the end of the nineteenth century in the USA spurred the development of the tall building. Up to that point, the tallest buildings in cities were either religious buildings such as churches or temples, palaces of the nobility or connected to defence (Kostoff, 2001). Since that time, however, a number of distinct periods of tall building development have occurred as a result of different sets of drivers. This chapter examines the challenge of tall buildings, looking specifically at the evolution of tall buildings, responses to them in particular places and the potential range of tall building impacts. It explores the evolution of the tall building using a number of cities and buildings to exemplify responses to tall buildings during specific periods and in particular locations, and is sub-divided into the following sub-sections: the emergence of the tall building; the modern movement and tall buildings; the post-modernist backlash; and the global tall building phenomenon.

The emergence of the tall building as an architectural form has been a feature of the twentieth century city (Bradford Landau and Condit, 1996). Likewise, responses to the development of tall buildings have characterised urban planning during this period. As well as the design and appearance of the buildings themselves, the urban planning implication of building tall started to be articulated from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Goldberger (1981) outlines that at the start of the twentieth century it was beginning to be understood that tall buildings were fundamentally different to what had been built before, and that they demanded a different set of attitudes towards the making of cities. The following sections use the examples of New York City, Paris, Houston and Shanghai to assist in understanding the drivers, impacts and responses to tall buildings during their evolution.