

Introduction from the Editors

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The high-rise is recognized worldwide as a symbol of ‘progress’ and ‘technological’ power, an ‘urban monument’ capable of turning the spotlight on itself, bearing praise and criticism to the entrepreneur, the architect, and the engineer, and often to authorities as well. The high rise – commonly and often indiscriminately referred to as the tower or skyscraper – is by now, a global phenomenon.

We see it everywhere in the world, from East to West from the Global North to Global South, from its cities of origin in the New World such as New York and Chicago to the historical cities of the Old World like Paris, London, Berlin, and even Rome, and in Chinese metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai. But we also see it in small, developing, and often perceived as ‘peripheral’ countries like Albania, whose capital Tirana has unapologetically risen to the thirtieth floor in the last two decades...

No doubt, by its sheer size and shape, the skyscraper is first of all and inevitably a sign, minimally a sign of itself, even (or especially) when its referentiality is putatively kept at a minimum, as in the case of the Seagram building in Manhattan, a building that screams through its Miesian silence: I am a skyscraper! The skyscraper is perhaps the only sign that is both a decorated shed (Venturi et al., 1972) or a “lobotomized building” (Koolhaas, 1978, p. 82) insofar as there is a disjunction between the outside (decoration) and the inside (function), and a duck insofar as the skyscraper is a symbol of itself, insofar as it cannot but look like a skyscraper ..., always already self-referencing and exclaiming: I am a skyscraper!

Yet, no sooner has the skyscraper announced its absolute, vertical self-referentiality than it starts to work laterally and horizontally, to conjure, structure, and mobilize a field of other signs, objects, contexts, neighborhoods, buildings, styles, cultures, technics, knowledge, ideologies, and desires. It is such a metaphoric power of structuring that Michel de Certeau, in “Walking in the City,” (de Certeau, 1984) reads in the figure of the skyscraper.

To think about the skyscraper, then, is to think about what it is around, about the whole city, the whole environment, the

whole landscape, the whole discourse... The skyscraper, as that which “Goes High!”, becomes the organon of the whole as such... Yet at the same time, precisely by its very virtue of being a “solar eye” it may also become an instrument of abuse and inequality, both a material object and conceptual idea that privileges a totalitarian whole that subsumes and erases the multiplicity and differences on which the very idea of the (city as a) whole that belongs to all is premised and promised.

It is the ambition of TAW 2022 the skyscraper interdisciplinarily, in its very multi-dimensionality: both as a freestanding object and an urban field or disposition; as a technological and social infrastructure; as an architectural typology and an economic instrument; as an architectural, engineering, environmental, and urban concept, and as both a contemporary and historical sign that has a history and is constitutive of modernity, hence of our times.

Through a series of inter-and-trans-disciplinary workshops, keynote lectures, and conference presentations, both in POLIS University and online, TAW 2022 aims to inquire and speculate about the skyscraper as a global condition yet framed from the context of an unbridled verticalization of the city of Tirana in the last two decades, and how such phenomenon is currently affecting and will bear on the transformation of the city. This edition of TAW elaborates on how such a verticalized built environment should be analyzed and reported in its complexity, and how to make it easy to be understood by citizens and professionals. The skyscraper will be discussed in terms of architectural morphology, structure and technology, management, and social impact, public transportation and services, and so forth.

Going High: The historical genesis of a concept and some evolutionary questions

The ‘tall building’ was born as a response to commercial needs following the Great Chicago Fire in 1871 and therefore not for residential objectives (Aimar, 2016a, p. 3). From there, a challenge to go high, even extreme, was established following also profit-based principles in an aggressively developing real-estate

market of the time. Then it became a trend all over the USA, Europe, and later also in Asia and the rest of the world. Economics has been an essential propellant that supported the technical development of the high-rise (or skyscraper) phenomena.

Tall buildings are also influenced by the physical features of a specific form and context-related aspects. Working on a such typology of edifices requires specific skills for an out-of-the-ordinary performance, with indirect effects that spill over into the ordinary design of other city buildings (Aimar, 2016b), a difficult task in which experimentation and research play significant roles since the genesis of the tall building concept (Aimar, 2016a).

However, many other factors had to converge and resonate for the tall building to come into being. Economics and steel construction would have been insufficient to trigger the emergence of the skyscraper if it were not for two other inventions: the elevator and the telephone, that is, the ability to both go very high and communicate at a distance. Later, the air conditioning would sustain even further the design and construction of a “well-tempered environment” (Banham, 1984) high above the ground.

