Talking Tall: Dormitowers

Tall Student Housing as a Re-emerging Trend



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Richard Simpson is Managing Director of UNITE's Development business, the UK's leading developer and manager of Student Accommodation. He leads a team responsible for the acquisition and development of UNITE's new property portfolio, including the delivery of 13 schemes in 2009 and over 1,000 beds in 2010, taking UNITE's student accommodation portfolio in excess of 40,000 beds, including some 6,000 in London.

Richard, who joined UNITE in 2005, was appointed Property Director for the London Student Hospitality Business where he assumed full accountability for the property performance of the London Business. Richard was promoted to the role of Managing Director of the Development Business and appointed to UNITE's Operations Board, which is responsible for the strategic direction of the company. Richard has an in-depth knowledge of development risk, especially with reference to devising and implementing London focused business plans.

"From an urban habitat point of view, student towers in or near a city center make sense... After all, it's not only buildings that shape the city, but also, and maybe even more so, the people living in it."

An interview with Richard Simpson (UNITE Group, Plc.) by Jan Klerks, CTBUH Communications Manager/Journal Editor

This past decade, "student skyscrapers" have re-emerged at or near university campuses and city centers. As such, the vertical dorm is making a comeback after a construction drought which started in the early 1970s. For a long time, the 98-meter (322-foot) tall Fenwick Tower in Halifax, Canada, a 252-unit student resident apartment building which was completed in 1971 near the campus of the Dalhousie University, stood as the world's tallest all-dormitory tower.

London recently saw the Nido Spitalfields Tower completed near the famous Gherkin Tower. Completed this year and standing 112 meters (361 feet) tall, it is currently the tallest all-dormitory tower in the world. Today, the tallest building which contains a substantial number of dormitories is the 144-meter (472-foot) tall Capri Tower in New York City. This 46-story, mixed-use tower was completed in 2001 and has 120 apartments for students of Marymount Manhattan College on floors 31 through 42. In Chicago, construction started on a 142-meter (566-foot) tall tower for the Roosevelt University, which will include 300 dorms. Other recent examples include a 132-meter (433-foot) student tower called Het Strijkijzer in The Hague, the Netherlands, which was completed in 2007. The City of Leeds in

the UK is well represented in this overview with three new student towers: Sky Plaza (103 meters/338 feet, 2009), Opal Tower (82 meters/269 feet, 2008) and Broadway and Broadcasting Place (69 meters/226 feet, 2009). The latter building has won the CTBUH Award for Best Tall Building in Europe in 2010.

One big difference with some of the older towers is that these used to be built near or on campus, while the new ones find themselves

...socialism

6 6Others build socialism on the ground. We go one step further and build a new socialism in the sky. 9 9

Sun Hai Yan, a member of the local government in Huaxi, in response to the development of a planned complex of 72-story towers in that city. From "The Richest Reds in China", The Time, April 4, 2008 (http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1728126,00.html)



Sky Plaza, Leeds, UK

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in or near city centers. The current development of tall dormitory towers is a good reason to have a closer look at a recently completed building as a representative of this emerging trend. In this edition of Talking Tall, we interview Richard Simpson, who is the Managing Director of Development at the UK-based UNITE Group and as such responsible for the Sky Plaza project in Leeds, UK.

Sky Plaza offers 34 floors of fully furbished studios, en-suite rooms, and one-bedroom flats, containing 533 units in total. At 103 meters (338 feet) tall, the building was the tallest all-dormitory tower in the world at the time of completion in 2009, and currently stands as the second tallest tower in the city of Leeds. The Sky Plaza project was developed in two phases. The tower was Phase II following Phase I in which 964 purpose-built en-suite study rooms in low-rise complexes were developed.

Development

Simpson confirms the notion of a central location, "We try to develop our student complexes close to a university campus, but if possible, close to the city center as well. As most universities in the United Kingdom are close to, or located in the city center, this is the first area where we look for available space when we plan to develop a student complex. Sky Plaza is located next to the Inner Ring Road and as such is right in the heart of the city, within walking distance to Leeds Metropolitan University, The University of Leeds, Leeds Technology College, Leeds College of Music, and BPP Law School. Also the city's nightlife and shops are right around the corner."

How did this development start?

Development starts by establishing a demand for student housing in a certain area. Market surveys showed that Leeds is considered to be a strong and vibrant university city, but that it had a shortage of good quality student housing. As a housing company, our focus on the market is strictly narrowed down to student housing, but we are also a vertically structured organization, integrating all

professional aspects of both development and management of our complexes. It means we finance our own buildings, but also employ the architects and engineers who act as process managers and surveyors during the design and construction process.

