

“Paris is an exemplar of city form, not an anonymous backwater, and its civic markers—Notre-Dame, the Eiffel Tower, Invalides—are historically meaningful iconic elements that enhance and celebrate the public realm. Its woven pattern of public space, its squares and boulevards, constitute its symbolic identity. This book compellingly makes the argument, with thoughtful essays by a remarkable, diverse group of voices, that the case financial and political players make for building towers in Paris is utterly without merit.”

— **Barbara Littenberg**, Co-author with Steven Peterson
of *Space & Anti-Space, the Fabric of Place, City, and Architecture*

“*Paris without Skyscrapers* is an urgent book. It is in its argument obvious: the projects that it describes are appalling. Those who love Paris hope that it is not a prophetic book.”

— **David Berlinski**, American writer and long-time resident of Paris

“Peruse *Paris Without Skyscrapers* and you will understand what the ongoing battle over the skyline – and the very soul – of Paris is all about. In knowledgeable, sometimes passionate but always thoughtful and learned essays, prominent architects, philosophers and activists weigh in on the folly of allowing “starchitects” to erect forests of high rise towers within the limits of the City of Light, robbing it of its identity and turning it into a soulless Dubai-sur-Seine. Saving Paris from this fate is a must. Reading this important book is a requirement.”

– **Harriet Welty Rochefort**,
author *French Toast, French Fried and Joie de Vivre*

“To destroy the example of Paris as a city of civilised streets, built in humane local stone, for the sake of the antiquated and discredited doctrines of the architectural modernists would be a crime against the civilisation of France, and against the European idea of the city.”

—**Roger Scruton**, Writer and Philosopher (1944 – 2020)

“By the end of this important book you too will realize, in the words of a famous leaflet of the Paris Commune: ‘the moment has come to fight with ferocity an enemy who has made pitiless war on us.’”

—**Lynn Ellsworth**, president of NYC citizen activist groups Alliance for a Human-Scale City & Human-Scale NYC, Inc.

“This important book should be required reading for all architecture students. The experts here give you the factual arguments that support what you always felt, that the classical city is a much more livable and future-proof place than all the new skyscraper cities combined. With facts to back up what you feel, you are ready to change the world!”

— **Michael Diamant**, Consultant, New Traditional Architecture and Architectural Rebellion, Stockholm, Sweden.

PARIS WITHOUT SKYSCRAPERS

The Battle to Save the Beauty of the City of Light

Mary Campbell Gallagher, *Editor*

Forewords by Andres Duany, Jan Wuyers, *and* Alexandre Gady

Illustrations by Leon Krier

A project of

The International Coalition for the Preservation of Paris, ICCP

In collaboration with

SOS Paris





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This book is dedicated to the memory of Mary Campbell Gallagher, the editor of this book prior to her passing, and a tireless champion of Paris as a global treasure. The book is also dedicated to Jan Wyers, late vice-president of SOS Paris. He was a man of great good judgment and good humor, and he loved Paris. We miss him.

This book is also dedicated to the people of Paris. They are the beneficiaries and the guardians of a two-thousand-year tradition. May they maintain their courage in defending their invaluable inheritance. This book exists to support them. May we all leave to our descendants a Paris that is as beautiful as the Paris that we have received.

Contents

PREFACE	xi
FOREWORD BY ANDRES DUANY	xi
FOREWORD BY JAN WYERS	xiv
FOREWORD BY ALEXANDRE GADY	xv
INTRODUCTION: A REVOLUTION FOR BEAUTY	xvii
I. PARIS DOES NOT NEED SKYSCRAPERS TO COMPETE AS AN INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL CENTER	1
Corporations Choose Locations for Economic Reasons, Not for Skyscrapers	3
<i>Robert Adam</i>	
II. POLITICIANS, DEVELOPERS, AND STAR ARCHITECTS WANT SKYSCRAPERS IN PARIS	9
Paris Skyscrapers 2008–2021	11
<i>Mary Campbell Gallagher</i>	
Outrage in Paris: On Herzog & de Meuron’s Tour Triangle	15
<i>William J.R. Curtis</i>	
Once Upon a Time There Was the Most Beautiful City in the World	19
<i>Colum Mulhern</i>	
Paris Must Rise Up Against the Tyranny of the Bureaucrat, Financier, and Press Agent	22
<i>James Kalb</i>	
Folly Towering, La Tour de l’immonde	23
<i>David Downie</i>	
III. PARISIANS DO NOT WANT SKYSCRAPERS	25
Skyscraper Plans in Paris: To What Extent Have Parisians Been Consulted?	27
<i>Marie Karel</i>	

