Tall Buildings and the Public Realm

Marcin Malinowski MSc Eng. Arch. 3ARP
Green Building Challenge, Polish Team

City is the only sustainable future form

Sustainability
Sustainable society is the key SD concept. Quick examination of human history reveals that competition and war is the prevailing way of resolving the conflict over scarce resources. Usually the thread to global natural environment is presented as the main future problem. That’s popular thinking not supported by facts. Recent ongoing riots in French cities show that the most urgent task is to improve people’s environment - which is mostly the urban one.

Genetics, purpose and universal values of the city public space

The first sound historical analyses - “Peloponnesian War” by Thukydides explores deeply the role and utility of cities and their culture. It’s obvious for Thukydides that main support for the war comes from urban proletarian which has nothing to lose as it produces little and have almost no share in the domestic product. 26 centuries later Carl Marx formulated the idea: “you have nothing to lose except your chains”.

The city is a specific human social life organisation order with many artificial tools: legal system, spatial structure, hierarchy of dominance, technology, and own economy among others. The city is a colony of people but it’s not a mere artificial organisation. The city is an attractor in natural biosphere flow of mass and energy. City location is specific. River estuaries, natural ports like Santiago de Cuba was chosen for location of cities because energy of water currents brought Europeans to the food rich coasts and then across the Ocean to land and gold of West India. People fund cities and migrate to cities because cities offer what cannot be achieved in another way. Cities liberate us from misery. How?

The core city values is public realm. Human inventiveness and life support evolves by means of exchange interaction and social quality of life is a key to the unquestionable urban life model success. City has a capacity for supporting more people than rural area. World urban and rural population growth curves clearly indicate the fact.

Why city is so attractive?
City is attractive because public realm offers a huge set of options for people’s productivity, which in economical terms is the growth of production possibilities frontier. The production possibilities frontier is something like optimum of services and production on the market and the market is one of primary city functions. The bigger and the stronger the market the more chance for life sustenance.

Can’t you have public realm in another place - say internet? One cannot live in internet. People need to move, interact, match, mate, eat, sleep and relax. The real world is physical, not ideal, religious, or virtual. There are some constraints to possible utopia like mass, distance and time. For the most of people the city is a chance to make some of the relations more successful than in another life models. This is due to spatial organisation -the city structure.

City structure is environment, therefore it’s of vital importance how tall buildings impact the city structure.

Attractiveness
Quality public space is a valuable asset. Buildings lives are shorter than their lasting impact on the public space.

Perception, Information

Public space. Technical space

Stealth
Modern building materials facilitate maintenance but create visually alien space.

Scale
Usually city centres inherit historical, fragmented land property structure, therefore public space scale don’t match the scale of the building.

Reduction
Technical space forces public space out due to massive concentration of traffic and infrastructural connections.

Privatisation
Due to inadequate quality of existing public space it is incorporated into buildings interiors, and privatised.

Adaptability
Tall buildings, office occupancy in particular, were believed to be easily adaptable for residential function.

Externalities
Security zoning plan for G8 summit in Warsaw shows the range of buildings internationation with nearest public space.

In the future tall office buildings may be outdated like industrial plants of XIXth and XXth centuries are now. Residential function of the city is the most universal one. Buildings can be adapted, but the space among them must then remain.

To adapt the public space to the standards of quality residential area, probably we’ll have to demolish buildings.