

FINANCIAL REVIEW

SE Life & Leisure - Luxury
HD **SKY HIGH**
BY Robert Bevan
WC 1,604 words
PD 20 June 2014
SN The Australian Financial Review
SC AFNR
ED First
PG 30
LA English
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WHEN THE ONLY WAY IS UP, THERE WILL INEVITABLY BE SOME FALLOUT, WRITES ROBERT BEVAN.

According to the architect himself, Rafael Viñoly's new 425-metre-tall **Park** Avenue skyscraper will be "ridiculously luxurious", with top-end fittings, four-metre-high ceilings and killer views. It will be the tallest building, not just in New York, but in the entire Americas. Expect price tags to match.

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Across the pond in London, an **apartment** designed by Sir Richard Rogers set a new **residential property** record this year when it **sold** for \$255 million. True, it is a roomy 1500 square metres, but it is a flat, not a mansion. No real garden – unless the eastern European buyer hopes to wall off Hyde **Park** opposite as his personal fiefdom.

When the GFC hit, construction cranes across the globe immediately juddered to a halt. High-profile skyscraper projects were cancelled or put on indefinite hold, including Santiago Calatrava's Chicago Spire tower, which was to spiral up from beside Lake Michigan like a narwhal's tusk.

Now, across the English-speaking world, there is more demand than ever for high-rise living. Melbourne is building some 41 towers across its CBD, Southbank and Docklands areas, including the Australia 108, which will vie with Q1 on the Gold Coast to be the tallest skyscraper in the southern hemisphere. London has some 230 in the pipeline (80 per cent of which will be **residential**) and last month Sydney's Urban Taskforce put forward proposals for dozens more super-tall towers, arguing they are necessary if the city is to maintain its global status. If these projects all go ahead, they will change our cities forever.

Their proponents argue that future cities have to be denser if they are to be greener, and something needs to be done about the housing shortage endemic to desirable cities the world over. Others worry that while a wealthy few will benefit from these luxurious windows on the world, their host cities will suffer the consequences.

Carol Willis, director of Manhattan's Skyscraper Museum, has staged an exhibition **SKY HIGH & The Logic of Luxury**, to examine the trend. Giddy heights of luxury

"New York and London are both hot markets for luxury housing, and in both, developers are adding conspicuously tall new towers to the skyline to answer demand and compete for the attention of wealthy investors," Willis says. The form these take varies from city to city. In New York, super-slim tall towers are the go. These are made possible by advances in lift technology, materials and wind-bracing.

Manhattan's zoning laws allow unlimited heights in some areas, as long as the set ratios of floor space to height are adhered to. Developers can even **buy** up the unused development rights from neighbouring sites. A dozen towers of between 50 and 96 storeys are planned or under construction.

"Slenderness," Willis notes, "is a strategy that produces several benefits. Piling fewer apartments per floor higher into the sky allows for open, panoramic views. Having fewer units per floor – often only one or two – speaks of exclusivity and luxury."

This also has the effect of reducing the area of the building core devoted to lifts, as does the use of "scissored" escape stairs where staircases are entwined within the one stairwell. Next novelty act

While New York is aiming for super slim, London is forever searching for the next novelty act, with towers incorporating gimmicks such as wind turbines that don't turn or throwing fantastical shapes that attract instant nicknames: the Gherkin, the Shard, the Walkie Talkie, the Cheese grater, the Can of Ham. Most of these are office or mixed-use towers, with **residential**-only skyscrapers a little more sombre, such as the grey cylinder of One St George Wharf that has been likened to a nose-hair trimmer. A whole comic book of topsy-turvy towers is set to emerge around Battersea Power Station, designed by Frank Gehry et al.

Some of these weird forms have derived from developers wanting to maximise the size of a building without fouling the invisible web of protected views criss-crossing the sky above the city, including those safeguarding the setting of St Paul's Cathedral.

Many Londoners are horrified at what will happen to the traditional scale of the city and its skyline. Mayor Boris Johnson promised that he would not allow "Dubai on Thames" to emerge – a reference to the Gulf city's fondness for vertical bling – but that's exactly what the UK capital appears to be getting.

