Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat Korea

International Journal of
High-Rise Buildings
www.ctbuh-korea.org/ijhrb/index.php

International Journal of High-Rise Buildings
March 2026, Vol 15, No 1, 1-18
https://doi.org/10.21022/IJHRB.2026.15.1.1

Contextual Design as a Catalyst for Placemaking in Tall Buildings

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Abstract The globalization of architecture has contributed to increasingly uniform urban landscapes, often diminishing local identity and sense of place. This paper examines contextual design as a human-centered approach to strengthen placemaking in tall buildings. Drawing on theories of contextualism, Critical Regionalism, and urban imageability, it argues that successful contextual skyscrapers emerge through the creative reinterpretation of local culture, architectural traditions, symbolic meaning, and urban form rather than through historical imitation. Using a qualitative comparative case study approach, the paper analyzes selected tall buildings in the United States and Asia. The findings demonstrate how culturally grounded architectural form, material expression, contextual integration, mixed-use programming, and pedestrian-oriented design contribute to placemaking by strengthening relationships between tall buildings, their surrounding urban fabric, and the public realm. Operating across two interrelated spatial scales—the urban scale and the pedestrian scale—the study shows how contextually responsive skyscrapers reinforce urban continuity, cultural identity, walkability, and everyday public life. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that contextual sensitivity and contemporary design can work synergistically to produce skyscrapers that are both innovative and deeply rooted in place, strengthening civic identity and humanizing vertical urbanism.

Keywords: Design approach, creative design, contextual design; Critical Regionalism; placemaking; urban continuity; civic identity; urban legibility; human-centered urbanism.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

Over the past several decades, the skyscraper has emerged as one of the most visible symbols of globalization and urban modernization. Cities competing for investment, international visibility, and economic prestige increasingly employ tall buildings as markers of growth, technological advancement, and global relevance. Yet the rapid proliferation of high-rise development has also contributed to increasingly homogenized urban landscapes in which standardized glass-and-steel towers often dominate the urban scene regardless of local culture, history, climate, or architectural tradition (Ren, 2011; Wood, 2011, 2022). As a result, many cities face growing concerns about the erosion of cultural specificity, civic identity, and a distinctive sense of place.

Critics argue that many contemporary skyscrapers function as isolated vertical objects shaped more by global economic forces and technological expression than by meaningful engagement with local identity and public life (Koolhaas, 1997; Elsheshtawy, 2004). Consequently, the challenge confronting contemporary high-rise architecture is not merely how to build taller or more technologically advanced towers, but how to create buildings that remain connected to the city's cultural narratives, spatial character, and lived experience.

This paper addresses that challenge through the lens of contextual design. In contrast to universal architectural approaches that privilege abstraction and formal autonomy, contextual design emphasizes responsiveness to local culture, historical continuity, urban morphology, climate, symbolism, materiality, and collective memory (Frampton, 1983; Canizaro, 2007). Importantly, contextualism should not be understood as literal imitation or nostalgic historicism. Rather, it involves the creative reinterpretation of local traditions, architectural languages, symbolic forms, and urban patterns within contemporary design practice, allowing architecture to remain innovative while maintaining meaningful connections to place.

The placemaking potential of contextual design is particularly significant in tall buildings, given their extraordinary visibility and influence within the urban environment. Skyscrapers shape urban identity, urban legibility, collective memory, and everyday public experience. When designed with contextual sensitivity, they can strengthen civic identity, support pedestrian vitality, enhance urban continuity, and contribute to a more meaningful

relationship between architecture and place. In this regard, contextual design offers a framework for reconnecting large-scale architecture with local culture, public life, and human-centered urbanism (Al-Kodmany, 2012, 2017, 2024a).

1.2. Theoretical Background

The discourse surrounding contextual design emerged largely as a critique of the universalizing tendencies of modernism and the placelessness often associated with the International Style. Throughout much of the twentieth century, modernist architecture emphasized functional efficiency, technological rationalism, and aesthetic abstraction, frequently privileging universality over cultural specificity and local identity (Frampton, 1983). While modernism enabled significant innovation and global architectural exchange, critics argued that its widespread adoption often produced environments detached from climate, history, material traditions, and collective memory (Norberg-Schulz, 2007; Relph, 1993). In response, architectural theorists increasingly advocated for place-sensitive approaches capable of restoring cultural continuity, civic rootedness, and meaningful human experience within the built environment.

One of the most influential responses was Critical Regionalism, as articulated by Frampton (1983). This approach promotes architecture that engages critically with local culture, topography, climate, materiality, and tectonic traditions while remaining responsive to contemporary technological and social realities. Rather than advocating historical imitation, Critical Regionalism emphasizes creative reinterpretation, allowing architecture to remain contemporary while preserving regional identity and a sense of place. Similarly, Norberg-Schulz (2007) emphasized the importance of preserving the genius loci, or spirit of place, while Relph (1993) warned against the growing homogenization of the built environment. Together, these perspectives established contextual responsiveness, rootedness, and human experience as central concerns within architectural discourse.

Within urban design theory, placemaking emerged as a multidisciplinary framework concerned with the relationships among physical space, social interaction, cultural identity, and everyday urban life. Lynch's (1960) concept of imageability demonstrated how landmarks, districts, nodes, edges, and paths contribute to urban legibility and collective memory, while Jacobs (1963) and Gehl (2010) emphasized walkability, public life, social inclusivity, and pedestrian experience as essential dimensions of successful urban environments. Collectively, this body of scholarship provides a strong theoretical foundation linking contextual design to civic identity, urban continuity, and human-centered urbanism.

1.3. Research Gap

Despite the richness of scholarship on contextualism and placemaking, most studies have focused on low-rise buildings, historic districts, traditional urban fabrics, and human-scaled environments. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how contextual design principles operate within the symbolic, spatial, and technological conditions of tall buildings. This omission is significant because skyscrapers exert extraordinary influence on urban identity, urban legibility, collective memory, and public experience across multiple scales. Yet scholarship on tall buildings has traditionally concentrated on structural innovation, sustainability, economics, technological advancement, and iconicity rather than examining contextualism as a framework for placemaking and civic rootedness (Koolhaas, 1997; Wood, 2011, 2022).