Towers: Paris Inspires the Near Suburbs	30
<i>Fabienne Gambiez</i>	
Will We See Skyscrapers in Paris?	31
<i>Alain de La Bretesche</i>	
Towering Masters of Illusion	33
<i>Christine Nedelec</i>	
IV. SKYSCRAPERS WILL INCITE A VICIOUS CYCLE OF EVER-INCREASING BUILDING HEIGHTS	35
Building Heights	37
<i>Leon Krier</i>	
Critical Problems of Plot-Ratios	39
<i>Leon Krier</i>	
PARISIAN CONTRASTS <i>between pages 41 and 42</i>	
V. PARIS DOES NOT NEED SKYSCRAPERS	41
The Tour Triangle, Conquest of the Useless	43
<i>Rémi Koltirine</i>	
No Need for Office Towers in Paris— Plenty of Room in La Défense	45
<i>Jean-Claude Cellier</i>	
To Liberate Paris from Unnecessary Skyscrapers	46
<i>The Paris Tower Team</i>	
The TGI Tower in Batignolles: It takes a village . . . or doesn't it?	48
<i>Corinne LaBalme</i>	
VI. SKYSCRAPERS ARE NOT MODERN, THEY ARE OBSOLETE	51
Towers Are Not Modern	53
<i>Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet. Interviewer: Bernard Gazet for SOS Paris</i>	

Contents

The Skyscraper Is an Obsolete Building Type	55
<i>James Howard Kunstler</i>	
Parisian Skyscrapers Raise Sky-High Concerns	57
<i>John Laurensen</i>	
Note to Paris: Beware of Swiss Bearing Architectural Gifts	59
<i>Don Zivkovic</i>	
VII. SKYSCRAPERS SUCK UP A NEIGHBORHOOD'S URBAN LIFE WHILE CREATING URBAN SPRAWL	63
Skyscrapers Kill the City	65
<i>Nikos A. Salingaros</i>	
Is There a Good Reason to Build Skyscrapers in Paris?	67
<i>Yves Contassot</i>	
Save Paris!	69
<i>Steven W. Semes</i>	
VIII. SKYSCRAPERS ARE UNSUSTAINABLE	72
Paris Deserves Better Than Skyscrapers	75
<i>Thierry Paquot</i>	
The End of the Skyscraper Age	78
<i>Gabriele Tagliaventi</i>	
Is the Tower an Intelligent Contribution to Sustainable Development?	82
<i>Abdeslam Mernissi</i>	
The Wild Forest and the Towers	84
<i>Bertrand Sauzay</i>	
IX. SKYSCRAPERS WILL DIMINISH, NOT INCREASE, THE ECONOMIC VITALITY OF PARIS	87
Will the "Curse of the Skyscrapers" Strike Again?	88
<i>Jan Wjers</i>	

Against the Towers	90
<i>Danielle Simonnet</i>	
The Whole Business Is Rotten!	93
<i>Cyril Bourayne</i>	
The Height of Folly? Evidence of the Destruction of Parisian Urban Heritage	96
<i>Michael W. Mehaffy</i>	
X. SKYSCRAPERS WILL DAMAGE THE UNIQUE CHARACTER OF PARIS	101
Interview with Francesco Bandarin	103
<i>Francesco Bandarin. Interviewer: Eric Bassi, Agence France-Presse</i>	
Skyscrapers Embody a Death Wish for Paris	105
<i>Claire Berlinski</i>	
A Resident's Perspective on Towers in Paris	108
<i>Bruce Liedstrand</i>	
Paris! Towers?	110
<i>Ray Gindroz</i>	
On the Necessity of Place to Paris	112
<i>Christine Huckins Franck</i>	
Let's Dare to Crystallize Paris	114
<i>Harold Hyman</i>	
Desperately Seeking Modernity	116
<i>Leonard Pitt</i>	
XI. THESE SKYSCRAPERS DELIBERATELY IMITATE ARCHITECTURAL FAILURES, NOT SUCCESSES	121
The Tour Triangle: Learn from the Tour Montparnasse	123
<i>Patrice Maire</i>	
Rejecting Valuable Urban Lessons	124
<i>Brian J. Connolly</i>	

