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The Promise of Public Realm: Urban Spaces in the Skyscraper City



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Abstract

This paper will reveal the importance of integrating the Ground Plane, Mid-Level and Rooftop Urban Public Spaces in the City. We will explore the NYLON New York/London axis of Urban Design, with London now emerging as a 21st C skyscraper city with 200 new towers. We will present the recent history of urban spaces together with a critical analysis of examples of successful Skyscraper City public realm and design of unsuccessful public spaces. Case studies of The Promise Fulfilled vs The Promise Lost in NY and London will be featured. Our Objectives are to communicate the essential requirement for well-designed public spaces in the Skyscraper City to create vibrant and healthy communities; in summary, the key issues are: Urban public space design as a commercial driver in the Skyscraper City; Promised Public spaces offered, to attain planning/design review approval, which are not delivered. Understanding the process to design public spaces

Keywords: Mixed Use; NYLON; Public Space; Roof Level; Urban Design; Vertical Urbanism

Reflecting upon the future of the skyscraper city has highlighted the importance of integrating the Ground Plane, Mid-Level and Rooftop Urban Public Spaces in the City. The following is an overview of examples from the recent history of urban spaces together with a critical analysis of examples of successful skyscraper city public realms and design of unsuccessful public spaces.

The best way to exemplify the recent successes and failures of delivering public spaces is a comparative analysis of two urban metropolises, New York and London. The comparative relationship between these two distinctly diverse cities has initiated the term NY/LON. With New York already an established heavy weight for vertical urbanism, London has been unveiled as an emerging 21st century skyscraper city with plans for 200 new towers.

In particular, this paper gives an overview of the recent history of the relationship between skyscrapers and public access. It also suggests possible reasons as to why this has occurred in addition to some suggestions for the future.

More so than ever before, the height of buildings is a key driver for developers, whether it is for yield or visual prominence on the capital's skyline. Yet, one must question how justifiable that is when most New Yorkers and Londoners are benefiting from being able to enjoy the views.



Figure 1. The Shard Viewing Gallery (Source: Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images)

Public Realm Design in New York and London

The visionary architects of the 1960s, such as Erno Goldfinger in London, designed utopias for modern urban communities, showing how density did not necessarily equate to a lower quality of life. Criticized for many years as bleak social housing environments, brutalism icons such as The Barbican, Trellick Tower and Balfron Tower are now celebrated for their pioneering approach to 'looking up'. Meanwhile, in New York, architects such as SOM and Mies van der Rohe successfully connected the interior with exterior through the design of grand, impressive entries separated only by glass to large public plazas.

Continuing the evolution of London as a skyscraper city was the development of Canary Wharf and the modernization of the City of London in the 1980s and 1990s. The real change, however, has been seen within the last decade and a half with a race to build iconic buildings of lasting quality and legacy. Initiated by Lord Foster's The Gherkin in the early 2000's, there has been an increase in eccentric design, such as the "Walkie Talkie" at 20 Fenchurch Street by Raphael Viñoly, particularly with Sir Peter Rees at the helm of the City Corporation of London's planning office. Other new skyscrapers in the City warrant nicknames such as the "Can of Spam" and the "Cheese Grater."

There is a movement towards the urban "public realm being elevated above the ground floor, in turn having access to fresher and cleaner air." This initiates some consideration by architects and urban designers as to how the top floors of these tall developments can be turned into the ideal sky courts and gardens, flexible enough to allow for public use. (Ridley, 2015)

London: The Promise Fulfilled

Within the UK, and particularly within London, the process of gaining planning consent is usually where the aspirations of the developer can come to a compromise with the interests of the public and those organizations that represent them. It is more often than not a lengthy process, which often leads to the developer and architect altering the scope and design to meet the requirements demanded. Once these requirements are met and consent is gained, there is always the intention to alter the design and scope again back towards the original design to gain more yield.

Planning departments from other London boroughs typically require significant plans for regeneration of the surrounding areas from developers to accompany any ambitious designs on a grand scale. A notable success for its benefits to the surrounding areas, less so in its yield, is Europe's tallest building, The

Shard in London Bridge. Even above the ground plane, and within the upper echelons of the building itself, the public is welcome to experience the views and lofty amenities. The top floor Viewing Gallery (see Figure 1) is accessible through paid ticketing, yet there are public areas integrated on the mid-level restaurant and bar floors that the public are welcome to enjoy views from – without the obligation to purchase refreshments. Other successful examples of rooftop dining experiences include Coq D'Argent at No. 1 Poultry (see Figure 2) and at 240 Regent Street, as well as the recently opened 24 Hour Duck and Waffle restaurant on the 40th Floor of the Heron Tower.

