

## **VERTICALISM: THE FUTURE OF THE SKYSCRAPER**

**©Iñaki Abalos, June 2008**

Modern architects thought up the skyscraper as a way of organizing work spaces – offices. And actually, the archetypical skyscraper of modern times is the very soul of such organization: the optimum way of filing and connecting up workers who file and connect up data. Buildings such as New York's Seagram Building, and Spain's fabulous BBVA Tower – a bank headquarters in Madrid, have cemented this concept in a way that will live on forever. But either they forgot, or the time had not yet come for, the multiple opportunities which building vertically opens up, and which we have seen expanding in the last few decades with global economic growth and the spreading out of populations in South East Asia. It would not be over-dramatic to say that all contemporary metropolises are designed to be occupied densely, and even the most recalcitrant mayors are beginning to understand that it's an instrument they should become more familiar with.

So far, "verticalism" – that is, conceiving of space and the modern city in vertical terms – is still in its infancy. An exciting transformation process is taking place before our very eyes. We've begun to view the city – and historic cities – from standpoints which effectively replace the two-dimensional nature of urban planning with a new "verticalism". It remains to be seen whether this will turn out to be a complementary or an alternative way of viewing the city (in terms of a ground plan, or in three dimensions; "urban planning", or "verticalism"). We can see how vertical buildings of many kinds are flourishing in the working lives of the generation in their 40's or 50's, and those younger than them: vertical university campuses, vertical museums, vertical libraries, vertical laboratories, vertical fashion buildings, vertical parks and gardens, vertical sports centres, and combinations of all these mixed in with buildings of a residential, hotel or office nature, sometimes forming "cities" of their own in which the building's cross-section becomes what the ground plan of the city has represented up until

now (mixed-use buildings). Other examples mix together towers with different uses but with the same logic of form, creating a "bundle" of towers – which is an effective and appropriate alternative to the large vertical mixed-use building because, in many contexts, it possesses the virtue of shifting the focus of interest from the objects themselves to the air surrounding this and that one, to the space which they create and to the way in which new structures interact with existing ones. In one go it transfers, so to speak, the iconic charge from the autobiographical object to the public space, to the "city" which they generate.

Historic cities can also find many answers to problems through this strategy of infiltration by small towers – this "acupuncture" strategy which, compared with the *boulevard* of Haussmann's Paris, offers the benefit of having the minimum footprint together with the maximum transformative ability. The successful experiment of the modern skyscraper centred essentially in private commerce should be re-run so that the skyscraper is of public benefit, or otherwise serves both commercial and public purposes; and new methods of planning management that foreshadow the future should be tried out.

The fact that institutional and public building types that had been anchored to decidedly horizontal 19th-century structures for a hundred years, are being included in this review, is beginning to signal a certain amount of adaptation in institutional territory too.

The public space that makes possible the most strategic contemporary verticalism, with its small footprint on places and the sustainability inherent in the synergetic use of the different activities of its cross-section, are factors that have greater and greater influence on its acceptance. The public space historically generated by the skyscraper – that mixture of trading streets and picturesque parks inaugurated by the invention of New York's Central Park, with its ability to transform Midtown – surely contains the genetic code of the contemporary public space. Trees and skyscrapers set one another off to good effect, creating an amalgam that is one of contemporary architecture's true leitmotifs. Thinking about vertical structures necessarily means thinking about new concepts in public buildings that satisfy the new demands produced by the

social, cultural and demographic changes driven by global metropolises. Verticalism is also the strategy that may enable historic European cities to continue to wield an influence in the highly competitive future that is already upon us.