Recent studies have begun to address this gap. Al-Kodmany (2012, 2017, 2024a) argues that skyscrapers can strengthen civic identity and public life through symbolic interpretation, pedestrian-oriented design, mixed-use integration, and sensitivity to local urban conditions. Likewise, Elsheshtawy (2004) and Sanghvi (2017) emphasize the importance of embedding tall buildings within their socio-cultural, environmental, and spatial contexts rather than treating them as universally transferable architectural products. These contributions suggest that skyscrapers can move beyond isolated object-making to become meaningful components of the urban fabric. Nevertheless, the relationship between contextualism, placemaking, and tall buildings remains underdeveloped within the literature. Existing scholarship has yet to fully explain how contextual skyscrapers operate simultaneously across the urban scene, district, and pedestrian scales to reinforce civic identity, urban continuity, collective memory, and public life.

1.4. Goals and Objectives

To address this gap, the paper examines how contextual design contributes to placemaking in contemporary tall buildings. Specifically, it investigates how the creative reinterpretation of local culture, symbolic expression, architectural form, materiality, mixed-use integration, pedestrian engagement, infrastructural connectivity, and urban integration strengthen the relationship between skyscrapers and place. Rather than treating tall buildings as isolated architectural objects, the study conceptualizes contextual design as a multidimensional placemaking framework operating across two interrelated spatial scales. At the urban scale, the analysis examines how tall buildings reinforce continuity with surrounding districts, cultural landscapes, landmarks, and the broader urban fabric through their siting, massing, architectural expression, and contextual relationships. At the pedestrian scale, it investigates how buildings shape public experience through active ground floors, accessible public spaces, walkability, connectivity, and everyday urban life. Through six case studies from Chicago and Asia, the paper explores how contextually responsive skyscrapers mediate between globalization and local identity, innovation and continuity, and technological advancement and cultural rootedness. In doing so, it argues that contextual design provides a critical framework for creating tall buildings that function not only as symbols of economic growth and modernization but

also as meaningful contributors to cultural memory, urban continuity, and public life.

2. Methodology

This study is informed by the author's extensive firsthand observation and documentation of skyscrapers across multiple cities and cultural contexts over many years. The research draws on direct site visits to numerous high-rise buildings and their surrounding urban environments, including streetscapes, public spaces, transportation networks, and adjacent neighborhoods. Through systematic observation and photographic documentation, the author examined how skyscrapers interact with architectural traditions, public life, pedestrian movement, and civic space. This experiential and visually grounded perspective provides a foundation for understanding the relationships among tall buildings, collective memory, public life, and the evolving character of place.

Within this broader body of field research, six internationally recognized skyscrapers were identified as particularly representative examples of contextual design in contemporary vertical urbanism: NBC Tower, 900 North Michigan, Grant Thornton Tower, The Heritage at Millennium Park, Jin Mao Tower, and Petronas Towers. Located in Chicago, Shanghai, and Kuala Lumpur, these projects were selected for their influential yet distinct approaches to integrating contemporary high-rise architecture into culturally significant, historically layered urban environments. Together, they provide a comparative basis for examining how skyscrapers can reinforce civic identity, cultural continuity, and place-sensitive architectural expression across diverse geographic and cultural settings.

Using a qualitative, interpretive case study approach, the study employs a descriptive-interpretive analysis that examines each project both as an architectural composition and as part of a larger urban system. The analysis evaluates key design attributes—including massing, façade articulation, materiality, proportions, setbacks, crowns, ornamentation, symbolic references, and spatial organization—to understand how architectural decisions contribute to contextual continuity, civic coherence, and urban identity. Particular attention is given to the creative reinterpretation of vernacular traditions, historical motifs, regional narratives, and local architectural languages within contemporary skyscraper design. Contextualism is therefore understood not as passive imitation but as an active design strategy that balances continuity and innovation, monumentality and human scale, and modernization and cultural rootedness. The analysis also considers how these buildings engage the public realm through pedestrian accessibility, mixed-use programming, retail activation, landscape integration, and connections to surrounding streetscapes, transportation systems, civic infrastructure, and cultural institutions. Rather than treating skyscrapers as isolated vertical objects, the study situates them within the city's everyday spatial, social, and experiential life, exploring how they contribute to walkability, civic interaction, public engagement, and continuity between architecture and urban life. To contextualize and substantiate these observations, the case studies draw on scholarly literature, project documentation, and published accounts for each building. The analysis, therefore, integrates insights from the literature with the author's firsthand observations and visual interpretations, creating a richer understanding of the design intentions, contextual influences, and placemaking contributions of each project.

Viewed holistically, this framework positions contextual design as a human-centered and place-sensitive approach to vertical urbanism that reconnects skyscrapers with local culture, civic memory, urban continuity, and public life. Through comparative interpretation and experiential observation, the study identifies broader architectural and urban design lessons demonstrating how contextually responsive tall buildings can become enduring, meaningful, and integrated components of the urban fabric rather than merely symbols of economic growth and global spectacle.

3. Case Studies

3.1. NBC Tower: Bridging Historic Inspiration and Modern Placemaking

We begin our exploration in Chicago with the NBC Tower. This architectural work exemplifies how historic motifs, particularly those rooted in the Art Deco tradition, can be reinterpreted to reinforce urban identity and street-level placemaking.

Prominently located on the north bank of the Chicago River, the NBC Tower stands as a compelling example of contextual design that synthesizes architectural heritage, visual symbolism, and civic purpose. Designed by Adrian Smith during his tenure at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) and completed in 1989, the 37-story tower draws formal inspiration from Chicago's historic fabric, especially the adjacent Tribune Tower—an emblem of neo-Gothic expression and civic ambition (Smith, 2007). While the Tribune Tower evokes Gothic verticality and ornamentation, the NBC Tower channels the clarity and dynamism of the Art Deco lexicon with pronounced vertical lines, tiered setbacks, and a sculptural crown. Paired with stylized ornamentation, its use of warm-hued stone and bronze-glazed windows embeds the structure within Chicago's architectural lineage while signaling a modern sensibility (Zukowsky et al., 2004) (Figure 1).