Contents

Le Plessis-Robinson: A Model for Smart Growth	126
<i>Charles Siegel</i>	
The Tour Triangle, Vitruvius, and Me	128
<i>Rosemary Flannery</i>	
Winning an Unequal Battle: A Study of the Campaign Against the Gazprom Tower in Saint Petersburg	132
<i>Olga Dobryanskaya</i>	
XII. SKYSCRAPERS WILL DIM THE BRIGHT FUTURE OF PARIS	137
Towers: The Wrong Solution for the Future of Paris	139
<i>Olivier de Monicault</i>	
The Paris Sky	141
<i>David Garrard Lowe</i>	
How the New Courthouse Steals the History of Paris	143
<i>Cyril Bourayne and Richard Malka</i>	
Paris: A Tale of Two Possible Cities	145
<i>Joan Z. Shore</i>	
Preserving the Role of Paris in Civilizing Cities	148
<i>Carroll William Westfall</i>	
Paris Awaits Its Silent Tipping Point	151
<i>David Brussat</i>	
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	156
BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND ADVISORY COMMITTEE, ICPP	163
DONORS	164
ABOUT THE EDITOR	167
ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR	168
INDEX	170

Preface

The world's dreams of lovely Paris were shattered in April of 2021, when a storm erupted on Twitter with Parisians posting thousands of pictures of garbage in the streets of the world's most beautiful city. Under the hashtag #saccageParis ("chaos in Paris" or "the sacking of Paris"), Parisians posted images showing that in place of its charming nineteenth-century street furniture, the city was installing banal modernist kiosks and concrete benches. Media worldwide reported the story.

As the world was unaware, however, the sacking of Paris did not begin yesterday. Since at least 2008, the city's leaders have ignored Parisians' love for their city's beauty. They have neglected basic maintenance of public spaces. They have sponsored competitions to "reinvent" Paris. Most important, contrary to residents' wishes, they have made plans to build skyscrapers on the periphery of the city in the style of the universally-despised Montparnasse Tower, rupturing the famous skyline.

Future leaders of Paris can collect the garbage and recreate the traditional kiosks and benches. Skyscrapers, however, once built, are a mistake that is not so easily corrected. Paris must halt the skyscrapers program immediately.

On behalf of lovers of Paris in the whole world, this book opposing skyscrapers is our contribution to Parisians' battle for the beauty of the City of Light.

Foreword

Andres Duany

This book shatters the illusion that Paris will always be beautiful. Among the great cities of the world, Paris is the one whose beauty most depends on the visual harmony of its buildings.

But now, a plan to build skyscrapers is at the gates. The first barbaric towers have already entered. In other ways, as well, elected leaders are degrading Paris.

Proponents of these new high-rises disingenuously suggest that without them, Paris will stagnate—becoming a tourist destination locked in its waning past. This fear-mongering is by the self-interested, motivated by the profit and prestige that large-scale projects yield. Some politicians have been led to believe that “tall is modern” and “short is outmoded.” It is astonishing to think that a city of six to eleven stories is considered too short! Admittedly, towers will add visual, political, and cultural discord to the city, which the avant-garde would welcome as an expression “of the times.”

The barbarism of the skyscrapers is that they would discard precisely those conventions of size, detail, and material that give Paris its harmony and, not incidentally, its marvelous way of life.

This book provides the essential arguments against the towers. The publisher, the International Coalition for the Preservation of Paris (ICPP), its committee of advisers, and its founder, Mary Campbell Gallagher, have fought through publications, in lecture halls, and on the Internet. The French association SOS Paris has carried the fight to the streets, to the commission rooms, and to the courtrooms of Paris.

The contributors are respected architects, authors, lawyers, and urbanists. Many are residents of Paris. None of them have a vested interest in the skyscrapers. They do understand that Paris is a living city and that it is in the nature of cities to evolve and to change. They thus seek to distinguish the changes likely to be consistent with the character of Paris from those certain to degrade it.

