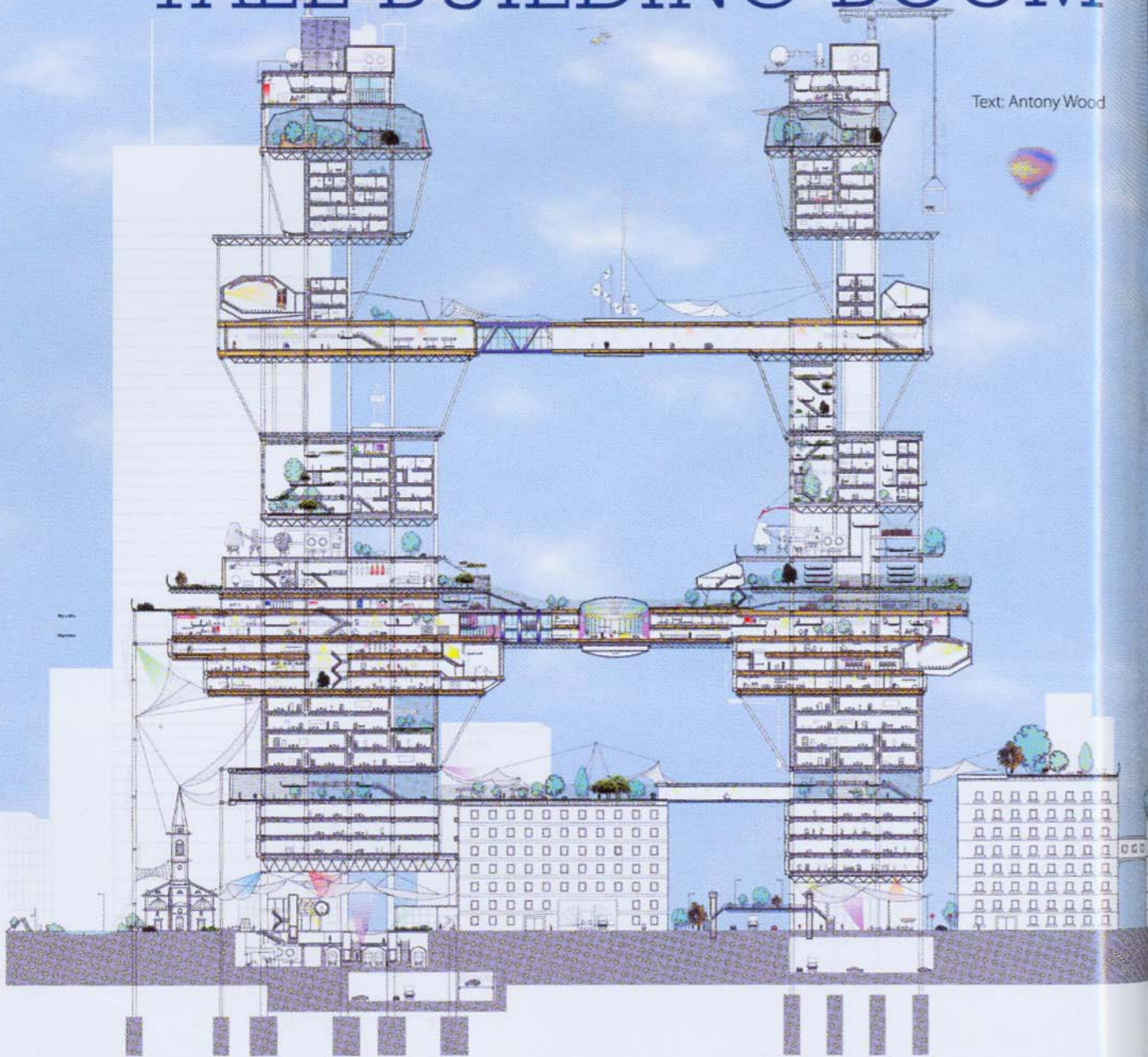


TALL BUILDING BOOM

Text: Antony Wood



Skybridges / connected towers proposal (copyright: Harjinder Singh / Antony Wood, Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat)

Few would dispute that we are in a tall building boom unprecedented in terms of its global scale, with ever-denser cities and ever-taller buildings being proposed from Moscow to the Middle East, from Shanghai to San Francisco. Even taking into account such golden periods of skyscraper building during turn-of-the-twentieth century Chicago or art deco New York, we are most probably at the most active level of tall building development ever, certainly on an international scale. But what is driving this unprecedented international boom? The non-exhaustive list below suggests some of the usual drivers, and perhaps some surprising ones:

1. Land prices. Always a driver for tall buildings but increasingly so now as many cities, especially in countries like the US and UK, seek to re-populate their urban centres with residential-recreational complements to the predominantly commercial-retail Central Business District stock. These relatively new markets are helping drive up city centre land prices, which makes building tall for investment return increasingly necessary.
2. Global icons. Building super-tall has never been just about increasing the commercial return on a development. On the contrary, there are many that

believe that, over a certain height, the economics just do not, literally, stack up. The creation of an architectural icon to soar above the city has always been a factor in the history of the world's tallest building, but now the focus has changed; tall buildings are increasingly being built to project the vitality of a city on a global scale – creating skylines with brand recognition on an international level. This shift from corporate to city (or even government) ambition is reflected in the very titles of the world's tallest; formerly we had icons such as the Chrysler Building or Sears Tower, now we have Taipei 101 or Burj Dubai, where the building itself takes on the responsibility

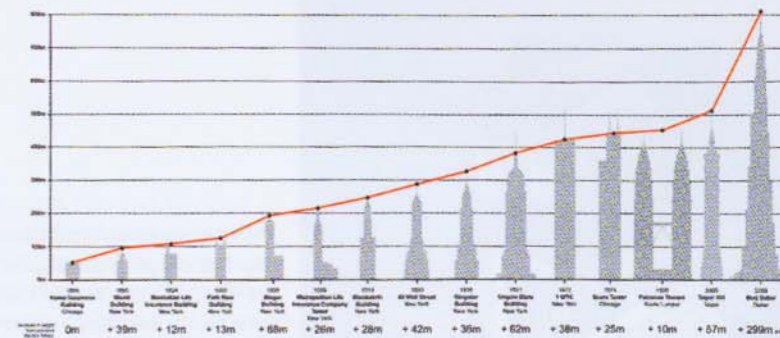


Figure 1: Height incremental changes in the development of the world's tallest building historically (copyright: Antony Wood, Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat)

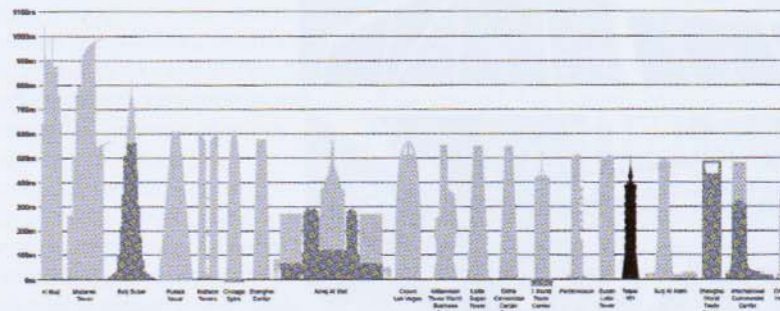


Figure 2: "Tallest 20 in 2020" (copyright: Antony Wood, Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat)

of helping promote the city on the world stage. This also, of course, works on a regional scale – country's tallest building, city's tallest building etc.

3. Sustainability. The threat to the planet through climate change and the need for more sustainable patterns of life to respond to this is now generally accepted. Denser, more concentrated cities are seen as an essential part of this more sustainable way of life – reducing energy consumption and climate-change emissions through reducing the suburban spread of cities, transport and infrastructure networks, loss of countryside etc. Tall buildings are a key factor in creating denser cities, giving the opportunity to accommodate more people (for work or live) on smaller footprints of land. In addition, the investment in every tall building project – both financially and professionally – gives them the opportunity to be exemplars in the embrace of sustainable design and technologies to perhaps lead the way for other, smaller, building types.
4. Collapse of the World Trade Centre towers. Perhaps the most far-reaching event to have occurred in the last half-century of more, the collapse of the World Trade Centre towers drew a big question mark over the tall building as an acceptable proposition for our future cities: should we continue to build tall in the post 9/11 world? Six years after that terrible event, to judge by the number of tall buildings being built and proposed, it seems the answer is a resounding yes. But why so? The event induced perhaps

the largest introspective analysis of tall buildings ever, whilst focussing attention on the typology. This has resulted in better designed, safer buildings which relate to our urban centres better than ever before. Governments, city authorities, financiers and developers have become increasingly aware of these benefits through the global re-examination of the typology.

Height trends

There are a number of statistics which are of interest. There are now more tall buildings in Asia than North America and, of the tallest ten buildings completed during 2006 according to the CTBUH, four were located in the Middle East and four in China. The world of tall buildings has changed much in the past decade or so, since the Sears Tower last held the title of 'the world's tallest' for the US. If you had pointed to the world's next tallest building during the eighties or before, you would have assumed quite securely that it would be located in North America, of steel construction and accommodating office functions. Today almost the exact opposite is true – the world's tallest building proposals currently are likely to be located in Asia, of concrete construction, and accommodating predominantly residential functions. This is certainly the case with the world's tallest currently under construction, the Burj Dubai.

The Burj Dubai is a fascinating case study in what is currently being achieved with tall buildings. In pure height terms,



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