



BOOK REVIEWS

The urban towers handbook by *Eric Firley* and *Julie Gimbal*, Wiley, Chichester, UK, 2011, 264 pp. ISBN 978-0-470-68474-0.

The skyscraper occupies a unique position in architectural and popular imaginary. It is an object of intense fascination as an icon or a symbol, evoking romantic ideas of the urban skyline. It is the quintessential image of the metropolis as an artfully-crafted composition of spires, domes and masts. It is also regarded with scepticism, as a blunt instrument of commercial real estate speculation and architectural ambition. The tall building is governed by the imperatives of image-making – the iconic silhouette and the dramatic profile. It is a performer for the larger public. As such it forms part of the ensemble that makes up the urban skyline, rendering it a highly public or collective form. The tall building as commercial real estate reminds us that architecture and indeed cities are largely commercial entities; historically points of convergence and trade, built as frameworks for commercial activities, moving goods and housing businesses. Architecture as image-based icon and architecture as a real estate instrument are two qualities that are amplified by the skyscraper as a building type.

Eric Firley and Julie Gimbal's book *The urban towers handbook* sets out to investigate the complex relationships between the urban tower as an architectural structure and the role that it plays in a larger urban ensemble. They allude to their preference for the tower's base – how it meets the ground, and the city – versus the glamorous tops of towers, or how they represent themselves against the skyline. In their investigation they confront a number of skyscraper conceptions and misconceptions, and urban legends and metropolitan myths: the tower as a singular figure versus the tower as part of an urban field condition, the tower as a generic or global type versus the tower as a

highly site-specific local building type, and the tower as a resource-intensive energy consumer versus the tower as part of a high-density and compact land-use plan that is inherently energy efficient.

The myth of autonomy or singularity is addressed in the first chapter where tall buildings are organized by the way they engage their urban contexts, either as solitaires, gateways, clusters, patterns or fabrics. Even the free-standing tower, exemplified by the Kingdom Centre in Riyadh, is explicitly aware of the role of the tall building in the urban context and as part of a larger composition. The selection and organization of projects highlights the degree to which they participate in an urban ensemble. Johnson and Burgee's Puerta de Europa towers form an urban gateway, while the Rockefeller Center forms a multi-block and hierarchical composition. The authors also feature a number of vertical cities, including Hong Kong and Monaco, as examples of high-rise cities that form extreme urban patterns and types. The showcasing of a city instead of individual buildings is a significant editorial choice. The presentation of high rise *fabric* highlights the urban tower as capable of producing *typicality* rather than exceptionalism. It shifts the focus from the architectural (and the architect) to the urban.

The city can be understood as an accumulation of material, processes and people. It can also be understood as the overlapping of dense networks of codes. To design an urban building involves complex negotiation with the regulatory structures in place in cities. Indeed the tall building could be understood as shaped primarily by forces that are external: regulations, zoning laws and building codes that govern height, massing, setbacks and sometimes the building materials used in any given context. The second chapter investigates the specific zoning laws of several cities, including London, New York, Hong Kong and Frankfurt. This chapter also highlights how *local* the building

type is, as zoning laws prescribe particular urban forms. New York's set back skyscraper type emerged out of the 1916 zoning resolution as a means of controlling building bulk to ensure access to light and air. This is distinct from London's view corridors, which control bulk to preserve certain views of St Paul's Cathedral, and Paris's zoning which limits building heights in the historical centre but is more permissive at the perimeter. The in-depth analysis of local zoning codes explains so much of the urban morphology of high-density cities, and underscores the fact that distinct urban fabrics owe more to the genetic structure of regulatory codes than to the individual authorship of architects.

Exterior conditions, such as zoning regulations, govern the maximum extent of a tower's form; the interior is governed by the informal codes of leasing cultures, floor-plate sizes, core-to-perimeter dimensions, and industry preferences for open plan or perimeter offices. The residential tower, made up of a granular structure of individual units, is distinct from the open-floor plate of the office tower. The slender shafts of many French tall buildings are a result of labour laws that insist that workers sit within 5 m of a glazed exterior wall. The leasable depths of many tall buildings in Tokyo reach 18-20 m, resulting in deeper floor plates and bulkier towers. These internal and organizational conditions are equally determining of the tower's form, but are underemphasized in this book. Indeed, the tower could be defined by the intense calibration of space and performance both internally and externally; where the compactness of the elevator core, the optimization of its leasing depth and its maximization of its building envelope are all equally important factors in its overall efficiency, and its ultimate success.

The final chapter, entitled 'High-rise and sustainability', addresses the building type relative to questions of sustainability and energy. The author, Philippe Honorat, a mechanical engineer with WSP Flack + Kurtz, acknowledges the tall building as an energy intensive building type. He notes the trend towards urbanization in both the developed and developing world as urban populations continue to grow. From a land-use point of view, the tall building is a key component of urban networks that share resources, such as public transportation, and encourage collective use of space, such as parks and recreation spaces. Given its inherent density and shared resources, tall building is a key component of our urban future.

The urban towers handbook is an extremely well researched, clearly illustrated, and beautifully

written resource. The larger agenda of the book – to understand the tall building as a figure within a wider urban field – is important and underappreciated. The role of the tall building in our rapidly urbanizing and energy conscious urban future demands more attention and this volume makes great strides towards achieving it.

Eric Howeler, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, 48 Quincy, Gund Hall, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA. E-mail: ehoweler@gsd.harvard.edu

The life and death of the Australian backyard by *Tony Hall*, CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Australia, 2010, 176 pp. ISBN 978-0-643-09816-9.

This finely researched and well presented book provides a compelling account of how powerful social and economic forces, in conjunction with ineffective and often archaic planning controls, have combined to dramatically affect Australian suburban form since the 1990s. The book's primary aim is to trace the disappearance of the Australian backyard – a resource that, Hall argues, offers multifarious benefits for both individual households and wider society – in order to generate discussion and debate on this often ignored, yet highly significant, phenomenon. Hall also draws on his extensive experience as an urban designer, town planner and former local councillor in the UK, to illustrate how this phenomenon could be reversed through simple regulatory changes, more proactive design guidance and a return to traditional Australian values.

The book commences with a lucid exposition of the suburban backyard, including commentary on its genesis, and its aesthetic, ecological, environmental, social and utilitarian values. Hall argues persuasively that retaining substantial backyards will enhance the wellbeing of individuals and the community – a point that is reinforced throughout the book – although he launches almost immediately into a detailed analysis of the form of older Australian suburbs that would, perhaps, have been better left for a later chapter. As a consequence, the reader has to wait until the book's second chapter to reach crucial introductory material, including a definition of the backyard. Despite this, Hall's examination of the form of older Australian suburbs, which includes data on average lot sizes, setbacks, dwelling footprints and