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# SELLING AIR

SHORT ON FOOTPRINT, LONG ON SKY, NEW YORK'S 'SUPER TALL' SKYSCRAPERS STAND ACCUSED OF ZOMBIE URBANISM. CONOR PURCELL EXAMINES THE CLAIMS

WORDS:
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Right: 432 Park Avenue, the tallest residential building in the world

Cities change all the time, usually slowly and usually imperceptibly. It's hard, however, to miss the new generation of super tall skyscrapers that are changing New York's skyline. Stand in Central Park and you can see them: some finished, some not, all of them pencil thin and incredibly tall, casting long, narrow shadows over the park's southern end. While New York has always been a city that built upwards and has never been shy about large-scale urban development, this new breed of skyscrapers seems different somehow; a by-product of a neo-liberal fantasy where apartments are 'assets,' and where air is something to be bought and sold. Take one of the first super talls: 432 Park Avenue.

Described by one critic as an "elongated toothpaste box," it rises more than 1,400 feet into the air, yet has a footprint of only 93 square feet. It's 'slenderness ratio' is just 1-15 (the ratio of the width of its base to its height), and looks from a certain angle, almost too narrow, as if the inhabitants on the highest floors should fear for their safety. Or, witness the rising form of Central Park Tower, which will be the tallest residential building in the world when it's completed, a vast glass monolith, looming over the southern section of Central Park. These are towers for the ultra-wealthy; glossy structures filled with luxurious apartments costing anywhere between US$10 and $90 million, places for the global elite to park their assets as much as places to live. Aside from the morals of such naked capitalism, the aesthetics of this recent push upward have also been called into question.

The city's architecture critics, never shy in voicing their opinions, have not held back. The renowned New York architect Steven Holl said: "If we rewind to Manhattan in 1934 and buildings like the Rockefeller Center, thin and vertical architecture marked great public urban space," he told Dezeen. "The Empire State Building's vertical dominance offered a public observatory deck. No such public space will be offered by our present privatised spires. Not only do they deny public access to the top and cast long shadows on the street, they will seldom be occupied, as their $90 million apartments are financial instruments, not really apartments for everyday life. Many of these profane spires have been built with tax abatements from our once public-oriented city government."

So are these buildings just the inevitable result of America's hyper-capitalist society, the obvious outcome of trying to squeeze as much 'value' from every new development? That's part of it, but it's also down to improvements in technology, which allow such feats of engineering to be built, partly it's down to developers wanting to make as much money as possible, and partly it's down to the fact that developers can transfer 'air rights' from adjacent buildings and build higher than ever before. "The current epidemic of out-of-context as-of-right development is many years in the making," says Tara Kelly, Vice President of Policy and Programs at The Municipal Art Society of New York, an advocacy group that focuses on the public realm. "But it's the result of a combination of two factors: engineering advances that allow towers to rise higher and skinnier than previously possible, and market conditions that make these properties profitable enough to justify the enormous construction costs."

Another driver has been the development of the condominium form of ownership, which allows developers to start booking sales off-plan, vastly reducing their risk. Condos can also be bought and sold without anyone's approval, unlike new co-ops, in which new

## THE SUPER TALLS CHANGING MANHATTAN'S SKYLINE

### CENTRAL PARK TOWER

This 95-storey tower has been beset by issues (both financial and construction) since work began in 2014. It's set to open next year and will be the tallest residential building in the world when finished. With Central Park views, the few available units left range from $6.9 to $63 million.

### 111 W 57TH STREET

Another luxurious residential super tall, 111 W 57th Street (also known as the Steinway Tower), looms over Central Park, at a mammoth 1,428 feet tall. Some analysts believe the tower will feature the first $100 million sale, and given its location on 'Billionaire's Row', who would bet against it?

### 432 PARK AVENUE

The tallest residential building in the world when completed in 2015, 432 Park Avenue was the first of the new era of super talls to hit Manhattan. It was also revealed that more than 50 per cent of the building's apartments were owned by foreign investors, most of which are unoccupied more than 10 months of the year.

### 53W53

Designed by Jean Nouvel, 53W53 is a 1,250 feet-tall skyscraper adjacent to the Museum of Modern Art in Midtown. The mixed-use tower will feature offices, apartments (ranging from $3 to $80 million) and is one of the more visually interesting of the new breed of super talls.

