

Time to take the ego out of skyscrapers, says renowned architect

Peta Tomlinson

SOM's Brian Lee, a speaker at the upcoming Business of Design Week, says a building's sense of place and purpose is more important than height

At 829.8 m (2,722 ft) the world's tallest completed man-made structure is still a long way short of a building's possible height.

The technical know-how that enabled construction of the 162-storey Burj Khalifa tower in Dubai could actually take it a mile high – almost twice its current size – and fulfil the vision of late American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who wrote about a mile-high skyscraper, which he dubbed The Illinois, nearly 60 years ago.

But why would you want to? asks Brian Lee, whose Chicago-based global architecture, engineering and design firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP (SOM) master-planned the record-breaking Burj Khalifa (soon to be surpassed by even taller buildings now under construction, including The Tower, which recently broke ground in Dubai and is slated for completion in 2020). Lee's firm, SOM, also designed Beijing's tallest building, the 74-storey China World Trade Center 3A tower, completed in 2010, and is currently constructing the 58-storey China World Trade Center Phase 3B, which will be the second tallest in the capital.

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Lee will be in Hong Kong this month for Business of Design Week (BODW), Hong Kong's annual design event. With Chicago the partner city of BODW 2016, Lee will be one of numerous Chicago architecture and creative experts offering their insights on design and architectural topics from urban renewal to public space use.

“Tall buildings can have a place in cities, if you think about their effects, which are pretty numerous,” he says. But building something just to be the tallest can be a case of misplaced ego, he argues. On the other hand, when properly done, “they can be magnificent,” he says.

“Our cities need to have thoughtfulness of planning,” Lee said. “As cities become even denser, we have to think about how you deal with the structure – not as just private objects planted on the block, but creating a setting. You have to move people to and from these buildings with mass transit, or walkable environments; provide open spaces, and civic places where people can gather; and integrate the mixed use that often goes with it. You need to activate the space into a 24/7 active environment.”

Buildings should also be meaningful and relate to their location, Lee asserts. “Should a tower in Mumbai be different to a tower in Hong Kong? I think it should be,” he said.

At BODW Lee will also talk about how SOM innovates as an architectural and engineering practice, rather than just accepting the status quo, and the role of 3D printing. Yes, you could in theory 3D print a tall building, he says.

In addition to the Chicago component, and alongside speakers including Winy Maas, co-founder of Netherlands-headquartered global firm MVRDV, and Younjin Jeong, co-founder/creative director of Korean design studio Urbantainer (who will talk about converting shipping containers into the shopping mall Common Ground, in Seoul), there will be Hong Kong participation from, among others, architects Eric Schuldenfrei and Marisa Yiu, founding partners of ESKYIU; Aric Chen, lead curator for design and architecture at M+; and Johan Persson, founder of C'monde Studios.

French botanist Patrick Blanc will return to Hong Kong to discuss his latest urban greening projects.



The pioneer of vertical gardens, whose first project, in Paris, took place in 1986, has a growing portfolio of work in Hong Kong, the latest being a vertical garden mixing 60 species and seasonal flowers in co-working space The Work Project in Causeway Bay.

While Blanc is pleased to see that greening of cities has become trendy in recent years, he worries that some who have jumped onto the vertical greening bandwagon have opted – especially in Chinese cities – for systems and plantings intended for instant impact, rather than longevity.

However, with clients now wanting more than just a short-term green carpet, “I am sure that in the next few years it will be done more and more in the right way”, he said. “My solution is one good solution but of course others could emerge.”

He also sees potential in the growing of edible gardens on urban rooftops, especially of one-season small fruit and vegetable plants, which don't need deep soil. "Obviously you cannot feed all the city, but there is a psychological advantage to growing your own food," he says.

Another speaker is Zoë Ryan, John H. Bryan Chair and curator of Architecture and Design at the Art Institute of Chicago. She is putting together the museum's first collection of design and editing a book on the important role that exhibitions have played in architecture and design history.

Ryan will champion the role of "speculative thinking" – historical examples including the writings of Charles and Ray Eames during their time in India in 1958 - and the contemporary architecture of David Adjaye, an African-born architect whose Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture opened recently in Washington, DC.

Architecture and design may not solve the world's problems, she says, but they play an important role in starting dialogue.

Business of Design Week 2016 runs from 30 November to 3 December at Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre. www.bodw.com/ [1]

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