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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Glauser, A. (2022). High-Rises and Urban Specificity: Politics of Vertical Construction in Paris, London, and Vienna. *Urban Planning*, 7(4), 284-297. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v7i4.5691>

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Article

## High-Rises and Urban Specificity: Politics of Vertical Construction in Paris, London, and Vienna

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Submitted: 28 April 2022 | Accepted: 23 August 2022 | Published: 22 November 2022

### Abstract

High-rise buildings have been experiencing a significant boom worldwide over the past two decades. This is true not least for European cities, where church steeples, town hall towers, and chimneys were the main vertical accents in city centers for a long time. This article focuses on the construction of high-rise buildings as a “glocal” phenomenon. The vertical building type has spread around the world, but approaches to it are site-specific and inextricably entangled with local problems, modes of action, and discourses. Construction strategies and discussions about tall buildings are quite diverse even in Europe alone. Presenting case studies of Paris, London, and Vienna, this article looks at three metropolises in which vertical building has caused particular unrest in recent years and reveals enlightening contrasts between them. In exploring the question of how distinctions are made in these cities between desirable and quasi-illegitimate buildings, or “possible” and “impossible” locations, I analyze city-specific patterns relating to vertical construction. Special attention is paid to urban planning—the activities of those actors who are responsible for developing strategies and implementing and concretizing legal regulations. The discussion draws on a larger research project and is based on the grounded theory research perspective. The data pool includes a large number of published and unpublished documents as well as interviews with actors from the fields of urban planning, architecture, and historic preservation. From a theoretical point of view, the article draws on reflections on the “specificity of cities” and “glocalization” in urban research.

### Keywords

cityscape; glocalization; high-rise building; sociology of architecture; specificity of cities; urban politics

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Vertical Cities: The Development of High-Rise Neighbourhoods” edited by Brian Webb (Cardiff University) and James T. White (University of Glasgow).

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### 1. Introduction

High-rise buildings have been experiencing a significant boom worldwide over the past two decades. After going through various cycles, the towering building type now plays a prominent role in debates about urban development and is shaping the face of cities more than ever before. This is especially true for China and the Gulf region, where metropolises are rising to the sky at a particularly rapid pace (Acuto, 2010; Graham, 2018; Ren, 2013). But such projects are also increasing in European cities, where—with the exception of Frankfurt—church and town hall towers and chimneys were the main vertical accents in city centers for a long time (Drozd et al.,

2018; Glauser, 2019). This trend towards a stronger verticalization of the cityscape touches on fundamental questions of urbanity and power in urban spaces and is highly controversial in many places.

This article explores high-rises as a “glocal” phenomenon. The towering building type has spread around the world, but approaches to it are decidedly site-specific and inextricably entangled with local problems, modes of action, and discourses. It would therefore be too short-sighted to interpret the worldwide spread of the vertical building simply as a trend toward standardization in a globalized world. In Europe alone, construction strategies and discussion constellations are highly diverse (Appert et al., 2018; Bach & Murawski, 2020;

Dixon, 2010; Greco, 2018). In this sense, vertical construction is a particularly illustrative example of the intertwining of globalization and localization dynamics in the contemporary world (Czarniawska, 2010; Robertson, 1995). Furthermore, it would be too reductive to simply trace local variations in high-rise buildings back to economic dynamics. The phrases “form follows capital” and “form follows finance” certainly identify some crucial aspects since a skyline does have economic preconditions. The construction of tall buildings, not to mention the development of entire high-rise clusters, requires a considerable concentration of capital and a willingness to invest in this way in certain places (Koster et al., 2014; Willis, 1995). However, while economic aspects are certainly important, they alone cannot account for how and why architectural patterns emerge in certain cities. In order to understand the current developments in dealing with vertical construction, it is crucial to take into account political conditions and especially the longer-term nature of cultural dimensions, which are the center of interest here (Charney et al., 2022; Glauser, 2019).

This article studies city-specific patterns in dealing with high-rise buildings based on the examples of Paris, London, and Vienna. It illuminates the politics of vertical construction and building strategies in these cities by analyzing predominant connotations of high-rise buildings and the logic applied to distinguish “desirable” from “quasi-illegitimate” buildings and “possible” from “impossible” locations. Special attention is paid to urban planning—the activities of those actors who are responsible for developing strategies and for implementing and concretizing legal regulations. The focus is primarily on the last twenty-five years, during which decisive shifts have become apparent in the three cities, but well-established socio-spatial patterns have also been reproduced. But what is considered a high-rise building? Even though this study primarily observes and explores different forms of definitional work in various cities, this is an important point to clarify. The definitions of when a building counts as a “high-rise” vary depending on the context. For example, while the International Highrise Award, which is presented in Frankfurt every two years, requires a minimum height of 100 meters, this limit is significantly lower in the building codes of many European cities, which specify a height of around 25 meters; this height is based, among other things, on the dimensions of the turntable ladders used by firefighters (Taillandier et al., 2009). Unless otherwise stated, this study largely shares this definition concerning the investigated urban practices.