Why did you decide to build a tower instead of a low-rise building?

This location offered opportunities for a large scale building with the potential to become a signature project. Ever since we started our business in 1991, we have been growing substantially and evolved as a business, so we felt that we were ready to take on a challenge. A project like this not only reflects on the city of Leeds, but also on us. One main lesson we learned from this development is that when projects grow taller, the risks involved will increase more than proportionally along the way. During development and construction, we ensured an office culture in which all risks could be identified and discussed in the open so they could be dealt with as early as possible.

How was the city of Leeds involved in this development?

Next to the usual development policies, Leeds has a Tall Buildings Design Guide, which is quite explicit about what it expects from a tall building when it comes to strategic issues such as location, relationship with the street, sense of place, usage, views and vistas, the skyline, sustainability, and the character and design quality of the building. It was up to us to deliver on all fronts. This may seem as quite a challenge, but we also learned that a process in which you have to prove the added value to the city can significantly strengthen the project. It makes you realize that you are working on a visible landmark project which will irreversibly alter the face of the city. This is an opportunity that isn't given to many. Good and respectful contact with the city and the understanding that realizing a tall building is a dynamic process, allowed us to submit a redesign of the originally approved 26-story scheme and to increase the tower to a height of 37 stories, with a completely new profile and cladding scheme.



Looking up Sky Plaza

Can you give us an example of something that added value for the city?

Adding 572 student apartments in a 103-meter (338-foot) tall tower not only has a significant impact on the skyline of Leeds, it also unlocked and boosted development in the immediate surroundings of the tower. Commercial spaces that were previously vacant now find themselves occupied by convenience stores, eateries and other commercial activities. It also freed many apartments in terraced housing projects, which were intentionally built for families but due to room shortage were occupied by students. As such, the project brought back a bit of balance in the local housing market.

In what way is this project different from your other projects?

Typically our projects are constructed out of prefabricated elements. Because of our integrated business structure, we even have our own factory where we fabricate the modules with which we build our complexes. Because of its height, a modular design can result in structural instability, which is a risk we didn't want to take. Instead, the tower has been built from cast-in-place concrete. \cancel{s}

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Studio apartment at Sky Plaza



The fully furbished kitchen of Sky Plaza's apartments

What technical implications come with the fact that this is a dorm tower?

Sky Plaza has four elevators, which is one or two more than usual for a residential building this size and height. But then, of course, the building has far more units compared to an apartment building. Also, our peak demand in the evening hours is higher compared to the peaks in the morning. On the other hand, we have a very limited number of parking spaces, mainly so because, in general, students do not own cars.

Management

Sky Plaza is owned and managed by the same company that built it. Today, the typical new dorm towers are developed and managed by companies dedicated to renting out student housing. Mostly these are non-profit organizations, but UNITE operates as a British Public Limited Company (Plc.). Another different way in which UNITE operates is that it develops and manages buildings that contain

student housing only. Often dorms are combined with residential condominium or other usages as part of a sharing policy. Floors 1–18 of Sky Plaza offer studios and en-suite rooms which occupy 2–5 bedroom clusters. Floors 19 and up offer a range of premium en-suite rooms in 3, 4, and 5-bedroom flats, as well as studios and 1-bedroom flats.

What are the main differences between managing a tower containing apartments and one containing dormitories?

The needs and wants of students are fundamentally different compared to those seeking regular apartments, which is why our company is specialized in this section of the housing market only. Unit size and duration of the renting period are the two main characteristics. Units can be rented for either 43 or 51 weeks, depending on the class roster. During the summer months, units can be rented by students who attend summer classes. We rent out to students only. We chose this policy to prevent people from renting a unit for the wrong reasons. By doing so, we want to ensure a better sense of safety and community within our buildings.

What amenities does the project offer which are typical for student housing?

One great benefit of having many units in one building is that it allows for a good number of shared amenities, like bike storage, internet access, gym, laundry room, and a common room with a pool table and vending machine. As student's stay in a dorm is a relatively short one, the individual units are fully furnished, including many features in the kitchen, bedroom and bathroom so the students do not have to invest in this. Not an amenity, but a typical bonus of living in a tall building are, of course, the views. Students find themselves in a position to enjoy views of the city which they might not be able to afford in housing once they move on in their career.

Future developments

From an urban habitat point of view, student towers in or near a city center make sense.

