



Sky's the limit for greener towers

High-rise buildings, once a byword for lifeless concrete towers, now have great potential to incorporate green public spaces and landscaping, adding a more human dimension to the dense development required by Asia's growing populations



"STREETS AND SQUARES IN THE SKY ARE VIABLE AND REALISTIC, CREATING VISUAL SPECTACLE, ADDING VALUE AND MAKING CONCENTRATED LIVING MORE ATTRACTIVE"
Simon Bee,
managing director –
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As urban populations grow and land becomes scarcer, we are building taller and denser mixed-use urban structures to cope with the demands of our modern cities and the multiple experiences within them.

The need for greater urban densities is driving the intensive development of cities and the surrounding landscape, so the search for how to humanise future buildings through new and idealistic typologies continues to challenge inquiring architectural minds.

This is one of the challenges Benoy is exploring in an internal research fellowship this year as our designers seek new models

for green, high-rise, mixed-use clusters.

Mixed-use projects are the lifeblood of our best cities and multi-activity development is undoubtedly the way to create richer city environments in the future.

However, as our city profiles become more concentrated and the mix becomes more complex, there is a risk that over development and over complication may push the concept of mixed-use into uninhabitable, unsustainable territory. If badly conceived, high-density, mixed-use development could pave the way for the slums of the future. We must clearly guard against that.

Tree-lined promenades between towers and landscaping at all levels of buildings can help to humanise designs for dense, mixed-use developments



Part of the answer to this conundrum is to carefully consider models of liveability, social viability and recreational amenities in such developments. I am a huge advocate of the benefit of good landscape and public realm in easing these tensions and get excited by opportunities for good public spaces high in our buildings – everyone needs their own piece of land, marketplace or village green, even if they live 40 floors above the ground.

Humanising harsh environments

Good landscape can soften and humanise the harshest environments and the total fusion of architecture and landscape that spawned the Garden City movement a century ago is now unlocking a new model of contemporary, habitable high-rise buildings in parts of the world; partly due to substantial improvements in the science and technology of sustainable landscapes.

Years ago at architecture school we were all obsessed with dressing-up our designs with greenery, sprouting from every rooftop, balcony or crevice. Our tutors despaired of us, saying we were hiding the architecture, but we were creating places that looked not only spectacular and surprising but friendlier and engaging at the same time.

This may well have been a pure reaction to some of the starker, more clinical architectural experiments of the post-war world. Most of the immediate post-war UK development did not deliver an abundance of healthy green spaces we each need and desire.

There are clear exceptions, of course – London's lavishly landscaped and spectacular Barbican complex being a case in point.

Several decades on, one might reflect that if landscape technology and urban design had been more interlinked at the time, the pioneers of the 1960s may well have paved the way for greater oxygenation and humanisation of our high-rise, mixed-use developments today and in the future.

Landscaping and good public realm design should pervade every aspect of contemporary mixed-use development and not just at ground level – habitable zones at any level of the building should benefit from a touch of green placemaking.

Tall and dense development need not mean isolation from public realm and open spaces. Modern landscape design know-how means that streets and squares in the sky are totally viable and realistic, creating visual spectacle, adding value and making concentrated living more attractive.

Fortunately, landscape technology may well be finally catching up with our utopian urban ideals. Even though the 1960s 'streets in the sky' model was never fully exploited, we are now seeing the idea of 'hanging gardens' as something beyond the fading images of ancient Babylon.

What does this mean in reality? When you look out of your future high-rise studio or townhouse, you will be presented with a flourishing environment of green space, oxygenating your world – places that are

immediate and accessible, spaces that add massively to the quality of our lives and the value of our real estate, even at locations many storeys above the ground.

If you think this all sounds a little fanciful, take a trip to modern day Singapore and look around. When I look from Benoy's studio windows there, I see these strategies are already a comprehensive reality.

Manicured parks at ground level, fully landscaped podium decks with public gardens and sports facilities, open places cut into buildings 30 storeys up, and tree-lined promenades and jogging trails linking towers; a three-dimensional Garden City in action.

These designs are enriching lives and importantly, are promoted by enlightened planning rules, which allow for creativity in landscaping without compromising floor space. Singapore sets a great example, evolving as it has from its Garden City underpinnings – it is Eden in the making.

The modern day interpretation of the Garden City concept in Asia has been a shift in attitude towards a total fusion of architectural and landscape disciplines – not just the two-dimensional connectivity of ground-based urban planning, but the drama of well-landscaped, three-dimensional, connected spaces.

This is about embracing mixed-use, high-rise living, with strong transport links, as we are all aware, but perhaps above all, enhancing these developments with a comprehensively designed landscape layer.