From a theoretical angle, this article mainly draws on the conceptual reflections on the “specificity of cities” developed at the interface between architecture, sociology, and urban geography (Diener et al., 2015; Parnell & Robinson, 2017; Schmid, 2015). While early socio-scientific approaches in urban research focused mainly on the differences between metropolises and rural regions or small towns—typical of this is Simmel’s

(1903/1997) classic essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life”—in recent decades interest has increasingly turned not only to intertwined urban and rural developments but also to the differences between metropolises and the question of how the particularities of cities are formed and reproduced (Diener et al., 2015; Löw, 2012; Soja & Kanai, 2007). In connection with this, the question of comparing cities has acquired new priority and relevance (Robinson, 2010, 2015; Wood, 2022). The concept of the “specificity of cities” encourages us to study the characteristic features of a city comprehensively. On the one hand, it takes into account the materiality of the city and emphasizes the built “urban territory” as a starting point for further development which is thus crucial to understanding path dependencies: “The built environment cannot be changed overnight, or at least not without causing massive destruction and devaluation of existing investments. Thus an urban fabric arises that can often barely be fundamentally changed and can only be adjusted with considerable efforts” (Schmid, 2015, p. 295). The urban fabric is, in material terms, a major reason why towering buildings encounter very different local conditions as they spread globally. On the other hand, the theoretical focus—addressed by the term “power structures” understood in a broad sense—is on the multiple forces that shape the urban territory and the ways urbanization is steered and controlled (Schmid, 2015, p. 297). Special attention is given to regulations, characterized as “explicit or implicit rules of play that apply in a particular area,” encompassing not only laws or explicit orders, but also powerful ideas of what a city should look like, what constitutes the respective city, and what does or does not fit in with it (Schmid, 2015, pp. 297–298). This aspect of formative images of cities is particularly relevant to understanding vertical construction and its underlying cultural dimensions, but it has received little attention compared to the formal and legal regulations of high-rise construction. Therefore, this article is especially interested in the prevailing modes of how Paris, London, and Vienna are interpreted by local actors. I will emphasize that the city-specific approaches to and ideas behind high-rise construction are closely interwoven with the prevailing images of the respective city. These images function as highly selective, interpretative models which are used as prominent reference points in high-rise strategies and justifications.

The discussion of city images as powerful interpretative models is further explored by illuminating city-specific patterns of observation, comparison, and imitation. The theoretical inspiration for this is drawn from the perspective of Scandinavian institutionalism or “discursive institutionalism” (Alasuutari, 2015; Czarniawska, 2010). Examining such patterns and looking at which other cities function as reference points for a given city is crucial to understanding the circulation and local appropriation of globalized patterns such as the tall building type (Czarniawska, 2010; Jacobs, 2006). Practices of observation and comparison are closely

linked to the representations of a given metropolis; what does or does not constitute a particular city is never imagined in isolation from other places. The way urban actors direct their attention to and focus on other cities (as positive or negative points of reference, as being similar or different) can be conceived of as a process of “identity and alterity construction” (Czarniawska, 2010, p. 15–16). It is characteristic of this perspective that negative references are considered just as relevant as positive references for understanding what makes a city tick in terms of self-definition (Czarniawska, 2010, p. 33). A primary goal of this article is to illuminate how the dynamics of “identity and alterity construction” are related to specific approaches to vertical building.

The following discussion draws on a larger research project on the politics of vertical construction in European metropolises based on the grounded theory research perspective (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010; Strübing, 2019). This approach is defined by a close connection between fieldwork, data collection, and data analysis. The field research for this project, including conducting interviews, mainly took place between 2010 and 2015. In this period, important political, legal, and building developments occurred in relation to high-rise construction in the three cities of interest. To examine the most recent trends, additional research was undertaken on regulations and building dynamics. The data pool includes a large number of published and unpublished documents, such as legal foundations (building codes and regulations), high-rise concepts and mission statements, policy position papers, urban development studies, documents related to historic preservation, and articles in the press. Furthermore, the study is based on 23 topic-centered, non-standardized interviews conducted with actors from the fields of urban planning, architecture, and historic preservation in Paris (5), London (5), and Vienna (6), as well as with certain relevant experts in these fields based in other countries such as Germany, Switzerland, and Spain (7). Last but not least, this study draws on a particular ethnographic method of urban research that Burckhardt (1995/2015) called “strolology.” To understand the formative architectural structures as well as the much-discussed lines of sight, extensive on-site explorations in the three cities were essential, especially in the first phase of the research project.

Presenting case studies of Paris, London, and Vienna, the article focuses on three metropolises in which vertical building has caused particular unrest in recent years (Charney et al., 2022; Glauser, 2019; Guinand, 2020). Revealing contrasts between these cities become apparent here, particularly against the backdrop of certain shared traits. Each of these three metropolises is the capital of a (largely) centralized country and a highly frequented tourist destination. From a global perspective, they are also important economic, cultural, and political centers, albeit with different emphases. The contemporary urban forms of these cities are the result of complex formation processes that have taken place