Rather than simply replicating historical forms, the NBC Tower abstracts key architectural motifs from Chicago's past and reinterprets them through a contemporary lens. Its tiered setbacks recall the iconic "wedding-cake" silhouette of early 20th-century skyscrapers—shaped initially by zoning laws to preserve light and air—while adopting modern proportions that blend historical resonance with contemporary architectural expression. The tower's palette references traditional materials, combining locally favored



Figure 1. NBC Tower, Chicago. A fusion of Art Deco inspiration and modern design, the 37-story tower honors the neighboring Tribune Tower while enhancing Chicago's urban identity through its vertical emphasis, stepped massing, and spire. Source: Photograph by author.

limestone and granite with contemporary glazing to effectively blend heritage with modern transparency (Schulze & Harrington, 2003). This thoughtful fusion of past and present establishes visual continuity with the city's architectural legacy and projects a forward-looking identity. These formal and material choices deepen the building's symbolic resonance, reinforcing civic pride and cultural continuity. The NBC Tower enhances urban legibility and fosters emotional attachment, core aspects of placemaking that link architecture to collective memory and lived experience (Smith, 2007).

The tower's placemaking success also stems from its strategic location within Cityfront Center, a key district that bridges the Loop and the Near North Side. Positioned where civic, commercial, and cultural zones converge, the NBC Tower connects diverse parts of the city's fabric. Its

proximity to landmarks such as the Wrigley Building, the Chicago Riverwalk, and Michigan Avenue enhances its spatial and symbolic significance and engages with architectural and pedestrian networks (Keegan, 2008). Rather than standing as an isolated icon, the tower integrates into a larger urban ensemble, reinforcing visual and spatial continuity downtown. Its alignment, massing, and materials enhance urban legibility, shaping movement, framing views, and strengthening the coherence of Chicago's evolving urban and street-level experience (Pridmore & Larson, 2018).

The NBC Tower engages its context at the pedestrian scale through a well-articulated streetscape. A publicly accessible plaza, transparent ground-floor edges, and pedestrian-scaled entries create a permeable interface that invites interaction and momentary pause. These urban gestures support a walkable and inclusive public realm. Furthermore, the tower's integration with the pedestrian network and proximity to major transit corridors advance multimodal connectivity and accessibility, hallmarks of equitable urban design (O'Gorman, 2003).

The NBC Tower exemplifies how a modern skyscraper can transcend its commercial role to become a civic landmark that bridges architectural heritage with contemporary urban life. Its Art Deco-inspired design, sculptural form, and pedestrian-friendly base enhance Chicago's urban identity while promoting accessibility and social engagement. Strategically situated within the Cityfront Center, the tower connects historic and modern architectural eras, fostering urban continuity, legibility, and inclusivity, demonstrating how skyscrapers can enrich urban identity and street-level civic experience.

3.2. 900 North Michigan Avenue: Honoring the Historic Chicago Water Tower Through Modern Placemaking

Continuing in Chicago, 900 North Michigan Avenue stands as a distinguished example of postmodern contextualism—one that skillfully engages its historic surroundings through formal nuance, material refinement, and civic-minded urbanism. Rising prominently along the Magnificent Mile, this 66-story mixed-use tower integrates retail, office, hotel, and residential functions into a cohesive vertical composition. The Magnificent Mile, a prestigious section of Michigan Avenue stretching from the Chicago River to Oak Street, is a premier shopping destination and a vital cultural and architectural artery. It combines commercial vibrancy with historic landmarks and civic institutions, serving as a symbolic and spatial connector between Chicago's downtown core and its northern neighborhoods (Pridmore & Larson, 2018). Within this dynamic context, 900 North Michigan Avenue contributes to the streetscape, offering a compelling model for how tall buildings can reinforce place-based meaning within a celebrated commercial corridor (Keegan, 2008).

Designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox and completed in 1989, the tower anchors the northern end of Michigan Avenue's retail corridor. Its significance extends beyond height or function, engaging thoughtfully with the adjacent Gothic Revival Chicago Water Tower—a symbol of resilience after the Great Fire of 1871. Rather than overshadowing the historic landmark, 900 North Michigan Avenue establishes a respectful dialogue through tiered massing, limestone cladding, and crenelated rooftop lanterns. These elements distill the Water Tower's essence—verticality, material solidity, and ornamental silhouette—into a modern architectural language. The tower bridges past and present, honoring historical memory while embodying contemporary urban ambition (Figure 2).

The tower strengthens its civic role through a carefully designed seven-level retail podium that activates the street with engaging façades, accessible entry points, and a sequence of setbacks and plazas. This human-scaled base anchors the skyscraper within Chicago's iconic urban fabric, enhancing walkability, accessibility, and visual continuity along Michigan Avenue. Rather than imposing isolation, 900 North Michigan Avenue supports vibrant street life and social interaction, exemplifying how a tall building can deepen its connection to the public realm (Schulze & Harrington, 2003).

As the tower ascends, its architectural language evolves, with sculptural setbacks and illuminated rooftop lanterns that create a distinctive, elegant silhouette. This design enhances urban orientation and establishes the tower as a civic landmark. Within the context of nearby cultural and institutional landmarks, such as Fourth Presbyterian Church, Water Tower Place, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, 900 North Michigan Avenue serves as a complementary vertical counterpoint. Rather than competing, it contributes to a layered urban composition that reinforces spatial hierarchy. Its height and form provide vertical punctuation while maintaining visual harmony with surrounding buildings, enriching this iconic city corridor's architectural diversity and experiential richness.

900 North Michigan Avenue's significance lies in its seamless integration of place, history, and modernity into a cohesive architectural statement. Serving as both a destination and a connective element, it links past and present, street, commerce and culture. By engaging thoughtfully with the adjacent Water Tower and surrounding landmarks, the building exemplifies how tall structures can enrich their context through meaningful architectural dialogue rather than overshadowing it. Its balanced scale, materiality, and public interface demonstrate that verticality can enhance civic engagement, both literally and metaphorically (Levin, 2007). This tower affirms a vital lesson for contemporary high-rise design: placemaking is not a limitation but the highest expression of architectural ambition (Olson, 2017). Through contextual awareness and intentional design, height is transformed into heritage, movement into memory, and architecture into urban meaning (Al-Kodmany, 2017; Rüedi, 2005).