Yet, it is impossible to imagine these innovations isolated, only as mere technological facts; they are above all else social: standing with others in an elevator (especially when the people are turned toward one another...), waiting impatiently (alone or with others) for the elevator to come and having to take the stairs when it is not coming; being caressed by the AC breeze, or finding oneself in a hellish nightmare in the 30th floor when AC is not working properly in a hot day; when talking in the phone while looking at a breath-taking view from the 50th floor; or when one’s girlfriend or boyfriend hangs up the phone or skype while in the 75th floor, or when the router goes bad and one finds oneself in the 100th floor without internet... – all these are social situations. The skyscraper then can be also imagined as a social environment and infrastructure.

That the skyscraper could transform both the modern city and society was recognized early on by visionary modernists as diverse as Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, William Lescaze, and George Howe, Raymond Hood, as well as affirmed modernists like Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier. They all saw the high rise as both an object and complex environment that embodied the modern spirit in its form, ornament, structure, materials, and various technological systems.

In its beginnings, the form of the skyscrapers resembled that of the vertically stretched classical palazzo. It was only later, in the early decades of the 20th century that the skyscraper started to acquire a form and typology of its own. The condition of sheer stacking of slabs and repetition of elements challenged the organicity of the classical Albertian compositional paradigm as per which nothing could be added or taken away from the final form. In the skyscraper, the silhouette, surface, structure, and program were freed from one another and turned into ‘variables’ that could be manipulated independently from one another.

Postmodernism precisely adapted such possibility to advance its ‘delirious’ urban and environmental dreams.

The skyscraper became an island, part of an archipelago of skyscrapers, potentially captivating the globe (Koolhaas, 1978) in and through their very stylistic excessiveness and repetition, across a presumably infinite grid.

Inheriting such a postmodern tendency, today’s skyscrapers are islands of mixed-use and different programs. The tower offers the possibility of combining different types and functions in one space or construction. Thanks to the factors such as urban intensity, it is possible to offer housing diversity, but also to combine other functions (services, shops, tertiary in general, etc.) despite housing per se, and to decide how to do it (Reale, 2008). The high-rise building, or the skyscraper later, seems more suited to the idea that embodies the International Style and its productivism ideas. Densification today means providing more possible spaces, from public to common spaces, as well as multiple types of residences. So, diversity has become an issue in the verticalization debate (Hoxha, 2021).

One can mention examples like Mirador from MVRDV, which verticalizes a series of different common spaces; or the Valley from MVRDV: a mixed-use building located in Amsterdam, featuring residential units, offices, parking, a sky bar and retail and cultural space, etc. In addition, there are examples like the Sky Green Residential & Retail Tower from WOHA, a mixed-use complex located in Taichung with two 26-story residential towers with apartment units from level 4 onwards, as well as retail spaces; or Meret Oppenheim Hochhaus in Basel, by Herzog & de Meuron, as a mixed-use building with apartments, offices, a café, and a restaurant. On the 6th, 7th, and 15th floors, there are outdoor areas that will function as terraces for the respective apartments, or as communal outdoor gathering spaces for the offices. Lastly, the VIA 57 West, designed by BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group), is also called the CourtScraper, because it combines a patio block with a skyscraper and creates a new typology, as well as the Linked Hybrid by Steven Holl Architects. So, the typology of tall buildings becomes a macrostructure with multiple functions.

What about the quality of life? City development and economy? Social and environmental impact? Design and technological progress? Image of the city and its reputation? City marketing and branding? Impacts over the city structure and urban tissue. And what about people and quality of life, first of all?

This trend listed above, therefore, seems to be context-related and influenced by it, thus bringing the context firmly back into the centre of urban and architectural discourse. It becomes perhaps necessary to discuss what the ratio of a tall building (‘tower’ type) should be to the context in which it is placed? How can the inevitable demands of the market be met but at the same time mitigate their social impact in the context? This solution could be a potential re-interpretation of the tall buildings as part of the variations regarding the urban block in a contemporary way (Reale, 2012), which update the concept of the “Bigness” by Rem Koolhaas (1995).

In a few words, we can pose several questions to be added by other queries of TAW 2022 participants.

- Is ‘going high’ or ‘verticalization’ the only alternative for

the city (centre)?

