

Heightened Conversations: Impacts of Building Heights in Capital Cities

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**John Worthington, Principal, DEGW Architects, and Visiting Professor
University of Sheffield**

Good evening, I'm delighted to be here actually, I think my colleagues who said my role is the sweeper. And in the sense what I find so interesting about this, is the ability now actually that what you're doing is opening up a conversation, a dialogue.

I've been involved in a number of European cities talking about height. Not how high but actually things like density, i.e. how much you can put on the same amount of land?

Intensity, which is different, how do you then use that space, and begin to think in terms of space and time. Because actually intensity is how many use I can get into that site. And how can I spread it over different parts of time. Because this is incredibly important.

And finally, identity, what is the place I want to create?

So it's relative. Lovely collection there. New York through to Rotterdam. You see, New York, big floor plates, tall buildings, 1:18 plot ratio. Rotterdam – Lilliputian, tiny little floor plates, 100 meters high, 300 foot, is a significant high building for them, and a 1:3 plot ratio.

So what is height? You know, that's the thing. So what are the main things? Why high-rise? The opportunities are strategic really. Establish the city global presence.

Supporting economic success. Intensification of land use, improving the public realm.

Because if you can build the comprehensively in the way that Robert was talking about, in terms of clusters, you can start to actually build a place. Comprehensive development. Symbols to attract investors. And landmarks for navigation, markers.

But there's also the other argument. Why not high-rise? The risks. And that's about local impact. Inflexible floor spaces. Only one type of space really. You can't get continuity of space on a horizontal on what Jurgen was talking about, or being able to get ambiguous space across the site.

Inflexible mix of uses. Construction costs. Floor area utilization. Huge as you go up, more and more goes to the core, less and less to usable space. Most important, phasing. Very big tall buildings. Once you start you can't suddenly stop when you're in the middle of a crisis. You can't actually phase it and the impact on the city vitality in terms of the groundscape.

Three buildings, three cities. Rotterdam was fascinating. Wiped out in the last war in the center. They were absolutely gun ho. Wanted to build tall, they love tall buildings. That was the *raison d'être*, that's what they were.

Dublin, on the other hand, actually it was a three story city. One to three story largely, some going up to five. So actually a building of eight stories was of considerable height. So what is high was the question?

What way do we should build a tall height? If so, where, was the big question.

London, of course, we need to build high in order to retain global economic positioning.

This was the financial argument. A sub plot there was actually the mayor saying, "If I can actually build this quite nicely, cause I can get a lot of return in terms of ratable value and actually the money people have to pay, that we can do with other things with."

That was not said, but that was the sub story there as well.

So three very different reasons, three very different sorts of cities. And this is the thing we've been talking about. You can have high buildings, as identified by markers. The individual high building, it has a landmark function, but it actually doesn't have any significant impact on density really.

But from a developers point of view, the individual buildings is wonderful, cause you can build 100% of your site and use the streets all around to service it, which you don't have to build and it could get light from everybody else.

So actually the single independent building is very attractive to the developer, and actually not very attractive to the city in terms if you really want to raise density. If you want to raise density, move towards that, the cluster.

Okay, so what other things are we're talking about? Well Robert mentioned it a bit -- but typology. Same amount of space, we can either go tall, and leave space around it on the site. Or we can cover the whole side and build a deep low groundscraper buildings.

Now we'll talk about groundscrapers and skyscrapers. These are the two combinations we've got really to talk about. We are using it in fact to create place, urban grain, block and plot layouts, street widths, plan, and scale.

And of course the European street. 15 meters wide street. Is sort of three to seven, eight stories. Or the European street slight higher have 22 meter streets going up to eight to ten stories. That's the kind of typical European city.

And yet considerable density, by the way. So, you can do wonderful things in that envelope. I think what we're talking about is "what can you do in that envelope?"

Now, Dublin was interesting. What we did there was, actually first and foremost, understand our character areas. We tried to define it in terms of not just character areas of what it looked like visually but where were places, in terms of what were the opportunities, in terms of developing.

There were very precious areas in the city, somewhere like Central Dublin with Trinity College Dublin, a most marvelous university, absolutely pure within its context, right in the center. That was somewhere very precious that you really didn't want to mess with.

But there were also the docklands and the railway line sightings which are places which were actually declining in terms of usage, changing, and large areas you could develop and change. So, these were, sort of, potentially the types of areas you had.

Then, of course, you've got this. You could begin to say, "Well, what could you do with the more precious areas?" I use a simple definition, actually, of when you're there, the

thing to test them with is could you make a historical film? You know, what could you see as you look around?

So, if I was inside Trinity College Dublin, what would I see? Well, actually, it was quite interesting because, you know, this is very important. There is the famous Golden Mile, which is the Georgian Mile, one of the most famous streets in Dublin.

And there suddenly what would happen if you did put something down in the docklands in the wrong place? You had to be incredibly careful where you put something on a character area we knew we could develop in, because we had certain key other character areas which we really wanted to save.

On Dublin, actually, the key thing here was the redefinition of that problem, was a higher building strategy. And it was how did we manage intensification and change?