They argue that the present urbanism of Paris is essential to the daily life of its neighborhoods, and that the public spaces that are its pride are defined by the steady cornice line of the surrounding buildings. This is not hypothesis—it is

a technical fact—the result of Haussmann’s codes, which prescribe most aspects of Parisian buildings. They determine the permitted height of a building, which depends on the width of the street and how much balconies should project, and they even favor the locally quarried stone that makes it a “white city.” Paris is one of the few cities whose everyday visual character immediately identifies it. Other cities are recognizable by a prominent signature building. But Paris can dispense with that. Thanks to Haussmann, its conventional avenues or boulevards will do the job.

Haussmann’s codes have persisted for a century and a half. Napoleon III and Haussmann were in power less than two decades. But their technical guidelines were in place from approximately 1860 to 1960, when President Pompidou suspended them, beginning the depredations made explicit by the grotesque Tour Montparnasse. Equally sordid were the new clusters around Les

Halles. The response to the Tour Montparnasse was such that the next president, the cultured Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, promptly reinstated Haussmann’s code. Paris thereby secured an additional thirty years of visual harmony. Thus banished from the center, architects made the outskirts of Paris the laboratory for their

“THIS BOOK
IS IMPORTANT,
BECAUSE PARIS
IS IMPORTANT.”

experiments. Anyone who has visited La Défense, or the demoralizing housing like Les Tours Aillaud, knows that the only lesson these places offer is that their mistakes should never be repeated.

Given their success, Haussmann’s codes should not be discarded now—certainly not on the whim of a transient mayoral administration, and against the expressed desire of the Parisian people themselves.

Perhaps those who will profit financially are influencing the political decisions—there would be nothing unusual about that. But it is also possible that the demand for building sites within Haussmann’s Paris is driven by something more sinister: the insecurity of architects who know that their buildings elsewhere have failed to foster a vital street life. La Défense, for all its density and architectural “innovation,” is a dismal place. Its adjacency to Paris has prompted constant comparison and has become a permanent indictment of the failure of the avant-garde. Now, because the traditional core of Paris is bustling with life, the architects *insist* on being allowed to build amid that

urban vitality that their own creations cannot foster. The proposed high-rises must therefore be understood as parasitic, dependent for success upon the pre-existing urban setting—which, ironically, they will cause to wither.

And we should not forget a major issue: Paris is *already at its carrying capacity*. Its boulevards can hold no more cars; the Métro is already saturated; the schools cannot absorb more students. Most humiliating of all for Paris is the explicit envy of the high-rise campaign of London. With its cool new buildings, London is a frisson from the distance, but it is also a torment of density. Ride the London Underground to experience physically the unpleasantness of *exceeding the carrying capacity*.

Paris is at a crossroads. It faces a choice. This book invites us to take a stand at the moment when Paris must choose to retain its exemplary life-supporting urbanism or be degraded into another generic world city of architectural fashion.

This book matters, because Paris matters.

ANDRES DUANY is founding partner, DPZ CoDESIGN, Miami, Florida.

Foreword

Jan Wyers

When SOS Paris was founded in 1973, the construction of the Montparnasse tower was already nearing completion. President Pompidou had other plans to modernize Paris, including a "cardo," a north-south highway right through Paris with tunnels under the city and entrances in the city center. We worked hard to prevent that project from becoming reality, and we won that battle. But despite protests, other tall buildings went up, among them the Beaugrenelle towers on the Front de Seine, twenty high-rise residential and office buildings at a height of nearly 328 feet (100m), or 30 stories. Fortunately, President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing decided to listen to the Parisians, and he limited the height of any new construction to about 120 feet (37m) on the periphery.

In 2008, however, newly reelected mayor Bertrand Delanoë introduced plans for even higher buildings, up to 590 feet (180m) to be built on the outskirts of Paris. The leading project was the Tour Triangle, a 40- to 48-story flattened pyramid that would cut the Exhibition Park at the Porte de Versailles in half. This project has been the focus of our battles in recent years: several protest marches have been organized. Many politicians, from both the right and the left, have supported our cause, and they still do.