Figure 2. 900 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago. This postmodern tower blends history and modernity, echoing the Chicago Water Tower's limestone cladding, tiered form, and decorative lanterns while fostering placemaking through mixed-use spaces and community engagement. Source: Photograph by author.

3.3. Grant Thornton Tower: Bridging Heritage and Modernity to Promote Placemaking

Continuing our exploration of tall buildings that thoughtfully engage the urban fabric, the Grant Thornton Tower, located in the vibrant core of Chicago's Loop—the city's central business district and cultural heart—exemplifies how skyscrapers can enhance urban identity and street-level experience. Renowned for its dense collection of historic landmarks, theaters, public spaces, and iconic high-rises, the Loop provides a dynamic context where architecture and public life intertwine. Completed in 1992 and designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates, this 50-story tower skillfully balances respect for historic surroundings with a progressive architectural vision. Rather than creating a stark contrast, the tower embraces continuity by mediating between heritage and modernity through its postmodern



Figure 3. Grant Thornton Tower, Chicago. This modern skyscraper bridges past and present with its illuminated crown and refined material palette, enhancing placemaking through connectivity and cultural continuity in the Loop. Source: Photograph by author.

design, classical references, articulated massing, and a carefully refined base and crown. More than a commercial office building, Grant Thornton Tower contributes significantly to the Loop's spatial coherence and urban identity, illustrating how tall buildings can actively participate in and enrich the city's civic and cultural life (O'Gorman, 2003; Saliga & Clarke, 1998) (Figure 3).

The tower's most distinctive feature—its slanted, faceted crown—offers a subtle yet intentional visual dialogue with the adjacent Randolph Tower, a 1920s Beaux-Arts skyscraper famed for its ornate tapering silhouette (Figure 4). Rather than mimicking historic ornamentation, Grant Thornton Tower abstracts classical elements into simplified, modern forms, bridging past and present architectural languages in a respectful and non-pastiche manner (Rüedi, 2005; Zukowsky et al., 2004). This reinterpretation elevates



Figure 4. A close-up view highlighting how the Grant Thornton Tower's crown draws architectural inspiration from the historic Randolph Tower, blending modern design with a tribute to Chicago's architectural heritage. Source: Photograph by author.

the building's presence on the urban scene and weaves it into Chicago's evolving high-rise narrative, reinforcing cultural memory and continuity. Materially, the tower strikes a careful balance between contextual harmony and visual distinction: light-toned granite complements neighboring civic structures, while crisp lines and reflective glass impart a contemporary sharpness, enabling the building to stand out without disrupting the coherence of the surrounding district (Schulze & Harrington, 2003).

Strategically situated near key civic institutions such as the James R. Thompson Center and the Daley Center, the tower occupies a vital node within the Loop's civic and commercial core, positioned at the crossroads of government, business, and pedestrian flows. Beyond symbolic prominence, it actively shapes spatial movement and enhances civic visibility as an architectural anchor that reinforces the



Figure 5: The Heritage at Millennium Park integrates historic architectural forms with contemporary design elements, fostering placemaking through Beaux-Arts-inspired details, substantial residential density, and its prime location adjacent to cultural landmarks such as the Chicago Cultural Center and Millennium Park. Source: Photograph by author.

area's legibility and urban rhythm. At street level, the building contributes to a welcoming, human-scaled streetscape through refined granite cladding, transparent glazing, and a modest plaza, crafting an approachable and elegant interface that counters the opacity typical of late 20th-century office towers and promotes walkability and informal social engagement (Levin, 2007). Its connection to the Chicago Pedway system further integrates the tower into the city's pedestrian infrastructure, linking it to transit stations, commercial arcades, and adjacent buildings. This below-grade network is essential in Chicago's harsh winter climate, sustaining year-round urban activity, comfort, and accessibility.

Collectively, the Grant Thornton Tower exemplifies how tall buildings can transcend mere commercial function to become enduring civic assets. The tower engages its historical

and spatial surroundings with respect and originality through carefully calibrating form, materiality, and contextual sensitivity. Rather than asserting dominance, it participates in the urban narrative, reinforcing the Loop's identity while enhancing legibility, connectivity, and public life (O'Gorman, 2003). Its integration of architectural expression with multimodal accessibility, human-scale streetscape, and symbolic continuity demonstrates that placemaking in high-rise design is not only possible but essential. In this way, the Grant Thornton Tower stands as a compelling model for how contemporary skyscrapers can contribute meaningfully to a more inclusive, resilient, and experientially prosperous urban future.

3.4. The Heritage at Millennium Park: Bridging History and Modernity to Promote Placemaking

Our final Chicago example, The Heritage at Millennium Park, illustrates the placemaking potential of tall residential buildings that are contextually attuned, civically engaged, and designed with a sensitivity to the pedestrian experience. By forging spatial and symbolic links between the Beaux-Arts legacy of the early 20th century and the cultural vibrancy of Millennium Park, the tower exemplifies how high-rise architecture can enrich the urban fabric rather than merely punctuate it (Pridmore & Larson, 2018; Uhlir, 2005).

Completed in 2005 and designed by Solomon Cordwell Buenz, the 57-story condominium tower rises 192 meters (631 feet) above East Randolph Street in the Loop. Rather than asserting itself as an isolated formal gesture, The Heritage engages in a deliberate act of urban choreography. Its position adjacent to the Chicago Cultural Center—a Beaux-Arts landmark—and directly facing Millennium Park places it at a spatial and symbolic junction between Chicago's historic architectural legacy and its contemporary civic life. The building's design mediates this position with care and restraint (Olson, 2017). Through vertically aligned window bays that echo classical proportions, stone-toned cladding that recalls neighboring masonry, and cornice lines that nod to historic rooflines, the tower forges a respectful visual dialogue with its older counterparts. These references are not literal replications but calibrated abstractions that maintain continuity while projecting a modern identity. In doing so, the building reinforces the civic character of Randolph Street as a dignified and cohesive corridor, contributing to its architectural rhythm without sacrificing its compositional clarity or temporal relevance (Figure 5).

