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# Fitting Form to Future Office Functions: Perspectives of a CTBUH Awards Jury Chair



Earle Arney

### Interviewee

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**Earle Arney** is the Founding Director/CEO of Arney Fender Katsalidis and a champion of the need to re-think how we create our cities. He holds a Master of Architecture from Harvard University and is an architect, urbanist, and tall building specialist. His practice works internationally from its London and Toronto studios, and the firm has just completed the 40-story tower at 100 Bishopsgate in the City of London, a 60-story tower in Calgary, Brookfield Place, and is currently designing another tall tower in London, alongside major master plans, and retrofit/adaptive reuse projects.

*Beginning in 2021, CTBUH introduced a new set of “functional” subcategories to the Best Tall Building Award, including Office, Mixed-Use, and Residential/Hotel, each reviewed by an independent jury. CTBUH Editor-in-Chief Daniel Safarik interviewed Earle Arney, Chair of the Best Tall Office Building Jury and CEO of Arney Fender Katsalidis, about his experiences and perspectives gained from this role.*

**This is the first year that CTBUH has recognized “functional” sub-categories as part of the Best Tall Building category. What do you think is accomplished by breaking the juries down along these lines and creating these sub-categories?**

I think the functional sub-categories are really welcome, as are the regional and the height sub-categories. It’s admirable that the Council has recognized the functional sub-categories, if only from a civic contribution standpoint, because buildings of different uses have different ways of engaging with their surroundings and their context. They often present a very different placemaking attitude. So, it makes sense that their functions and their uses are separated. Similarly, breaking down into subcategories, the height is really important, because generally speaking, the taller a building goes, the greater the demands placed on it in terms of its civic contribution, its embedment within the context, and its potential to uplift and delight people. Tall buildings arguably have to work harder in that regard.

The regional categories are helpful, too, because, “tall” in one context is often “not tall” in another. In my home city of London, to some people anything over 10 stories is a tall building. Yet, we’re in the middle of designing a 65-story building here, which is much more common when we’re working in Asia or Australia. That macro-scale and planning context is helped by isolating the use as well as the height of buildings.

**What did it mean to you to be the Best Tall Office Building Jury chair?**

It’s an honor being the jury chair for Best Tall Office Building, particularly given the quality of the submissions and the caliber and camaraderie of my fellow jurors. We had some brilliant discussions. It’s also a really interesting time to assess office buildings. There are significant challenges faced in all regions, particularly the office sector. Clearly, there’s no better and more needed time to innovate, as offices need to adapt, pivot and change to the challenge of our thinking that has been really brought home by the last year of the pandemic.

**What kinds of things were the jurors looking for that would result in a project getting high marks?**

Well, it was really wide-ranging. The jurors were all looking for ingredients that go to make a great office building. And that spanned from matters of wellness, sustainability, functionality, durability, and flexibility, which is particularly important. Now, given the experience of last year, the issue of civic contribution and cultural sensitivity, that is, what makes a building sit really well and contribute to the city in which it’s in, was really important, as was innovation:

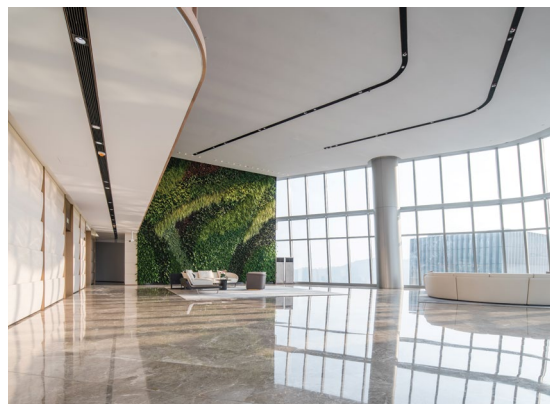


Figure 1. Best Tall Office Building: 100 Bishopsgate, London (left); Shimao Qianhai Center, Shenzhen (right).  
© Allies and Morrison (left); Gensler / Blackstation (right)

How to do things really efficiently? There is this really increased amplitude placed on doing things with a great sensitivity towards both efficiency and responsibility.

The other thing that came into play with the jurors was this consideration of buildings having “good bones.” The most sustainable building is the building that you don’t build, right? It’s the one that you might redevelop or renovate. And this is particularly the case with tall buildings, given their longer lifespan. So, that meant that there was also a search for buildings with obvious adaptability and changeability, whether that was for different uses or different ways of accommodating the same uses.