Australia has not been immune to this novelty trend either, as Jean Nouvel's vertical garden tower at Central **Park**, Sydney, or Yve, the swooning glass block by Wood Marsh in Melbourne, testify. The NSW Urban Task Force's CEO, Chris Johnson, argues: "Sydney is being held back by out-of-date planning rules ... Across Asia, many cities are building towers that are symbols of the prosperity and the optimism of that city's economic growth."

While it might be reasonable to use grandiose skyscrapers in an attempt to put on the map a city that has emerged from the sand only a few decades ago, it suggests a juvenile lack of self-confidence to argue that long-established cities such as London or Sydney need to emulate Dubai and Doha to be relevant. Tell that to Berlin with its strict height controls. Australian cities already build higher than London, Paris or Tokyo. A changing skyline might be one sign of a healthy, dynamic city but a deliberate free-for-all smacks of desperation or an ideological, "let-the-market-rule" attitude to planning – as in London where regulations are often simply set aside. Mischievous delight

Perhaps more important than skylines is the effect skyscrapers can have at ground level: Londoners were mischievously delighted when the concave glass façade of the Walkie Talkie, officially 20 Leadenhall Street and also by Viñoly, accidentally concentrated the sun's reflected rays on a Jaguar parked nearby, melting its panels.

That's an extreme case, but all tall buildings create microclimates if not carefully handled. Wind turbulence can create permanently blowy conditions at street level, or throw whole areas into shade for part of each day. This is less a problem in sunny climes where a certain amount of shade might provide welcome relief, but can become a big issue in temperate winters.

Even super-slim skyscrapers can create substantial change when they arrive in numbers. New York's Municipal Art Society has warned that seven of the new luxury towers planned for the south end of Central **Park** will throw extensive areas of its lawns into gloom during winter.

Critics of Melbourne's tower frenzy also warn that **apartment** blocks are too close together, shading each other and creating future slums in the sky.

Part of the problem is that, despite the benefits of being able to pile a lot of building on to a relatively small **site**, skyscrapers are still enormously expensive to build, compared with lower blocks. So while luxury fit-outs might be necessary to attract buyers, corners are cut with cheap external details and materials. They are equally expensive to repair and almost impossible to replace.

Despite all these potential pitfalls, Daniel Safarik, spokesman for the international Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, argues such towers are inevitable: "We're running out of developable space in our cities, and that means there is nowhere to go but up," he says.

There is also a realisation that access to greenery and fresh air is important, he adds. "In places with temperate or warm climates particularly, we are seeing sky gardens and green walls at height, and bridges connecting multiple towers in clusters." Singapore is one of the leaders in this area. Star trappings

Other star towers are coming with star trappings. In Miami, the 60-storey Porsche Design Tower, being developed in partnership with the German sports car **company**, has amenities such as plunge pools on most balconies. According to The Atlantic magazine's Citylab summit, 22 billionaires, some 2 per cent of the world's total, have bought units there.

These are investment homes: architectural safety deposit boxes designed to appeal to Russian oligarchs, **China's** business elite or Indian steel magnates in a time of global, political and financial uncertainty. They may never be actually occupied before being resold.

Their expense also means these cloud-bothering buildings are not a solution to the mass housing needs of most cities, despite what tower-backers in many cities argue. It's true that almost 90 per cent of Singaporeans live in high-rise social housing, but these are cheap, grim affairs. Super-tall, super-snazzy towers will remain the preserve of the rich and famous, the kings and queens of all they survey. In this market, Chicago's Spire looks like it might be revived.

All depends on local factors, however. In Melbourne, the supply of apartments is 60 per cent higher than demand, with rents likely to fall in consequence. Suddenly, luxuriously tall towers can look like bad investments.

In the white-hot premium **property** market of London, Renzo Piano's \$2.74 billion Shard, the tallest tower in Europe, has just celebrated the opening of its Shangri-La **Hotel**, but many of its other floors remain unrented, its \$91 million apartments unsold.

Just across the Thames, meanwhile, the Gherkin has gone into receivership 10 years after its elegant snout was completed.

Bubbles this size will make an almighty bang should they pop.

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AN Document AFNR000020140620ea6k0000m