

Vertical urbanism: high-rise buildings and public space

Ute Lehrer and Loren March

When Richard Harris and I asked Anne Haila to contribute to our book on the Suburban Land Question (Harris and Lehrer 2018), she answered in her usual provocative way, stating that there is no suburbanization in the context of Singapore and Hong Kong, the two Asian cities she had become quite knowledgeable about over the past thirty years (Haila 2016). Using Edward Glaeser's (2011) argument that cities are the greatest invention of human kind, she challenged him on forgetting the strong role of state and local governments, who are the land owners in those two places. Land ownership immediately also brings up the question of public versus private space and how they constitute each other. In the context of high-rise buildings, where we have the individual units (either owned or rented) as well as the common spaces (hallways, elevators, but also common rooms that one finds particularly in condominium buildings – swimming pools, BBQ places, gym, etc.), this question of ownership becomes front and centre.

Despite the increasing presence of residential high-rise buildings around the globe (Harris 2015; McNeill 2005), there is relatively little written about the function of public space in and around them that goes beyond themes of isolation, abandonment, safety, security, and crime (Adey 2010; Amick & Kviz 1975; Friedrichs 2011; Fumia 2010; Gifford 2007; Kern 2010a; Lees & Baxter 2011; Power 1997). Vertical urbanism, however, is an area of increasing interest for scholars seeking to understand the practices of everyday life within high-rise buildings, and offers a starting point for examining such questions. A perspective of verticality renders visible unique forms of spatial production, materiality, lived practice and imaginary, and unsettles typical horizontal approaches to urbanization and suburbanization (Baxter 2017; Graham 2016;

Graham & Hewitt 2012; Harris 2015). Peering through a lens of verticality, we might see how public space takes on unique and hybridized forms in (sub-)urban high-rise towers, tied to tendencies towards internalization and privatization, particular practices of dwelling, and to public imaginaries and discourse.

Theorists of verticality argue that it has long been an important dimension of the city, as a form of urban dwelling, and that it plays an increasingly significant role in city life as high-rises are a more and more common built form. Urban geographer Andrew Harris (2015), for example, notes the importance of expanding and diversifying our understandings of vertical space in order to appreciate the multitude of trajectories and forms that it can potentially take. Others observe how, far from being homogeneous, high-rise forms are diverse and contextually specific, emerging around the world out of unique circumstances, and gradually changing over time (Chen & Shih 2009; Jacobs 2005). Thinking through verticality can reveal how basic configurations in the materiality of high-rises can be quite significant, have considerable effects on the everyday life, and are important in our understandings of how these dwelling-spaces function and are lived as dynamic wholes.

Many discourses of verticality have pointed to the ways in which, as a built form, it serves to propagate urban segregation, and have focused upon new, elite and gated vertical forms which act as a means by which “the elites abandon public space; lifting themselves above the poor, the marginalized and the violent” (O’Neill & Fogarty-Valenzuela 2013, 378; see also Adey 2010; Costa Vargas 2006; Graham 2015; Graham & Hewitt 2012; Hewitt & Graham 2015). Many argue that verticality must be understood in relation to power, emphasizing the ways in which verticality implies both ‘security from the insecurities below’ (Adey 2010, 58), and the existence of a privileged surveillant gaze from above (Adey 2010; Hewitt & Graham 2015; Williams 2013). Others tie verticality to entrepreneurial planning logics that intertwine with the hegemonic narratives and projects of the state (Margalit 2013), emphasizing the ways in which the residential high-rise acts as a unique ‘machine that makes the land pay’ (in Margalit 2013, 376), thus constituting it as an ideal for capitalist urban development. Tall buildings have long been symbolic icons of economic development and modernization (Acuto 2010; Cartier 1999; Charney & Rosen 2014; King 1996), but are also now functional tools in the strategic concentration of density, urban growth, and intensification (Rosen & Walks 2013). Here verticality emerges out of particular historical contexts, patterns of investment and capital flows, development trajectories, and the imperatives of political coalitions, alongside dominant narratives which posit land and property as an instrument of growth, power and accumulation.

Much of the literature on vertical gated communities also emphasizes the enclosure of public services and amenities, and the ways in which the built form

of the high-rise serves to internalize and protect shared privately-owned goods, drawing attention to their increasing role as a technology of exclusivity (Harris 2011). Much of this literature focuses in particular on the form of the high-rise condominium and the unique spatialities which emerge through the collision of the condo property relationship with the built form of the high-rise tower. Within contexts of neoliberal urban development in North America, the verticalization of the condominium property structure has had astonishing effects in terms of spatial restructuring (Lehrer, Keil & Kipfer 2010; Rosen & Walks 2013).