Also coinciding with this major transportation infrastructure development is the Crossrail Place, Canary Wharf. Planned to be the largest of the Crossrail line station, this £500 million transport, retail and leisure hub designed by Foster + Partners is located by the towers of the former Docklands within the Canary Wharf financial district. With the transport component still under construction until 2019, this 256m-long building has recently opened to the public in May of this year, with a 4,160-square-meter public garden under its partly glazed timber-beamed roof (whose span is longer than The Shard is tall). It would seem that this glass roof park has fulfilled its promise as an investment in the local area rather than the much mocked and not-so-public Sky Garden in the "Walkie Talkie" at 20



Figure 2. Coq D'Argent at No. 1. Poultry (Source: CN Traveller)



Figure 3. Central Saint Giles' Piazza (Source: Vicinittee Ltd)

Fenchurch Street. The space not only caters to the immediate working population of the area (and general public passing through) but is also intended to be used by the 3,200 people who will live in the residential towers to be erected by the end of 2019. This is a welcome change to the area, now that the top floor at One Canada Square, commonly known as the Canary Wharf Tower, is now closed to the public and used as office space. Specifically in London, the myriad of reasons behind these restrictions includes the fear of public safety. The BT Tower, which was most certainly the tallest structure in the West End of London, closed its observation deck to the public in 1980, potentially in response to the multitude of IRA terrorist incidents, and has since never fully reopened.

Early on in Tony Blair's government, a taskforce led by architect Lord Richard Rogers produced

a report on the "Urban Renaissance". This report tried communicating how land must be used more effectively, in turn making cities more vibrant through higher densities, achieved with the help of good design and quality public spaces.

While in power, former Mayor of London Ken Livingston crafted a manifesto called "The London Plan," which was partly put in place to change this form of segregation. Livingston wanted to make it key criteria for major developments that approved tall buildings to make allowance for public access on upper levels.

As conveyed, the key driver of access is to deliver a promised benefit to the local community. Half of the examples given only grant access to those lucky few occupiers, either living or working in the building. It is a promise usually set out

during planning stages, strategically to gain consent for the development. Once consent is gained, developers seek to blur the lines between public and private access resulting in a development quite different than what was submitted for planning upon completion.

Coinciding with the regeneration of the Tottenham Court Road area for the Crossrail transportation scheme is the Central St. Giles complex, again designed by Renzo Piano Workshop, and containing offices, apartments, restaurants and retail around a central piazza. Central St Giles fits well with its urban context, responding to the shapes and colors that surround it. The development offers a permeable ground plane, which responds well to all seasons and the vagaries of British weather with both indoor and outdoor public plazas (see Figure 3). However, the discreet urban roof gardens nestled at the top are only for the lucky occupiers of this development.

Within the residential sector, developer Harry Hendelsman's Manhattan Loft Group has introduced the idea of mid-level open-air terraces for either private or communal residential use at Manhattan Loft Garden.

London: The Promise Missed

The "Walkie Talkie," properly known as 20 Fenchurch Street, not only caused controversy for its questionable façade engineering, but has also limited their "Sky Garden" to those who can pay the entrance fee. Even then, the enjoyment of the views is limited due to the restrictions caused by the building design. As critics point out, "The Sky Garden was meant to be a free public space with the most spectacular views of London. But it feels like you're trapped in an airport, you can barely see the city because of a steel cage" (Newman, 2012) (see Figure 4)



Figure 4. 20 Fenchurch Street Sky Garden (Source: Alex Cortado)

The affectionately labeled “Gherkin” at 30 St. Mary Axe, by Foster + Partners is arguably more successful in terms of design and lasting quality to London’s skyline. The glass-roofed top floor lounge, previously approved by planners for its potential as a public viewing platform, is sadly now restricted in terms of access by the general public. Run by restaurant group Searcy’s, the lounge is a private member’s club. This is with the exception of its building tours organized annually for “Open House” (where private buildings are opened up to the public for one day) in September, and limited to 30 people at any one time.

