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In Praise of Monumentality: Vertical Urbanism and the Human Condition

Wayde Tardif

Principal, Client Leader M+U, DLR Group, Seattle, WA USA

E-mail: waydetardif@dlrgroup.com

Abstract

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The skyscraper has long represented modernity's ambition, yet its civic and emotional potential remains overlooked. This paper reexamines the skyscraper through Sigfried Giedion's framework of monumentality, not as spectacle or isolated icon, but as a medium for collective meaning. Drawing from Heinrich Hübsch, Hannah Arendt, Richard Sennett, Mike Davis, Adolf Loos, and Jacques Derrida, it argues that monumentality in the city of height should emerge from relationships among towers rather than individual objects, from shared visibility rather than private prestige. Integrating lived experience in Dubai, China, and Hong Kong and reflections on Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67 and Marina Bay Sands, the essay shows how consciously composed density can recover the symbolic dimension that sustains public life. It proposes a renewed ethic of vertical urbanism, where clusters of towers act as civic fields fostering appearance, reciprocity, and wonder, and where height binds aspiration to responsibility and architecture to the human condition.

Keywords: Tall Buildings, Urban design, Sociological Impact, Master Planning

1. Introduction

The skyscraper is the defining artifact of the modern metropolis, a vertical concentration of ambition, capital, and technological prowess. Yet despite its ubiquity, it remains curiously undertheorized as a collective form. In most architectural discourse, the tall building is framed as an engineering achievement or a corporate emblem, not as a civic instrument. Its presence dominates the skyline, but its role in the city's lived experience remains disconnected from a shared civic order. The contemporary metropolis is therefore marked by a paradox: it is increasingly defined by height, yet increasingly uncertain in what that height signifies. Towers accumulate but rarely cohere. They are seen but seldom understood as part of a collective order.

The questions that frame this discussion are not new. My engagement with them began in a course titled Architecture as Power, taught by Michael Kaplan at the University of Tennessee, which foregrounded my understanding of the relationship between built form and systems of authority. That framing has remained with me in practice, where I return, time and time again, to a simple question in my own studio: Where does the architecture live in a project? It is a question that distinguishes between form as object and architecture as something that emerges through its relationship to human life.

This essay proposes that ownership should be understood not merely as legal possession, but as a collective civic condition. Spaces become "owned" when they are repeatedly used, recognized, and shared by those who inhabit them. Historically, courtyards, plazas, and streets functioned in this manner. They were not collectively owned in terms of legal titles, but they were collectively claimed through practice.

The challenge for vertical cities is that this sense of ownership has not yet fully adapted to tall structures. While towers may be owned individually, the spaces between them are seldom claimed by the community. As a result, the degree of monumentality in the contemporary metropolis depends on how effectively vertical urbanism can foster an environment of shared ownership. Ideally, people should see themselves not merely as occupants of isolated units but as active participants in a cohesive spatial community.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper uses a theoretical and comparative interpretive method rather than empirical measurement. Its materials consist of architectural theory, urban critique, and selected precedents drawn from professional experience and comparative observation. The theoretical corpus includes Giedion, Sert, Léger, Hübsch, Arendt, Derrida, Sennett, Davis, Loos, Koolhaas, and Safdie. The experiential and comparative materials include Dubai's Sheikh Zayed Road, OMA's One

Square Kilometer City, Hong Kong's layered urban fabric, Mainland Chinese high-rise districts such as Shanghai's Lujiazui, Habitat 67, and Marina Bay Sands.

The method is to read these texts and precedents relationally, asking how height, visibility, ownership, access, and repeated use shape the civic meaning of vertical urbanism. Rather than treating the skyscraper as an isolated object, the analysis evaluates the conditions under which towers operate as part of a collective spatial order.