Placemaking is further reinforced through infrastructural connectivity. The tower's integration with the Chicago Pedway system provides seamless access to transit lines, civic institutions, and major cultural attractions, including the Art Institute of Chicago and the Theater District. This embeddedness within a broader pedestrian and transit network supports a car-independent urban lifestyle, aligning with sustainable, equitable, and walkable city design principles (Keegan, 2008).

At the street level, The Heritage cultivates an active urban edge. Retail frontages along Randolph Street and Wabash Avenue, articulated with transparency and human-scaled detailing, invite public interaction while softening the transition between the tower and the sidewalk. Wide sidewalks, articulated entries, and public-facing program elements create a lively streetscape that supports social encounters and inclusivity. These interventions counterbalance the tower's vertical scale, transforming it from a detached residential enclave into a participant in the everyday life of the Loop (Olson, 2017).

Beyond its architectural and infrastructural contributions, the tower's position at the threshold between private dwelling and civic interface underscores its dual role. Residents benefit from panoramic views of Lake Michigan and the surroundings, while the building's form and siting contribute to the definition and activation of Millennium Park and surrounding public spaces. In this way, The Heritage exemplifies a new urban residential typology that extends beyond private amenities to engage and elevate the public realm (Pridmore & Larson, 2018).

Taken together, The Heritage at Millennium Park demonstrates how a tall residential building can contribute meaningfully to placemaking through contextual design, pedestrian connectivity, and active engagement with the public realm. By drawing upon Chicago's Beaux-Arts legacy while embracing contemporary architectural expression, the tower establishes continuity between past and present. Its integration with the Pedway network, active street frontage, and visual relationship with Millennium Park illustrate how high-rise housing can strengthen urban vitality rather than function as an isolated vertical enclave. Equally important, the tower both benefits from and reinforces the imageability of Millennium Park, one of Chicago's most recognizable civic destinations. Residents enjoy direct visual and physical access to the park, while the building helps strengthen its role as a focal point of downtown public life. The Heritage thus offers a compelling model of residential placemaking in which contextual sensitivity, civic engagement, and human-centered design work together to enrich the city's cultural and spatial fabric.

3.5. Jin Mao Tower: A Modern Pagoda Rooted in Chinese Heritage and Placemaking

Completed in 1999 and designed by Adrian Smith during his tenure at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), the 88-story, 421-meter (1,380-foot) tower occupies a prominent site in the Lujiazui financial district of Pudong. Once a low-lying swampland, the site of Jin Mao Tower has transformed into a global symbol of China's urban and economic rise. The tower anchors the district both visually and symbolically. Beyond its technical achievements, Jin Mao stands as a cultural landmark that bridges the past and future, connects local identity with international aspirations,



Figure 6. The Jin Mao Tower in Shanghai reimagines the traditional pagoda through a tiered design that symbolizes prosperity, blending cultural heritage with engineering innovation to anchor placemaking in the heart of Pudong. Source: Photograph by author.

and balances monumental presence with active civic engagement (Wang, 2016).

Formally, the Jin Mao Tower draws direct inspiration from the vertical layering of traditional Chinese pagodas, reinterpreting their architectural grammar to express spiritual and philosophical ideas within a contemporary high-rise form. Its symmetrical octagonal base—a shape deeply rooted in Chinese cosmology—symbolizes balance and wholeness, while the building's tiered setbacks and gradually tapering silhouette evoke the principle of vertical ascent, reflecting ideals of harmony with the cosmos and the pursuit of spiritual elevation. The deliberate incorporation of the number 88—highly auspicious in Chinese numerology—into the building's height (88 stories) and symbolic design underscores its alignment with themes of prosperity, good fortune, and cultural significance (Al-Kodmany,

2024b). In rejecting the anonymity of generic international modernism, Jin Mao asserts a strong regional identity that is legible and meaningful within local traditions and the broader global architectural context. In this way, the tower functions as a building and a spatial narrative. This vertical allegory embodies national identity, cultural continuity, and a forward-looking vision of modern China (Figure 6).

Materially, the Jin Mao Tower's design deepens its cultural resonance through a refined interplay of texture, detail, and craftsmanship. Its stainless steel and aluminum cladding evoke the delicate intricacy of traditional Chinese latticework, infusing the façade with a rhythmic pattern that bridges heritage and modernity. Meanwhile, using stone and granite at the base of the building gives it tactile warmth and invites human-scale interaction, softening the transition from monumental skyscrapers to pedestrian realms. This thoughtful material palette embodies a dialogue between cutting-edge construction technologies and artisanal traditions, reflecting China's complex journey of modernization alongside cultural preservation (Smith, 2007). Internally, articulating surfaces and finishes subtly reference classical motifs without resorting to pastiche, creating a sophisticated and approachable environment. Through these material strategies, Jin Mao transcends mere architectural form, inviting viewers and users alike to experience a layered narrative that celebrates technological progress and enduring cultural values.

Beyond its formal symbolism, the Jin Mao Tower actively fosters placemaking at both urban and human scales. Its base features a mixed-use podium with retail, restaurants, and publicly accessible spaces that enliven the street and encourage pedestrian engagement through generous setbacks, plazas, and landscaped walkways. This permeability breaks down the traditional barrier between skyscrapers and sidewalks, extending the building's influence into everyday urban life by promoting walkability, social interaction, and civic vitality (Zhang, 2016). Internally, the tower is a vertical neighborhood, housing premium offices, the Grand Hyatt hotel, dining venues, and a public observation deck. This layered program attracts diverse users throughout the day, creating a dynamic environment that mirrors Shanghai's density and rhythm. The observation deck offers panoramic views of the Huangpu River and historic Bund, reconnecting visitors to the city's broader spatial and cultural narrative while fostering orientation, memory, and collective identity.

