

Was CTBUH Right to Change Evaluation Categories for “Best Tall Building”?

One of the most significant changes to the CTBUH Awards program this year is that of the “Best Tall Building” evaluation from regional to height categories. We asked two architects with a difference of opinion to answer the question, “Was CTBUH Right to Change Evaluation Categories for ‘Best Tall Building’?”

YES

James von Klemperer,

*President and Design Principal,
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Recent changes to the CTBUH Awards program make a lot of sense to me. In previous years, when only geography was used to categorize projects, dramatic mismatches in scale emerged. Juries were asked to compare the merits of highly divergent typologies in a consistent and meaningful way. A 12-story building was meant to be evaluated on the same grounds as a 112-story building. In the end, submissions at both ends of the scale suffered, and this caused a good measure of confusion and disappointment amongst entrants.

Though some aspects of building design are scalable, many are not. While we might enjoy the intellectual game of comparing the structural forces or urban connections inherent in small, medium, and large buildings, they are fundamentally different.

This new format should better enable the Council to reward excellence at all heights, and to underscore the special achievements of particular structural, vertical transport, and other technical challenges. The goal should be to encourage excellence in all categories. Height-ranged categories should be considered for recognition, with an educated understanding of the specific challenges that relate to these scales. By looking at distinct height ranges, juries should be able to unburden themselves from having to make intellectually tortured comparisons between dissimilar

objects. We won't be trying to combine a discussion about tuned mass dampers with an appreciation of the adaptive reuse of grain silos.

Such categorization by size will allow for a deeper discussion of the already complicated attributes to be evaluated, including structural efficiency, technological innovation, functional efficacy, urban betterment, environmental sustainability, and aesthetic merit. We can all look forward to an interesting evolution of this awards program. It will never make everyone happy. Some will win, while others of comparable merit will lose – but the process should become more meaningful, thought-provoking, and encouraging of excellence.

NO

Michael Hensley

Senior Associate, Pickard Chilton

Regional codes, economies, and cultural norms play an essential role in a building's development and pose challenges when comparing buildings from different locations, which is not ideal. But comparing buildings by height results in greater discrepancies.

Globally, varying levels of importance are placed on contrasting factors. In some locations, access to daylight is a code-driven requirement that greatly impacts the opportunities and restrictions of a given tower. This mandated requirement inherently alters its shape and form, influencing design parameters. Additionally, it influences height, which can result in misleading comparisons.

The site also plays a major role in appropriate material selection and a project's construction methodology. Structural material selection can greatly influence engineering and design. While almost any design can be achieved with a given material, appropriateness and economy matter. It is also important to respect of local construction traditions. The goal of any great design should be to seamlessly incorporate the best elements of local craftsmanship. While globalization has reduced some locational differences, there still exist many complex and nuanced qualities to each locale which, when harmonized, can yield truly great architecture.

Local customs and economy also greatly impact design. Cultural traditions can define a building's beauty according to composition, material choice, and color palettes. Local economies also dictate plausibility. While a rich mixture of program types may be desired and viable in certain cities, such a mix may not be achievable in others due to market demands. These biases and market-driven requirements manifest themselves in the resulting design, and contribute to the challenge of comparing buildings from various locations.

Buildings are influenced by and respond to place. Comparing projects from across continents inherently results in unequal assessments. While comparing buildings of similar heights may seem logical, their heights have been defined by their location and the idiosyncrasies of local codes, cultural norms, and economies. We should be cognizant of these factors and how they influence design and construction.