2.1 Origins of Monumentality

Monumentality has always been architecture's means of speaking across time. For Giedion, it represents the moment when the lifeblood of a civilization crystallizes into form. The monumental object exceeds utility. It aspires to permanence and to the status of symbol. The Parthenon, the Gothic cathedral, and the Renaissance dome all manifest their epochs' metaphysical orders. They do so not merely through size but through coherence, integrating structure, ritual, and worldview. Modernity ruptured that unity. Industrialization altered the conditions through which architecture could operate as a shared cultural expression, fragmenting the city into specialized zones and turning it inward toward function and type. When Giedion, Sert, and Léger drafted *Nine Points on Monumentality* (1943), they did so in response to what they saw as a loss of spiritual dimension in modern architecture. They argued that the machine age required a new form of monumentality derived not from a historical frame, but from the authentic expression of collective life in the present. In this sense, monumentality is less a typology than a condition. It is a quality that endows certain buildings with enduring resonance. Yet the skyscraper, though monumental in scale, often fails in this regard. Its vertical repetition and mechanical neutrality resist the symbolic integration that characterizes true monuments.

2.2 Form, Architecture, and the Human Collective

Heinrich Hübsch's search for a new architectural expression recognized that the problem of form is inseparable from the problem of meaning. Architecture does not simply give shape to material conditions; it gives structure to collective life. When that connection weakens, architecture risks becoming mute, technically resolved yet culturally unmoored. This condition is increasingly evident in the contemporary high-rise, where optimization through engineering and economics has refined the building to a point of abstraction, precise in performance yet uncertain in significance.

This tension persists into modernity, where Giedion later warns that architecture risks becoming a purely technical problem. The skyscraper exemplifies this dilemma. Its mastery of construction and efficiency masks a deeper crisis of meaning. The question is no longer whether we can build higher, but what that height is intended to express within a shared world.

For Arendt, the human condition is defined by the capacity to create such a world, one that exists between people and endures beyond them. This world is sustained through the space of appearance, where individuals reveal themselves through action and presence among others. Architecture participates in this condition when it provides the settings for visibility, encounter, and recognition. In the vertical city, however, these conditions are often distorted. Visibility becomes continuous, but not reciprocal. Proximity intensifies yet does not necessarily produce relation. What appears as connection can instead reinforce hierarchy.

Visibility, however, is never neutral. As Derrida reminds us, to be seen is also to be exposed. The act of appearing before others carries a condition of vulnerability, one that architecture cannot fully resolve. In the contemporary glass tower, this condition is amplified. Transparency is often equated with openness, yet it can just as easily produce asymmetry, where individuals are visible without participating in a shared field of recognition. The result is a form of exposure without reciprocity, where presence is observed but not necessarily acknowledged.

Richard Sennett extends this critique by describing the erosion of public life as a spatial transformation. The city that once fostered encounter increasingly privileges comfort, consumption, and control. In the skyscraper, this shift is amplified. The vertical stack concentrates occupation, yet fragments experience. Floors accumulate, but do not inherently connect. The building gathers people without necessarily bringing them into relation.

Taken together, these positions describe a condition in which architecture retains its technical capacity but loses its civic ground. To recover monumentality within this context, architecture must reassert itself as a medium of shared experience. It must construct the conditions under which individuals can appear to one another meaningfully, not as isolated occupants, but as participants in a collective field. Without this, height remains an abstraction, and the city in elevation remains incomplete.

3. Results

The analysis produces three primary findings. First, monumentality in vertical urbanism shifts from the singular object to the relationships among buildings, spaces, and users. Second, height becomes civic only when access, visibility, repeated use, and distributed ownership are structured as shared conditions. Third, the examples considered here demonstrate that contemporary vertical cities contain fragments of collective life, but that these fragments have not yet coalesced into a fully coherent framework for sustaining shared civic experience.

3.1 From Singular Icon to Collective Form

Twentieth-century architecture elevated the singular icon. Towers became symbols of ambition and technological power. Yet the more singular the tower, the less it participates in the city. It becomes an object of admiration rather than belonging. As urban density increases, the isolated monument gives way to the cluster. The skyline becomes a composition rather than a collection. Monumentality shifts from object to relationship. It emerges through alignments, proximities, and shared visual fields.

This transformation does not guarantee civic life. The failure of earlier vertical utopias, such as the Pruitt-Igoe housing scheme in St. Louis, MO, in the United States, demonstrated that infrastructure alone cannot produce community. Monumentality requires the alignment of physical, symbolic, and experiential conditions.

What emerges across these examples is not the resolution of the problem, but its persistence. Contemporary vertical urbanism reveals fragments of a collective condition, yet it has not produced a coherent framework for sustaining shared civic life.