Certainly, the commercial location of The Gherkin excuses its exclusivity more so than if it were, like the Battersea Power Station, in a significantly more residential area. After years of submitting plans to redevelop the much loved and culturally iconic structure, planning was finally approved for not only an overhaul of the building itself into a mixed-use design on a grand scale, but also a master plan for the whole Nine Elms, Battersea area leading up to Vauxhall, including two new train stations, a new site for the US Embassy, and a multitude of office and residential buildings. Nick Cuff, Wandsworth Council’s planning chairman, believes that the regeneration of the whole area is an opportunity to create new public spaces, even if they are privately owned. Cuff says this will include, “a new stretch of the Thames riverside path and a linear park running right the way through the district from east to west. There will also be a network of new public squares, roads, footpaths, cycle lanes, outdoor shopping areas and recreation spaces, which together will create an active, pedestrian friendly environment for Londoners to enjoy.” (Carmona, 2014) There are plans for an observation-viewing platform in one of the original chimneys, but as with other examples covered, it is still unclear as to whether this will come to fruition.

As can be seen, tall building design has not only been limited to commercial offerings, with an abundance of newly built and planned residential towers across London. Notable successes include the Tower Hill Double Tree Hotel and Harry Handelsman’s Manhattan Loft Gardens. (see Figure 5) There have of course been less successful results of this trend such as Strata SE1, although again accompanied by a plan to regenerate the long deprived area of Elephant & Castle in Lambeth.

A host of other major developments are refusing to allow visitors to access them. 1 Blackfriars Road, designed by Simon Haugh Partners, is nicknamed “the Boomerang,” thanks to its distinctive angled shape, and it was initially set to have an impressive observation section within

its crown. The tower was granted planning permission by Southwark Council in July 2007 (despite objections from a number of parties including English Heritage, Lambeth Council, Westminster Council, and the Royal Parks). These initial plans included a public observation platform; however, since a new development company took over the project, they altered the function of the building following consultation with authorities, which will result in the removal of the tower’s viewing platform.

This is yet another example of a promise made and then lost within the development process. It is simply not justified that Londoners should be prohibited from accessing buildings that dominate their communities and the cityscape. There have, however, been steps taken to ensure that the positive effects of such major developments are felt on the ground level, as well as in the sky.

Continuing the approach of “The London Plan,” the most recent Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, produced a manifesto for public space, “London’s Great Outdoors.” The manifesto argues that there is an increase in private management of publicly accessible space. Johnson writes: “Where this type of ‘corporatization’ occurs, especially in the larger commercial developments, Londoners can feel themselves excluded from parts of their own city.” (Carmona, 2014) London has had a long history of benefiting from private management of publically accessible spaces, such as the building of Bloomsbury and other now

historic parts of London by the great estates, and more recently by schemes as diverse as Canary Wharf, Paddington Basin, King’s Cross St. Pancras, Stratford City, and Greenwich Peninsular. These are all examples “in which the state has depended on the proceeds of growth and private sector innovation and resources to subsidize diverse public interest objectives, such as the delivery of affordable housing, infrastructure, and public space.” (Carmona 2014) One must now question whether there is a need for stricter criteria on the social benefits these major developments can grant to the immediate and wider community.

New York: The Promise Fulfilled

Similarly, in terms of access, New York has had comparable successes and failures in contributing to the heart of urban life. Like in London, the 1960s and 1970s were the “heyday” of visionary architecture, with efforts to create pockets of urban utopia within Manhattan. Designed and realized in 1967 by landscape architectural firm, Zion & Breen, Paley Plaza in Midtown Manhattan is a prime example of creating a legacy of urban respite for New Yorkers.

