

# Tall Urban Form and Counting as an Expression of Power

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The design and construction of skyscrapers has engrossed cities throughout the world as a means to express wealth and influence. This has made tall urban form a key component of cities' infrastructure over the last century. The high price and scarcity of land in central cities are major motivations for constructing towers—primarily for office space, but also for residences and hotels. In this paper, I use the trope of the anthropology of numbers, first used by anthropologist Diane Nelson, to explore who “counts” and how people with power in cities undertake the process of counting (Nelson 2008). The process of counting numbers brings greater understanding to the ways urban residents do or don't interact with tall urban form as it is built around them. Along the way, this approach reveals problems with excessively tall towers that are often felt but rarely expressed. Numbers and the practice of counting form a lens that observers of cities can use to read urban form and decipher unequal power relationships between groups of urban dwellers.

This paper will also explore the role that counting and numbers have played, among other interdependent factors, in envisioning urban form. Studies of Hong Kong, New York, Chicago, and London will assist this process. The influence of gender is one such factor, where tall buildings are conflated with power and masculinity. Also key to this paper will be the role of corporations—the institutions that count in several ways: in their practices of accounting, in their number of employees, and in the dollars on their balance sheets that propel urban form skyward. Each of these contributes to the argument that counting is a frame through which to view cities that have a significant number of towers. Finally, I will articulate some of the problems created by towers and consider possible solutions, incorporating theories from New Urbanism in a discussion of alternatives to massive towers and the issues they create. Returning urban form to the human scale and refocusing on the individual city dweller can improve the urban built environment for everyone.

## The City, Building Form, and Actors

An initial definition of the city as a conglomeration of diverse types of people is useful for this paper. The city, with its range of ethnic, socioeconomic, generational, and occupational diversity, is the reality in which city builders

work (even if the structures they create are intended only for a small number of residents). Larry Ford echoes this interpretation when he describes the impact of towers upon the American city: “Tall office buildings and the resulting skyline came to epitomize what an important city should look like in America” (Ford 2003, 141). Following the era of modernist city building, the largest of these places became what Saskia Sassen calls globalized cities, “international business and financial centers ... sites for direct transactions with world markets that take place without government inspection” (Sassen 1991, 216). This type of business justifies the existence of large towers, containing millions of square feet to house workers.

These are the contexts in which American cities have built towers, while places like Hong Kong and London followed suit in their quest to become prominent global financial and corporate centers. All of these cities, through the presence of corporations that increasingly decentralized to more numerous office locations, entered a postmodern era with great uncertainty, both in the size of the municipal tax base and number of jobs created or lost (Harvey 1991, 240; Sassen 1991, 221). These trends informed the direction of cities as they built new towers.

Despite the huge numbers of individuals in the world's largest cities, very few control the creation of the urban forms that everyone uses. The divergent interests of corporate institutions and city residents raise questions of power relationships. Arjun Appadurai considers power relations in terms of numbers in his study of globalization, as well as the ethnic and religious violence that results:

[n]umerical majorities can become predatory and ethnocidal with regard to small numbers precisely when some minorities (and their small numbers) remind these majorities of the small gap which lies between their condition as majorities and the horizon of an unsullied national whole, a pure and untainted national ethos (p. 8, emphasis in original).

I rely on Appadurai's work here because of his careful consideration of power dynamics between groups in a rapidly globalizing world. Like the cities in this paper, the arenas of Appadurai's book are best explained in numerical terms. He argues that the very fact that a minority group

was numerically small accounted for the threats arising from larger majorities. These are conceived in the first place, Appadurai claims, via instruments of the modern state, as “[m]inorities and majorities emerge explicitly in the process of developing ideas of number, representation, and electoral franchise” (p. 41-42, 50). I will narrow the application of Appadurai’s theory to the large “global” cities like New York, London, and Hong Kong, but his claim could stretch much farther.

I argue, then, that majorities and minorities, small and large numbers of people, are key to comprehending the city and its power structures. Here I focus on the builders and occupiers of tall urban form, numerically a tiny minority but disproportionately powerful in their effect on how the city works and what it looks like. Appadurai calls these the “oligopolies, elites, and tyrannies” that also comprise small numbers (p. 61). The large majority of urban residents, by contrast, only passively interact with towers.