I’ve learned a great deal by being on this jury, and one of the things that I was reminded of was the searing importance of clear communication of, what are the big moves and drivers of projects? One of the particularities of this brief was, “how do you divine the differences between functionality, purpose, and other matters?” For me, there’s almost like a Maslow’s pyramid, where you have to have all of those base criteria sorted in terms of functionality, and that’s worth celebrating. But the building also had to have a spirit and enjoyment and a delight that uplifts people. It needed to be enchanting in the way it engages with a city context. It’s not about buildings being shouty or iconic, but about the larger contribution beyond just the functional performance—you need both of those. It’s this rich amalgam of that, which I think goes to make an extraordinarily good tall building, and we had many to choose from.

**The buildings in the awards program were designed before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, and the whole proposition of the high-rise office was thrown into question. How did the jury account for this in assessing the viability of the designs?** The jury were really aware of the sensitivities. The built environment as a whole has been hard-hit by this tremendous step change in how tall buildings are considered, particularly in terms of placing wellness, the circular economy, and care of the earth, really front

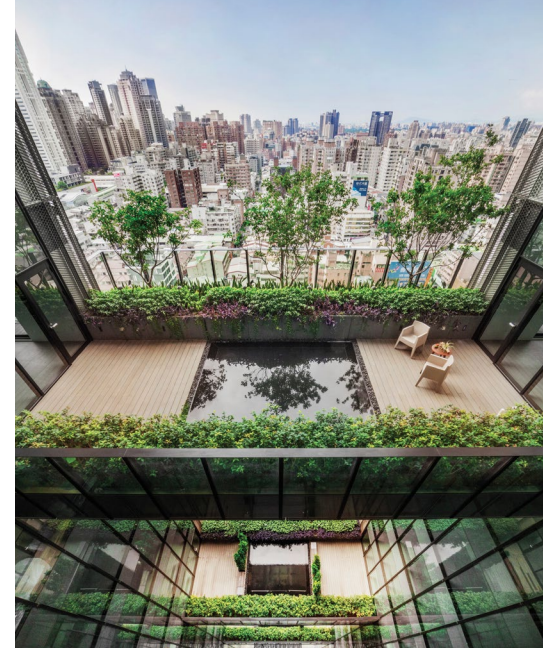
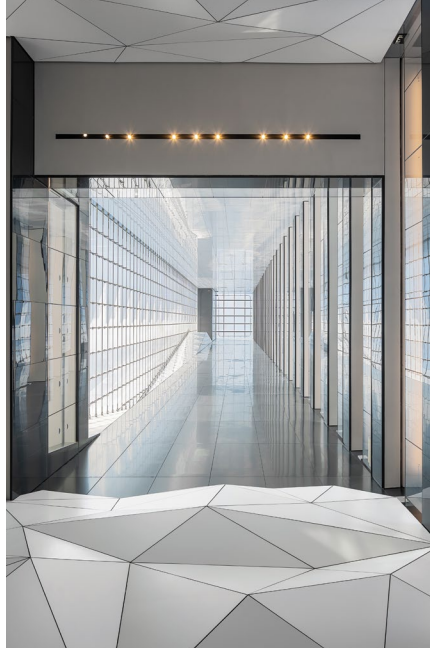


Figure 2. Best Tall Residential or Hotel Building: Arlozorov 17, Tel Aviv (left); Sky Green, Taichung (right).  
© Moshe Zur Architects (left); Kuomin Lee (right)

“There’s almost like a Maslow’s pyramid, where you have to have the base functional criteria sorted, and that’s worth celebrating. But the building also has to have a spirit, enjoyment and a delight that uplifts people.”

and center of the business case of buildings. Having said that, it takes a really long time to procure a tall building. Certainly, all of the projects were designed prior to the pandemic and conceived within that environment. Even so, some of the entries were better suited to accommodate some of those changes that we’re anticipating.

**The prevailing trends in office design, such as the open plan, connecting staircases, and engineering accidental collisions between colleagues, to some began to look more like liabilities than assets during the pandemic. What was your take across the entries you saw, and on the potential for such designs to be positively repurposed post-pandemic?**

Ultimately, that is a question that probably demands an answer from a building owner or landlord perspective, as well as an end-user perspective. We work both sides of the fence. And it’s interesting seeing that tension, but I think, in general, landlords and building developers and asset managers recognize that they need to work much harder to

accommodate the best tenants. I think that we’re going to see a flight to quality from end users and tenants, who will be demanding great indoor environmental qualities of building, and we’ll see a great shift to those assets and buildings that do those things well.