over centuries and are thus the product of various societal conditions and building strategies characteristic of them. In urban research and architectural history, these metropolises have received special attention not least because, in the second half of the 19th century, when they were among the largest cities in the world (and, in the case of London and Paris, the centers of the largest colonial empires), they became the scene of radical, standard-setting urban transformations (Benjamin, 1935/2006; Jacobs, 1994; Olsen, 1988). Concerning the 20th century and the formative role of the Cold War, it is important to consider that these cities only bring with them the experience of one side of the East–West divide in Europe. Although they have provided important examples of socialist or social-democratic housing construction in certain phases of history—particularly noteworthy in this context are the intensive building activities associated with “Red Vienna” in the interwar period and the projects of the Greater London Council (1965–1986) in London (Blau, 1999; Harnack, 2014)—these cities are strongly shaped by a capitalist societal and economic context and are lacking experience of state socialist urbanism (Hatherley, 2016; Stanek, 2020). As a result of political prioritization and the presence of strong heritage lobbies, the architectural heritage in each of these cities today is the focus of (re)staging and is almost excessively managed. At the same time, urban actors in all three cases are striving for a “modern,” contemporary cityscape to a certain degree—and they are taking different paths in doing so, as will be outlined in more detail below. There are, in principle, countless ways to compare Paris, London, and Vienna. Based on a grounded theory approach, I have deliberately refrained from comparing the three cases along predefined, standardized dimensions. Rather, this research perspective is based on continuous comparison in the closely interwoven phases of data collection and analysis (Czarniawska, 2010, p. 4–5). Against the background of the theoretical considerations outlined above, the aim is to reconstruct the categories relevant to the specific urban contexts and also to focus on how local actors themselves compare cities when discussing the respective high-rise policies.

## **2. Paris: Beauty (*beauté*) Above All: Towers and a Ring Road as a Picture Frame**

Paris is an illuminating case as regards vertical construction in that the city has adopted quite different and even contradictory strategies in its history of dealing with the towering building type. On the one hand, Paris has been an important source of impetus for high-rise construction. This is particularly true of the construction of the Eiffel Tower (324 meters) for the 1889 World’s Fair and, from the 1950s onwards, the development of the La Défense office district in the west of Paris—outside the city limits but closely connected to the center (Barthes, 1979/1997; Evenson, 1981; Marrey, 2008, p. 31). On the other hand, high-rise buildings



have been almost completely banned from the city for a longer period, largely as a reaction to post-war vertical construction efforts. Between the late 1950s and mid-1970s, not only were numerous high-rise developments built in the suburbs of Paris, but there were also determined efforts (now mostly forgotten) to transform Paris *intra muros* into a veritable high-rise metropolis (Cupers, 2014; Marrey, 2008, p. 34). During this period, the towers built in Paris were among the tallest in Europe at the time, such as the 1973 210-meter Tour Montparnasse (Figure 1). Yet these vertical ambitions came under heavy criticism in the context of real estate scandals and generally changing political, social, and economic conditions. Particularly among the political elite, the prevailing conviction was that there should be no high-rise construction on Parisian urban terrain—high-rise buildings should only be realized beyond the city limits (Sandrini, 2014). In 1977, strict height limits were introduced that were practically tantamount to a ban on high-rises in the whole city. Building heights were limited to 25 meters for the inner districts and 37 meters for the outer districts, and several vertically ambitious building projects that had already been approved were stopped at the highest political level (Marrey, 2008, p. 37). Thus, within a few years, the attitude towards vertical construction in Paris fundamentally changed; instead of becoming a vertical city, Paris developed some of the world’s most restrictive building regulations.

From the early 2000s onwards, Paris began to rediscover vertical buildings, and its strict attitude towards vertical construction has increasingly been questioned. It is no coincidence that this came at a time when the topic of high-rise buildings was in the air in other cities, too; London in particular set the course for more vertical construction (Charney et al., 2022; McNeill, 2010). Bertrand Delanoë, a member of the Parti Socialiste and mayor of Paris from 2001 to 2014, signaled as soon as he took office that the limits for vertical building in the city should be reassessed. This position was supported by renowned French architects, namely Dominique Perrault, Jean Nouvel, and Christian de Portzamparc, who also publicly advocated an end to the ban on high-rise buildings in Paris (Marrey, 2008, p. 40). This triggered heated debates; high-rise construction has been highly controversial in Paris, and the idea of increasing the building heights came close to a taboo. After several years of disputes, the city parliament decided in 2010 that building practices should be opened up for individual high-rise buildings with special aesthetic qualities, with a maximum height of 180 meters and at a clear distance from the city center and its historical structures (Glaser, 2019, pp. 78–80; Mairie de Paris, 2011). It is no coincidence that the six potential new high-rise locations that had been evaluated by experts in the years before at the behest of the city government and planning authorities are all



**Figure 1.** Tour Montparnasse, Paris. Source: Photo by © Martin Argyroglo.



close to the city limits and the Boulevard Périphérique (Marrey, 2008). Furthermore, it is significant that recent vertical building projects on Parisian urban terrain have been entrusted almost entirely to “star architects”—that is, architectural offices symbolically consecrated by the award of the Pritzker Architecture Prize and aptly characterized by Sklair (2010) as producers of “iconic architecture,” closely intertwined with capitalist globalization (Gravari-Barbas & Renard-Delautre, 2015). The Renzo Piano Building Workshop is responsible for the new

courthouse in the Clichy-Batignolles district; the architects Herzog & de Meuron are behind the design of the Triangle building to be erected at the Porte de Versailles exhibition center; and the Atelier Jean Nouvel designed the Tours Duo 1 & 2 built in the Masséna-Bruneseau quarter (Figure 2). It is no coincidence that all of these architects have made a name for themselves primarily through the design of museums or concert halls and have a comparatively “artistic” image (Foster, 2011; Gravari-Barbas, 2020).