- Are there other options that can be used, like low/mid-rise with mid/high-density?
- What are the differences between high density and verticalization in the city?
- How can the tall-building typology (>14 floors, >50 m) meet the requirements of local communities, businesses, and authorities? What about the requirements of architects, engineers, and builders?
- What can be the benefits and/or problems to be expected in the future by such typology?
- What stays behind the ‘glorious’ phase of construction? What does it mean for maintenance?
- Is this a possible architecture to be sustained by the Albanian society and economy?
- Or do we need to invent new models of life towards a future that is calling for resilience and stability?

Going high: the case study of Tirana, Albania

The curiosity about high-rise buildings in Albania is high, given that several of them are currently under construction, especially in Tirana. These include the ‘Eyes of Tirana’, designed by Henning Larsen and measuring a height of +85.04 m, and the under-construction commercial tower close to the ‘Tirana International Hotel & Conference Center’, designed by Bolles+Wilson. Lastly, there is also the ‘DownTown One’ project designed by MVRDV, which will reach an architectural height of +144 m on completion. Also, by the same Dutch firm is the ‘Skanderbeg Tower’, which is expected to reach a height of approximately +85 m. The city centre indeed is fuelled by more and more high-rise buildings like them.

However, the debate on the topic is ongoing since the proposal phase for the redevelopment of Tirana city centre, close to Skanderbeg Square, in 1963 and then in 1974 (Dhamo et al., 2021, pp. 186-187, 190). This only led to the construction of one building, the Tirana International Hotel (56 m) on Skanderbeg Square, which was the tallest building in Albania between 1979 and 2000. The debate has been reopened also since 2003 to the present time with the new masterplan for the city centre, designed by Architecture Studio in Paris.

Today, Tirana is also booming with high-rise buildings, especially in the city centre. Inheriting from the past a monotonous skyline of building with 4-6 (before the 90s) and 7-9 floors (during early transition), at present days, it is quite something jumping to 40 floors and more. Staying in the city context, the architectural firm Grimshaw Architects proposed only one skyscraper for the northern extension of the city boulevard in 2015. In the meantime, a new building such as the Plaza (+85 m high) remained empty for five years after completion in 2015 and now is transformed into a luxury hotel. Tirana International Hotel, changed owners several times between 2004 and 2012, and now has a 36-story expansion from behind...

This has opened a vivid debate in the city among citizens, communities, professionals, and authorities. Verticalization of Tirana is also associated parallel with densification in general.

This seems to have harmed standards of public space, green and sports areas, as well as public services and utilities. As a result, the ‘tower’ phenomenon has earned both, pride and hate, fuelling more the local, professional and political debate.

Also, in terms of local architecture, this has opened a new perspective among architects and city scientists about design, aesthetics, functions, services, and technologies applied in the new buildings developed in Tirana and Albania in general.

At present time in Tirana, for example, often many flats are spontaneously used for functions such as kindergartens, call centres, and other services. These apartments are therefore slowly being adapted from their original functions, other than those for which they were designed, by installing these functions on the 3rd or 4th floor above ground, for example. This is an example of the need for a response from architects, developers, and authorities to provide new alternatives to specific local demands. So verticalization is not happening only because of the densification and building high but there exists a verticalization of services and functions as well, which need to be responded to by the supply provided by developers and authorities (Hoxha, 2022).

Is the skyscraper, the tower, or more generally, the high-rise good or bad? Can we demystify the high-rise phenomena, and draw some conclusions about the pros and cons of such developments in the city? Can we structure criticism, and balance it with the benefits for the city and society (Aliaj et al., 2003)? What and how about the city's image and history? The city's development and economy and their social and environmental impact? The impact the high-rises have on the city's infrastructure and urban fabric. And what about the people and the quality of their life (in the city) in the first place?

In terms of the locally produced architecture, this has opened a new perspective among architects and city scientists about design, aesthetics, functions, services, and technologies applied in the new buildings developed in Tirana and Albania in general. Are we following international trends? Or are we just copying them? Can we invent new ideas, techniques, and design methodologies? Can we use it to promote and brand Tirana as a good laboratory of creative/innovative architecture? In other words, can we have agency over the city, and what and how might that be?

- In between learned and general opinions, scientific arguments and political activism, ‘cool’ professional expertise and ‘hot’ public debates, individuals and institutions, and power and public agency, TAW 2022 will attempt to address these questions:
- So, why build high-rises in Albania at this moment?
- What does it mean to go high in Tirana now, in terms of the relationship between public spaces and the built environment?
- Is it possible having low/mid-rise and mid/high-density in Tirana and other cities worldwide?
- Are there typological alternatives in the Western Balkans (e.g., Belgrade, Skopje, Pristina, and Thessaloniki, among others) that can be considered also for Tirana,

Albania, as a case study?