Paley Plaza is in fact one of 500 privately owned public spaces in New York City. Other notable examples include the Trump Tower and Citigroup Center. The city’s relationship with privately owned public space stems from

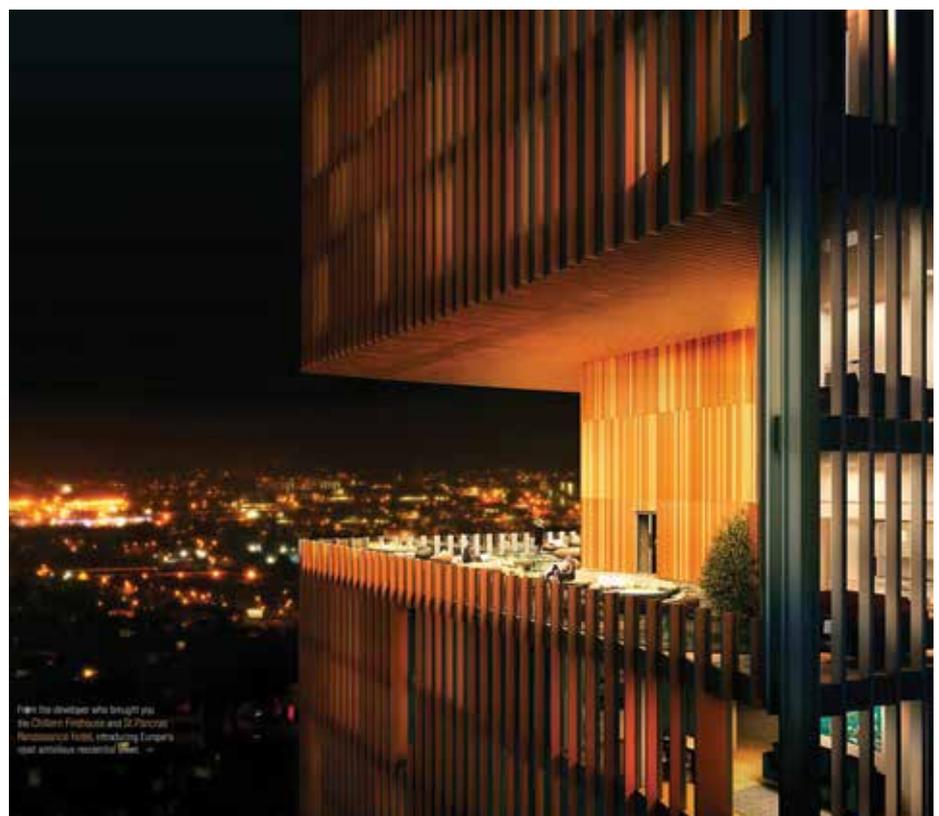


Figure 5. Manhattan Loft Gardens (Source: Manhattan Loft Group)



Figure 6. 2 WTC Diagrams by BIG Bjarke Ingels Group (Source: Bjarke Ingels Group)

the history of zoning in New York City, which came to a pinnacle between the 1960s and 1970s. "Privately owned public space" as a term is defined as private property accessible by the public under zoning or similar regulatory arrangements. It can also be used more broadly to refer to spaces such as shopping malls and hotel lobbies that are privately owned and open to the public, even if there is no legal obligation to be opened to the public. Between the 1960s and 1970s, The City Planning Commission established rules on the creation of public spaces related to the erection of major skyscrapers in the city. The addition of covered pedestrian spaces, such as indoor atriums with seating and amenities within the ground plane of the Lever House (390 Park Ave at 54th Street), designed by SOM in the 1960s, was celebrated as "an efficient pedestrian circulation system and an attractive sheltered public space" (Kayden, 2002). Today, it is still one of the only office buildings in Midtown that allows public access. Encased in the glass lobby, this hedged-in conservatory evokes a similar approach to the greenhouse in London's Barbican (also designed in the 1960s). Its lush green space provides an oasis within one of Manhattan's busiest districts, and also a place to admire a bird's-eye view of the surrounding architecture.

As skyscrapers get ever taller, mid-level terraces are becoming more popular, as demonstrated by the Yotel Group's first urban offering, their hotel located in Times Square. With multiple areas, the 4,000 square foot balcony terrace functions both as a space for mobile working and meetings during the day, and as a social area by night.

The creation of sky gardens is also a way to enhance the urban narrative from building to building. "It can also provide better-integrated routes through an increase in footfall, capitalizing on the movement economy" (Worpole and Greenhalgh, 1996).

The recently proposed Two World Trade Center is a perfect example of this approach. Architects Bjarke Ingels Group saw the site as an opportunity to link the Wall Street financial district with the more media focused business area of Tribeca through the design's cantilevers and terraces. From an eastern perspective, these design features are thought to resemble the modern architecture known to the latter neighborhood. (see Figure 6) In an interview, Bjarke Ingels described the concept of the redesign as such: "Two World Trade is almost like a vertical village of bespoke buildings within the building that also can be seen as a single tower. It actually

has an inclination towards One World Trade Center, so the two towers – even though they're not twinning – by having a mutual relationship, the space between them is parallel, although at an incline" (Fedak, 2015).

