DOI: 10.23817/2026.defarch.4-8

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CHANGES IN THE PERCEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN HIGH-RISE ARCHITECTURE

ZMIANY W POSTRZEGANIU WSPÓŁCZESNEJ EUROPEJSKIEJ ARCHITEKTURY WYSOKOŚCIOWEJ

A b s t r a c t

High-rise buildings have been present in the landscape of European cities since the early stages of the formation of European identity. Their presence has been associated with various forms of narrative, defining economic status, political expression, a manifestation of the ability to compete globally, technological potential, and responses to environmental challenges. This study reflects on the transformation of contemporary approaches to architectural form, moving towards the humanisation of space and the integration of high-rise architecture with the dimension of human experience.

Keywords: *high-rise buildings, humanisation of space, urban identity*

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Budynki wysokie są obecne w krajobrazie miast europejskich od początków formowania się tożsamości europejskiej. Ich obecność wiązała się z różnymi formami narracyjnymi określającymi status ekonomiczny, polityczny manifest, wyraz zdolności w konkurowaniu globalnym, technologiczny potencjał, odpowiedź na środowiskowe wyzwania. Badanie stanowi refleksję nad zmianą współczesnego podejścia do form architektury w kierunku humanizacji przestrzeni i powiązania ich z aspektem doświadczenia ludzkiego.

Słowa kluczowe: *humanizacja przestrzeni, tożsamość miejska, zabudowa wysoka*

1. INTRODUCTION

In some medieval European cities, residential-defensive towers were a distinctive feature of the urban skyline, serving as symbols of the prestige and status of powerful patrician families. Their height and grandeur often rivalled the dominant religious landmarks, namely the towers of churches and cathedrals. Italian *torri* (or *case-torri*) have survived to the present day in cities such as San Gimignano, Bologna, Siena, and Florence[1]. Although these structures primarily fulfilled defensive and representative functions, they marked one of the earliest stages in the deliberate shaping of the urban landscape through tall buildings.

[1] E. Guidoni, *Storia dell'urbanistica. Il Medioevo*, Laterza, Rome–Bari 1992.

A breakthrough in the design of tall buildings came with the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. The development of steel structures, lifts and new construction technologies made it possible to erect multi-storey buildings, whose height was primarily determined by the need to use limited urban space more efficiently. Skyscrapers became symbols of modernity and economic development.

These changes were also reflected in Warsaw. In the 1930s, the Prudential skyscraper, designed by Marcin Weinfeld, was completed. Standing at 66 metres tall, the building, with its innovative structure developed by Stefan Bryła, became a symbol of modern architecture and the ambitions of the Second Polish Republic. During the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, despite heavy shelling, it survived and became a symbol of the city's resilience.

After the Second World War, Warsaw's development was subordinated to the principles of Socialist Realism. Modernism was considered undesirable, and architecture was expected to serve ideological and propagandistic purposes. As a result, many innovative projects were abandoned in favour of monumental buildings inspired by Classicism, such as the Marszałkowska Housing District and the Palace of Culture and Science. It was only after 1956 that a return to modernist design approaches became possible[2].

At the same time, alongside modernist housing developments built in Western European cities, office skyscrapers began to emerge, shaping the image of metropolises as financial and economic centres. The business districts that developed in the second half of the 20th century were characterised by relatively uniform architectural forms, largely inspired by American examples. They were dominated by high-rise office buildings with steel-and-glass façades, designed around economic efficiency and the effective organisation of working spaces. Often located in city centres or on former industrial sites, these districts became symbols of globalisation, the growth of the service sector, and the increasing influence of large corporations in contemporary metropolitan structures[3].

