
Whether there is a genetic predisposition in the human race to build upward, whether there is an architects’ machismo that expresses itself in the erect building, or whether healthy urban centers truly require the type of density that tall buildings offer, the urge to build upward continues, with its intensive energy consumption, oppressive vertical transportation systems, and tortuous emergency egress. Still, the osmotic romance of what was once considered a uniquely American building type is now a global phenomenon, with Asia, both in the Middle and East, having added dozens of dramatically tall buildings to its urban skylines. Tipping its hat nominally to New York, once but no longer the epicenter of skyscraper construction, this book, published to accompany an exhibition at the Museum für Gestaltung in Zurich, is tailored to the informational needs of the show’s audience. Employing the somewhat strict constraints of the exhibition, it presents five short chapters by seven authors, starting with New York and continuing with London, Zurich, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. (The double entry on China is appropriate given the level of high-rise activity in that country.)

Thus, despite the addition of a short index of names and a general bibliography on the history of tall building design, overall High-Rise seems like a codex version of the didactic material from the exhibition, resulting in a whole that is less than the sum of the parts. And with small photographs in the city chapters providing inadequate documentation (floor plans are few) and small, heavy type—an injustice to the smooth translation—High-Rise is a vexing reading experience.

Almost addenda, the photographic preface and final chapter, entitled "The High-Rise, Photographically Considered" (a somewhat tired reference to Louis H. Sullivan’s 1896 essay “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered”), are the sole original aspect of the publication. Eleven photographers, having interpreted skyscrapers from as many cities, offer both day and night, interior and exterior, close-up and distant, and construction and as-is views, communicating eloquently to us the avarice and arrogance, clutter and discomfort, and genius and glory of high-rise shelter. For Bas Princen’s 2007 photograph Valley (Jing'an) alone, with its concrete and glass Shanghai apartments, like latter-day cliff dwellings, growing out of sheer rock, cavities in which also contain housing units, High-Rise is noteworthy, but in its limited perspective it fails to supersede the Buell Center’s Tower and Office: From Modernist Theory to Contemporary Practice (Iñaki Ábalos and Juan Herreros, MIT Press, 2003) or the more recent Tall Building: Imagining the Skyscraper (Scott Johnson, Balcony, 2008).

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