

# THE ARCHITECTURAL DIMENSION: Contemporary architecture and high rise constructions as a contextual challenge

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## Abstract

The first documented incident on high buildings must surely be the Tower of Babel.

And they said: 'Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, with its top in heaven, and let us make us a name; lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth'.  
Genesis XI, 4

While the sorry end to this abortive project is well known, we can but imagine that the headlines of the conservation tabloids the next day probably read – *God was on our side*. According to the Midrashic commentaries the main issue was the debate between the collective public inspiration and the primordial private speculation. It is with this in mind that the term Babelism is coined.

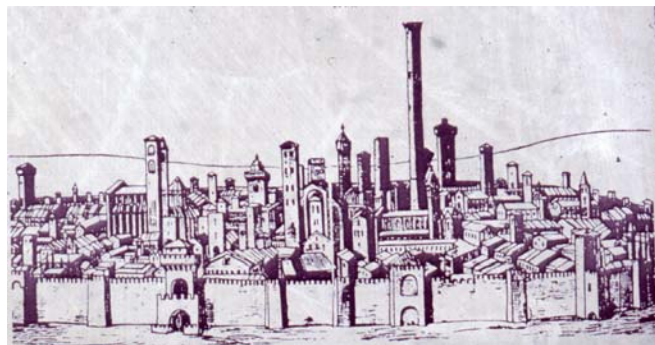
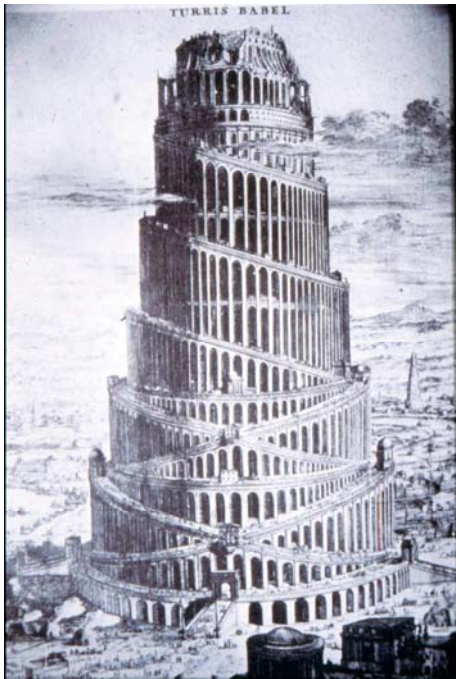


fig 1 - tower of babel – albert durer

fig 2 - bologna

Religious symbolism was the dominant city-form in early history; nevertheless there were examples of secular and religious skirmishes especially during the Middle Ages that found their manifestation in the Italian hill-cities. Here the competition for the sky was accompanied with a series of urban rules governing the use and management of the towers.

The skyline was part of the civic identity. Spiro Kostof defined the skyline as the line where earth and sky meet, physically and spiritually. It was the meeting of the real and virtual – the heavenly and earthly Jerusalems. By the middle ages this 'meeting' was engraved in the minds of the community expressing itself in art and literature.

Historically, the urban silhouette, what the Germans called the "city portrait" or Stadtbild, was the result of a cumulative process, and its reading was calculated. The landmarks...were symbols of a collective life; they advertised civic priorities, and made palpable the hierarchy of public institutions.<sup>1</sup>

Canaletto painted the stadtbild of London in 1746 from the house of his patron, the second Duke of Richmond. For centuries, St Paul's Cathedral ruled the skyline, together with a host spires, almost all designed by Wren. At this period, only two secular features appear on the scene, the glowing Monument and a dark conical bottle oven.

The depiction of the Thames and the embankment buildings in the backcloth were a major part of the London identity. Not only the sonnet by William Wordsworth, but the paintings by Turner, Whistler and Monet all played on the theme of the city fair and majestic.

Upon Westminster Bridge – September 3, 1802

Earth has not anything to show more fair;  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A site so touching in its majesty;  
This City now doth like a garment wear

The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields and to the sky,  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

.....

