

“Bissian” Architecture

By Nathan Hewes

Preface

The essay that follows is an adaption of the work of Eula Biss, which has been adapted to fit my own interpretation, topics, ideas, and personal experiences. To the outside reader, this may seem like a random collection of thoughts on architecture and the Emporis Scale; for the experienced reader, who knows Biss and her writing style, this piece may be more interesting and insightful. Both however, I believe will enjoy the topics covered, pondering and questioning the dimensions of complexity in the layout of this writing. Various times while I was writing this piece, I had to prevent myself from following the rubric for a standard essay. In a way, I found that not being able to write how I was most comfortable and capable was somewhat limiting. Yet I believe my experimentation with “Bissian” style has created a new frontier in my knowledge of what a creative writing piece can be and what it can accomplish. In the end of your typical essay, you want the reader to be persuaded and agree, or begin to agree with what you have to presented and argued. In the “Bissian” essay, one leaves the reader to draw conclusions for themselves. My biggest concern here is whether or not I have left this piece open ended enough for the reader to draw their own conclusions without feeling like they have to adhere to my own ideas presented.

“Bissian” Architecture

The Low Rise

The modern building is the natural result of man's quest for shelter and prosperity. It has taken a number of years for architecture and engineering to evolve from the most basic shanty characterized by history, to the glass fortresses that gleam in the sunlight. Architecture has become a means of expressing one's power in such a world. The taller your building, the more power you wield. And if you sit in an office or apartment atop such a lofty space, from a relative perspective, you have oriented yourself closer to heaven than everything beneath you. Society may hold you high up in a tower of luxury.

From a tower there is a much longer distance to fall.

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I'm on a college tour, across the river from where I actually attend university. It has been a long week of seeing school after school and hearing the same message played over and over again on tour after tour. Yet for me this tour is special. Now paying less attention to the tour guide, dodging lamp posts and leading us down a crowded sidewalk, the shimmering work of Gehry comes into view. The Stata Center, with its twisted and mangled appearance, presents itself as being as confusing and interesting as some of the work likely being carried out within it. I yearn for it as the tour approaches, like a child who has just seen the ice cream truck on the hottest day of August. The whole structure from the naked eye looks as if it could collapse upon itself at any point. Its leaning towers and punched out windows make it look incomplete to some, but is it?

The Emporis Standard is a scale that classifies buildings into three main categories based on height. There is the low rise buildings, which are less than 35 meters, the high rise building, which ranges in height from 35 to 100 meters, and the skyscraper, which is classified as being 100 meters or taller.

The Stata Center is a powerful and ambitious building, yet from a comparative perspective, it maintains its status without the height that surrounding buildings have. Its prominence is most clearly attributed to its eccentric form and destruction of the status quo for what a city building can look like. As a society, what the Emporis scale classifies as a sky scraper is so often attributed as being the most respected, most prominent structure. Yet here a low rise building has effectively stolen the show and captured the attention of the surrounding area through elegant and creative use of form and integration of bright and, at times, shocking colors and materials.

"The Stata is always going to look unfinished. It also looks as if it's about to collapse. Columns tilt at scary angles. Walls teeter, swerve, and collide in random curves and angles. Materials change wherever you look: brick, mirror-surface steel, brushed aluminum, brightly colored paint, corrugated metal. Everything looks improvised, as if thrown up at the last moment. That's the point. The Stata's appearance is a metaphor for the freedom, daring, and creativity of the research that's supposed to occur inside it." — Robert Campbell, *The Boston Globe*

A building does not have to be defined by its height to have an impact and be noticed in its environment.

The Boeing Everett Factory is the largest building in the world by square footage, covering a larger area than Disneyland: a massive workspace for a massive industry.

The building is tall and stared at; it stares back at times as if to admonish personal opinion and criticism. The low rise is more functional, welcoming, and open to creativity. It is the place where the common people gather.

Native Americans are usually credited and known for historically building their residences and other buildings from a support structure of sticks, limbs, and sheath-like structures with thatch, hides, canvas, and tree bark. The main goals behind these comparatively primitive edifices were ease of construction, relative transportability, and practicality with regards to the climate. All were surely low rise by today's standards, but in their time and with the knowledge their builders had, they were nothing short of technical wonders.

Today we construct buildings with steel and glass to serve a different set of goals. We look for our buildings to offer a sense of strength and permanence; they can serve as a haven from the dangers of the outside world.

As a youngster, I was an avid fort-builder; any piece of furniture that could be covered with a sheet or blanket could suddenly become a place of residence for any given rainy day. Their crudeness or structural integrity was never taken into consideration; there was never a need for anything formal—the main rule to be followed was “the bigger the better”. But in architecture, what you do with a space is more important than how big a space you create.

The High Rise

"As the avenues and streets of a city are nothing less than its arteries and veins, we may well ask what doctor would venture to promise bodily health if he knew that the blood circulation was steadily growing more congested!" — Hugh Ferriss, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*

My first time in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Providence, Pittsburgh; the experience has always been the same. When you drive in to the dark forest you look up for the light. In the path to finding light, my vision must pass story after story of concrete and steel.

