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On Architecture: The problem with most high-rises is how well they reach the street

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Seattle is about to prick the heavens with a quiver of new skyscrapers, and given the evidence already hulking around, this prospect should not automatically fill our hearts with joy. Through the 120-year history of high-rise buildings, architects and developers have inflicted cities with far more bad ones than good, both globally and locally. A charitable guess at the ratio might be 10 to 1.

If you're surveying Seattle's skyline from Kerry Park or the Bainbridge ferry, that will seem like a thoroughly uncharitable, and unfair, dissing. From a distance, our downtown skyline is thrilling. It exudes power and prosperity. There are at least a handful of interesting shapes to punctuate the bristle, and on frequent occasions the interactions of sun, sky or fog with some of the better towers -- especially the 76-story Columbia Center -- can make downtown seem like a sculpture garden of the gods.

But tall buildings affect cities in two different ways that have almost nothing to do with each other. One is as sculptural objects framed in the sky, where their impact is artistic or symbolic. The other is where the buildings meet the ground and create either pleasant or oppressive spaces where people walk and congregate.

Architects regularly misfire with big buildings that are bad by both measures, but the tendency is to fail more often and more egregiously at street level.

One reason is that it's fairly difficult to make a 500-foot-high building seem humane and welcoming to a 5-foot-something biped approaching it. The other is that a building's owners are naturally more concerned with the way the building reads in the skyline, because that's where its marketable image gets fixed in the public eye.

Three weeks ago, the Seattle City Council enacted a new downtown code that will allow more and taller towers. It requires rain shelter for pedestrians, but it may have little other effect on how they look and act at street level.

"It doesn't change a lot at the ground plane," says Blaine Weber, a principal of Weber+Thompson, a firm that has nine new Seattle towers in various stages of design. "It is going to encourage more graceful, slender, taller towers. The previous code encouraged short, squat, fat towers."

Worldwide trend

The current trend in skyscraper design worldwide is decidedly tall and slender, but also increasingly sculptural and dramatic. Santiago Calatrava has designed an astonishing 124-story twisting crystal shard for Chicago that will eclipse the 1,450-foot Sears Tower by 550 feet. Beijing-based MAD Architectural



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DAN DELONG / P-I

The Washington Mutual Tower succeeds at being pedestrian-friendly with a public plaza that incorporates open space, benches, trees and ironwork.



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Design Studio has proposed a writhing 50-story tower for a Toronto suburb that evokes either a Slinky or a headless Marilyn Monroe in a provocative pose. Norman Foster's 40-story London office tower has been nicknamed, for too-obvious reasons, "The Gherkin." In certain of these cases, the architects have decided that winning notoriety for the bizarre is better than being admired for the beautiful.

Cristalla, a 23-story condominium tower completed in 2005, offers little depth or relevance with its aged facade, jewel facets and terra-cotta decor.

Seattle may not get one of these iconic towers soon, but the trend toward skyscrapers-as-sculpture is chiseling and tweaking some of the shapes that will appear in our skyline -- generally for the better. Weber+Thompson's sleek Fifteen Twenty-One, a 38-story condo tower that will begin rising on Second Avenue this summer, appears to be a substantial cut above the generally drab residential boxes that have preceded it.

But creating more graceful or intriguing shapes for high-rise buildings doesn't make a city more livable, and that's what's missing from Seattle's downtown plan.

In terms of what it does for the street, Seattle's best high-rise is the "old" Washington Mutual Tower of 1988, which politely steps 50 feet back from Second Avenue, creating a leafy two-level public plaza with benches, stainless steel sculptures and the mottled texture of granite cladding. People use this space like a public park, a refuge from the sensory commotion of the street. It demonstrates a simple principle: in a dense, crowded urban environment, open space is more beautiful and valuable to most people than architecture.

Contrast the Columbia Center, which also carves out a street-level plaza in the lap of its east-facing scoop. As graceful as this tower's profile is -- it's more confident, authoritative, dramatic architecture than the fussy Washington Mutual -- it slams into the ground with a stony thud, because the formalistic plaza seems not to welcome lingerers and the entrance offers no human-scaled gesture.

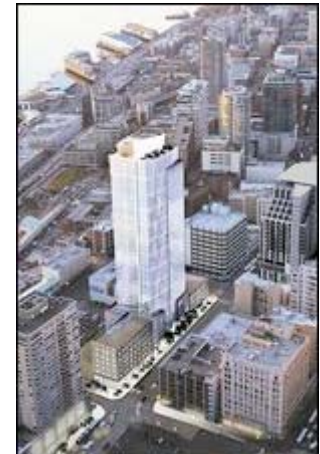
Street-level dialogue

There's a debatable street-level dialogue in Weber+Thompson's first downtown residential tower, Cristalla, completed last year. The architects salvaged the Italian Baroque-ish facade of the 1915 Crystal Pool Natatorium on the site, and grafted it onto the first floor of a jewel-faceted, 23-story glass tower. It may seem churlish to complain, but this is like preserving history through a postcard collection -- better than saving nothing, but only superficially enlightening. The flouncy terra-cotta decoration is mildly engaging, but it doesn't really say much about its era and doesn't speak the language of our century, either.

What we're getting in the coming skyscraper crop probably is going to be better, on average, than the aloof and austere high-rises built between 1950 and 1990. It'll be energized by de rigueur street-level retail, deadly features such as five-story parking-garage podiums either will be driven underground or disguised (as in Weber+Thompson's Fifteen Twenty-One), and they'll likely cut shapelier profiles in the sky. But they won't be good enough unless something forces a more profound revolution in the way we think about high-rise design.

City Councilman Peter Steinbrueck, an architect himself, says that the increasingly sophisticated Seattle market will demand better-designed buildings "to some extent." But he adds, correctly, "The market by itself is not going to produce the best results. I'm absolutely convinced of that."

That leaves the city to get tough and creative -- and us to demand it. So here are some of the things we



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P-I PHOTO

Cristalla designer Weber+Thompson appears to have improved its next condo attempt, Fifteen Twenty-One, which will begin rising on Second Avenue this summer.

ought to think about:

- That ground-level welcoming details may be more important than sky-high mojo.
- That high-quality open space, dedicated to the public, is essential for a humane and livable downtown.
- And that our moral obligation in occupying this breathtakingly beautiful sliver of land between mountains and sound is to keep trying to build a city that lives up to its natural environment.

That would suggest about 10 good skyscrapers for every bad one.

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