William Wordsworth

This definition of majesty is entwined between the skylines of the towers and domes with the human activity of theatres and temples. The cultural significance of the architecture and its symbolism is evident.

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<sup>1</sup> Kostoff, S The City Assembled, Thames and Hudson,



fig 3 – Canaletto



fig 4 - Whistler

We are here also to reflect on the case-study of Cologne and the effects of high building around the Cathedral. The current situation reduces us to visual corridors as opposed to the panoramas in the Woensam woodcut of the sixteenth century. No doubt, a change affecting its cultural significance.



fig 5a - Cologne, woodcut view by Anton Woensam of Worms, 1531

As the industrial revolution gained momentum the values and form of the cities was debated. Father Cities, Garden City Movement and the City Beautiful were all part of the reactions to the changing order of the skyline from spires to chimneys. Pugin's images of 1836 shows this very contrast lauding the landscape of the Gothic city as opposed to its industrial competition.



fig 5b - Images from A.W.N. Pugin's Contrasts 1836.

The first high buildings were probably a whopping culture shock for most of the population. Old habits die slowly and the challenge of the secular god of Mammon was too much for the traditionalists. This resulted in the race for the heavens embodied in the Chicago Temple by Holabird and Roche, 1924 as the first of the "revenue churches". The conventional 19 storey office tower is topped by an elaborate gothic 'sky chapel' accessible by express elevator of which Richard Neutra, in his extolling the merits of vertical structures, would have been proud. The sanctuary relief shows Christ approvingly contemplating Chicago's business district from the heights of a nearby rooftop. This was paralleled by the gothic icing on the Chicago Tribune tower transferring the religious power to the media.



fig 6a - Chicago Temple



fig 6b – Chicago Tribune Tower

How can we resolve the continuing and contemporary architecture in the historic urban landscape? This surely can be debated by the sharpening our definitions of the urban significance and identify independently the urban and architectural justification.

There seem to be two patterns for the historic city – the layered synchronic tel or the unified diachronic city. In the former, the city re-invents itself building onion layer upon layer in a kind of Kleenex society, jettisoning the expendable. The latter city has a sense of permanence accepting the growth while the changes take place in the horizontal realm extending over large areas of land. Perhaps this can be defined as the *Project City* (whole design) as opposed to the *Process City* (evolution). As examples, Bath is probably the epitome of the Project City being hard to grow and hard to change while Bruges and Prague have the essence of evolution being easy to grow and hard to change.

One must not be blinded by physical form and beauty, the definition of Cultural Heritage and its justification is far reaching. Let us take the example of one of the possible cultural significances of the Old City of Prague. The defenestration of Prague has a record in which for most cases the rebelling Protestants tossed entrenched Catholics out of the windows of strongholds of city halls.<sup>2</sup> In such a case, it would be the window detail that would give the special justification and demand their protection.