**Figure 2.** Tours Duo, Paris. Source: Photo by © Martin Argyroglo.



An urban planner in Paris explained the official agenda in an interview: high-rise buildings in Paris were to be built only in a few individual cases—as monuments in the form of “some very beautiful towers”—in locations where the dazzling new projects should signal an improved connection between the suburbs and the city of Paris and “add intensity and attractiveness” to sites near the Boulevard Périphérique ring road, which are characterized as urban problem zones due to heavy emissions and limited permeability. Urban planning and development policies continue to be guided by the principle that the center of Paris should be characterized by historical structures and that eye-catching new towers can only be tolerated on the periphery (in the truest sense of the word). The relevant urban planner justifies this with the argument that historical structures lend Paris its particular *beauté* or “beauty”:

What makes Paris beautiful and charming is above all its architectural unity. We think that it is more interesting for the reputation, the attractiveness of Paris to preserve this urban form, rather, I would say almost,

than to disfigure it by putting a tower next to Notre Dame, for example, or a tower next to the Louvre.

The prevailing understanding of Paris which underlies this approach is that the city is an outstanding example of beauty that has evolved historically, if not the most beautiful city in the world. This formulaic and seemingly self-evident description of Paris has been influential since the 1970s and is closely linked to the idea that anything that could endanger the beauty of Paris should be kept out of it (Marrey, 2008; Sandrini, 2014). Key dimensions of the “urban territory” in this context are the city limits, materialized in a peculiar way in the Boulevard Périphérique ring road built between 1963 and 1973 to replace the city walls of the mid-19th century (*fortifications de Thiers*; Figure 3; see also Cohen & Lortie, 1992; Cupers, 2014; Schmid, 2015, p. 298). They function as a symbolically important distinction and kind of “picture frame.” Anything that is not clearly singular or that evokes associations of quantity rather than quality—high-rise buildings in clusters, for example—is excluded from Paris proper and relegated to the