The crown of the Jin Mao Tower is a striking synthesis of Art Deco inspiration, Chinese symbolism, and contemporary engineering. Composed of layered setbacks and metallic spires made of aluminum alloy and stainless steel, it evokes the vertical rhythm and geometric refinement of classic skyscrapers while referencing traditional Chinese architectural elements such as pagodas and dougong brackets. Its symmetrical, tapering design embodies themes of Chinese cosmology: harmony, spiritual ascent, and cosmic order. At night, integrated lighting accentuates the crown's sculptural complexity, transforming it into a luminous beacon that enhances Shanghai's urban identity and reinforces its civic landmark identity. More than a decorative feature, the crown serves as a symbolic and spatial crescendo, uniting cultural heritage with futuristic ambition and contributing meaningfully to the city's imageability and placemaking.

Viewed holistically, the Jin Mao Tower represents a compelling, culturally responsive vertical architecture model that transcends mere functionality or spectacle. By synthesizing advanced structural innovation with symbolic design language, pedestrian engagement, and sensitivity to historical context, the tower redefines placemaking as a multidimensional endeavor that unfolds at the street level and throughout the building's vertical expanse (Wang, 2016). It demonstrates that skyscrapers, rooted in local cultural narratives and designed with civic intentionality, can serve as powerful agents of urban identity and continuity. As a defining landmark and a civic interface, Jin Mao affirms the enduring role of cultural memory in shaping the contemporary city's spatial, symbolic, and experiential dimensions.

3.6. Petronas Towers: Blending Islamic Tradition and Modernity in Architectural Placemaking

The Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur stand as a landmark achievement in high-rise design and a compelling example of how contextually responsive architecture can bridge tradition and modernity while strengthening civic identity and urban placemaking. Designed by César Pelli and completed in 1998, the twin towers rise 452 meters (1,482 feet) across 88 stories, combining structural innovation with a design deeply rooted in Malaysia's cultural heritage. More than engineering accomplishments, they serve as powerful national symbols whose architectural expression draws upon Islamic geometry and local cultural traditions while projecting Malaysia's aspirations for economic progress, global engagement, and cultural confidence (Pelli et al., 1997). Their significance extends beyond their iconic form through their integration with the broader Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) development, where architecture, public space, transportation, commerce, and cultural amenities together create a vibrant and cohesive urban environment.

Centrally located within the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) development, the towers are not isolated objects but carefully embedded components of an integrated urban plan. The KLCC master plan incorporates retail, public parks, cultural institutions, and transit connectivity, ensuring that the towers serve as nodes of activity and engagement rather than detached icons. Their role within this urban ecosystem exemplifies a holistic approach to placemaking, where tall buildings reinforce the vitality of their surroundings through thoughtful siting, programmatic integration, and spatial coherence (Bunnell, 1999).

The towers' formal design is deeply rooted in Islamic



Figure 7. The Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur fuse Islamic tradition and modernity through an eight-pointed star plan and minaret-inspired forms, with a skybridge symbolizing unity and reinforcing their role as cultural and architectural icons. Source: Photograph by author.

geometry and symbolism. Their floor plate is derived from the *Rub el Hizb*, an overlapping square motif common in Islamic art, reflecting principles of unity, order, and spirituality. This symbolic grounding affirms Malaysia's Islamic heritage and invests the towers with cultural meaning beyond formal aesthetics (Loo, 2016). The use of stainless steel and glass façades evokes modernity while maintaining a respectful dialogue with traditional ornamentation. The towers' repetition, rhythm, and symmetry echo Islamic design principles, creating a vertical expression that is contextually grounded and globally resonant (Moon, 2015) (Figure 7).

Interestingly, the twin towers possess unique placemaking potential through symmetry, spatial framing, and symbolic balance. The Petronas Towers elevate this typology, offering a bold yet harmonious silhouette that enhances Kuala



Figure 8. The Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur integrate Islamic geometric principles with contemporary engineering through an eight-pointed star floor plan, minaret-inspired forms, and a connecting skybridge. Their culturally rooted design and integration with the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) development reinforce civic identity and urban placemaking. Source: Photograph by author.

Lumpur's legibility and visual identity. Their mirrored forms establish an axial clarity that resonates at the urban and street levels, embodying Kevin Lynch's notion of imageability (1960). Their gleaming façades, reflecting light and shadow throughout the day, animate the urban scene and deepen the city's experiential quality (Al-Kodmany & Ali, 2013).

At night, the towers undergo a symbolic transformation. Architectural lighting illuminates their Islamic-inspired geometry, creating intricate patterns of brilliance and shadow. The Skybridge, suspended between the towers at levels 41 and 42, becomes a luminous focal point—a beacon of unity that underscores the project's cultural and spatial symbolism. This nocturnal presence extends their

placemaking influence, reinforcing their identity as civic markers and enhancing their role as active agents in shaping the city's emotional and visual landscape (Figure 8).

Placemaking at the ground level of the Petronas Towers is carefully designed to foster vibrancy and inclusivity. The towers' base features the Suria KLCC retail complex, which activates the site with engaging edges and pedestrian permeability. Adjacent to the towers lies KLCC Park, a 20-hectare landscaped oasis designed by Roberto Burle Marx, offering water features, walking paths, and shaded seating that provide residents and visitors with a vital respite from urban density. This seamless integration of tall buildings with generous green space exemplifies a core principle of vertical urbanism—balancing density with accessibility, comfort, and ecological richness (Thornton et al., 1997). The civic role of the towers is further enriched by cultural programming, notably the Petronas Philharmonic Hall, Malaysia's premier concert venue, which adds cultural depth and draws a diverse audience. Together with direct connections to the city's LRT system and pedestrian pathways, these elements ensure the towers are physically accessible, socially inclusive, and deeply embedded in the everyday life of Kuala Lumpur.