Since the late twentieth century, the development of European Central Business Districts (CBDs) has been closely linked to increasing competition among metropolitan areas for investment, the headquarters of multinational corporations, and major financial institutions. Unlike their American counterparts, European CBDs have generally evolved within historically compact urban fabrics, requiring new high-rise developments to be integrated with existing urban structures. Cities competed by creating prestigious office locations, improving transport infrastructure, enhancing the quality of public spaces, and promoting themselves as attractive business destinations. The development of financial districts such as La Défense in Paris, Canary Wharf in London, and Frankfurt's Bankenviertel formed part of broader strategies aimed at strengthening the position of metropolitan areas within the global economic network. Competition between CBDs extended beyond the provision of office space to include access to highly skilled labour, innovative economic sectors, and international urban recognition[4].

Today, existing architectural and urban structures are undergoing processes of modernisation at multiple scales, ranging from the transformation of entire urban districts to the

[2] W. Baraniewski, *Ideologia w architekturze Warszawy okresu realizmu socjalistycznego*, "Rocznik Historii Sztuki" 1996, no 22, pp. 231–260; M. Leśniakowska, *Architektura w Warszawie. Lata 1945–1965*, Arkada Pracownia Historii Sztuki, Warszawa 2003, pp. 67, 88–90, 106.

[3] P. Hall, *Cities of tomorrow: An intellectual history of urban planning and design in the twentieth century* (3rd ed.), Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2002, pp. 378–403.

[4] S. Sassen, *The global city: New York, London, Tokyo* (2nd ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001, pp. 122–126, 140–167, 171–196.

adaptation of individual buildings. These transformations are driven by changing functional, social, and environmental requirements, as well as by the need to adapt existing building stock to new patterns of work, mobility, and urban lifestyles.

2. EUROPEAN BUSINESS CENTRES

Research into the contemporary transformation of European business districts, such as Bankenviertel in Frankfurt am Main, Canary Wharf in London, La Défense in Paris, and Zuidas in Amsterdam, indicates several dominant development trends aimed at moving away from mono-functional office areas and improving the quality of user experience. These include increasing functional diversity through the introduction of residential, service, cultural, and recreational uses; creating spaces that encourage social interaction; improving safety through the design of environments that enable natural social surveillance; and enhancing pedestrian and cycling accessibility.

An important aspect of contemporary regeneration processes is also the ecological transformation of business districts, involving the expansion of green areas and biodiversity, the development of blue-green infrastructure, the reduction of energy consumption, and the implementation of solutions supporting urban adaptation to climate change. At the same time, efforts are being made to revitalise public spaces through art, cultural events, sport, and temporary forms of use. These transformations demonstrate a shift in the model of European CBDs – from isolated employment centres towards multifunctional, more open, and resilient urban districts that respond to the contemporary needs of residents, users, and the economy. Although these centres are embedded within networks of global interdependencies, they develop their own individual strategies for growth and transformation[5].

2.1. FRANKFURT AM MAIN – BANKENVIERTEL

An example of the contemporary transformation of Bankenviertel in Frankfurt am Main is the FOUR Frankfurt project (arch. UNStudio), being developed on the site of the former Deutsche Bank headquarters. The previous layout of the area was characterised as a closed corporate complex, primarily dedicated to financial and administrative functions. The new concept envisages transforming this site into a multifunctional vertical district, combining office spaces, residential units, services, restaurants, and public spaces.

A key element of the project is the opening up of the ground-floor level and the creation of a network of squares, pedestrian routes, and green spaces between the towers. As a result, an area that previously functioned as a corporate environment with limited accessibility is becoming a place for encounters and everyday activities involving diverse groups of users. The FOUR Frankfurt project demonstrates a shift in the approach to high-rise architecture – from buildings understood as symbols of economic dominance towards more integrated elements of the urban fabric that support social interaction[6].

[5] A. Glauser, *High-Rises and Urban Specificity: Politics of Vertical Construction in Paris, London, and Vienna*, "Urban Planning" 2022, no 7(4), pp. 284–297.

[6] Groß & Partner, *About FOUR*, "FOUR Frankfurt", https://www.4frankfurt.de/en/about-four (access: 10.07.2026).