“OUR BATTLE TO PRESERVE THE PARIS SKYLINE GOES ON.”

was the Tour Triangle, a 40- to 48-story flattened pyramid that would cut the Exhibition Park at the Porte de Versailles in half. This project has been the focus of our battles in recent years: several protest marches have been organized.

In a November 17, 2014, session, the City Council voted against the Tour Triangle, but Mayor Anne Hidalgo, successor to Delanoë, was undeterred. She declared the vote illegal on a technicality, and she took the fight to court and won. Nonetheless, we, too, are undeterred.

Our battle to preserve the Paris skyline goes on. This book sets out many arguments against high-rise buildings in Paris—and all of them are valid!

JAN WYERS (1939–2019) *was vice-president of SOS Paris.*

Foreword

Alexandre Gady

A book such as this warms the hearts of Parisians who love their city: a collection of essays from writers around the world, including the United States, that very model of modernity that we in France were late to take up and consequently render in an almost ridiculous fashion as we run from one new style to the other. Sometimes it is best to take a little distance in order to gain a better perspective. This book stands as a warning. It shows us that Paris belongs not only to France, but to a humanity committed to transmitting and preserving the singular beauty of the City of Light.

Since its appearance more than a century ago, the skyscraper, a pure creation of Western culture, has conquered the planet to the point of becoming commonplace, expressing a race for height between capitals and nations, a test of virility translated into tons of steel, glass, and concrete.

The challenges skyscrapers present regarding issues of aesthetics, structure, function, etc. fade from view when it comes to understanding them within the greater cultural context. Then it becomes clear that, with an almost religious zeal, the skyscraper stands as the ultimate symbol of modernity,

The truth, however, is that skyscrapers are buildings of the past, a hackneyed image of power and economic arrogance that indeed marked the twentieth century, but whose utility today has been rendered outmoded.

“THIS BOOK
STANDS AS A
WARNING.”

Aesthetic questions aside, the skyscraper symbolizes a culture that seeks to dominate. That is why it is such a blatant expression of ego and individualism. By its very height it imposes itself on the community altering our view of the landscape and reducing our visual experience. We lose the sense of wholeness of the urban fabric and instead see isolated objects each screaming for attention.

New York stands out as the ultimate symbol of a city dominated by skyscrapers. But there are other major cities without skyscrapers, small in number, such as Rome or Venice, that all embody a deep respect for their past, and thus deserve our respect.

Paris was of this category. In the 1950s, city officials wanted to build

their Parisian version of Manhattan but wisely chose to realize their reveries of modernity outside of Paris, in La Défense. But then came the Pompidou years. Elected president in 1969, he inverted the equation, declaring there will indeed be skyscrapers in Paris. In an attempt to pass himself off as the sensitive thinker, he emphasized that he would build them everywhere but not in the center of the city. This is code for “not in the wealthy districts.” They would be spared. It was the poorer Paris districts, like place d’Italie, place des Fêtes, Front de Seine, etc., that would be graced with very tall buildings. As part of his arrogant brand of vandalism he also tore down the old central market, Les Halles, and created a highway along the Seine. We recall with horror his famous declaration: “We must give up our outmoded aesthetic and adapt Paris to the automobile.”

Years later that policy has been recognized as a failure. Uninformed city officials managed to diminish the capital but without building the New York of their dreams. Today, these buildings built during the three postwar decades of prosperity stand in a sorry state of decay and face the prohibitive cost of maintaining and upgrading them to modern standards.

Forty years later, urbanists are still promoting this same model of city planning emphasizing that they will densify the periphery of Paris. No one seems to care that while this protects the wealthier bourgeois population living in the center of Paris it also exacerbates the huge divide between Paris and its neglected suburbs. On the contrary, an opposite approach is needed: one that expands the city beyond the borders established in 1860. This is the purpose of Grand Paris, a project launched more than ten years ago, that struggles to overcome obstacles that continue to maintain the suburbs as a collection of feudal states.

A little daring is called for here! We cannot allow the future of the most beautiful city in the world to fall into the hands of clever real estate speculators who, while making a pretense of caring for the city, in truth care little for the culture, history, the very soul of Paris, and seek only to profit from it.