Overall, the Petronas Towers exemplify how tall buildings can transcend architectural spectacle to become deeply embedded instruments of cultural meaning, civic life, and national identity. Their synthesis of Islamic design principles, cutting-edge engineering, and inclusive urban programming demonstrates a multidimensional placemaking model that honors heritage while embracing innovation (King, 2008). Rather than as isolated icons, the towers engage with their context at every scale, from urban scene to streetscape, offering spaces for symbolic reflection, social interaction, and collective experience. In doing so, they affirm that when thoughtfully articulated, verticality can serve not merely as a measure of ambition but as a spatial framework for belonging, memory, and civic continuity in the evolving global city (Pelli et al., 1997).

4. Discussion

The examined case studies demonstrate how contextual design can strengthen placemaking by reinforcing urban continuity, civic identity, and meaningful relationships between tall buildings and their cultural and spatial environments. Rather than functioning as isolated architectural objects, the projects reveal how skyscrapers can contribute actively to public life through contextual materiality, symbolic form, pedestrian engagement, mixed-use integration, and infrastructural connectivity. Drawing on examples from Chicago, Shanghai, and Kuala Lumpur, the discussion illustrates that placemaking operates across multiple spatial scales—from urban imageability and district coherence to street-level experience and everyday urban life.

A recurring theme across the case studies is the creative reinterpretation of historical and cultural references within contemporary skyscraper design. The Chicago examples—including NBC Tower, 900 North Michigan Avenue, Grant Thornton Tower, and The Heritage at Millennium Park—establish visual dialogue with surrounding landmarks and architectural traditions through reinterpretations of Art Deco, Gothic Revival, and Beaux-Arts vocabularies. These references are not literal reproductions but contemporary translations that mediate between historical continuity and modern architectural expression. NBC Tower, for example, reinterprets Chicago's early skyscraper tradition through vertical articulation, tiered setbacks, and a decorative crown, while employing contemporary materials such as bronze-tinted glass and polished stone to reinforce both modernity and historical rootedness. Similarly, 900 North Michigan Avenue engages the adjacent Chicago Water Tower through limestone cladding, stepped massing, and crenelated rooftop lanterns that reinterpret Gothic influences within a contemporary postmodern language.

The Chicago projects further demonstrate how contextual sensitivity contributes to urban vitality through integration and pedestrian engagement. Mixed-use programming, active retail frontages, transparent bases, plazas, and transit connectivity transform these towers from isolated commercial objects into integrated components of the civic realm. Grant Thornton Tower, for example, strengthens urban continuity by directly integrating with the Chicago Pedway system, enhancing accessibility and pedestrian movement within the downtown core. Likewise, The Heritage at Millennium Park reinforces continuity between old and new urban layers through the preservation of historic storefront façades along Wabash Avenue while simultaneously introducing contemporary transparency and curvilinear forms. Its adjacency to Millennium Park, integration with pedestrian infrastructure, and active ground-level uses strengthen its role as a civic connector between residential life and public space. Collectively, these projects reveal that contextualism extends beyond formal aesthetics to encompass movement, accessibility, public interaction, and everyday urban experience.

The Asian examples broaden the discussion by illustrating how contextual skyscrapers can embody cultural symbolism, collective memory, and national identity within rapidly modernizing urban environments. Jin Mao Tower reinterprets the traditional Chinese pagoda through tiered setbacks, octagonal geometry, and symbolic numerology, transforming vernacular principles into a technologically advanced contemporary skyscraper. Organized into eight articulated segments symbolizing prosperity and harmony, the tower merges cultural rootedness with modern engineering. Similarly, the Petronas Towers translate Islamic geometric principles into a globally recognizable high-rise composition through the eight-pointed Rub el Hizb motif, tapering minaret-inspired forms, and intricate stainless-steel ornamentation. In both projects, contextual design becomes a form of cultural storytelling that communicates shared narratives, values, and aspirations while projecting technological

Table 1. Case Studies of Contextual Design and Placemaking Contributions

Case Study	Cultural Contextualization	Design Features	Placemaking Strategies
NBC Tower, Chicago	Echoes of Chicago's Art Deco and Gothic Traditions	Vertical massing, setbacks, decorative spire, limestone façade	Aligns with the Tribune Tower; activates street life through a public plaza and substantial urban frontage
900 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago	Honors the nearby historic Chicago Water Tower	Limestone cladding, stepped setbacks, ornamental lanterns	Complements historical context while providing mixed-use programming and vibrant pedestrian interaction
Grant Thornton Tower, Chicago	Establishes dialogue with Beaux-Arts Randolph Tower and the surrounding Loop architecture	Faceted crown, light granite, and glass palette	Enhances civic presence through integration with the Pedway and contributes to visual and pedestrian continuity
The Heritage at Millennium Park	Bridges Beaux-Arts Cultural Center and Millennium Park	Blended historic façades with modern vertical elements	Connects to transit and public spaces; supports residential life and civic engagement through active ground uses
Jin Mao Tower, Shanghai	Integrates Chinese symbolism, pagoda forms, and auspicious numerology	Tiered structure, octagonal base, 88 floors	Merges cultural identity with modernism; incorporates plazas and sky observatories to support public interaction
Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur	Embeds Islamic geometric symbolism and national identity	*Rub el Hizb* floorplan, minaret-inspired tapering, stainless steel façade	Part of the KLCC master plan, with a park, a concert hall, a skybridge, and transit connections, fosters cultural resonance

advancement and global ambition.

Equally important is integrating these towers into broader urban ecosystems. Both Jin Mao Tower and the Petronas Towers incorporate plazas, landscaped public spaces, observation decks, retail environments, pedestrian pathways, and transit connectivity that activate the ground plane and encourage social interaction. The Petronas Towers' relationship with the broader Kuala Lumpur City Centre development—including KLCC Park, cultural institutions, and commercial amenities—demonstrates how skyscrapers can function as civic anchors embedded within everyday urban life rather than isolated icons. Similarly, Jin Mao Tower employs landscaped courtyards, observation spaces, and active pedestrian interfaces that strengthen its engagement with Shanghai's evolving public realm. These projects demonstrate that successful placemaking depends not only on symbolic form but also on accessibility, inclusivity, and integration with the city's social and spatial rhythms (Table 1).