A second example is Omniturm, designed by Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG), which introduces a new model of hybrid high-rise development to Bankenviertel, combining office and residential functions. A distinctive feature of the building is the shift in its form in the middle section, creating terrace spaces and giving the structure a more dynamic character. The introduction of residential functions increases the diversity of users and extends activity within the building beyond typical office working hours.

Open ground-floor spaces and the lobby also play an important role, as they have been designed as areas of interaction between the building and the city rather than merely as representative entrances to the office component. Omniturm illustrates a broader trend in contemporary high-rise design, in which multifunctionality, accessibility, and the quality of user experience are becoming as significant as the economic efficiency of the building.

The transformation of Bankenviertel reflects a wider shift in the model of European business districts – from mono-functional employment areas towards more complex and multidimensional urban structures. Both FOUR Frankfurt and Omniturm demonstrate that contemporary high-rise architecture increasingly employs shared spaces, mixed-use strategies, and the activation of ground-floor levels as tools for strengthening social relationships and improving the quality of the urban environment.

2.2. LONDON – CANARY WHARF

The Canary Wharf business district in London has already partially undergone a transformation from a mono-functional financial centre towards a more diverse urban environment. Initially, the area was developed as a location for the financial sector, based on large office complexes and spaces designed primarily to serve corporate needs[7]. Contemporary initiatives, however, focus on increasing the accessibility of spaces, introducing new functions, and creating places that encourage social interaction.

One example of an initiative aimed at improving user comfort is Jubilee Park, a green public space located between the high-rise buildings of Canary Wharf, which breaks the character of a financial district dominated by office development. The introduction of greenery, resting areas, and spaces for social gatherings has enabled more diverse uses of the area by employees, residents, and visitors. The park demonstrates that contemporary business districts are increasingly using public space as a tool for improving the quality of the urban environment.

A second example is One Canada Square, where the building's surroundings and ground-floor level have been integrated with a network of services, restaurants, and shared spaces. The changing approach to high-rise design has resulted in lobbies and entrance areas becoming places for interaction and social encounters rather than merely circulation zones for office workers. The integration of business functions with cultural, recreational, and social elements has contributed to greater activity within the district beyond standard working hours.

The transformation of Canary Wharf reflects a broader shift in the model of contemporary CBDs – from isolated financial centres towards multifunctional urban structures. The development of green public spaces, active building frontages, and places that support social

[7] Ch. Hamnett, *Unequal city: London in the global arena*, Routledge, London 2004. pp. 2–3.

integration demonstrates that contemporary high-rise architecture is increasingly designed with consideration for human experience and the quality of urban life.

2.3. PARIS – LA DÉFENSE

The La Défense business district in Paris is undergoing a process of adaptation to contemporary requirements concerning the quality of urban space. The original model of the district was based on the separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, the dominance of large office buildings, and the extensive elevated urban platform (*la dalle*). Current initiatives focus on increasing functional diversity, improving user comfort, and transforming the district into a more open and active urban environment.

One example is the La Défense Seine Arche project, which extended the original business district beyond the boundaries of the traditional high-rise area. The project aimed to create a more diverse urban structure by introducing new residential and service functions, public spaces, and green areas. Particular importance was placed on shaping the continuity of pedestrian spaces and creating new meeting places that improve the relationship between the business district and the surrounding urban areas[8].

The second example is the renovation of public spaces at *the parvis de La Défense* (the square in front of the Grande Arche), involving improvements to the quality of the paving, the introduction of greenery, resting areas, and new forms of spatial activation. In the past, this space primarily served as a representative corporate plaza and a transit area, whereas contemporary transformations aim to enhance its attractiveness as a place for everyday use. The organisation of cultural events, artistic installations, and temporary activities strengthens the social function of this space[9].

An important element of the transformation of La Défense is also the development of public art, which has been one of the district's defining features from the outset. The placement of numerous sculptures, installations, and contemporary artworks in the spaces between the towers helps create a more diverse user experience and counteracts the anonymous character of large-scale development. The transformation of La Défense demonstrates a shift in the approach to high-rise architecture – from treating skyscrapers as independent symbols of economic power towards designing an urban environment that supports social activity and users' everyday experiences.