Wherever there are students, there is urban life, and what better urban environment than a

New Dormitowers

Het Strijkijzer



This 132-meter (433-foot) tall Strijkijzer (meaning "flatiron") in The Hague, the Netherlands, was inspired by the Flatiron Building in New York City The

shape was a natural result of the triangular shaped plot near one of the main train stations on which the tower was planned.

Commissioned by the local housing corporation Vestia, the tower contains 300 independent studios for students and 51 luxury apartments in the top of the tower. Next to being the second tallest dorm tower in the world, it is also the world's second tallest building with a pre-cast concrete structure

Nido Spitalfields



Standing 112 meters (367 feet) tall, the Nido Spitalfields tower in the East End of London, currently stands as the tallest full dormitory

world. Opened in September 2010, it offers more than 222 en-suite singles with kitchenettes, 689 twin share apartments, and a variety of share apartments from four to six bedrooms all with an en-suite bathroom. In total it can accommodate over 1,200 students. Its floor-to-ceiling windows offer extraordinary views of several London landmarks, including the famous Gherkin/Swiss Re building in London's center.

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city center to cater the needs and wants of those to whom urban density is a natural extension of their habitat. After all, it's not only buildings that shape the city, but also, and maybe even more so, the people living in it. As students live in compact spaces and transport themselves mainly on foot, by bike, or public transport, they also represent a more sustainable life style which is being made possible by the proximity of urban amenities. At the same time, hundreds of smaller units allow for a higher population density than a tower with the same height, but with only 2–3 apartments per floor.

Do you plan more student towers in other cities?

Yes. Most cities in the UK will zone central business districts for clusters of tall buildings. A lot of the established universities in the major provincial cities are located very centrally. As such, some of the very best sites for future student development are located in these areas where tall buildings are permitted. A tall building also adds to the student experience by creating accommodation that is perfectly suited to the feeling of desired city center living.

Based on your experiences, would you say that the tall student tower is an incident in the urban landscape, or a more lasting trend?

I think it is here to stay. Especially as good development land in city centers becomes scarcer and when cities look to reinvigorate themselves by permitting taller buildings. There is no doubt that tall buildings are more expensive per unit than low-rise alternatives, but then the overall experience created is superior.

What's the best advice you would give companies and cities who want to develop tall student housing?

Tall buildings are a different proposition to just undertaking functional development of lower-rise buildings. There is something more significant in creating a building that adds a little bit more personality to the city's urban landscape, which will be viewed for generations to come. The responsibility and excitement that comes with this is special. Overall, the planning and coordination with the wider team needs to be that much more thought through and aligned, and more care must be taken to ensure all stakeholders are fully bought into the vision, and the purpose of the building.

Tallest Single-use Student Dormitowers

Building Name	Campus	City	Year	Floors	Height (m)	Height (ft)
Nido Spitalfields	-	London, UK	2010	34	112	367
Sky Plaza	-	Leeds, UK	2009	36	103	338
Fenwick Tower	Dalhousie University	Halifax, Canada	1971	32	97	320
Dobie Center	University of Texas	Austin, USA	1972	29	93	307
Livingston Tower	State University of New York	Albany, USA	1965	22	87	286

Tallest Mixed-use Residential/Student Dormitowers

Building Name	Campus	City	Year	Floors	Height (m)	Height (ft)
The Capri	Marymount University	New York, USA	2001	48	144	473
Roosevelt University Tower	Roosevelt University	Chicago, USA	2012	32	143	469
Het Strijkijzer	-	The Hague, The Netherlands	2007	42	132	433
Skrapan	-	Stockholm, Sweden	1959	27	86	282
Lincoln Tower	Ohio State University	Columbus, USA	1967	26	79	260

Roosevelt Tower



A 32-story
academic and
residential tower
planned for
Chicago's
Roosevelt
University is on
the rise in
Chicago's South
Loop area. The

(469-foot) tall zigzag shaped tower, designed by VOA Associates of Chicago, will house around 300 dorms stacked on top of science laboratories, new lecture halls and a new home for Roosevelt's College of Business Administration. The first 10 floors will be dedicated to student space, including cafeterias and meeting rooms, a fitness center and offices.

Broadcasting Place



One of three recently completed student towers in Leeds, UK, is Broadcasting Place, the winner of the CTBUH 2010 award for "Best

Europe." The building offers 241 student rooms giving choice of an en-suite room in one of the 5-bedroom student flats which include a kitchen and lounge, or one of the 22 student studio apartments. Named after an old BBC Broadcasting studios on the site, the tower is located right in the city center. The development also includes replacement accommodation for the local Blenheim Baptist Church, landscaping and other facilities such as an internet cafe and exhibition space.

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