Municipal governments have usually supported the construction of skyscrapers. The economic boost of massive construction projects followed by leases from large corporations virtually guaranteed the support of mayors, city councilors, planning commissioners, and economic development officers. Moreover, the symbolism of a trophy tower—signifier of a wealthy and powerful city—

can direct city leaders to support buildings much taller than the local real estate market would otherwise support. A rare but notable exception is the use of floor-area ratios (FARs) in zoning codes to restrict height and implement building setbacks. First practiced in New York almost 100 years ago to limit a building’s bulk, this was a rare instance of using numbers as a regulating force (Ford 2003, 143). However, the primary use of an FAR is to define an area in which taller buildings can occur, delineating a Central Business District (CBD) area and keeping tall urban form out of other neighborhoods at the same time. It was not until the 1950s that the New York Department of Planning and Zoning offered FAR “bonuses,” in the form of allowing higher floor-area ratios for buildings that also included public plazas, access to transit stations, or other amenities to benefit individuals (Ford 2003, 143). With this spatial separation in place, city leaders have promoted towers whenever possible for their CBDs.

Building tall for status does not occur only in American cities. Anthony King argues that London’s power as a financial center is visually represented by its tallest building, at the time of writing the NatWest Tower, today only the fourth-tallest in London as others continue to seek the trophy distinction of highest tower (King 1990, 88). And as for Hong Kong, Huang notes,

[m]onumentality in Hong Kong’s urban contexture is



Renaissance Center in Detroit, Michigan. Photo: Joel Batterman, 2010

best manifested by its distinctive capitalist architecture, i.e., the skyscrapers that assume the functions, forms, and structures of monuments. Global compression requires monumental buildings ... [to serve] as a mirage of collective will, in Hong Kong's case, a will to achieve phenomenal economic success from its liberal economic system and global city status (Huang 2004, 18).

Towers, therefore, carry a great deal of symbolic weight for their host cities and will likely continue to be built.

Within these urban contexts, the people who assign numbers act as oppressors, whether deliberately or not. The next section will detail how oppression arises with building, but in general most urban residents only interact with the numbers themselves (in the form of square footage, or numbers of floors), not the people who created them. The response of urban theorists, led by Sassen, has been "to understand the global city as a dual city with the intensification of two classes—the new elite or the international business people and the low income 'others'" (Huang 2004, 5; Sassen 1991, 210). Here, I extend this argument to the site where these two classes meet and interact: in and around the towers where much of the city's business occurs.

### **The Anthropology of Numbers: Who Counts and Who Gets to Count?**

The design of towers is usually not friendly to passing city residents, as exemplified by Tsung-yi Huang's research. In reality, the massive scale of the built environment in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Shanghai alienates the individual attempting to navigate superblocks. Buildings both tall and short present blank walls toward the sidewalk. This is similarly true in large cities worldwide, where a modernist aesthetic fused with bullish economic ambitions to create fortress-like skyscrapers that leave few available parcels of land in Central Business Districts for pedestrian-oriented open space.

But if towers in particular are oppressive and isolating to passersby, I argue that the situation of workers inside them is even more difficult. These instrumental people fit into Appadurai's binary of minorities in a globalizing world: "needed but unwelcome" (p. 44). In order to support huge buildings, and to run the businesses housed inside, legions of workers are necessary, but towers remain unresponsive to their needs. In this section, I use the questions framed by ethnographer Diane Nelson<sup>1</sup>—

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1 Nelson originally used the anthropology of numbers in her study of Guatemalans attempting to make sense of civil war and genocide, asking such questions as whether a numerical threshold of victims is required to term a mass murder a "genocide." I have chosen to adapt this frame of counting and numbers for this paper because of the close ties to hegemony and class conflict in the world's largest cities, where many thousands of laborers find urban form that was decided for them by small

who counts and who gets to count—in order to tease out the relationship between the power holders, the powerless, and the expression of power through numbers. This exploration covers several themes: who is disadvantaged by building design, the power that corporations hold in marking city skylines and urban identity, and the firms that inhabit or own towers as practitioners of accounting.