I have a personal view, informed by the research that we’ve conducted and what our clients are telling us, that the density of occupation of buildings might well remain about where it is. We’ve done quite a lot of survey work in this regard. There’s no doubt that hybrid working will have an indelible quality. If you consider that in isolation, that might mean you have fewer people coming to the office at any one time. However, I think that the purpose of the office will change, also. The pandemic has demonstrated that most knowledge workers can do most things remotely. But it has also illustrated that there is this great need for cultural connectivity and collaboration, and a sense of community that the workplace fosters. It is an absolute truism that physical proximity breeds innovation and creativity.





Figure 3. Best Tall Mixed-Use Building: 35 Hudson Yards, New York City. © Dave Burk / Skidmore, Owings & Merrill

With those things in mind, the purpose of the office in my view will change. It might well become one of those things in which organizations seek to build community, connectivity and culture within their own organizations, in ways that cannot be done through a flat screen. That results in space being used differently, and perhaps being used less densely, with what some people might call “breakout areas,” but beyond that, areas that foster creativity and innovation, those serendipitous conversations. Those demand more space than if you’re just racking benching and desks together. So, when things even out, I think the demand for office space from occupiers will largely remain where it is, relative to the size of their organizations.

**It does seem, though, that there will be more skepticism about large, open office spaces that are branded as something beyond that.**

End users and building developers are really informed, and they’re really smart. They know that people matter. And I think that there’s been this massive shift, in terms of wellness, sustainability, user experience, from being marketing-driven to being front and center. Right now, there’s a massive intersection between investor risk and climate risk. And you see that in the whole cycle of annual general meetings of major global corporates, that is translating very much into how those buildings are procured. It’s a liability to be an

asset owner of something that is not appropriate for its time, particularly in terms of the circular economy, sustainability and wellness, on a corporate level.

On a tenant level, on account of hybrid working, it makes natural sense that there is going to be this mobility of the workforce that is going to be absolutely unlocked, unlike anytime before, because now you can work for an organization where, if they’re in a neighboring city, perhaps it doesn’t matter so much, because you may not be going there five days a week. Recognizing that mobility of talent will dictate what it takes to secure and retain the best and the brightest. Having a high-quality office will be one of their instruments of doing that, so that, on those days on which their employees are coming to engage in that pool of creativity and community, it’s a really rich and rewarding experience.

This means we are gravitating beyond the cursory view that you might have three different work settings: a breakout area, some other desks, and a meeting room. For projects we’ve done for the likes of Deloitte in Canada, they have 18 different potential work settings, from a meeting room to a treadmill desk, to a room with a view, to seat with a view, whatever it might be. There’s an extraordinarily rich menu of places from which to work. And I think all of those will be tuned with this overarching focus on community and collaboration that the office now absolutely needs to fulfill.

**Do you think that, in a more cautious development environment, we might see more renovations, especially if some occupiers are reducing space, or changing the way they procure space?**

Yes. Some buildings that we thought may have been past their prime in terms of the structure or the format might well come to the fore. On a very superficial level, people might think, “well, no one’s going rent those spaces, because they’re very big, and the chance of infection is great.” However, what now might be the case is that the office building is the bastion of health and wellness. To actually enter into an office

building through all the necessary, but seamless practices like temperature checks, track and trace might mean that being in an office building is an incredibly safe environment. That might then unlock vertical connectivity, much more. So, rather than having a series of pancakes of office floors, we will probably see much more spatial and visual connectivity between levels. Those big floors, around 45,000 square feet (4,200 square meters), are actually much better-suited to those kinds of interventions than those plates of a much smaller size. So, leaving aside the obvious tragedy of the past year, I think it is such a profound time to be an architect, with all these changes that we’re currently experiencing.

**What kinds of things do you foresee taking away from this jury experience into your own practice?**

Mostly, it is that we are aligning office buildings for a kind of renewed purpose. It’s about great indoor environmental quality, such as abundant fresh air, great quality of life in views, connectivity with nature and biophilia, and buildings that are emblematic of an authentic brand. This is very important. My sense of the jury’s deliberations was that the developments that demonstrated a responsibility to materials and resources and achieved their outcomes, and did so responsibly, were more favored, together with those buildings that had “good bones” which could enable that “loose fit, long life” goal. The winners tended to be buildings where adaptability and flexibility were well considered.

Our profession relies on knowledge-sharing. So, it’s always a gift to learn from our peers, and to see how people not just create or design buildings, but also how they present them. As I mentioned, I’ve been reminded of the importance of being crystal-clear in award submissions as to the key parts of projects, and the techniques that communicate that well and are rapidly understood. I think I’ve also been really inspired by the great architects who submitted, regarding addressing the complex matters of context and climate change and civic purpose, and how all those things are balanced. ■