

Friday, June 4, 2010

Expert Insight

After 100 years, height act still something to treasure

Washington Business Journal - by [Larry Beasley](#)

With the 100th anniversary of the federal height act, marked June 1, the debate about the height of buildings in the nation's capital is once again front and center. On one side are those who strongly support the scale of the city, its views, light and openness. On the other side are those who believe the height act restricts economic development and limits opportunities for sustainable communities. So which side, if any, is right?

When done well, tall buildings can make a city magical. I know this having helped bring tall buildings to a high science during my years as planning director in Vancouver — a city known for its skyscrapers and density.

As a consultant to cities worldwide, I know that tall buildings can help advance sustainability because they increase density and mixed uses. Tall buildings provide more space with which to achieve a more complicated building program. They also can inspire great architecture and allow for beautiful views.

I'm not speaking of unendingly tall buildings, because at a certain point massive buildings draw negatively on the environmental equation and can actually create isolation. Coupled with a carefully calibrated zoning system of bonuses and incentives, height with density has leveraged better design and every quality amenity that we could possibly want for Vancouver.

One might expect that I'd be an unapologetic advocate of easing Washington's height limits. Not so. Washington — unlike Vancouver — is not a city starting from scratch. It is a very symbolic capital with more than two centuries of history. It has a distinct personality, due in great part to the height of its buildings that shape a unique skyline known the world over.

A cityscape should be deliberately structured for a larger purpose — to say something about the city, its people and its place in the world. It should not be just the random result of economic activity and investor opportunity.

In most North American and newer cities around the world, building height restrictions were never in place, and the skylines of these cities are a reflection of their economic power. This has worked for juggernauts of the world economy like New York and Hong Kong because their unmitigated scales have endowed them with a special symbolism. But for hundreds of other cities, laissez faire height restrictions have resulted in forgettable skylines.

When debating the value of building taller, one must expand the focus from that of the individual to the community as a whole. To a developer, the math is simple: Greater heights and densities translate into economic opportunity. From the perspective of what makes the city

valuable relative to others, then the city's unique appearance makes it inherently more valuable, and its comfortable, human scale makes it more attractive.

For 100 years, Washington's clear and simple height policy has fundamentally shaped the city. Despite the impetus for the legislation's enactment — safety — its achievement at the symbolic level is profound. It allows the national symbols of the capital to prevail over all other features of the city. It also creates a coherent frame of walls among the buildings and grand ceremonial spaces.

There is an inclination in North American culture that when we get a little bored by something we just change it. That is a risky thing to do in Washington, simply because of the great legacy of a graciously designed city. In particular, under no circumstances should any variations in height be considered for the monumental core. This would be a sacrilege.

I worry that Washington will give up the scale that's been shaped over 100 years of careful stewardship for spurious aspirations. Varying heights is not a magic bullet for economic gain or green construction. Nor will it liberate architecture. With a good architect — and Washington has many — these things can all be achieved at any scale.

It is a wonderful experience to walk along a Washington street that is so gently scaled and elegantly designed. Discovering beautiful, iconic buildings that pop up out of that standard form is something to be cherished.

I hope the Vancouver experience provides some useful advice. If nothing else — be very careful as you gamble with the 100-year legacy of Washington's height act. It may be the single most powerful thing that has made this city the world treasure that it is.

Larry Beasley, a professor of planning at the University of British Columbia and founding principal Beasley and Associates, Planning Inc., spoke at the National Capital Planning Commission's recent symposium on the 100th anniversary of the height act.