ALEXANDRE GADY *is professor of art history at the University of Paris-Sorbonne and Honorary President of the Society for the Protection of Landscapes and Aesthetics of France (SPPEF)(Sites & Monuments).*

Introduction

A Revolution for Beauty

We'll Always Have Paris—Or Will We?

The world loves Paris for its beauty. Paris is the world's city, and most people think that it will always be beautiful. But Paris is in peril: its leaders are about to destroy the city's beauty. Despite polls, protests, and lawsuits showing that residents oppose tall buildings, its leaders are erecting colossal glass-walled skyscrapers at the old gates of the capital and degrading the city's appearance elsewhere.* The city is dirty, and they are trashing or selling its street furniture. This book is an urgent call to the world to support the people of Paris. We seek a revolution for beauty. *Beauty is worth fighting for.*

From Cairo to Buenos Aires to San Francisco, cities have imitated the wide tree-lined avenues and human scale of Paris. Parisians and visitors alike love the city's uniqueness: its hierarchy of public squares, streets, and buildings; its low skyline of six- to eight-story buildings set compactly together, its livable, walkable human scale, its small shops and vibrant street life. They love its enchanting filigreed density, its grand royal buildings with gardens, apartment houses with courtyards glimpsed through latticed iron gates, the Seine crossing the city, the boulevards penetrating the old neighborhoods and crossed in turn by narrow alleys, while above, the towers of Notre-Dame and the Eiffel Tower proclaim the greatness of God and of France. All in a bustling city of two million people with high culture and a history that goes back to the Romans. Home to the Enlightenment, to Voltaire and Rousseau, Paris was also the birthplace of the Modern, known for writers Jean Cocteau and Albert Camus, painters Manet and Chagall and Picasso. And every few feet, it seems, is a sidewalk café, for a coffee or a glass of wine.

Paris is a great collective work of art. Whether it was Henri IV creating the place des Vosges, Cardinal Richelieu building the Palais-Royal, Napoleon I

* As of this writing, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic makes office towers look as hazardous to public health as cruise ships and pointless for many employees who can work at home, but still those leaders persist.

Introduction

extending the rue de Rivoli, or the city creating the quais along the Seine or planting trees along the boulevards, the aim has been to make the city beautiful. Public spaces and architectural ensembles were more important than individual buildings.

In this book, forty-nine experts, half of them Parisians, address the urgent current crisis: Paris is about to destroy its beauty. Drawing on a range of disciplines, from architecture to economics, from literature to urbanism, they show that while the traditional urbanism and architecture of Paris are an unparalleled success, plans for one particular type of development—skyscrapers—put that success in jeopardy. Paris, we argue, must change by evolution, not by rupture. One of the world’s glories is at stake. As Olivier de Monicault, honorary president of SOS Paris, says, “*The beauty of Paris is not a renewable resource.*”*

Most of the essays gathered in these pages were written expressly for this book about Paris. But the beauty, human scale, and livability of cities is under attack everywhere. It has become unfashionable even to talk about beauty, let alone to demand it in urbanism and architecture. Too often, we have allowed beauty to lose its place among builders’ primary objectives. Beauty is too often treated as at best an afterthought, an unaffordable luxury, or a matter of irrational personal taste. Cities desperate for funds allow hucksters to sell them hyperdevelopment that is not beautiful, that does not reflect the history and uniqueness of the place, that residents do not want, and that will not make anyone’s life better. Paris has no practical need for any of the towers it plans to build. Instead, Paris wants to compete with other world cities by looking more like them. Developers and builders have sold Paris projects that are not beautiful, that do not reflect the history and uniqueness of Paris, and that residents do not want.

The twelve sections of this book move from the present to the future, returning to the theme of the embattled beauty and history of Paris, as well as to the highly suspect claim that the glass-walled, air-conditioned skyscrapers Paris City Hall proposes could ever be sustainable.

But let us pretend that we can set beauty aside for the moment and ask whether Paris may need skyscrapers today just to survive in the rough world of international competition among twenty-first-century cities. In July 2008,

* “Towers: The Wrong Solution for the Future of Paris,” « Les tours, fausse solution pour l’avenir de Paris » *Bulletin* of SOS Paris, No. 85, June 2012. Essay reprinted in this volume.