### TOWER FIFTH

Slated for Fifth Avenue, this tower would become New York's tallest skyscraper by roof height upon completion. Consisting of 1,556 feet of office space, it would dominate Midtown Manhattan (at least until a taller building is approved), provided it can get past the New York zoning laws.


BURBERRY

Left: The One57 skyscraper, also known as The Billionaire's Building

buyers need to be approved by a tenants' board. Ultimately, though, these towers are about wealth, and what better way for the ultra-wealthy to maintain their assets? "People are parking their money in New York and London," says the architect A.M. Stern, "because they seem safe in comparison to the instability in the rest of the world." They are also, crucially, anonymous. You won't find entry buzzers with names at the entrance to 432 Park Avenue or 111 West 57th Street. The ownership of these apartments is often hidden behind arcane offshore companies, and even the physical apartments themselves, floating high above the city, cannot be seen into by any of their neighbours. The apartments themselves are filled with curated libraries, yoga studios, dog bathing facilities and professional kitchens. The interiors, as luxurious as they are, are almost beside the point. "If you have to pay six to eight thousand dollars per [square] foot," says the architect Rafael Viñoly, "and you design a unit for someone who has that kind of money... you're wasting your time. Who wouldn't want to do whatever they want with that space?" And as the towers get taller (and thinner), the number of apartments shrinks. The developer Bruce Eichner built CitySpire in 1987; it had 300 apartments on 50 floors. He built Madison Square Park Tower in 2017 – it has 83 apartments across 65 floors. Putting just one apartment on a floor promotes a sense of exclusivity, guarantees 360 degree views and ensures no useable floor space is wasted on corridors or elevator hallways.

While the super wealthy might love these towers of excess, others are less than happy. The architecture critic Michael Sorkin wrote in Architectural Record: "The rise of the horrible, steroidal collection of towers near Central Park, with their absentee oligarch owners... their limp starchitect designs, their shadows over the park, their public subsidies, and their preening San Gimignano competition for the most vertiginous views has launched a thousand critiques of the city's rampant up-bulking."

While it's easy to blame rapacious developers and the greed of faceless overseas investors, the role of city authorities has also come under a lot of scrutiny. Elizabeth Diller, another New York-based architect, and partner in the architectural firm Diller Scofidio and Renfro, believes a large part of the problem is due to a lack of planning. "I believe in planning logics where you have neighbourhoods, and you don't just do one building at a time," she says. "We need more planning vision in the city than there is now, where there's no thinking of the effect of tall buildings. Every property owner is in it for themselves, building into outer space."

New York though, has had a succession of gilded ages and arguably has always been a city that looked upwards. The city's first 'skyscraper,' the Tower Building at 50 Broadway, was eleven storeys high when it was completed in 1889. That was surpassed the following year by the 20-storey, 308-feet New York World Building, which was the tallest building in the world at the time. By 1931, the Empire State Building opened, all 1,250 feet of it, a giant leap, literally and metaphorically, from just a few decades before. The reason towers grew so much in height over the intervening period was due to improvements in technology, specifically, steel frames replaced load-bearing masonry walls, which were difficult to use on small plots of land.

Another technology that helped the advent of the skyscraper? The elevator. New York built upwards around its financial centre in Downtown, before moving towards Midtown, clustering towers around Grand Central Terminal and Penn Station. But this new generation of skyscrapers is not just about New York, but a story about every global city where the ultra-wealthy buy property. "These towers are the most visible symbol of inequality," says Carol Willis, the founder and director of New York's Skyscraper Museum and adjunct associate professor of Urban Studies at Columbia University. "The sales price of most of these towers is now about $5,000 or $6,000 per square foot and it can go up to $10,000 per square foot. There is an enormous amount of resentment, about this type of 'zombie urbanism' such as Billionaire's Row."

Pressure groups are not giving up on New York's skyline without a fight however. Most want similar things: more public reviews of the planning decisions, and less leeway given to developers. "We would like to see the public review process made more robust and more effective, with a greater role for local stakeholders whose neighbourhoods are affected by these changes in development," says The Municipal Art Society's Kelly. "New York is currently involved in a revision process for our City Charter, the document that defines the functions of the New York City government. As part of that effort, we have called for codifying a comprehensive planning process that addresses issues such as infrastructure, schools, open space, transit, historic preservation, resiliency, and sustainability alongside the factors of building density, bulk, and height that our current Zoning Resolution considers."

It will remain to be seen who wins the battle for New York's skies.

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