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Debating Tall: A Supertall Future in the US?

In 1990, only 11 buildings in the world could be counted as a “supertall” (defined as a building over 300 meters tall), and all but one could be found in the United States. By the end of 2011, the number of supertall buildings in the world had risen to 42, but during those two decades, only four new supertall buildings were completed in the United States. So the question posed in this edition of Debating Tall is: *Does the supertall building have a future in the United States?*

YES

Adrian Smith

Partner at Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture, Chicago

If cities don't continue to build and improve their conditions, they will die. Supertall towers can be a catalyst for growth and prosperity in our cities. I have also seen the pride in people's eyes when they're involved in creating, owning, building and operating such grand edifices. When we lose the spirit to reach for glory, we lose our soul.

When considering the very tall or supertall building in the United States, we have to take into account three factors. One is the cost-effectiveness of the tower, in particular the return on investment. If the construction of a supertall tower makes economic sense and planning permission is given to build it, there will be more supertall structures built in the US. A city such as New York has a very high premium for luxury condominiums in its high-density core that could justify the building of a supertall tower if the government permits it.

If the return on investment is not there for a stand-alone tower, a very tall tower could make sense as the centerpiece of a larger development. The central tower can increase the value of the adjacent land and the buildings around it, making the overall project financially feasible. This was the concept with the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, where the tower itself made little or no profit but increased the value and desirability of the land around it, which made the entire urban subdivision very profitable. Jin Mao Tower in Shanghai was a similar example. If the developer of the Chicago Spire had owned the adjacent parcels of land, the Spire might have been built on this premise.

The third reason to build a supertall is to create a local, regional or national landmark, bringing significant attention to its owner and location. The Petronas Towers in Malaysia is a great example of this approach. Petronas made little economic sense and sat two-thirds empty for several years after completion, but the worldwide attention it brought to Kuala Lumpur and to Petronas as an oil and gas company was very significant. It established Kuala Lumpur as a tourist destination and enhanced its reputation as a location for

business. It also showcased the attractive lifestyle of this part of the world and bolstered its economy.

There's no reason that any one of these three development strategies couldn't work in the US. We must always strive for greatness and find the means to attain it. If not, we will become irrelevant.



One World Trade Center, New York will be the newest US supertall when completed in 2013 © CTBUH

NO

Paul Beitler

President of Beitler Real Estate Services LLC, Chicago

From our earliest recorded history, man has been obsessed with building tall structures. The Tower of Babel, the Pyramids, Eiffel Tower, Empire State Building, Willis (formerly Sears) Tower, Burj Khalifa and now the next “world's tallest building” in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia rising 3,280 feet above ground level. Even when man isn't building, that hasn't stopped him from dreaming. In 1956, the

visionary architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, proposed a “mile-high” building (which bears a striking resemblance to the design proposed for the Kingdom Tower in Jeddah). If Sigmund Freud were alive today, I wonder what he would say about man's quest to build all these tall towers projecting into the sky. Could it be that man would rather aspire to build the next tallest “anything” than to not aspire at all?

The truth is supertall buildings in America offer no advantage over shorter buildings when attracting tenants or investors. Financial lenders will not take the risk to lend over a five to six year construction period. From an operational and energy standpoint, they are not sustainable. Today, their height serves as a reminder that they were built because someone could.

Looking out from the top of Willis Tower, one gets the same Lilliputian view of the ground below as a passenger flying in an airplane. That is, of course, when the clouds are not engulfing the building reducing visibilities to zero. Standing in the washroom can be such a thrill watching the water in the toilet basin slosh from side to side, as the building sways to the ever constant pressures from the wind.

I've always admired those people who can spend fifteen minutes of their day or more riding a series of elevators and/or escalators to reach their appointed office or living space atop supertall buildings. How frustrating it must be if they forget a business document or car keys and have to make the trip several times. Have you ever tried walking down an eighty-story or taller building when there is an emergency and you can't use the elevators?

Living in the age of “green” awareness, I'm sure that by building “taller” and thin versus “shorter” and wide, there is the argument that with less earth being covered, you are reducing the building's carbon footprint.

Are supertall buildings in America's future? Well, as long as building technology continues to advance; capital to build remains available; and the obsession for tall buildings persists, our attention will be drawn to whomever proposes the next “world's tallest.”