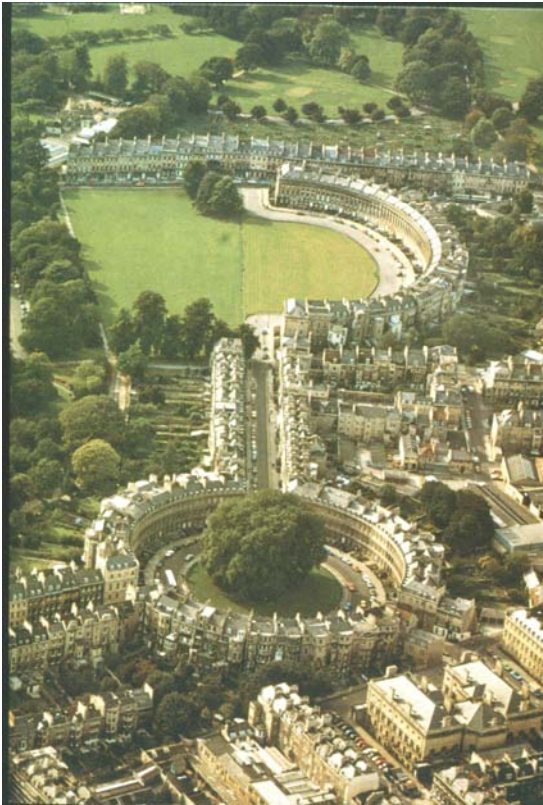


fig 7 - city as a project – Bath

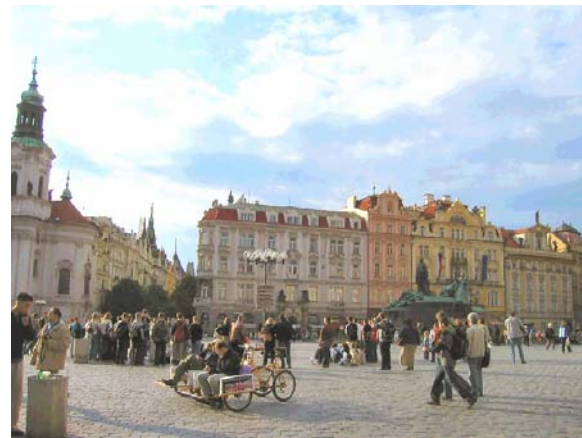


fig 8 - city as a process - Prague

Consequently, we are dealing with the definitions of and attitudes to *growth and change*. At what point is the growth considered a change. The seminal paper of George Miller and developed in a design format by Christopher Alexander identifies the magic number of  $7 \pm 2$  and provides us with a possible formula to define the threshold where the effects of change move us into a different scale and form<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Gould, S.J.; The Diet of Worms and the Defenestration of Prague;

<sup>3</sup> Miller, G.A; The Magic Number of Seven plus or minus Two; Psychological Review, 1956

The Buffer Zone is also defined by its cultural significance. This zone may be visual, functional or ethereal but it is an integral part of the context of *chronos* and *topos* and adds to the comprehension of the site.

The urban 'set of rules' is also part of the cultural significance. Why? because they are an inherent part of the socio-political resolution of the conflict between theory and reality. Hausmann in his designs for Paris gave guidelines and details for every part of the façade. In this case we might redesign the individual plot with contemporary architecture will respecting the urban rules and cultural significance. There is the dichotomy between urbanism and architecture. Historic cities lie between those that possess *grand urbanism and simple architecture* and those with *simple urbanism and grand architecture*. For most cases, what we are now viewing is an urban schizophrenia. It is an ongoing conflict between the aesthetics and ethics, the functional and economical and the cultural and social.

The basic tenet is to see in the historic urban landscape a series of fractal components and, for want of better categorization; some will be urban while others architectural. Conservation of urban fabric or of architecture will be dependant on the defined cultural significance. While the urbanism will include townscapes, roofscapes, main visual axes and building plots the architecture will look at building volumes and heights, details and design and form of the structures and open spaces. Both will contain historic and cultural components. Architecture can change while conserving the urban fabric and vice versa.

I would venture a comparison between the towers of the Italian hill cities and the modern skyscrapers of Hong Kong. The cultural significance of the urban grain and the land ownerships of the various Chinese communities are preserved while the architecture is dramatically changed. Outrageously tall structures are built on incredibly small, but historic, building plots. Could this still be considered urban conservation?

One cannot dissociate the tall building from other urban policies. There is a complex evaluation of the forces and resulting causes and effects of the tall building. Certain sites may have more than one criterion for cultural significance, affecting the complex definition of authenticity.

In the long run we are evaluating public good as against private gain. But can we divide out our city into public and private realms? The Bigger...and better...syndrome must give way to the model of *public space as opposed to public height*.



fig 9 – Hong Kong towers

### Theory and practice

We can academically develop, guide and control the urban changes – we cannot effect their realization except in a totalitarian society. But the theoretical, and even rational, solutions usually cannot be realized in the real legalistic world of politics and compromise. In this ball-game, solutions must have an urban equity.