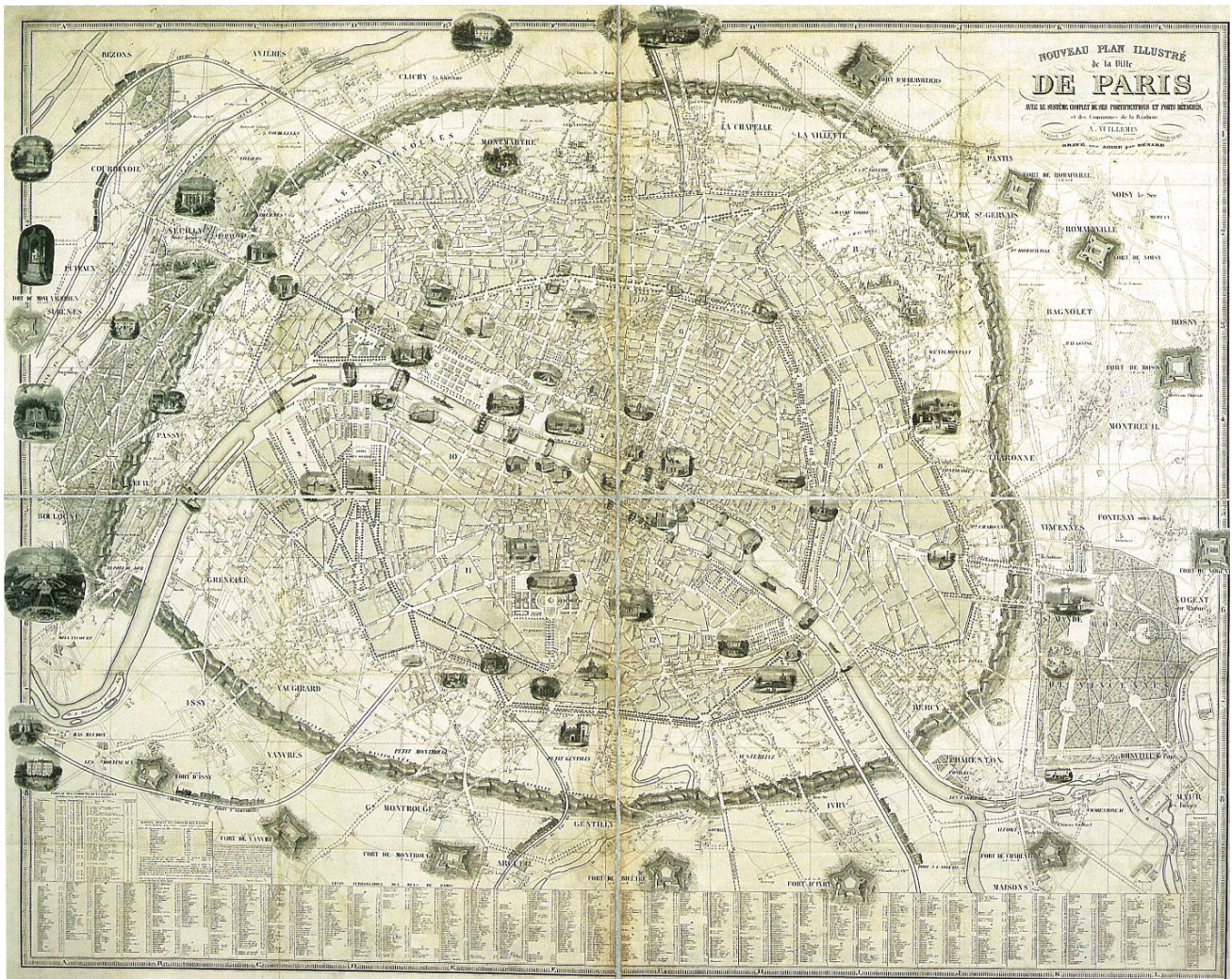


Figure 3. The new illustrated map of Paris, 1847. Source: Pinol (1996, p. 43).



suburbs (La Défense remains a key location for office towers). The relationship between Paris and its diverse suburbs is characterized by the interviewed urban planners mainly as a complementary one, and a staff member of the urban planning department stresses that “everything fits together quite well.” This should not, however, obscure the fact that we are talking about a distinctive, long-established center–periphery structure. It is important to emphasize that the gesture described above has not only been effective in relation to buildings in Paris but also in relation to social groups. The tendency to displace dominated classes to certain suburbs was already characteristic of the radical urban restructuring under Haussmann during the Second Empire (1852–1870), and it has been a predominant pattern again since the 1970s in connection with migrants from the territories of France’s former colonies (Castel, 2007; Lefebvre, 1968/2005). The distinction between Paris *intra muros* and the *banlieues* is widely embedded in power relations, both from a material and a symbolic point of view, and is thus also linked to questions of social inequality, even though the suburbs are by no means homogeneous, especially in socio-economic terms (Castel, 2007; Le Galès, 2020).

Even if, after 33 years of banning high-rise buildings, the construction of new towers is sometimes regarded as a kind of revolution in Paris, it is important to remember that when dealing with vertical construction, patterns are being applied that are by no means new but are strongly anchored in history. This also applies to predominant orientation patterns. The fact that high-rise construction became such a pressing issue in Paris in the early 2000s is no doubt closely linked to the fact that London was clearly setting the course for increased verticalization in the same period. The city of London has been an important reference for Paris for centuries (Olsen, 1988), and the British capital stands out clearly as an unrivaled reference point in the current discussions about vertical construction in Paris. What is striking about London is that it serves as the favorite example of both proponents and opponents of vertical building. When the former—particularly representatives of the fields of urban planning, architecture, and journalism—point out the danger that Paris could be left behind in terms of contemporary architecture, London often tops the list of cities exerting a kind of pressure to act. It usually sits alongside Barcelona, Rotterdam, Vienna, Frankfurt, and sometimes Berlin, all of which are Western European metropolises (Taillandier et al., 2009). Conversely, those who associate the increased construction of high-rise buildings with the ruin of Parisian beauty typically also refer to London. These references, however different they may be, are always presented as self-evident. It simply seems to be “clear” in Paris that London is thematically relevant. Even though actors in Paris are obviously not interested in directly imitating London’s approach to the high-rise issue—as we will see in the following section, London is taking a completely

different and much more radical path in this respect—and although Paris deals with high-rise construction in a very specific way, there is a clear connection between vertical construction in Paris and London on an observational level.

### 3. London: Verticalization of the Center and the Obsession With a “Global City Look”

The cityscape of London has changed drastically in the last two decades. While the British capital was long considered the epitome of a “scattered city” (Rasmussen, 1937, p. 23), mainly characterized by extensive flat structures, today it is one of the few European metropolises—together with Frankfurt, Istanbul, and Moscow—in which entire clusters of towers are growing skywards even in central locations. More than in any other Western European city, the London city government and planning authorities banked on tall buildings and set the course for London to achieve a high-rise skyline in a short period (Charney, 2007; Glauser, 2019, pp. 99–100; McNeill, 2010). Their strategy aimed at nothing less than a verticalization of the city’s historical and economic center (Craggs, 2018; Tavernor, 2004). In and around the actual City of London with its banks and insurance companies—but now in many other parts of the metropolis as well—numerous towers have been erected in a veritable *tour de force*, some of which are among the tallest in Europe. This is especially true of the Shard London Bridge, a 310-meter high-rise designed by Renzo Piano (Figure 4). London has thus departed from the idea common in other European cities that the city center should be essentially defined by its historical “heritage.” This idea was also influential in London until the 1990s, and it was embodied by the initially “decentralized” development of clusters of high-rise buildings from the 1980s onwards in Canary Wharf, London’s former dockland area (Carmona, 2009; Jacobs, 1994, p. 760). How is it that so many towers have been built in the center of London within just a few years, against the fierce opposition of English Heritage, while in Paris only a few solitary high-rise buildings at the edge of the city have provoked years of political tug-of-war? How do municipal and planning authorities justify the construction of high-rises even in the proximity of historic buildings and structures? And what interpretation of London underlies these policies?