Another area of focus within verticality emphasizes the unique practices and forms of inhabitation that exist within high-rises (Baxter 2017; Baxter & Lees 2008; Harris 2015; Le Blanc 2016). This perspective complicates binary narratives which posit vertical space solely as a space of privilege in relation to the ground below. Alison Blunt (2008) for example, suggests that built forms have ‘biographies’ which are “shaped [by] embodied practices of settlement, inhabitation, and domestic life” (2008, 550). Rather than simply representing the visions and narratives of city-builders, high-rises also contain a multitude of stories of the everyday, entangling practices of dwelling with the specificity of the built form. Richard Baxter (2017) calls this ‘verticality as practice’. More intimate encounters with the interiors and geographies of these buildings reveal a vast array of differences between them, not only architecturally, but also in terms of how they are transformed and lived through the socio-spatial practices and physical modifications of residents themselves (Chua 1997). Stuart Elden (2013) suggests that in thinking through verticality we must not simply add a dimension of height to a horizontal plane, but must instead understand the possibilities of life contained within these spatial forms that are rendered visible through this analytical approach (see also Bridge 2013). With this in mind, designated common areas within the high-rise – such as lounges, lobbies and recreational facilities – are not solely to be seen as collectively owned property, but might be perceived as presenting varying degrees of public space (Lehrer 2016). Informal spaces of encounter such as hallways, stairwells, elevators, and parking lots might also produce important kinds of public space that are emergent and rooted in spatial practice (Le Blanc 2016). Thus, following the work of Jan Gehl (2011), we note the importance of public encounter and interaction in producing a social world, yet, departing from Gehl, we emphasize the equal importance of spaces of encounter *inside* buildings to those *between*, stressing the *interrelatedness* of the two, and the unique ways in which the high-rise causes these to intermingle.

Following this, we might consider the ways in which practices of inhabitation spill over from the interior space of the high-rise building (March and Lehrer 2019). In terms of public space, the vertical home is unique in that the view of

surrounding landscape is often a fundamental part of its material culture, offering residents privileged visual access to a piece of the sky (Baxter 2017) – assuming one doesn't live in the lower floors within a canyon of other high-rise buildings. This is reminiscent of architectural theorist Rem Koolhaas's (1994) depiction of Manhattan's first high-rise towers, his description of the new scale they produced in the skyline, and the special privilege they granted to certain inhabitants to 'inspect their domain' (1994, 24). Just as the conspicuous built form of the high-rise becomes a part of the shared urban space, a prominent element in the city skyline, the landscape of the city conversely becomes part of the high-rise. The view, and ownership over it, is often an essential part of how 'life in the sky' (Mizrahi Developments 2018) is now romanticized and marketed (Rosen 2016; Vyhnač 2018). Similarly, high-rise residents in contemporary buildings are often sold the surrounding neighbourhood as an amenity related to their unit. Areas both outside and within the residential high-rise become parts of its geography. Verticality is no longer simply a unified, dichotomous other to horizontality, but instead becomes emergent, textured, heterogeneous, and intertwined with it in complex ways. Relationships between private and public become similarly complicated, layered and hybridized (Bondi 1998).

Finally, verticality also considers a unique series of collective urban imaginaries wherein the high-rise looms large. These imaginaries have been diverse, both dystopian and utopian. They span back to the late nineteenth century when this built form emerged, being shaped by experiences, representations, images, and narratives (Blunt 2008; Domosh 1987; Hewitt & Graham 2015; McNeill 2005), they are varied and contested (Baxter 2017; Harris 2015), and change over time (Fincher 2007). As a result, high-rises can act as powerful and iconic urban symbols, and often, in spite of their 'private' nature as residential spaces, can take on a very public identity when they are drawn into the city's collective image (Chen & Shih 2009), and civic discourse (Fennell 2012).

We can conclude that high-rise towers that dominate the urban landscape in Singapore and Hong Kong are more than just expressions of real estate interests. The high-rise towers are homes to people and challenge continuously the public and private divide. They constitute both public and private spaces – and this is true not only in cities such as Singapore and Hong Kong but around the world.