Skyscrapers have frequently been built tall as status symbols for their corporate clients, their host cities, or both (Ford 2003). Even if scarce land and the real estate market call for a tall building, its height is often pushed yet higher to make a more striking impression. Leslie Weisman argues that these buildings cause multiple problems that are ignored in favor of achieving monumental height. Even with no specific need to be tall, "the excessive height of these antihuman, environmentally irresponsible man-made mountains has been lauded by many architects as the 'answer' to the future development of urban form" (p. 40). Weisman advocates returning to a smaller-scale design. As for their location and its relationship to power, Huang notes that in Hong Kong, "high-rise skyscrapers with corporate names ... in a sense are built not with glass and metal but with the space taken from the anonymous high-rise buildings in which the majority of inhabitants have no easy access to the global monumental space or the information flow" (Huang 2004, 28-9).

Urban towers have also been problematized for being excessively masculine. Weisman classifies this form as a phallic, fear-inducing shape reflective of the mostly male-led corporations that build and occupy them: "No single architectural form better incarnates the union of social roles and sexual anatomy than the American skyscraper, the pinnacle of patriarchal symbology and the masculine mystique of the big, the erect, and the forceful. Allusions to male sexuality are unavoidable when referring to the skyscraper" (Weisman 1992, 16-17). Casting the tower as aggressively masculine is another way to claim that its form exerts power over individual city residents.

As the post-Fordist economy took shape in the United States and other industrialized nations, the effects were far-reaching (Appadurai 2006, 27; Fillion 1999). As the American economy shifted in the last four decades from producing manufactured goods to providing information and services, the names on the towers symbolizing wealth and power shifted along with them. In New York, for example, some of the most famous skyscrapers built before 1960 held the names of Woolworth, Chrysler, and GE. Since then, the tallest towers built have borne the names of service providers and money managers: AT&T, Chase, Time Warner, and Bank of America.

These newer "trophy" towers conceal reality, for in many American cities in the 1960s corporations began moving away from Central Business Districts, and numbers of powerful government and business leaders.

the towers that they had used there, for cheaper and more flexible office space elsewhere. Greater numbers of square footage became available for fewer dollars in suburban office park locations fewer miles from their executives' new homes, so the decision became a matter of merely following the numbers. What effects did that have? First was the empty real estate and accompanying loss of jobs in the city center, another effect of a powerful minority upon the majority of residents in central city neighborhoods (Jargowsky 2002). This became evident to anyone who visited a CBD, where relatively few workers remained in office towers still sporting corporate logos. Second was a loss of urban identity, as evidenced in Chicago. That city's tallest building, the iconic Sears Tower, is now known as the Willis Tower after its most recent leaseholder, an insurance firm, purchased naming rights for 25 years. No Sears employees at all remain in the Tower, as that company moved its offices to suburban Hoffman Estates, Illinois years ago (Chicago Tribune, March 12, 2009).

Chicago also provides an instructive case study for one instance of the opposite occurrence. Acting in the opposite direction of most corporations, United Airlines moved its headquarters in 2006 from Elk Grove Village, Illinois, a suburb 23 miles from the Loop, to a high-rise tower at 77 W. Wacker Drive (ChicagoBusiness.com, May 13, 2006). This notable exception to corporate real estate trends usefully informs the discussion of corporations and how they use towers, for branding at the same time as for actual office space. United leveraged monetary incentives from the City of Chicago to move to the city's iconic<sup>2</sup> Loop rather than to Denver or San Francisco, creating an artificial attraction to a tower by a small number of powerful elites (ChicagoBusiness.com, July 13, 2006). Due to the strong influence of government in this decision, this action is not likely to be replicated elsewhere, with the possible implication that older towers will largely remain absent of major corporate tenants.

Also notable about the United Airlines office move was that the City of Chicago's incentive package required a minimum number of employees—350—to be sited in the Loop for a minimum of ten years (ChicagoBusiness.com, July 3, 2006). Here the use of counting to frame the occupancy of a tower again arose. The City believed that the deal would only be worthwhile if a minimum number of workers were located downtown. However, the agreement never specified who these workers

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2 Indeed, the lease on the tower space that United Airlines eventually chose for their executive offices included naming rights, and is now known as the United Building.

were or what should be provided for them, only that their numbers must reach a specific threshold. At every decision point where United and the City of Chicago made a choice here, numbers determined the outcome.