Originally the low rise sufficed in a city, when populations were more diversified in their occupation of land. However, as key economic industries and components became centralized in cities, the population density increased significantly, creating a huge demand for more space—more space than what could otherwise fit using design techniques of the past. As a result the buildings grew taller to accommodate the growing crowds, effectively using recent advances in building design, mainly the integration of iron and steel into structures—the advent of the elevator helped too, to fit more people into the same amount of space by adding more and more floors. Many of the skyscrapers of their day have become demoted to highrise status, as counterparts have grown more common and even taller. Of course when one builds higher there are a number of additional questions to take into account and problems to be dealt with.

For someone, such as myself, who is interested in designing buildings and, to a certain degree, has pondered buildings of such height and sheer magnitude, the rise of such structures over the past 100 years has only helped to strengthen these interests. As an engineer you always ponder what is possible, what is feasible, and what is practical. The rest of the world asks the question: how much is it going to cost?

The high rise can accommodate a number of special features that make it highly desirable in urban environments. In coastal regions, it can generate huge profits for developers who want to bring ocean views to the masses.

After a hot day of wandering around a city, there are few pleasures more thoroughly enjoyable than slipping back to one high rise hotel, trading trousers in for trunks and taking the elevator up to a penthouse swimming pool. It's the equivalent of going to the beach in the sky. I'm swimming in the cool salt water, my feet slipping on the tile beneath them and across the shimmering swells the great panes of glass yield a wondrous vista.

"No stream rises higher than it's source. Whatever man might build could never express or reflect more than what he was. He could record neither more nor less than he had learned of life when buildings were built." —Frank Lloyd Wright

The high rise in its most ideal state is a representation of the emergence of classicism in society. The rich collect themselves and party in their towers while away from their country estates of perpendicular grandeur and charm. Then, the lower and less sophisticated find themselves inhabiting the low rise buildings, that exist in the shadows of their glossy neighbors.

The Skyscraper

Turning a hotel elevator into a thrill ride was a rather difficult task during the morning rush hour in Montreal. But that is what my dad and I wanted to do one morning. My family had been staying in the 37-story hotel for a few days and had noticed the rapid speed at which the elevator traveled. It only seemed natural that at one point we should wonder how fast we could get the car to drop on the 400 foot descent. And while it took few tries to get a car to go all the way without interruption, when we finally were able to, the ride commenced and my stomach took a couple of extra seconds to settle back into place. I'm sure hotels love guests that do this, especially when you consider the expense of running multiple elevators all day and night, yet such a sacrifice must come when building into the sky.

"A skyscraper is a boast in glass and steel" —Mason Cooley

Burj Khalifa stands like a number of buildings in Dubai. Its size expresses the vertical ambitions of man to reach higher and higher points in the sky. At over half a mile high, one has to begin to wonder what purpose is served by charging so high up into the clouds, when the same amount of space could have likely been allocated in a much lower rise and more efficient building at half the height. Clearly, such a building must serve more of a purpose than simply providing space for the people of a city. It must send a message, one of power and strength, and on the whole, success.

At such a height, the term skyscraper seems to be more appropriately supplanted by sky piercer as this building drives significantly higher into the sky than all of its predecessors.

"There is nothing more poetic and terrible than the skyscrapers' battle with the heavens that cover them." —Federico Garcia Lorca

Surely there must have been a similar reaction in 1929 when the Empire State Building was completed. In 1931, though New York was already used to tall buildings, given the completion of the Chrysler Building just the year before.

The adrenaline junkie/roller coaster addict/engineer inside me has a desire to design buildings of such magnitude in my own time. There are few words to describe the feeling to be attained when taking the elevator from the foundation to the pinnacle.

When the doors open to reveal a panorama of the expansive view that surrounds, the heart may pause, the mouth may run dry, and the eyes open—ever so wide.

At the precipice, where a half inch of glass

Keeps you from falling

Falling—rushing—plunging

And planting yourself back upon

The street, where life is normal.

Where you look up, not out.

The top is achievement, success. A far off fantasy, a dream of what we can become and where we can go. The ground floor is reality, where we make our way from each day on the path of progression.

In our time the elevator ride may grow longer, but our view, from which we see the world we have helped to create gets better.

Opportunity to reflect becomes more ample.

"Architecture is the alphabet of giants; it is the largest set of symbols ever made to meet the eyes of men. A tower stands up like a sort of simplified statue, of much more than heroic size." -Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Are we being cocky when we build into the clouds? All too often society likes to flaunt success. With the rise of ornamentation in architecture, the building has evolved to become a fundamental expression of success. And if a building fails to define what we have achieved we may throw names upon so that we may further make ourselves prudent to that which surrounds.

The fact that buildings are created by man allows for them to be susceptible to many of the problems of man, in due time they all will eventually fall, to a certain extent. Life is an evolution, a path that leads to unknown and yet it is shaped by what we do today. Nature has been the force that has driven them to creation and nature will be the force to bring them down and bring about new ideas and new heights to be attained.

Burj Kalifa, so much taller than anything else that surrounds it, will be losing its stature and prominence when Kingdom Tower, the pride of Saudi Arabia casts a shadow down upon it in 2018, succeeding it by 600 feet.

After every achievement, there is always more that can be done; there are higher pinnacles to reach, more success to be attained. Until man discovers a limit to what can be done, man's measurement of achievement in architecture will never cease. But the skyscraper, like a house of cards, is capable of being undermined by the slight wind of evolution.