- Are there other international models of social-economic relationships that are more appropriate for Tirana and Albania?
- What is the status of such issues in Europe, North America, and the rest of the World?

Going High, and the social dimension of the ‘verticalization’ culture

Considering the implications of ‘Going High!’ in other fields as well, some authors have described the pros and cons of living in high-rise buildings under different terms.

Whipple listed several problems in terms of “movement and amenity, microclimate, psychological effects, destruction of vistas and historic buildings, and monopoly space” (Whipple, 1971, p. 70). Microclimate includes variations in terms of natural ventilation in the nearby context (Kuznetsov et al., 2016) and the surrounding thermal environment (Nugroho et al., 2022).

Of the case studies reviewed by Gifford in his study (2007) through the literature, it “suggests that high-rises are less satisfactory than other housing forms for most people, that they are not optimal for children whose social relations are more impersonal, and the helping behavior is less than in other housing forms. Meantime, crime, and fear of crime, are greater, that affected the chances for suicides.” (Gifford, 2007, Abstract).

Similarly, socio-psychological issues are also associated with high-rise buildings in the study of Kalantari and Shepley, “particularly for lower-income populations.” (Kalantari & Shepley, 2021). Moreover, some concerns are also increased regarding urban dimensions of the podium and the amount of “embodied energy” in light of the ongoing climate change (Aimar, 2016c).

Others, as Whipple pointed out, the pros connected to “a higher utilization of limited land resources, compactness in the arrangement of urban activities, convenience through the proximate location of interacting uses, easier communication” (Whipple, 1971, p. 70).

Certain postmodern neoliberal aesthetic and economic tendencies have turned the skyscraper into a closed environment. They have become ‘smart’ archipelagos that are removed and isolated from the urban context. Of course, the question is: What happens to the space in between these skyscrapers, the presumably ‘neutral’ zone between them (Luarasi, 2021, pp. 91-92)? Investigating the topic of the skyscraper in Tirana is important precisely because this city is a veritable symptom of the complexity of the skyscraping the city if one were to think of the skyscraper as also an action or verb rather than as simply substantive. While yielding a new look, the skyscrapers in Tirana have also caused urban erasures, by violating existing cultural and historical urban layers. Hand in hand with such morphological urban erasures and under the aegis of urban ‘gentrification’ and ‘rehabilitation’, the skyscrapers or the high-rises, in general, have been instrumentalized to enable social and economic segregation and homogenization of the city and urban space. Skanderbeg Square most strongly evinces such condition, and it is veritable mise en scène of

an urban lobotomy that started before WWII, with Gherardo Bosio (Luarasi 2021, p. 3). The towers around it have ‘expedited’ and structured such erasure (Luarasi, 2019, pp. 79-80).

Consequently, some questions arise that need to be addressed:

- What are the impacts of such a ‘verticalization’ culture in public spaces?
- What is the social dimension concerning the impact of public transportation, local urban context, economic differences and fairness, environmental impact, quality of life, etc.?
- What do the local people think about the ‘verticalization’ culture? What about the difference between verticalised-skyscraperised centre with the rest of the city, and informally developed areas?
- How to promote a better social balance, and avoid segregation? And how to avoid another real estate bubble?

Tirana Architecture Weeks (TAW) 2022

To respond to the posed dilemmas and question marks, TAW 2022 has opened a debate that brings into focus, as an object of study, inquiry, and speculation, both the skyscraper and what is around it. A discussion that has gone beyond the mere politicized debate and poor daily technical jargon. We need to hear professional and technical arguments from different local and international actors and institutions to adopt a more friendly approach to be able to open a public debate for the best of architecture and the city.

The debate of TAW on tower/skyscraper phenomena wants to be guided by one conceptual idea: that the topic of the skyscraper should not be seen just as the skyscraper as a vertical object, but also about what is around it (including the neighbouring urban settings, or the city in broad terms). In other words, it is about an object and a field. This aesthetic and political premise intends to allow participants and contributors to unpack the concept: socially, economically, anthropologically, technologically, and so forth. An approach that can also be well contextualized here in Tirana, and replicable in any other city and society.



Figure 1. The main banner of the Tirana Architecture Weeks - edition 2022. (Source and courtesy: Polis University – Renis Batalli, Gani Kasa, Lediona Mirashi, and Marina Dalipi.)

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