New York: The Promise Missed

New York also has a history with opening then restricting access to the top floors of its iconic buildings. A prime example is the Chrysler Building, which had an observation deck until 1945. Again, this could be due to security reasons, following the end of the Second World War. 9/11 caused an increase in security in New York overall. Yet, the recently realized One World Trade Center has a ticketed three-level observation deck which opened on May 29th 2015, located on floors 100-102, below the official top floor, level 104 (see Figure 7). Similar to the Empire State Building, visitors will be separated from the tenants, with a separate entrance next to the ground level museum.

Conclusion:

Without debate, there is an essential requirement for well-designed public

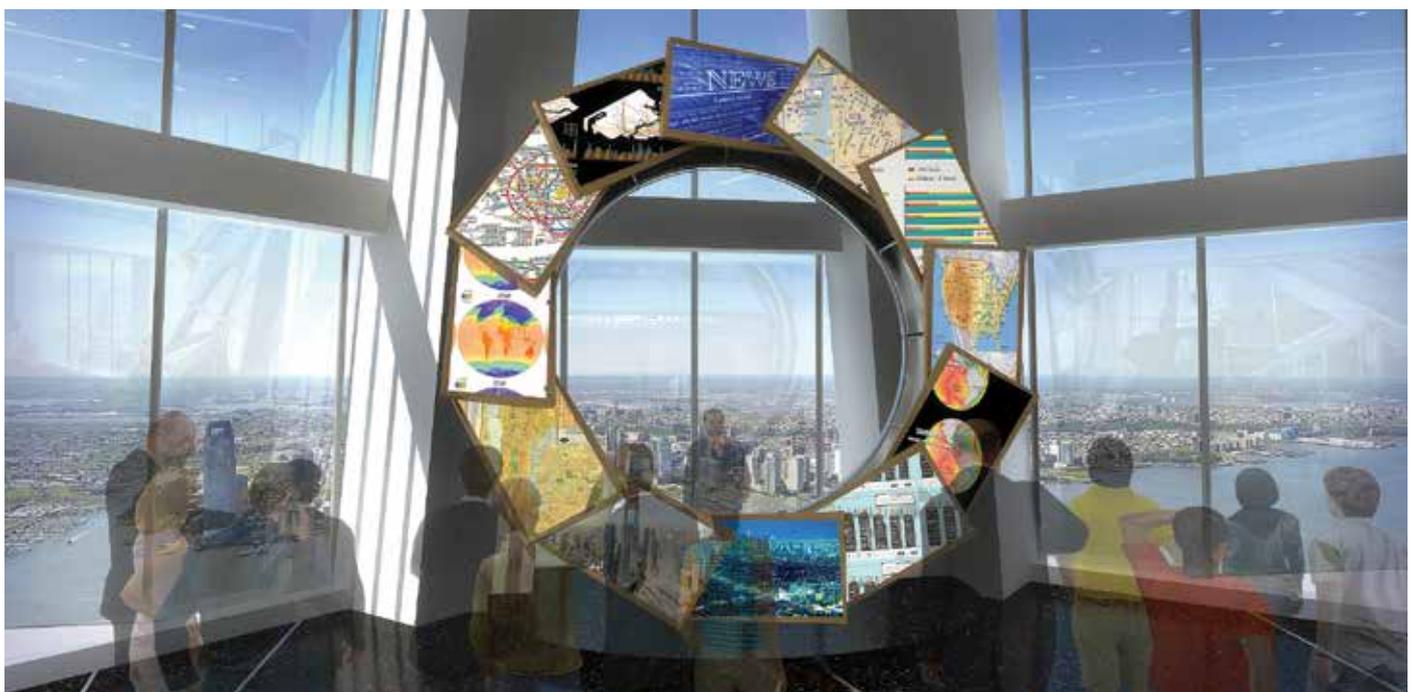


Figure 7. 2 One World Trade Centre Observation Deck (Source: Official One World Trade Centre)

spaces in the skyscraper city to create vibrant and healthy communities. Understanding the process in designing public spaces that connect ground to upper levels is a critical step to creating sustainable vertically-oriented urban communities. Inclusivity is key to the successful integration of these major developments that have such an impact on the day-to-day lives of city dwellers. This is particularly true as a growing number of public spaces are privately owned. Thus, it is essential to challenge the private sector to be as generous as possible with the provision of public space, arguing its commercial viability. A mixed urban environment is key to avoiding the disconnection of buildings and lack of spatial recognition. (Ridley, 2015)

