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The trend for elite towers that reach ever skywards isn't healthy for a sustainable community or for a balanced quality of life



📸 The view from New York's tallest residential skyscraper, One57 on to Central Park. Photograph: Christina Horsten/dpa/Alamy Live News

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In so-called hot cities such as London, Toronto and [New York](#), the planners and politicians are letting a thousand towers bloom. In others such as Seattle, Washington or San Francisco, battles are raging over height limits and urban density, all on the basis of two premises: 1) that building all these towers will increase the supply of housing and therefore reduce its costs; 2) that increasing density is the green, sustainable thing to do and that towers are the best way to do it.

I am not sure that either is true. I am an architect and I certainly consider myself an environmentalist, but it appears to me that in a lot of cities, these new glass towers don't add much at all to the city in terms of energy efficiency or quality of life. Often they don't add many more housing units than the buildings they replace. I am also a heritage activist, not because I particularly love old buildings, but because there is so much to learn from them and from the neighbourhoods. and cities that were designed before cars or electricity or thermostats, and were built at surprisingly high urban densities.

There is no question that high urban densities are important, but the question is how high, and in what form. There is what I have called the Goldilocks density: dense enough to support vibrant main streets with retail and services for local needs, but not too high that people can't take the stairs in a pinch. Dense enough to support bike and transit infrastructure, but not so dense to need subways and huge underground parking garages. Dense enough to build a sense of community, but not so dense as to have everyone slip into anonymity.



Harlem Brownstones, in Manhattan, New York. Low-rise homes make for a better neighbourhood and population density than the super high rise. Photograph: Alamy

At the Goldilocks density, streets are a joy to walk; sun can penetrate to street level and the ground floors are often filled with cafes that spill out onto the street, where one can sit without being blown away, as often happens around towers. Yet the buildings can accommodate a lot of people: traditional Parisian districts house up to 26,000 people per sq km; [Barcelona's Eixample](#) district clocks in at an extraordinary 36,000.

Building tall does not necessarily even increase residential density; in fact, it can do the opposite. In New York's tall, slender towers, the elevators and stairs take up a huge proportion of the floor space, and there is lot of expensive exterior wall for each unit. The construction costs for this kind of building are ridiculous, and only the very, very rich can afford to pay the price, so apartments are therefore often huge as well; consequently the population density can actually go down.

There is less street life too, as ground floors are taken up with lobbies and exits and ramps instead of stores and restaurants. The great majority of the new projects that are busting through height limits, view corridors and historic districts do nothing to ease the housing crisis and nothing to improve the urban fabric.

At the Goldilocks density, construction is a lot cheaper and the buildings a lot more efficient; in [Montreal's Plateau district](#), the buildings are mostly just three storeys high, with exterior stairs. Every inch of interior space is used for living, making them almost 100% efficient, and accommodating over 11,000 people per square kilometre. New, greener forms of construction can be used, as Thistleton Waugh did with [their 12-storey timber tower in](#)