Should we make distinction between historic and new areas? High buildings within a comprehensive development change the urban fabric; they are, effectively, a change and not an incremental growth of the city. It is this change that should be measured between the public good and the private gain.

I give two examples of modern 'sets of rules', San Francisco and Sydney. Both cities look at the high building as an urban envelope, concentrated and focused, strengthening the topography, while preserving the existing views and other historic landscapes. They both fall in the category of the comprehensive public urban policy. The new urbanism is distinct from the historic order and will become historic in its own sense and meaning after the trials of time will determine the best vintage.

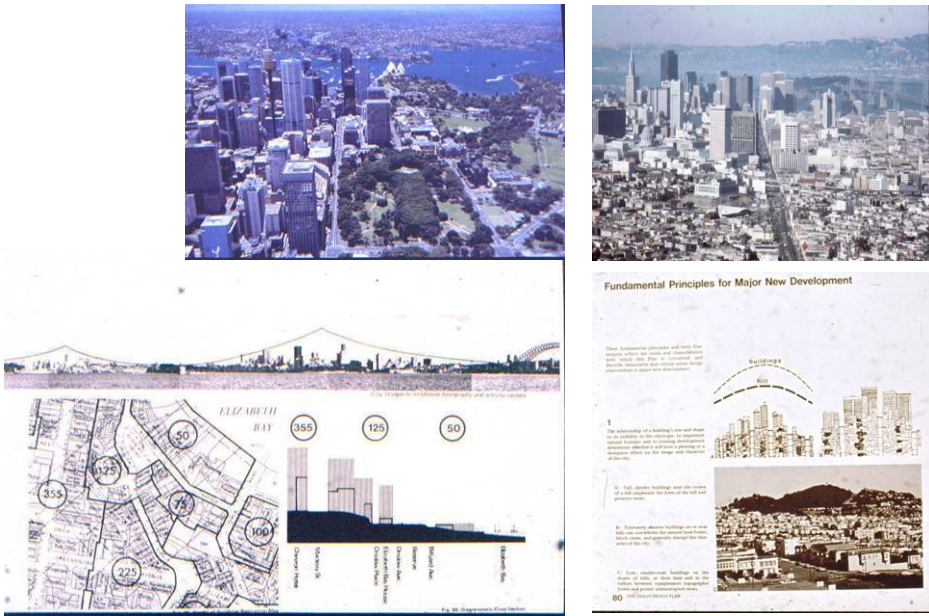


fig 10 – sets of rules, Sydney and San Francisco

Modern tall buildings in their new context will receive respectability when the United States nominates to the World Heritage List the icons of this period in Chicago and New York and as the inception of this outstanding phenomenon.

The case of the White City of Tel Aviv – the modern movement raises similar questions. The inscription is based on two distinct criteria (ii) and (iv) – the planning of the Garden City movement and the architecture of the international style each exemplifying the adaptation of cultural and geographic conditions. Can buildings be changed or added to, architecturally, without the compromising of the urban criteria.



fig 11 – Tel-Aviv



fig 12 -Tel Aviv Ein Vered Street  
1933, P. Bijonski.



I would like to conclude with a reflection on the poems of Berthold Brecht.<sup>4</sup> The series of poems during the years 1925-1928 on *the Impact of Cities* needs to be considered in the light of his American poems of 1941-1947 and his return to Germany after the Second World War. Perhaps the *Crushing Impact of Cities* is most poignant. How the tall boxes are successor to the abundant houses that contained four family generations concurrently. These were the layered periods rich in history, transformed

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Suddenly

Some of them fled into the air

Building upwards; others from the highest rooftops

Flung high their hats and shouted:

Next time so high!

.....

Let us wish that our cities retain that environment where we can sustain the spirit of the poetry embodied by Brecht.

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<sup>4</sup> Brecht, B. Poems 1913-1956, Methuen, NY, 1976