Another American city, New York, provides key context for how companies with sweeping control over the economy have blended this power with their habitation in skyscrapers. Investment banks in the late 20th century emerged as extremely powerful entities, dictating how to run a corporation for maximum shareholder return and when and how to undertake a corporate merger for the same purpose. Thus, they had a hand in directing how accounting—the practice of counting and its use in corporate operations—should be practiced (Nelson 2008). While this role is powerful in its own right, I argue that investment banks hold even more control than is evident.

This is because they turned skyscrapers in New York—the prime headquarters city for global banking—into symbols of greed and wealth that

were celebrated by some and reviled by many. Bankers themselves regarded the skyscraper as a positive symbol of prosperity, as did municipal leaders if celebrating an economic boon for their city. After the first economic crisis of the 21st century was traced to the instruments of capital that investment banks created, these reactions became even more salient.

Karen Ho's ethnography of Wall Street is a rich source for unpacking what banks control and how to expose that power through counting. Ho found that investment bankers enriched both themselves and the leaders of the companies whose funds they controlled while preventing anyone else from participating in this extraordinary wealth creation:

As Wall Streeters understand it, by the time stock market knowledge seeps to the masses, the bull market has turned into a bubble economy ... Wall Street, then, views the democratization of stock market participation as a bellwether of oversubscription and as a signal for insiders to sell, meaning 'latecomers' to the market tend to bear the brunt of crashes (Ho 2009, 23).

Thus, investment bankers did not intend for their strategies for stock market success to be adopted by many people; in fact, that was considered poisonous to their strategy. When people outside of small, exclusive Wall Street networks began to gain expertise in multiplying wealth in the stock market, then, the opportunity to capitalize on it was already lost.

How does this relate to the towers that house



New York City, New York. Photo: Andrew Stern, 2009

many investment banks? Their physical presence—in the form of office space—in global financial centers is key to their operation, even if they are not permanently staffed (Ho 2009, 311). Thus, physical space in the financial districts of multiple global cities is widely considered a necessity, even if their operations are run from New York. The towers of Lower Manhattan that house the largest banks, like Goldman Sachs and Merrill Lynch (before its acquisition by Bank of America), have long been icons of American capitalism in the popular imagination, tempered more recently by the greed and outsized lifestyles of their executives.

After the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the surviving skyscrapers in Lower Manhattan became even more iconic (Ho 2009, 8-9). The Deutsche Bank and the original 7 World Trade Center buildings (both irreparably damaged from the collapse of the WTC towers) in particular became symbols, and further conflated the identity of investment banks with the towers housing their headquarters and sometimes bearing their names. When the stock markets rose and corporations were profitable—yielding large numbers in the form of windfall profits—there were positive connotations; when widespread subprime mortgage defaults dragged the American economy down, however, they became more negative and resentful. With few tangible symbols to ascribe to stock trading and the institutions that controlled the process, towers became their popular signifiers.

## Who Doesn't Count?

### An Exploration of Oppressed City Users

When planners and bureaucrats impose urban design from above, few city users get a say in the form that it will take. If numerous and diverse city users had been asked for input, would central cities have taken the form of towers? Moreover, would the city be less oppressive if allowed to form organically? I argue that some cities would not have risen vertically to the extent of cities like Chicago and Hong Kong. The scarcity of land and its high cost would still account for some towers, but the “trophy” towers we see today would be fewer in number and smaller in terms of floors, height, and square footage. While a more equitable urban experience would not be guaranteed with organic, less tall urban form, at least the problems described here would be mitigated.

Having established that the designers and builders of towers, as well as the corporate and municipal leaders that helped get them there, mattered in urban power relations, it follows to ask who does not “count.” As Huang describes it, “we will have to clarify whose open space is enabled by the social infrastructures of global cities” (p. 11, emphasis added). Often, the answer is that few people do benefit, while most are not even considered.