3.2 The Vertical Urban Model as Civic Fabric

The vertical city collapses the traditional distinction between architecture and urbanism. Towers can no longer be understood as isolated commissions; they operate as interdependent components within a larger spatial system. As density intensifies, the city extends not only across the ground plane, but through section. Urbanism must therefore be conceived in three dimensions, where relationships between buildings, circulation, and shared space are constructed vertically as well as horizontally.

This shift, however, does not inherently produce a civic condition. As Mike Davis observed in his account of Los Angeles, urban form can just as readily encode separation as connection. His description of fortress urbanism reveals a city in which public space is diminished, access is regulated, and movement is controlled. In such environments, the spatial logic of the city reinforces exclusion. Ownership remains legible in legal and economic terms, yet fails to translate into a shared civic experience.

The vertical city risks intensifying this condition. Stacking functions and populations does not guarantee interaction, and proximity does not produce relation. Without a coherent framework for connection, the three-dimensional city can become an accumulation of isolated domains, each internally resolved but collectively discontinuous.

To operate as civic fabric, vertical urbanism must do more than organize space; it must construct the conditions through which space is collectively recognized. Distributed ownership depends on access, visibility, and repeated use, but, more fundamentally, on individuals' ability to locate themselves within a shared spatial order. These conditions cannot be assumed. They must be deliberately structured to support movement, encounter, and recognition across levels.

The challenge, then, is not simply to build upward, but to translate the qualities of civic life into height. The vertical city must become legible as a continuous field of relationships, in which architecture and urbanism are no longer distinct disciplines but integrated aspects of a single, shared construct.

3.3 Comparative Observations in the City of Height

To build in height is not only to construct space, but to construct the conditions under which identity can appear. For Arendt, identity is revealed through presence among others within a shared field of recognition. It is not possessed internally, but emerges through participation in a common world.

In the vertical city, this condition is uneven. Towers amplify visibility, yet often isolate the lives they contain. What appears as connection can dissolve into separation. Without spaces that support reciprocal presence, identity remains unrecognized, and the city becomes a field of observation rather than participation.

This condition is not theoretical. It is observable in practice.

When I opened my own architectural practice, POSIT Studio, JLT, in Dubai in 2005, the towers along Sheikh Zayed Road stood as a procession of singular ambitions. Each building asserted identity through form and branding, yet collectively they failed to produce an urban condition. From a distance, the skyline suggested coherence. From within it, the absence of connection was unmistakable. The ground plane lacked continuity, and the spaces between towers did not operate as shared civic territory. Ownership was explicit, but not distributed.

As a foil to this condition, Rem Koolhaas' OMA created the so-called One Square Kilometer City and proposed a radically different approach. By consolidating density into a continuous structure, it rejected fragmentation and sought to construct unity through form. Yet it revealed a parallel limitation. Density alone does not produce community. Without relational depth, even unified form becomes abstract. The problem is not fragmentation or consolidation, but the absence of a framework through which shared life can emerge.

Hong Kong presents a more integrated condition, shaped not only by economic pressure but by topography. Its steep terrain has produced a layered urban fabric in which circulation, infrastructure, and occupation are interwoven. Elevated walkways and transit systems create continuous movement across levels, allowing the city to operate in section as much as in plan. The coincidence of topography and density creates opportunities for integration that are not entirely designed but produced by necessity.

Within this condition, distributed ownership begins to emerge through use. Spaces are inhabited repeatedly, and the city becomes legible through participation. While access remains uneven and often mediated, the system sustains a degree of reciprocity. Towers do not stand apart; they participate in a broader field.

Mainland Chinese cities present a different condition. Districts such as Shanghai's Lujiazui achieve visual coherence at the scale of the skyline. Towers align to produce a collective image, projecting unity and identity at the level of representation. Yet this coherence does not always extend to lived experience. The city is seen before it is inhabited. The collective is expressed visually, but not fully realized spatially.

Over time, these environments begin to evolve. Informal use and adaptation introduce new forms of life that were not originally prescribed. In this sense, monumentality may emerge through occupation rather than design alone, suggesting that the collective condition is not simply imposed but constructed through use.

