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Contact: Carol Willis, Director  
Email: caw3@columbia.edu  
The Skyscraper Museum  
39 Battery Place, New York, NY 10280  
Hours: Noon – 6PM, Wednesday – Sunday.  
Admission: \$5; \$2.50 for Students and Seniors  
Office tel: 212 945-6324 Fax: 212 732-3039  
Hours and directions: 212 968-1961  
www.skyscraper.org

## SKYSCRAPER MUSEUM EXHIBITION

### Vertical Cities: Hong Kong | New York

What city has more skyscrapers than New York? [Answer: using 400 feet—nearly 40 stories—as a benchmark, Hong Kong has 558 buildings to New York’s 360.] An exhibition opening July 16th at The Skyscraper Museum examines the evolving identities of the world’s most strikingly similar “Vertical Cities.”

Hong Kong—a city of 7 million on the other side of the world—is Asia’s Manhattan. Born of a perfect harbor, like New York, it evolved from a colonial port into a dominant center of international finance and commerce. Each city embraced the skyscraper as the principal instrument of modern urbanism. The intense dynamic that concentrates people and businesses in vertical density—a model established in Manhattan in the early twentieth century—has been repeated in Hong Kong since the 1970s *in extremis*.

Today, Hong Kong surpasses New York in the number of high-rises, hyper-dense habitation, and efficient mass transit. The exhibition uses photographs, film, architectural drawings, maps, and large-scale models to convey Hong Kong’s character: its iconic skyline, a crowded commercial core with multi-level traffic, a network of pedestrian bridges, and vertical shopping malls. The unifying theme is density, exemplified by the city’s uniquely slender towers on tiny lots, or the monumental apartment blocks of 50 to 60 stories or taller, multiplied by the dozen in New Town housing estates in the New Territories.

The exhibition also features large architectural models, 6 to 8 feet in height, of several of Hong Kong’s signature towers, including the 88-story IFC2 designed by Cesar Pelli; the 118-story ICC, designed by the New York office of KPF, scheduled for completion in 2010, and the new 70-story One Island East in Quarry Bay by the Hong Kong firm Wong & Ouyang. A highlight of the installation is the rarely-seen original 6-foot model of I.M. Pei’s Bank of China, whose elegant architectural geometries and structural engineering by Leslie E. Robertson make it arguably the most beautiful skyscraper ever erected.

Modes of transport is another theme of the show, and the installation also includes an analysis in mural-scale drawings, film, and photographs of the Mid-levels Escalator, the world’s longest outdoor moving ‘electric staircase’ that climbs the steepest hills of Hong Kong, snaking up existing streets to provide 55,000 daily pedestrian commuters with free transit. This project of architect and Hong Kong Chinese University Associate Professor Laurence Liauw with students of Hong Kong Polytechnic University vividly captures this idiosyncratic urban improvisation. Also on loan from Hong Kong is a context model of the major buildings of Central, representing the portfolio of the developer Hongkong Land that illustrates the elevated pedestrian bridges of the district.

There is a striking contrast between the shoe-horned congestion of the historic core of Central, the more recent master-planned environments of the mixed-use transit hubs at the International Finance Center (IFC) and the International Commerce Center (ICC), and the highly-ordered skyscraper housing estates of New Towns in the New Territories. But the Hong Kong principle of vertical density is constant. All the residents of Hong Kong live at the concentration of Manhattan—nearly 70,000 people per square mile—and many occupy districts of more than 100,000 per square mile. Throughout the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, a dramatic contrast exists between the mountainous expanses of the preserved natural landscape—covering more than three-quarters of the entire territory—and the hyper-dense built area.

Of the world’s major cities, Hong Kong is the most densely occupied, although the statistics of its average density—a mere 6,200 people per square km or about 16,000 per square mile—belie its true character. The exhibition underscores the difference between vertical density and low-rise urban crowding in a section that compares skylines of the largest and statistically most dense cities of the Eastern Hemisphere. Of these, only Shanghai remotely rivals the high-rise development of Hong Kong.

Today, the world’s two great skyscraper cities are Hong Kong and New York. They are a West-East pair with remarkably similar urban histories, experiencing many of the same stages of development—explosive laissez-faire growth, regulation, and master-planned mega-projects, and, more recently, public participation in the planning process—but in different eras. They are also prophecies of cities of the future: skyscraper cities.

**Vertical Cities**, which runs through February 2009, is the second in a cycle of three related exhibitions, entitled **FUTURE CITY: 20 | 21** that juxtapose a retrospective of American visions of the skyscraper city of the future from the early 20th century with an exploration of Chinese cities today, pursuing the parallel conditions of rapid modernization and urbanization. The first exhibition of the cycle, **New York Modern**, looked back at prophecies of the skyscraper city in the early 20<sup>th</sup> twentieth century when the first dreams of a fantastic metropolis took shape. The third, “China Prophecy,” explores the 21st-century skyscraper city of Shanghai.

#### Related Programs

The Skyscraper Museum, together with the New School’s India China Institute and Tishman Environmental and Design Center, will host an international symposium October 17 & 18 assembling architects, developers, government officials, academics, and professional experts to examine the relationship between vertical density and sustainable solutions in Hong Kong and New York.

**Vertical Cities** is supported by the MTR Corporation. Founded in 1975, the Mass Transit Railway carries 3.4 million people every day on a highly efficient and reliable system serving the entire Hong Kong SAR. The Airport Express, the MTR’s latest project, conveys passengers from the airport to Central Hong Kong on a dedicated high-speed track in only 30 minutes. In addition to subway operations, the MTR is one of the largest property developers in Hong Kong, partnering with private companies to construct and manage properties above the stations.

For images, contact: [admin4@skyscraper.org](mailto:admin4@skyscraper.org)

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