Beyond the examined case studies, numerous contemporary skyscrapers further demonstrate the diverse ways contextual design can influence urban experience and spatial quality within high-density cities. Taipei 101, for example, not only draws upon bamboo symbolism and traditional East Asian cultural references but also incorporates a multi-level retail podium, public gathering spaces, and direct connections to Taipei's transit network, reinforcing its role as an active urban destination rather than a standalone landmark. In Dubai, Burj Al Arab employs the symbolic form of a traditional Arabian dhow sail, yet its significance extends beyond visual identity through its relationship with the surrounding waterfront and its contribution to the city's evolving coastal public realm.

Similarly, 30 St Mary Axe in London responds to its historic context through a carefully tapered profile that preserves important sightlines, respects the surrounding urban fabric, and minimizes its visual impact on nearby historic landmarks. At street level, the building introduces publicly accessible open spaces that enhance pedestrian permeability and contribute to the vitality of the surrounding financial district. In Singapore, Oasia Hotel Downtown advances a different interpretation of contextualism by integrating extensive vertical vegetation, sky terraces, and naturally ventilated communal spaces. Rather than relying on historical references, the project responds directly to the city-state's tropical climate and environmental conditions, contributing to urban biodiversity while offering a distinctive public and visual experience.

5. Conclusions

This paper has argued that contextual design provides a powerful framework for advancing placemaking in tall buildings within an increasingly globalized urban environment. The case studies demonstrate that contextually responsive skyscrapers can reinforce civic identity, urban continuity, and collective memory by establishing meaningful relationships with their cultural, historical, spatial, and environmental settings. Operating across multiple scales—from the urban fabric to the pedestrian realm—contextual design enhances imageability, strengthens connections to surrounding streets, landmarks, transit systems, and public spaces, and contributes to vibrant and accessible urban life.

The findings further suggest that successful contextual design depends on creativity rather than imitation. The

most effective skyscrapers do not replicate historical forms or merely conform to their surroundings; instead, they creatively reinterpret local traditions, symbolic narratives, material expressions, and urban patterns through contemporary technologies and architectural innovation. Contextual sensitivity and creative expression, therefore, function as complementary forces, enabling tall buildings to be simultaneously modern, distinctive, and deeply rooted in place.

This study draws upon the author's direct observations, field visits, visual analyses, and photographic documentation, while also engaging extensively with the scholarly and professional literature associated with each case study. The findings emerge from a synthesis of firsthand experience and literature-based inquiry, allowing the analysis to situate individual buildings within broader architectural, cultural, and urban design discourses. As with all qualitative architectural research, a degree of interpretive subjectivity remains inherent in the evaluation and integration of evidence. Nevertheless, the framework presented here contributes to a deeper understanding of how skyscrapers shape identity, public experience, and the evolving character of place. Ultimately, in an era of increasing architectural standardization and global visual sameness, contextual design remains an essential strategy for humanizing vertical urbanism, strengthening collective memory, and creating more meaningful, place-sensitive cities.

6. Key Takeaways

The preceding analysis suggests several broader principles for architects, urban designers, planners, and policymakers seeking to strengthen placemaking through tall building design. Rather than serving as prescriptive rules, these principles highlight how contextual responsiveness can reinforce identity, enhance urban integration, and enrich the public experience of vertical urbanism.

1. **Contextual Design Reinforces Identity and Sense of Place**
   Tall buildings contribute most effectively to placemaking when they respond to the cultural, historical, spatial, and environmental characteristics of their surroundings. Such responsiveness strengthens local identity and fosters continuity between new development and the existing urban fabric.
2. **Creativity and Contextualism Are Complementary**
   Successful contextual design does not rely on imitation or historical replication. Instead, it creatively reinterprets local traditions, symbolic narratives, and urban patterns through contemporary architectural expression, allowing buildings to be both innovative and place-sensitive.
3. **Tall Buildings Should Engage the Public Realm**
   Placemaking extends beyond the tower itself. Active ground floors, accessible public spaces, pedestrian connections, and human-scaled design interventions help transform tall buildings from isolated objects into integral components of civic life.
4. **Cultural Symbolism Enhances Meaning and Imageability**
   When architectural form, materials, and spatial organization draw upon local cultural references, tall buildings can become memorable landmarks that strengthen collective memory, civic pride, and urban legibility.
5. **Urban Integration Strengthens Connectivity and Vitality**
   Contextually responsive skyscrapers are integrated into broader urban systems, including streets, transit networks, public spaces, and mixed-use districts. Such integration supports accessibility, activity, and long-term urban resilience.
6. **Mixed Uses and Diverse Activities Foster Vibrant Places**
   Tall buildings contribute more effectively to placemaking when they accommodate a variety of functions and users. Programmatic diversity helps sustain activity throughout the day and strengthens connections between buildings and their surrounding communities.
7. **Contextual Design Humanizes Vertical Urbanism**
   Ultimately, contextual design enables skyscrapers to transcend their role as iconic objects and become meaningful contributors to urban life. By balancing innovation with cultural awareness and civic sensitivity, tall buildings can enrich both the physical and symbolic dimensions of place.

7. Future Research

Future research may further expand understanding of the relationship between contextual design and placemaking in tall buildings by examining a broader range of geographic, cultural, climatic, and socio-economic contexts within global vertical urbanism. Comparative studies of prominent architects known for context-sensitive design approaches, including and, could provide deeper insight into the design philosophies, creative processes, and contextual strategies that shape contemporary skyscrapers. Additional research may investigate how contextualism is interpreted across different architectural traditions and professional cultures, and how it influences public perception, sense of place, urban imageability, and community identity. Longitudinal studies could explore the extent to which contextual skyscrapers maintain their relevance and placemaking value over time as cities evolve. Future scholarship may also examine how emerging technologies, sustainability imperatives, climate adaptation measures, and artificial intelligence influence the future evolution of contextual design. Finally, research on evolving building typologies—including supertall towers, mixed-use megastructures, adaptive reuse high-rises, transit-oriented developments, and environmentally responsive vertical urbanism—may

further clarify how contextual design can contribute to creating more culturally meaningful, socially engaging, and resilient urban environments.

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