This dual condition is reflected in the work of my old boss, Moshe Safdie. His Habitat 67 sought to reconcile density with individuality, producing a collective form through aggregation rather than uniformity. Singapore's Marina Bay Sands extended this ambition to the metropolitan scale, lifting the ground plane into the sky to establish a shared datum above the city. Having worked as Senior Designer on that project, I observed how the ambition toward public monumentality is

continually negotiated through capital, governance, and control. The project did not resolve these tensions, but it demonstrated that shared experience can still emerge within constrained systems.

Across these examples, a consistent pattern becomes visible. Vertical urbanism does not fail because it is tall. It falters when it cannot construct relationships. Where buildings remain isolated, ownership fragments and meaning dissipates. Where systems of access, visibility, and use are shared, distributed ownership begins to take hold. Yet even in these cases, the condition remains incomplete. The elements of collective urban life are present, but they have not yet coalesced into a coherent, durable framework.

4. Discussions

4.1 The Political Economy of Monumentality

Monumentality today is inseparable from capital. The contemporary skyscraper is not only an architectural object but also a financial instrument shaped by investment, speculation, and regulatory constraints. Its form is conditioned as much by economic logic as by spatial intent. Within this framework, ownership is defined primarily in legal and financial terms, often disconnected from lived experience.

Davis's account of Los Angeles makes this condition explicit. His description of fortress urbanism reveals how built environments can encode systems of exclusion, in which access is controlled, and public space is diminished. In such contexts, the city no longer operates as a shared field, but as a series of protected enclaves. Civic life is not eliminated, but constrained, displaced, and unevenly distributed.

A different relationship to urban space is evident in the 1968 student uprisings in Paris. There, occupation did not produce fragmentation but rather reinforced a sense of collective presence. The city was not treated as an external object, but as a shared ground of action. While Davis does not explicitly draw this comparison, it follows from his analysis: where the spatial and political structure of the city allows for collective claim, even moments of conflict can reaffirm the idea of a shared world.

What emerges from this contrast is a clearer understanding of monumentality within contemporary conditions. Where distributed ownership is absent, urban space becomes alienated, its form legible but its meaning diminished. Where it is present, space can be collectively recognized and inhabited, allowing civic life to persist even under pressure. Monumentality, in this sense, is not produced by scale or form alone, but by the extent to which the city can be experienced as a shared construct.

4.2 Vertical Humanism: Toward a New Ethics of Monumentality

If monumentality once depended on shared belief, today it must arise from shared vulnerability and distributed ownership. The city of height makes this condition visible. Life within towers depends on systems that extend beyond any single building, revealing forms of interdependence that are both infrastructural and social. The vertical city does not eliminate the need for a shared world; it intensifies it.

Within this context, distributed ownership shifts attention from possession to participation. A space becomes civic not when it is defined as public, but when it is recognized as shared through use, presence, and repeated occupation. Monumentality, in turn, emerges from relationships that sustain recognition across difference. A skyline becomes meaningful not simply because it is seen, but because it is collectively understood as part of a shared spatial order.

The examples of Dubai, OMA's proposal, Hong Kong, Chinese cities, and the work of Moshe Safdie demonstrate that vertical urbanism produces divergent outcomes depending on relational intent. Each reveals, in different ways, the conditions under which monumentality can emerge or fail. Taken together, they do not present a resolved model, but a field of partial and incomplete attempts, fragments of a collective condition that has yet to cohere fully.

5. Conclusions

The architect's role within this condition is both visionary and custodial. To design is not simply to produce form, but to construct relationships that allow shared experience to become possible. This requires an understanding of the city not as a collection of objects, but as a continuous field of interaction, where access, visibility, and use are structured to support the emergence of a common world.

The task, then, is not to refine the skyscraper as an isolated object, but to recognize that the collective condition it aspires to has not yet been fully realized. The vertical city remains an incomplete project, awaiting a framework for constructing, recognizing, and sustaining shared space.

To praise monumentality today is therefore not to revive historical forms, but to insist that architecture bind aspiration to responsibility. The city of height will be worthy of wonder when its spaces are not only seen, but shared. Monumentality will endure not in objects, but in the relationships through which the city is recognized.

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