2.4. AMSTERDAM – ZUIDAS

Another example of the contemporary transformation of European business districts is Zuidas in Amsterdam, where the development of high-rise architecture is increasingly moving away from the model of autonomous office buildings towards the creation of a mixed-use urban environment. Contemporary developments in this part of the city demonstrate a shift in the approach to skyscraper design – from buildings primarily representing economic power and

[8] European Public Establishment for the Development of the Defence Region Seine Arche (EPADESA), *La Défense Seine Arche: A sustainable and attractive business district*, EPADESA, Paris 2015.

[9] Paris La Défense, *Paris La Défense: A lively district,* Paris La Défense, Paris 2026, https://www.parisladefense.com/sites/default/files/04.PDF/STRATEGIE%20TERRITORIALE/Plaquette/brochure_pld_2026_uk.pdf (access: 10.07.2026).

corporate prestige towards spaces that support users' everyday experiences, social interaction, and integration with public space. Particular importance is being given to lobbies, atriums, terraces, and shared spaces, which are becoming elements of the city's social structure[10].

An example of this approach is The Valley by MVRDV, one of the most distinctive next-generation developments in Zuidas. The building combines office, residential, commercial and cultural functions, breaking away from the traditional functional separation characteristic of business districts. Its stepped form creates a system of terraces, balconies and green spaces that provide additional areas for use and foster interaction between residents and employees. The architecture of the building treats greenery and shared spaces not as decorative elements, but as tools for creating a higher quality living environment.

A similar direction is represented by the ABN AMRO headquarters complex in Zuidas, which was designed from the outset not only as a workplace, but also as an important element in shaping the urban environment. The building is distinguished by its extensive entrance zone and representative atrium, which functions as a central space integrating users, employees and visitors. The shared spaces were designed to create a more open and welcoming working environment, combining circulation, recreational and social functions. The use of large areas of glazing, access to greenery and carefully designed communal interiors strengthen the relationship between the building and its urban surroundings, emphasising the importance of daylight and connection with the external environment. The ABN AMRO complex represents an example of office architecture in which institutional prestige is combined with the idea of creating a high-quality working environment. This development demonstrates that contemporary high-rise buildings in Zuidas increasingly serve as active elements of the city – places that encourage meetings, collaboration and the development of social relationships, rather than merely efficient office structures[11].

3. SUMMARY

The history of high-rise architecture in Europe shows that tall buildings have always served purposes extending beyond their practical functions, symbolising prestige, economic power, political ambitions and technological progress. In the 20th century, they became an important element in shaping the image of metropolises and financial centres.

European business districts, such as La Défense, Canary Wharf, Bankenviertel and Zuidas, initially developed as mono-functional office areas. Today, they are transforming into more sustainable and mixed-use urban districts, combining workplaces, housing and leisure functions.

Contemporary developments, including FOUR Frankfurt, Omniturm and projects in Zuidas, demonstrate a move towards the humanisation of high-rise architecture through mixed-use functions, active ground floors, public spaces, greenery and areas that encourage social interaction. Intermediate spaces, such as atriums, terraces and rooftop gardens, are also becoming increasingly important in improving user experience.

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[10] Gemeente Amsterdam, *Visie Zuidas 2016*, Municipality of Amsterdam, Amsterdam 2016, https://openresearch.amsterdam/nl/page/74910/visie-zuidas-2016 (access: 10.07.2026).

[11] '*Founding father' ABN AMRO comes and goes*, "Zuidas", 01.12.2020, https://zuidas.nl/en/blog/2020/12/01/founding-father-abn-amro-comes-and-goes/ (access: 10.07.2026).

At the same time, high-rise design is increasingly addressing environmental challenges, including energy efficiency, green infrastructure and the development of public spaces. As a result, contemporary high-rise architecture is moving away from being merely a symbol of prestige towards becoming an open, welcoming and sustainable component of the urban ecosystem.

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