

Title: **Debating Tall: Limit Tall Buildings to the Outskirts of Historic Cities?**

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Limiting Tall Buildings to the Outskirts of Historic Cities?

Tall building construction is on the rise in historic European cities. As economic pressures mount to build taller in the central city, we ask, should that practice continue?

YES

Phillippe Chaix

General Director, EPADESA

In terms of architecture and urbanism, it is easier to build tower blocks outside a historic city center. In Europe, our cities are very old, and comply with a form of architecture that has become harmonized over the centuries and is thus hard to change. In Paris, Haussmannian and post-Haussmannian architecture have created a harmonious, uniform architectural fabric into which it would be hard to add high-rise buildings today.

Moreover, the general public sometimes has a negative view of skyscrapers, which cannot be built without serious consultations and major educational efforts with the local residents.

La Défense, started at the end of the 1950s, is the epitome of a high-rise district on the outskirts of Paris. We often assume that vertical neighborhoods are dense by default. This is a common error. The density at La Défense is lower than in the center of Paris. You can breathe, and public spaces hold a place of honor. It is also home to many residents who have taken full possession of this unique territory and thrive here.

Nowadays, high-rise districts fully comply with sustainable development standards, emphasizing land conservation. Access is an essential factor in the energy balance of a district such as La Défense, where 85% of users (employees, residents, visitors, etc.) arrive or leave via public transport.

Concentrating tower blocks outside the historic city also makes it possible to develop high-performance networks, such as heating and cooling systems, fiber-optics networks, and the like. This is not always the case in so-called “classical” cities.

The ideal solution would be to find a compromise between building tall in a dense historic city and building exclusively on the outskirts. The wealth of a city comes from its architectural mix, which needs to evolve over time with projects that reflect the times in which they were built. Tall buildings are part of this continuum.

NO

Sir Stuart Lipton

Chelsfield Partners

Despite the perpetual dynamism of cities, the central cores of cities in Europe have retained much of the magic of medieval street patterns and spaces. Historic districts contain much of a city’s character, social activity, civic and arts buildings, as well as a few interesting commercial buildings. These districts should be respected and maintained, but not without reconsidering the potential of areas around them as grounds for change. The juxtaposition of old with appropriately designed new buildings can further complexity and interest in civic life.

It is worth remembering that cathedrals were the tall buildings of their time. This juxtaposition of an iconic tower against the low-rise landscape often produced the

shock of the new, but over time became a landmark.

Cities are becoming denser for good reasons of environmental change. In the interest of sustainability and quality of life, people should be able to walk to work, live locally, and not be forced into long rail or car journeys. For this to happen, in many European cities the peripheral high-rise development—such as Paris La Défense or London Canary Wharf – now needs to come into town.

There are clear benefits of higher density. In the United Kingdom, it prevents some “greenbelt” fields from being developed. High density is already a way of life in Europe generally. Barcelona is an eight-story city and one of the densest in Europe. Paris is predominantly eight stories, while London is a five-story city. So the choice here is, “Do we spread our city or do we build upwards?”

There are social issues to consider as well. While low-rise buildings bring a certain urbanity and feeling of comfort, living in a high-rise building brings a feeling of optimism and aspiration, as well as the invigoration felt from natural light.

We need to bring modern technology and life into our cities, fostering a continually evolving built environment driven by innovation, surprise, and delight. High-rise buildings will become the norm in dense human cities, where personal interaction and ease of access with a range of amenities remains the rationale for their existence.

