



# CTBUH Research Paper

[ctbuh.org/papers](http://ctbuh.org/papers)

---

Title: **Strategies for Tall Urban Buildings**

Author: William Pedersen, Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates

Subject: Urban Design

Keywords: Design Process  
Urban Design

Publication Date: 2004

Original Publication: CTBUH 2004 Seoul Conference

Paper Type:

1. Book chapter/Part chapter
2. Journal paper
3. **Conference proceeding**
4. Unpublished conference paper
5. Magazine article
6. Unpublished

© Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat / William Pedersen

# Strategies for Tall Urban Buildings

William Pedersen

AIA, Kohn Pedersen Fox, U.S.A (Architectural Design)

---

Tall buildings are, by their nature, insular and autonomous. The demands of their own biology make them resistant to forming linkages and relationships with other structures. Yet the dynamic of a successful urban environment depends on the interaction individual buildings have with each other and with the place they inhabit. When urban buildings do not interact, the city becomes much like a social gathering of humans with no one wishing to make conversation. My central preoccupation with the design of tall buildings, and the subject of my talk today, is their transformation into a more social state of existence.

For me, ascribing human characteristics to tall buildings assumes their “behavior” within a society of structures and presupposes a conditioned set of manners. Hence, tall buildings have responsibilities to their own nature as well as to the nature of other structures. They become actors on the cities’ grand stage. Each must play a specific role as they act out this drama. Some must perform modestly while others perform grandly.

The anthropomorphic characteristics of the tall building generate an attraction for me that evokes a love-hate fascination. Often, they are like Gulliver in the land of Lilliputians. They threaten by virtue of their size. Furthermore, they are most often recognized as masculine representations. Given the erectness of their posture perhaps that association is unavoidable. But as with most overtly masculine gestures, there is possibly a female counterpart within. While the emergence of this female aspect might threaten a tall building’s formal identity I have continued to explore the ambiguity of the male-female dialogue as a way of energizing its character.

Do tall buildings require new theories of urbanism? Sometimes, but usually we prefer to draw our influences for a new structure from the existing dynamic of an urban condition. For us, “what is” brings about what will be. That has always been our method. The linkage in time from past to future can only be brought about when each successive urban intervention builds upon the pressures emanating from a previous condition. True, at times a

tabula rasa, a new beginning, is necessary. However, that is the exception, not the rule.

What does building upon the existing imply? Is it simply a matter of looking for examples of a prevailing style within a context and mimetically aping the assumed character of a place? Or is it a method that seeks a larger meaning within a context? One that will enable the new intervention to explain and redefine the context, bringing about an evolved dynamic and an increased energy. The later has always been our intention.

Architects of tall building alter the scale, the balance and the meaning of a place with their structures. What is incumbent upon us is to bring about this transformation with positive effect, humanizing the context by skillful juxtapositions, layering our structures with hierarchical modulations of scale to link the small, medium and large into an energetic equilibrium.

We have built and are building in North American cities, European cities and Asian cities. As architects of global architecture, we must ask ourselves new questions about tall buildings. Is the tall building such a uniquely American invention that it can only be viewed as yet another import to be displayed in the new situation like a Hermes scarf, a Mercedes Benz or a Picasso? Can it make meaningful connections to the specific character of a place such as Seoul, Frankfurt or Shanghai? If the introduction of regional identity is to be added to our task, can it transcend the obvious to be more than a caricature of the indigenous? Regional motifs, poorly understood and then inflated to a gargantuan scale can alter the original meaning of a thing to an absurd degree. Meaning at a smaller scale, does not often transpose successfully to a larger scale.

Our aspiration when designing within a foreign context is to evolve a type of architectural alchemy by fusing our culture with that of another. Hopefully this fusion offers the possibility to bring about something new and meaningful, where solutions emerge that could not be achieved without the interaction of cultures.

The juxtaposition of opposites and an interest in hybrid forms has been at the heart of my work from the beginning. It is a fundamental sensibility which I bring to the design of tall buildings. Consequently, my buildings rarely are dominated by a single gesture. Rather they usually are formed by an interaction of parts. The relationship of these parts never seeks fragmentation. The parts always remain committed to the whole.

With this as an introduction I would like to illustrate these intentions with some visual analogies. Then I will discuss three strategies for the design of tall buildings which have emerged from my work over time.