The outcome there was that the city manager said to me, "Right, John, you've done that job fantastic, and I realize you didn't tell us where we should put our high buildings. But what you told us is we need to manage change. I'm going to put you together with a little committee to go with three wise men." □

I brought in Sir Richard McCormack from London and David Mackay from Barcelona. And the three of us, which I chaired, then actually helped to bring together the city architect and the city planner, who were fighting each other.

So, the first thing was to get things sorted out within the organization. Then when we had done that, we moved outwards and talked with the professionals. Finally, 10 years later, still chairing that committee, we actually brought in the whole wider population talking about Dublin as an urban area.

Rotterdam. Fascinating. Wanted to build tall buildings. The big thing there was actually to show them that just by building tall buildings -- their original question to me was they wanted to build a 250-meter-high building.

I said, "Hang on. Well, if you built that, that's a year and a half of your total takeout. Do you really want to risk yourself like that? That if something goes wrong, you can't do nothing else, and it sucks all of the vitality out to the street."

So, here, these were the kinds of things. There was the city's interest, the investors' interests, and the users' interests. What was nice when we did come up with what to do was actually, we created a Gaynor Commission, which I chaired.

In that case, every time somebody wanted to develop a high-rise building, they came to the commission. And we said, "What we've learned so far in looking here, there are some certain problems. We want to take one problem at a time."

And each developer was asked to take one thing. They started largely to be around problems on the ground floor. Because the trouble is with high-rise buildings, they soak up the time. So, that was the key thing to actually then and each time you'd solve a problem and move forward.

And here was their goal: establish a framework for creative design and mixed-use development through use of both ground scrapers and skyscrapers in order to intensify the vitality of places and reinforce the identity and character of quarters within the city with the minimum use of regulatory control.

That was very important. The idea of trying to get the minimum regulatory, and the maximum through dialog, working together, which was really what the commission was doing. And here's the sort of thing they came up with, in terms of in the end; intensification and innovation.

We said you don't have to build tall, to really build special and identify things. You can be innovative. After all, actually, if it's just about building tall, somebody else comes along and builds a building a bit taller than you, and you are no longer the greatest building around.

But something like Lloyd's of London, or Hong Kong Shanghai Bank, is a unique place even though it's dwarfed by other buildings around. So we were saying, establish a robust zone and height control framework for discretionary design discussions which can be negotiated. So we are moving away from being precise, we're talking about negotiation. Dialogue is an important idea.

Ensure the minimum controls to achieve the maximum impact. Encourage new building typologies to reflect changes in working and living. Concentrate detailed guidance on quality of ground and skyline. And so on and so on.

So we got two ideas now. Groundscape. What's happening at the ground level.

Absolutely critical in terms of density and height. And what's happening at skyscape.

The view across the city when you're 12 stories or 10 stories in the air.

This is a fascinating place. All the things you see out there. I've been looking here. The opportunity they've got are huge. Because you haven't actually dealt with your skyscape very well actually.

And London was the same. London actually I did the Shard, and it was evolved here.

But this was actually purely about one very important building, which was hugely important as an identifier. At a metropolitan level, 10 miles away, you can see this thing, and it sort of tells you about it. And it was actually about moving the center, the old city, the square mile, the area that Robert was talking about, across the river to where there was a major station, where people used to come from and then trudge across the bridge to the other side. And saying that that could be a new form in its own right.

And so, what are the emerging building types? And I think that's what you need to concentrate on. Well, actually, if it's within this sort of mid-height, interesting, because in fact, the ground floor, and going down below ground, is what I call showcase space.

Increasingly with organizations now, a big chunk of their space is given over to places where they are showing off what they are doing, where they're testing products, doing training, etc. Semi-public space, allowing the public to come through, not in masses, but moving through it.

Middle. Two sorts of space – deep and less deep. And at the top, something special again. Instead of just a slab which is all the same going up, think about what those top

two stories can be. Something different. And in sort of 8-10 stories you've got a vast variety of things you can do.

Kings Place in London. It's what, 6 to 7 stories high? But it goes down three stories, with concert halls, exhibition halls, etc. And the whole of the ground floor is semi-public space. You can see coming through there. I can walk through here as a member of the public, and come to the canal on the far side, and you can see the opening on the other side, and look down and see these spaces below. I think this is very typical of the sort of spaces we'll get. I nearly passed that, but basically the difference between North America and Europe is statutory and advisory.

And just why a height strategy? Well, a strategy and something set is very important. It provides insurance for landowners, investors, and developers. People want to know what they are working within. So you want some clear simple things. And what I love about what your height is that it's simple.

Improves the quality of the urban experience at the level of groundscape, skyline, and urban vistas. Think of those four separate things. It sets expectations against which to measure performance. That's important. What am I really trying to do? What sort of city do I want? And it structures the city.

So I would suggest you could recognize the value of mid-rise, mixed-use nodes in optimizing urban diversity, vitality, and capacity. Great opportunity. And I think actually what this is about is reframing the problem. You have started with height, but you got the opportunity to say what sort of city. Thank you.