In the realm of office towers, employees and the

general public did not count when corporations undertook the practice of accounting (Nelson). This is evident in Karen Ho’s ethnography, where she argues “[e]mployees, located outside the corporation’s central purpose, are readily liquidated in the pursuit of stock price appreciation” (Ho 2009, 3, emphasis in original). Shareholders, on the other hand, were the subjects that counted based on their control of large numbers of dollars that investment bankers spent their time multiplying exponentially. The move from acting in the interest of the corporation (and, by extension, its employees) to pleasing its shareholders above all others is telling. Because increasing stock price enriched the bankers as well as shareholders, the corporation’s mission and work came to be ignored unless either or both offered a strategic opportunity to drive share prices higher. As Ho describes it, “[w]hile a rising stock market necessitates exuberant marketing to generate buyers, it is also undermined by this exuberance as the companies the stocks represent often do not ‘grow’ as quickly as the stock price” (Ho 2009, 330). The work of investment banks became multiplying dollars for relatively few investors, even if it did not actually benefit the corporation whose shares they traded. This trend, of a powerful elite acting to benefit a small minority, occurs in many aspects of urban economies. As a result, the needs of the large majority of city residents are ignored.

## Potential Solutions: New Urbanism and Reducing Height to Human Scale

One remedy to the tall urban form that dwarfs and ignores individuals is the smaller scale espoused by the New Urbanism movement. If towers are unwieldy behemoths that impede pedestrian flow, deaden neighborhoods by presenting blank walls to the street, and function without regard to workers’ needs, better forms should be pedestrian-oriented, interactive with their surroundings, and designed and built with the individual user in mind. These solutions are embedded in the practices of New Urbanist building. When designing urban areas, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk propose as a model a mixed-use neighborhood with about a quarter of a mile between its center and its edges. This approach overcomes the issues that zoning codes have exacerbated in the United States: sprawling communities and dependence on automobiles to reach the workplace, schools, and shopping destinations from home (Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1996, 211). This could achieve the truly walkable city with open space as exemplified by Huang, assuming that changing or working around zoning codes will allow such development in the first place; otherwise, not much change can occur.

The Central Business Districts of Chicago and Hong Kong are large and generally do not incorporate housing with office and retail areas, and hence would not fare well under the New Urbanists’ measurement tools. However, an opportunity exists to instill some elements

of a smaller scale by adhering to the principles laid out by New Urbanism's proponents for new construction. Moving from the monumental scale of trophy towers to the human scale will alleviate many problems. Of course, this scale is not practical for large corporations needing to house many workers or areas that need thousands of apartment and condominium units to satisfy housing demand. Even though its application cannot be universal, with careful attention, the New Urbanist model can be applied where it is appropriate.

Is it possible to minimize power differentials with the shift in focus to building at the human scale? At the least, building at a smaller scale would exclude large firms that locate in skyscrapers for symbolic purposes in addition to their need for space. As a result, the oppressively large numbers of trophy towers built for awe and not for the everyday experience would be minimized. However, this would not preclude their presence, as cities usually want to attract these corporations and will help them locate somewhere. In this case, perhaps it would only prevent towers from rising in certain neighborhoods. Still, the possibilities embedded in building differently are clear: urban residents and workers might feasibly walk to workplaces and sites of leisure; would have interactive, mixed-use neighborhoods rather than walls facing the street; and would not work in offices characterized by unhealthy environments. Moving away from the use of large numbers to express power would contribute positively to the urban environment.

## Conclusion

Skyscrapers, then, do not only engender feelings of awe at their massive size; equally important is their effect on the people who live in the cities in which they are built. Too often, towers are cited for their efficient land use in crowded areas, while the downsides they have brought to urbanites are not acknowledged. By exploring these issues with the trope of numbers, the stark power differentials and disregard for human users come into focus. More than simply elegant and efficient forms that provide needed space and a tangible symbol of economic success, towers can also be oppressive and destabilizing for the many people who do not control them. While powerful corporations and city government officials hold the power to determine urban form, we should attempt to democratize urban form itself. While it is not practical to reduce the height of extant buildings, constructing new buildings at the scale of the individual human—especially the pedestrian—is the best course of action. Focusing on this small number—one—is key to refashioning the city for its individual citizen and worker.

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