

Undaunted, Skyscrapers Reach Higher

Eager developers want to shrug off the current economic crisis, but the global downturn could yet quash future high-rise plans

By [Matt Vella](#)

The global financial crisis seems to have done little to dampen the sky-high ambitions of [architects](#) and developers racing to build the world's tallest buildings. Even as the U.S. [credit crunch](#) spilled across the Atlantic and beyond, the skyscraper boom continued to escalate. At Cityscape, Dubai's annual real-estate trade show (Oct. 6-9), the government-backed property developer [Nakheel](#) unveiled new plans to build a \$38 billion, 3,000-ft. skyscraper in the city, dwarfing the most ambitious global projects to date in both size and cost.

The Nakheel announcement caps a decade-long tall-building boom. As technology, materials, and designs have become ever more sophisticated, the architects, engineers, and developers have rushed to begin building daring structures, transforming the definition of modern skyscrapers. According to the Council on Tall Buildings & Urban Habitat, a nonprofit based at the Illinois Institute of Technology, some 36 buildings have reached heights of 1,000 ft. or more, meeting the definition of "supertall" structures. The council estimates that a further 69 supertall buildings are currently in construction. ([See a slideshow](#) of the council's list of the 20 tallest buildings in the world currently under construction.)

Robust economies awash in petrodollars have led the trend, notably [Russia](#) and a handful of countries in the [Middle East](#). In the United Arab Emirates, for example, the anticipated \$1.4 billion Burj Dubai tower is already the world's tallest structure, even though construction is not expected to be completed until fall 2009. Developed by Emaar Properties and designed by Chicago architects [Skidmore, Owings & Merrill](#), the vast tower will contain an Armani-styled luxury hotel and corporate office space as well as high-tech features like the world's fastest elevator. The building will be more than 1,000 ft. higher than Chicago's Sears Tower, the tallest building in North America. In Russia, meanwhile, work has begun on the pyramid-like Russia Tower, designed by British architects [Foster + Partners](#) and large enough to accommodate 250,000 people.

FULL SPEED AHEAD

Still, it remains unclear how current global economic woes will affect the supertall trend, and analysts believe a worldwide slowdown could yet quash future projects. By 2010, overall construction growth will be roughly halved in Latin America and the Middle East, to 6.4% and 3.7% respectively, estimates Scott Hazleton, director of construction services at research and investing firm [Global Insight](#). He attributes the drop-off to both the economic slowdown and the saturation of building in these markets, and he points out that both figures handily outpace outright declines of -0.2% in Western Europe. "The scope of some projects may change," notes Hazleton. "But the Middle East in particular still has tons of cash reserves."

Indeed, most supertall projects are of such scale and complexity that many design details change during the years of construction. Confirmation of the final height and floor count of the Burj Dubai, for example, has been a closely held secret and has reportedly changed since construction began four years ago in hopes of maintaining

the building's tallest status. The Skidmore, Owings & Merrill-designed Trump Tower Chicago, proposed in 2001 and now nearing completion, was initially intended to be the world's tallest building, but plans were scaled back after the September 11 terrorist attacks.

But around the world, planners have so far largely shrugged off the economic crisis at hand. At the unveiling of the Nakheel project earlier this month, Chris O'Donnell, the company's chief executive, told *The Wall Street Journal* the long-term scope of the project insulated it from yearly economic fluctuations. "The project will be built over 10 years, and we'll have many more [economic] cycles before then," he said. "The world will be a different place by the time it's built."

DWARFING NEW YORK AND CHICAGO

More certain are the sometimes stark differences buildings now in construction have with older skyscrapers. Whereas well-known edifices such as the Chrysler Building in New York were built as corporate icons containing offices, many new constructions in the Middle East and Asia are designed as mixed-use properties, often hosting luxury residences. New towers are being constructed with concrete and composite materials rather than steel—enabling new design possibilities, including unheard-of heights. "New skyscrapers are the opposite of the typical tall building of the past 100 years," says Antony Wood, executive director of the Council on Tall Buildings & Urban Habitat. "Materials, locations, and meanings have all changed."

That has left cities that were once pivotal in defining the urban landscape—notably New York and Chicago—with little to boast about. According to Wood, just two buildings in the U.S. are expected to be among the world's tallest by the year 2020. Those include the graceful, twisting Chicago Spire designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, which broke ground last year and will reach some 2,000 ft. or 150 stories. One World Trade Center, designed by American architect David Childs, will also stand out when it is completed in 2013. But for now, it seems, height seekers will need to head east.

[Vella](#) is a writer for *BusinessWeek.com* in New York.