London’s dramatic verticalization has undeniable social and socio-economic implications (Atkinson, 2019), but it is by no means a direct response to economic conditions. Instead, it is largely the result of an urban policy that was set in motion in the context of New Labour, especially under the former mayor Ken Livingstone (Charney, 2007; Gassner, 2020). It is worth noting that municipal and planning authorities have justified the dramatic verticalization of the cityscape only in part through references to economic “constraints” or the principle of densification, which has been extolled as





**Figure 4.** The Shard, London. Source: Photo from © Moment Open/Getty Images.

a cardinal virtue even though it barely stands up to a reality check—generally speaking, the taller a building is, the more its densification potential and resource efficiency decline, mainly due to safety, distance, and zoning regulations. This was clearly pointed out by a commission engaged by the British parliament as early as 2002 about the planned towers in London (House of Commons, Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee, 2002). Significantly, municipal and planning authorities have also justified the push for vertical construction with the argument that tall buildings are “appropriate” to the appearance and representation of London (Tavernor, 2004). Such justifications, which relate to symbolic and aesthetic criteria, have typically involved the use of metaphorical language which draws parallels between structural verticalization and figurative vertical aspirations and emphasizes London’s supremacy as a world metropolis in Europe. In a political position paper, for example, former mayor Ken Livingstone advocated high-rise construction in London as follows: “London must continue to grow and maintain its global pre-eminence in Europe. London must continue to reach for the skies” (Greater London Authority, 2001, p. 4).

A particularly widespread pattern of explanation and justification stresses that London is one of the most important global cities, together with New York and Tokyo, and therefore needs a “global city look” to adequately express its position as an outstanding financial center and world metropolis (Ren, 2011, p. 13). This interpretative model is almost omnipresent and has to be seen in the light of British colonial history and the role of London in this context. The concept

serves as a substitute narrative for the characterization of London as the “heart of the Empire” (Jacobs, 1994, p. 760), which was formative for a long time and brought London into focus as the center of the greatest world empire in history (King, 1990/2015). This substitute narrative, which defines London as one of the world’s most important global cities, is readily available when it comes to “explaining” the recent construction practice of the British capital and justifying the “necessity” of a skyline. Corresponding ideas appear both in interviews with urban planning representatives and in statements by politicians, as well as in academic papers (Tavernor, 2004). It is particularly revealing that even those actors who are skeptical or dismissive of the newer high-rise construction in London seek to give meaning to it in this way. The following example illustrates this: Peter Miller (pseudonym) works in London as a consultant on urban design issues, was involved in the planning of the Shard skyscraper, among other projects, and has prepared expert reports for local authorities in various other European cities. When interviewed, he said there is no question that the verticalization of London is strongly linked to image considerations. He is convinced that the city government’s primary aim with the new towers was to present London visually as a “modern new city.” The size of the buildings plays a central role in this: “I think there was a very strong feeling that iconic buildings should be tall. That was a statement. And even more that they have to be clustered.” Although Miller is critical of high-rise construction, he defends it, arguing that London is big enough—“twenty-two million people, if you take greater London”—and has enough investors to

afford a skyline. His perspective assumes a positive correlation between the size and economic importance of a city and the height of its buildings. During the interview, he repeatedly emphasized that London plays a special role in Europe, and he vehemently denied the idea that Paris is a suitable city for comparison: “London is a different level. You have to take it at a different scale.” In his account, only the cities of Tokyo and New York are adequate as references (“the three critical global cities”).

This pattern of characterizing London is similar in nature to the dominant pattern of interpretation which states that Paris is a city of outstanding beauty, if not the most beautiful city in the world. These shorthand city descriptions have the character of “certitudes” that are brought into play as a matter of course in the discussion about urban policies and city (image) questions. They are handy and convincing because the selectivity and contingency of the respective interpretations remain largely hidden and thus beyond the reach of questioning. However, these characterizations are by no means neutral; they look at these metropolises from a very specific angle, which makes interventions in the urban territory appear to be selectively (in)appropriate (Schmid, 2015, p. 298). In the case of London, it is noteworthy that the most prominent shorthand formula used to characterize the city since the 1990s and justify its verticalization is linked to a social science discourse and seems to get its power of definition not least from this connection (Brenner & Keil, 2006; King, 1990/2015; Sassen, 1991/2001). The term “global city” has also been present in the world of city rankings for some time, namely, in the form of the Global Cities Index produced by the consulting company A.T. Kearny. The construction of this index is only loosely linked to the social science concept of the global city. The index mainly claims to account for the “global elite” and applies the term “global city” less as an analytical category and more as a label. This use of the term bears similarities to the way it is employed to characterize the city of London in high-rise debates. There, too, the discourse around London as a global city is not primarily analytical, but it clearly has a normative bent to it. When actors in London describe the metropolis as one of the (three) most important global cities, they are suggesting that the city is of special significance worldwide and plays a leading role.