REFERENCES

- Acuto, M. (2010). High-rise Dubai, urban entrepreneurialism and the technology of symbolic power. *Cities* 27, 272–284. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2010.01.003>
- Adey, P. (2010). Vertical Security in the Megacity. *Theory, Culture & Society* 27:6, 51–67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276410380943>
- Amick, D.J. & Kviz, F.J. (1975). Social alienation in public housing: the effects of density and building types. *Ekistics* 39:231, 118–120.
- Baxter, R. (2017). The High-Rise Home: Verticality as Practice in London. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41:2, 334–352. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12451>
- Baxter, R. & Lees, L. (2008). The rebirth of high-rise living in London: towards a sustainable and liveable urban form? in R. Imrie, L. Lees & M. Raco (eds.) *Regenerating London: governance, sustainability and community*. Routledge, London.
- Blunt, A. (2008). The 'skyscraper settlement': home and residence at Christodora House. *Environment and Planning A* 40, 550–571. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a3976>
- Bondi, L. (1998). Gender, class & urban space: Public and private space in contemporary urban landscapes. *Urban Geography* 19:2, 160–185. <https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.19.2.160>
- Charney, I. & Rosen, G. (2014). Splintering skylines in a fractured city: high-rise geographies in Jerusalem. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32, 1088–1101. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d13174p>
- Chen, L.-W. & Shih, C.-M. (2009). The public nature of high-rise buildings in Taiwan. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27, 317–330. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d3306>
- Chua, B.-H. (1997). *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore*. Routledge, New York.
- Costa Vargas, J.H. (2006). When a Favela Dared to Become a Gated Condominium - The Politics of Race and Urban Space in Rio de Janeiro. *Latin American Perspectives* 33:2, 49–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X06289892>
- Domosh, M. (1987). Imagining New York's first skyscrapers, 1875–1910. *Journal of Historical Geography* 13:3, 233–248. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-7488\(87\)80112-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-7488(87)80112-3)
- Elden, S. (2014). Secure the volume: Vertical geopolitics and the depth of power. *Political Geography* 34, 35–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2012.12.009>
- Fennell, C. (2014). Experiments in Vulnerability: Sociability and Care in Chicago's Redeveloping Public Housing. *City & Society* 26:2, 262–284. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12043>
- Fincher, R. (2007). Is High-rise Housing Innovative? Developers' Contradictory Narratives of High-rise Housing in Melbourne. *Urban Studies* 44:3, 631–649. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980601131894>
- Fumia, D. (2010). Divides, High Rise, and Boundaries: Toronto's Downtown East Side Neighbourhood. *Ethnologies* 32:2, 257–289. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006312ar>
- Gehl, J. (2011). *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*. Island Press, Washington.
- Graham, S. (2015). Luxified skies: How vertical housing became an elite preserve. *City* 19:5, 615–645. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2015.1071113>
- Graham, S. (2016). *Vertical - The City from Satellites to Bunkers*. Verso, London & New York.
- Graham, S. & Hewitt, L. (2012). Getting off the ground: On the politics of urban verticality. *Progress in Human Geography* 37:1, 72–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512443147>
- Haila, A. (2016). *Urban Land Rent: Singapore as a Property State*. Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118827611>
- Harris, D.C. (2011). Condominium and the City: The Rise of Property in Vancouver. *Law & Social Inquiry: Journal of the American Bar Foundation* 36:3, 694–726. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-4469.2011.01247.x>
- Harris, A. (2015). Vertical urbanisms: opening up geographies of the three-dimensional city. *Progress in Human Geography* 39:5, 601–620. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132514554323>
- Harris R. and Lehrer, U. (eds.) (2018). *The Suburban Land Question: A Global Survey*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442620629>
- Hewitt, L. & Graham, S. (2015). Vertical cities: representations of urban verticality in 20th century science fiction literature. *Urban Studies* 52:5, 923–937. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098014529345>

- Jacobs, J.M. (2005). Hybrid highrises. Institute of Geography, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh, online paper. [Last accessed December 28, 2018] Available at <<https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/819>>
- Kern, L. (2010). Selling the 'scary city': Gendering freedom, fear and condominium in the neoliberal city. *Social and Cultural Geography* 11:3, 209–230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649361003637174>
- King, A. (1996). Worlds in the city: Manhattan transfer and the ascendance of spectacular space. *Planning Perspectives* 11, 97–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665439608559398>
- Le Blanc, R.M. (2016). What High-Rise Living Means for Tokyo Civic Life: Changing Residential Architecture and the Specter of Rising Privacy. *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 42:2, 315–341. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jjs.2016.0057>
- Lees, L. & Baxter, R. (2011). A 'building event' of fear: thinking through the geography of architecture. *Social & Cultural Geography* 12:2, 107–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2011.545138>
- Lehrer, U. (2016). "Room for the Good Society? Public space, amenities and the condominium" In: Haripriya Rangan, Mee Kam NG, Libby Porter and Jacquelyn Chase (eds.), *Insurgencies and Revolutions: Reflections on John Friedmann's contributions to planning theory and practice*. Routledge RTPI Library Series, Boston, pp. 141–150.
- Lehrer, U., Keil, R. & Kipfer, S. (2010). Reurbanization in Toronto: Condominium boom and social housing revitalization. *DisP - The Planning Review* 46:180, 81–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02513625.2010.10557065>
- March, L. & Lehrer, U. (2019). "Verticality, Public Space and the Role of Resident Participation in Revitalizing Suburban High-rise Buildings" *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* Summer 28:1, 65–85.
- McNeill, D. (2005). Skyscraper geography, *Progress in Human Geography* 29:1, 41–55. <https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132505ph5270a>
- O'Neill, K.L. & Fogarty-Valenzuela, B. (2013). Verticality. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19:2, 378–389. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12038>
- Power, A. (1997). *Estates on the edge: the social consequences of mass housing in Northern Europe*. Macmillan, New York.
- Rosen, G. (2016). Condo-ism and Urban Renewal: Insights from Toronto and Jerusalem, in A. Lehari (ed.) *Private Communities and Urban Governance*, Springer International Publishing, Switzerland, 77–94. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-33210-9_4
- Rosen, G. & Walks, A. (2013). Rising cities: Condominium development and the private transformation of the metropolis. *Geoforum* 49, 160–172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.06.010>