The numerous examples given illustrate that there is still a majority of skyscraper developments that have pulled back access to views that could be enjoyed by the wider community. Yet, other developers have seen the observation deck as an opportunity to create an ongoing legacy and interest in the building. As such, public spaces – which inform design proposals – must also be integral to the final commercial offer, translating to successful reality in the skyscraper city. This is an ongoing theme in the work of Stephan Reinke Architects, particularly within their London scheme, Houndsditch Properties. With the site located in the dense financial district of the City, there is an opportunity to create both destination public realms such as the trio of tiered sky gardens, and pedestrian linkages

between streets and through the site's ground plane. (see Figures 8, 9, 10)

As mentioned, we have seen the rise of more privately owned public spaces, although we must always consider that "Successful public space is not defined by legal ownership so much as use" (Worpole and Greenhalgh, 1996).

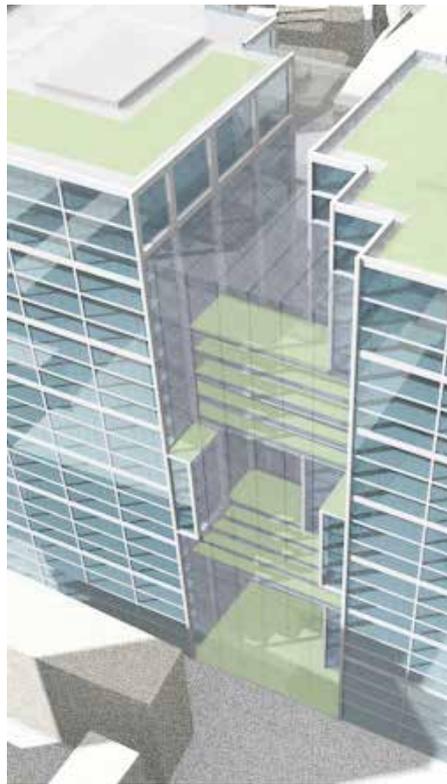


Figure 8. Houndsditch Properties Public Areas and Sky Gardens Render (Source: Stephan Reinke Architects Limited)

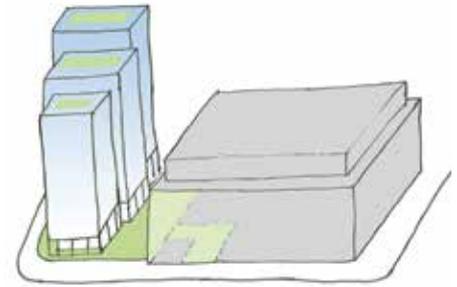


Figure 9. Houndsditch Properties Public Areas and Sky Gardens Sketch (Source: Stephan Reinke Architects Limited)

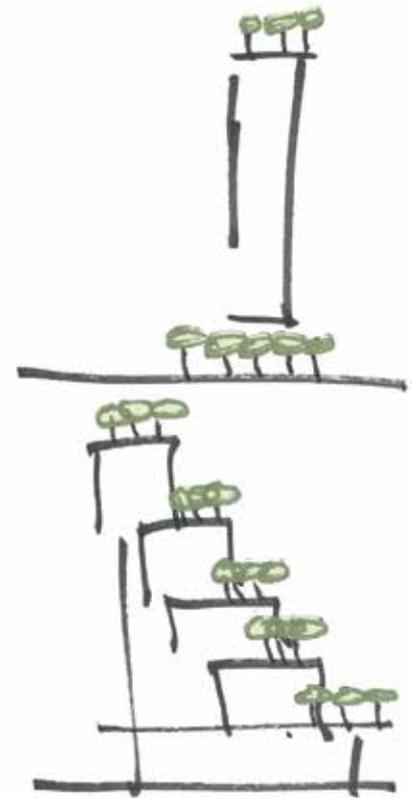


Figure 10. Sky Gardens concept study (Source: Stephan Reinke Architects Limited)

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