With regard to “identity and alterity construction” (Czarniawska, 2010, p. 16) in London, it is important to emphasize that, in the debates about high-rises and the cityscape, the British capital is generally clearly distinguished from the “Continent” and other European cities, the significance of which is strongly relativized. As a complement to the recurring explicit references to New York (and, to a lesser extent, Tokyo), it is suggested that European cities are of little significance as points of reference for London, either because they are too small or, as in the case of Moscow or Istanbul, because they are not relevant enough or too “different.” The idea of comparing London with other European cities is tantamount

to a taboo. The same is true in a global perspective for comparisons with (vertical) Asian metropolises such as Singapore, Shanghai, or Hong Kong; the UK had colonial relationships with some of these cities until very recently, the effects of which still linger (Jenni, 2015; Ren, 2013). And while much of the investment in London’s real estate market comes from Qatar, China, or Russia, in the context of urban planning and urban policies, great pains are taken to avoid associating London with metropolises in these countries—i.e., with any cities other than New York and Tokyo (Atkinson et al., 2017).

#### **4. Vienna: High-Rise Construction as a Symbol of Regained Centrality**

In some respects, the approach to vertical construction in the Austrian capital stands between the urban planning and high-rise policies of London and Paris. In Vienna, the high-rise building has become a widespread phenomenon, particularly since the early 1990s—after the fall of the Iron Curtain and Austria’s accession to the European Union in 1995. In this euphoric phase of construction, many new high-rises were erected in just a few years (Glauser, 2019; Seiß, 2007). Based on the semantics of internationalization and the concept of Vienna as a “hub between East and West,” the Vienna municipal government and planning authorities initially pursued an aggressive strategy in dealing with vertical construction (Grubbauer, 2011, p. 20; Musner, 2009). Similar to London, the envisioned spatial order did not call for a rigorous separation of historical and contemporary striking architecture. Instead, the aim was to interweave old and new. High-rise buildings were therefore also planned in central locations in the city. Though the municipal and planning authorities refrained from allowing vertical projects in the first district of Vienna, tall buildings were planned, and some were even built, in the zones and districts immediately adjacent to it.

However, the efforts to combine historical and contemporary striking architecture soon collided with the strategy pursued at the same time by the Austrian government to have the entire city center of Vienna recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The approval by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in 2001 to classify the “Historic Centre of Vienna” as a universally significant urban artifact amounted to a kind of refortification of the city center, as delineated by the Ringstraße (Musner, 2009, p. 21). In conjunction with this classification, UNESCO formulated relatively strict principles not only for the “core zone” but also for the “buffer zone” (covering large areas adjacent to the core zone) to prevent visible change in the cityscape on the level of the built urban territory as well as in the city’s prominent sightlines (UNESCO, n.d.). This new regulation of the urban territory caused central locations in the city to become particularly explosive and controversial terrains for striking new architecture. Over the last 20 years, the Viennese municipal government has repeatedly clashed



with the UNESCO World Heritage Committee; the arguments reached their peak (to date) in July 2017 when the “Historic Centre of Vienna” was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger in response to plans to build a 66-meter high-rise for luxury apartments near the Heumarkt (the “core zone” of the respective world heritage site; see Guinand, 2020). Against the background of these years-long conflicts, the municipal government, and planning authorities eventually began to focus their high-rise planning—if not consistently, then at least more than they had originally—on decentralized locations in the city, namely, in an area on the other side of the Danube, close to the UN headquarters and at a clear distance from the historic center. It is no coincidence that the tallest building in the city—the DC Tower 1 with a height of 250 meters designed by French architect Dominique Perrault—rises into the sky on this site (Figure 5).

Vienna’s high-rise strategies have therefore tended to converge with those of Paris, insofar as old and new structures are spatially and visually clearly distanced. However, this should not obscure the fact that the towering building type has very different connotations in the two cities, which is mainly due to divergent historical experiences. While in Paris this building type is often associated with soulless office architecture, ugliness, or social problems (and recently even with terrorism), in Vienna it generally has more positive connota-

tions and continues to stand for modernity and overcoming marginality. At the same time, the fact that the city center is dominated by historical structures is comparatively controversial in Vienna and characterized by ambivalence. While historic structures are almost unanimously associated with beauty in Paris, in Vienna they have by no means only positive connotations. In the interview with a municipal official responsible for high-rise construction, he pointed to the cranes visible from his office in the city center and emphasized, not without pride: “Vienna is growing again....In the eighties, Vienna still had a bit of a depressive mood. Iron curtain, non-EU. We did well, but we were a bit in a vacuum.” For him, these (construction) dynamics are a necessary component of a vibrant city and an essential counterweight to its architectural heritage. In an indirect way, this is a criticism of the prevalence of the historic building structures advocated by historic preservationists. This problematization has a certain tradition in Vienna, since its building heritage bears witness to a time when Vienna was the center of a vast monarchy and not the capital of a small state, as it is today. In this respect, the city’s architectural heritage recalls Vienna’s loss of significance (Musner, 2009).

The approach in Vienna also has specific features in terms of observational patterns, comparative practices, and shorthand descriptions of the city. While in London and Paris, specific individual metropolises determine



**Figure 5.** Donau City, Vienna. Source: Photo by © Hertha Hurnaus.

the field of observation and function as references, the situation in the Austrian capital is more complicated. Depending on the actors or documents in question, various cities emerge as central points of reference, namely Chicago, San Francisco, New York, Paris, and London (Tillner, 2001). Nevertheless, in Vienna, too, these references are by no means arbitrary or removed from collective practice. Instead of a particular city, it is a particular line of vision that shapes the practice of orientation in Vienna and thus also “identity and alterity construction” as described by Czarniawska (2010, p. 16). The dominant perspective here views cities to the west of Vienna as potentially interesting points of orientation, while simultaneously assuming that cities to the east (namely, the capitals of Eastern European countries) are oriented towards the city of Vienna. This clear westward focus and the taboo against an eastward orientation are remarkably consistent in Vienna. This pattern emerges not only in the perspectives and documents of urban planning authorities but also in the opinions of heritage conservationists, whose perceptions are otherwise quite different from those of urban planners in Vienna.

