

The Fallen Idols

- **Societies** soon tire of their built idols and there is pressure to construct ever taller and more impressive buildings
- **Height** and proximity regulations, stating a gradation from the central, iconic skymark, might allow more developments to 'sell' the view



The once-isolated Petronas Towers now form the centre of a cluster of some very tall buildings which are springing up around KLCC



by
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Architecture features a testament to address societal and cultural needs to erect symbols with the power to signify a certain status. Over recent decades, and drawing on this role, the symbols of architectural largesse – most especially skyscrapers – have become objects of worship and are often regarded as works of art.

Many cities now compete to include works by “star” architects in the fabric of their skylines, much as paints in a museum: there is a clear imperative to build constantly taller buildings and establish their landmarks in the sky, their skymarks.

However, and with rare exceptions, societies soon tire of their built idols and there is a continual pressure to construct ever taller and more impressive buildings. This is the paradox and banality of architecture: buildings can be simultaneously iconic and replaceable.

But, why?

Very tall buildings have become, more than ever, icons that transgress not only the technological challenges that their consecration requires, but also human, social, religious or racial boundaries. They are the ethos which underpin the cultures that created them, symbols of technological, economical and social eras, reflections of societies' aspirations aiming to become built legacy.

However, as ambitious and addictive as platonic love, the affair ends when the object of desire is reached. Something similar happens with these iconic megastructures: human societies fall in love with the goal of tall towers and the ultimate achievement they represent but, once completed, the building which had been so idolised during the design and planning process, becomes real, tangible and interest expires. Then, a new taller and

more inspiring focus of societal attention and a new hope are demanded and ultimately created.

KLCC state of mind

The Petronas Twin Towers (1998: 452m) have achieved a status matched by few other human constructions in history. Idolised by Malaysians and visited by millions of tourists every year, the power of this skymark has symbolised the advancement of an entire country and its capital city: it is no accident that the wider development, of which the towers are part, is called Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC).

The Twin Towers proclaim to the world a nation full of promise and which is willing and able to maintain an outstanding position in a fight of giants to be the most innovative, the most beautiful and, especially, the tallest.

For me, it is a war which has largely been won: Petronas out-matches almost all its contemporaries in the most important category: timelessness. The Towers continue to amaze me when, talking to friends or tourists, they think that the towers were completed 10, 30, 50 years ago (it was 20).

In fact, they could have been completed yesterday as they continue to pass the test of time. There are other regional exam-

ples which compete for this level of recognition. Shanghai, with its congested Pudong shore, accelerated this movement with the Oriental Pearl Tower (1995: 468m) which has been progressively over-topped by taller buildings with the most recent being Shanghai Tower (2015: 632m), the second-tallest building in the world.

Hong Kong innovated even earlier with its Bank of China (1990: 367m) and less than three decades later, its island shore is now so congested that development has mainly shifted to the opposite shore, with the recently completed International Commerce Centre (ICC) (2010: 484m), starting a new process of sky colonisation.

Lastly Dubai, which is home to some of the tallest buildings ever constructed, including the Burj Al Arab (1999: 321m) and culminating in the mega tall Burj Khalifa (2010: 828m), currently the tallest structure in the world.

However, and almost unbelievably, even this building was not enough to satiate the nation's lust for tall buildings and another tower will soon surpass Dubai's own benchmark with the already under-construction Creek Tower (2020: 1,000m).

Kuala Lumpur is following a similar trajectory and the once-

isolated Petronas Towers now form the centre of a cluster of some very tall buildings which are springing up around KLCC. These new skymarks are colonising satellite locations around Kuala Lumpur and are vying to become part of a constellation, which will also increase the value of the wider city.

Another example is provided by Manhattan. The Empire State Building (1931: 443m) was the tallest building in the world for more than 40 years, until the completion of the North Tower of the former World Trade Centre (1972: 527m).

However, even nowadays, when few taller buildings than this icon have been completed in downtown Manhattan and around Central Park, the world continues to identify New York with the Empire State Building – and it still largely dominates the skyline of the city – creating, as the lyrics says, an Empire State of Mind.

In conclusion, while I do not argue that cities should not construct ever taller towers and use the available technology to support this goal, I wonder whether there should be any limit, or any rules or restrictions.

A plan in section and a controversial formula

With several buildings now surpassing half-a-kilometre in height, and with others under construction breaching 1km, I cannot help but remember the old European regulations, still in force in some cities, which prevent the construction of buildings higher than medieval bell towers of cathedrals and major churches.

It seems somewhat anachronistic as so many cities compete to construct ever-taller towers but, there is little doubt that limiting building height has maintained the beauty and charm of many ancient capitals.

Let's go back to Kuala Lumpur. The capital shows in its chaotic parcels the superimposed traces of its relatively brief history. A characteristic chaos, as

unique as challenging for urban planners and architects, which making traffic an even bigger issue, offers the possibility of pictures of a city with a changing background of whimsical building perspectives.

I must admit that I still smile when, while going around any corner, I discover in the sky a glance of the towers, presented in an unusual angle in the midst of so many other buildings. They provide context, location, and then I know where I am.

Perhaps chaos is simply an order that has not yet been deciphered. However, the same planimetric chaos is translated into the skyline where, a too tall building might asphyxiate an icon, diminishing its isolated splendour.

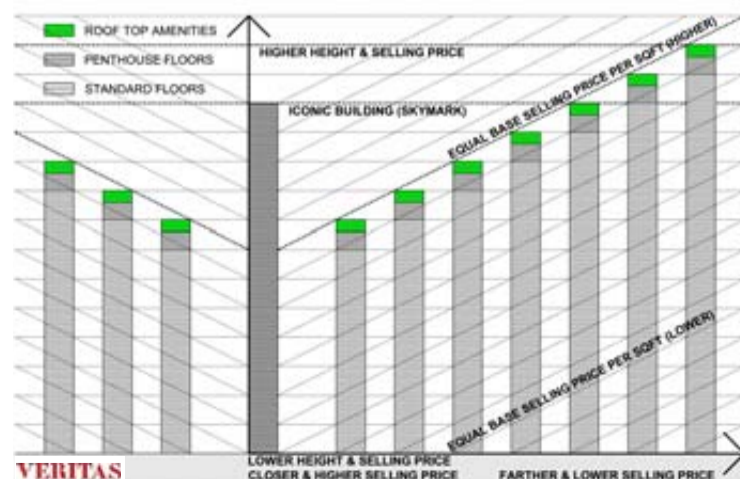
There are two main implications of an unregulated skyline. On the one hand, if the iconic skymark is cornered by other very tall buildings, cities might not be able anymore to “sell” their overly-cluttered skyline as an attraction for both tourists and their own citizens.

Also, if a cluster of tall buildings rings the icon, there might be no chance for surrounding layers of buildings to enjoy any view of it. The solution seems to be clear in the form of height and proximity regulations – as imposed in many European capitals – which state that a gradation from the central, iconic skymark must be closer-lower to further-higher.

A pricing formula might be related to the distance and height of buildings, for example, one square foot at a closer-but-lower floor might have the same selling price as one square foot at a further-away-but-higher floor.

Given the opportunities to “sell” the views, particularly from penthouse floors and rooftop public amenities or common facilities, wouldn't this be more profitable for both city and developers? **FocusM**

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