This orientation perspective seems to emerge automatically and is in a peculiar state of tension with the prominent characterization of Vienna as a “hub between East and West” (Grubbauer, 2011, p. 20). This shorthand description—which has been in circulation since the 1990s and was used by the city of Vienna extensively in image campaigns—suggested symmetrical relationships. But when it comes to Vienna’s reconstructed patterns of orientation, there is no hint of the kind of symmetrical relationship implied by the idea of a hub. Interestingly enough, this contradiction hardly seems to be noticed in practice. This and the fact that the one-sided perspective from East to West comes into play so effortlessly points to well-established relations of orientation, whereby the constellation of the Cold War clearly seems to be having an aftereffect. This also manifests in certain perceptions of Vienna as a “marginal” city with a special affinity for the morbid (a topos that is expressed particularly trenchantly in Georg Kreisler’s song *Death Must Be Viennese*) and with alleged deficits in regard to modern structures that need to be remedied following the example of Western metropolises. This understanding of Vienna as a city that needs to “catch up” is not consistent, but it emerges in interviews with older actors who were around retirement age at the time of the interview, and who sometimes explicitly refer to the fact that the Iron Curtain was just 50 km away from Vienna. Nevertheless, this understanding does seem to play an important role in the perception of high-rise construction in Vienna. It is not only (or even primarily) the vision of Vienna as a hub that makes vertical construction appear to be appropriate here; the city’s supposed lack of contemporary structures also makes the trend towards verticalization a largely welcome development (Guinand, 2020).

## 5. Conclusions

If we look at how high-rise buildings are connoted and used in different cities, it becomes clear that they do not have a fixed meaning. The way they are perceived and judged and what they (can) signify have distinct spatially and temporally features and vary widely according to context. In London, clustered high-rises are praised by planning and municipal authorities as indispensable ingredients of a global city that place this metropolis in an exclusive league together with New York and Tokyo. Meanwhile, in Paris, the towering building type is primarily present as a threat to urban beauty and is only desired in very special forms—as solitary buildings or “monuments.” In Vienna, in turn, high-rises are largely a symbol of overcoming marginality and regained prosperity. A central reference problem in urban planning in all three cities is the relationship between the historic city center and newer striking buildings or “iconic architecture” (Sklair, 2010). The debate on new, towering architecture is closely intertwined with the question of how architectural history is to be evaluated, whereby the defining power of the international organization UNESCO also plays a central role (Glauser, 2019; Musner, 2009). Typically, it is not the height of a building itself that is currently or potentially in dispute, but rather its size in relation to the adjacent buildings; this was particularly the case with the controversial building project close to the Heumarkt in Vienna, which despite its relatively modest height of 66 meters became a veritable bone of contention in this context. The metropolises examined here answer this controversial question in markedly different ways. While Paris and Vienna—albeit for different reasons—adhere to the model widespread in Western Europe that the city center should be shaped by historic structures, and that old and new eye-catching architecture are to be clearly separated spatially and visually, London has taken a different path, setting a course (several years before the vote for Brexit) to move away from this model, not only in terms of construction but also concerning relevant orientation points.

The specificity of these cities in which the actual high-rise policies are based was explored mainly in relation to the prevailing images of the cities—the predominant models of interpretation that characterize the respective city’s essence—and, closely linked to this, the reference cities that reflect their central horizons of observation and points of orientation. As we have seen, such (powerful) ideas of what constitutes a respective city and what does or does not fit in with it are largely unquestioned by local actors and typically shared by both opponents and supporters of high-rise buildings. The particular logic behind these models of interpretation and fields of observation, as they shape questions of urban planning and politics in Paris, London, and Vienna, has developed in the close interplay of the individual city’s history and broader geopolitical constellations. In contrast to city rankings, in which numerous



cities (typically worldwide) are placed in relation to one another, the historically ingrained, reconstructed reference relationships are characterized by reduced and specific orientation patterns. The fixation of Parisian actors on London, the strong distancing of actors in London from the “Continent” as well as from a multitude of larger metropolises other than New York and Tokyo, and the omnipresent East-West orientation in Vienna are surrounded by taboos and quasi-implicit prohibitions against comparison. Thus, they are intimately linked to questions of “legitimate” identity and alterity construction and reflect longer-term cultural dimensions. These include the crucial patterns of responding to historically formative constellations, namely, how colonial history or the Cold War are (implicitly) addressed in different cities. These patterns and their genesis deserve to be studied more closely on a global level, as they profoundly affect the way cityscape issues and high-rise buildings are approached today (Bach & Murawski, 2020; Parnell & Robinson, 2017).

### Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to the four anonymous reviewers and the editors of this issue for their valuable comments and suggestions. Furthermore, I would like to thank Jessica Spengler for her outstanding copy-editing.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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