

# From the first high-rise building to the modern skyline: social class and architectural evolution

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## **Abstract:**

This article mainly explores the rise of high-rise buildings, driven by population growth and social development. Firstly, the emergence of the first high-rise building was introduced, followed by an overview of the development of high-rise buildings in different periods. In addition, the significance of high-rise buildings in modern society, particularly their impact on urban development and social stratification, was also discussed. High rise buildings have replaced the low-rise luxury ancient buildings of the last century, and due to other factors such as geographical environment, their high prices have gradually become the preferred choice representing the affluent class. And discussed the situation and duality of the high class represented by high-rise buildings. High rise buildings not only elevate urban standards, but also effectively connect ancient history with modern culture. High rise buildings not only provide better living resources and convenience, but often reflect the image of the city and the stories behind it.

**Keywords:** High-rise building, History, Social-class

## **1. Introduction**

What do you think when you see this? Gazing out the window in New York, the fiery red decorated the silver blue of the sunset sky. The crosswalk was filled with diffusing streams of people returning from work.

Through this description, I believe everyone has roughly guessed where they can see this scene. That's right, it's a high-rise building.

High-rise building are currently the most common constructions in daily life, most of them appear in the city center of the city and many cities consider sky-

scrapers as their representative cities, for example, when it comes to the Oriental Pearl TV Tower, many people will think of Shanghai. When it comes to the Central Park Tower, people think of New York City. Yes, it seems that we have become accustomed to associating cities with high-rise buildings now. However, we always focus on the surface of events without thinking about what is happening behind them. Why start building high-rise buildings? What do high-rise buildings represent now and in the last century? So I would like to introduce the history and representatives behind high-rise buildings with great prizes in

the following article.

## 2. Changes in high-rise buildings due to different factors

Why build tall buildings? Firstly, we need to clarify that the first building defined as a high-rise appeared in 1884 (This image is from the documentary “History of Skyscrapers” Harvard online).



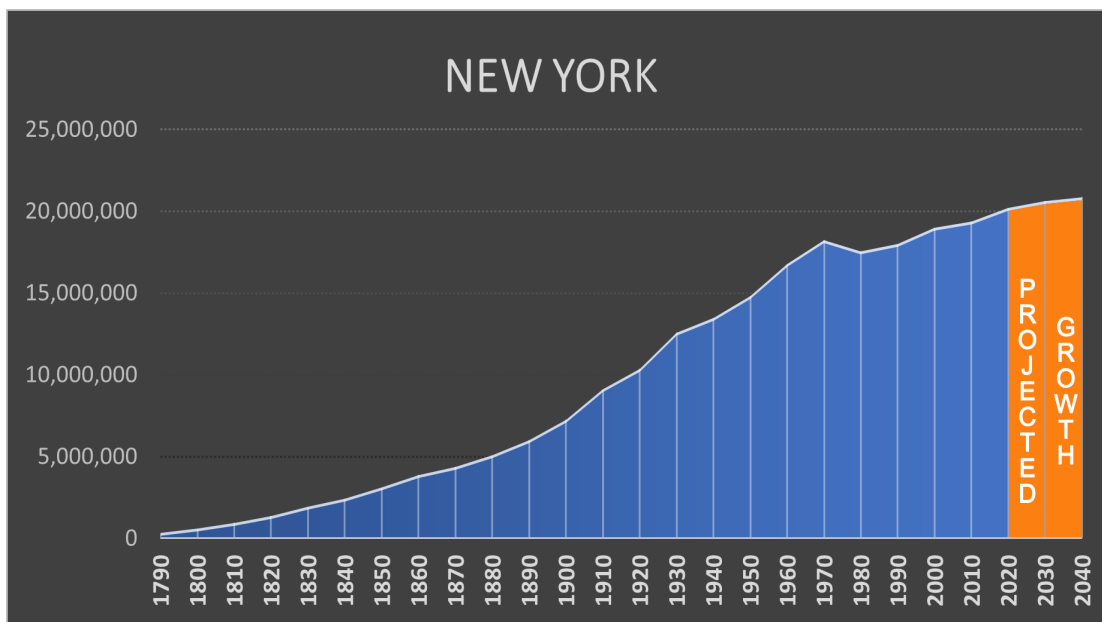
**(Fig1) Chicago’s home insurance building ,built in 1884**

From the documentary History of Skyscraper. Harvard Online

<sup>1</sup>Before the 1970s, there were not many high-rise buildings and most of them were used for office work, but why did high-rise buildings rapidly increase and become residential buildings after that? Due to the increase in population.

Regarding the issue of population, it is more about a country experiencing a large-scale increase in its population base after stabilizing, we can observe the following statistical chart, which records the population growth from 1790 to 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Harvard Online. History of Skyscraper. YouTube, 25 Feb. 2019, <https://www.harvardonline.harvard.edu/>.



**(Fig2) New York City census table <https://npg.org/population-data/new-york.html>.**

Simply put, the impact of population on high-rise buildings is due to a significant increase in the population base

and limitations on the territorial area of a city/country. So it is necessary to abandon low rise buildings that occupy an area but cannot accommodate many people, and replace them with high-rise buildings that can accommodate more people under the same area.

But why is the population growing rapidly? There is another way besides giving birth, that's right! It's immigration. Taking New York as an example, it has experienced three major waves of immigration. The first time was from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, when most of these immigrants came from Europe, such as Germany, Italy, and Eastern European Jews, who later became an important hub in New York. The second large-scale immigration occurred after World War II, and most of the people this time also came from Eastern Europe. The third immigration period, with the largest number of people and the greatest impact on New York, occurred from the 1970s to the present day. The immigrant population is more diverse, coming from all over the world, such as Asian countries like China, South Korea, and Malaysia. And countries in South America and Africa. This immigration has brought the population of New York to its peak and made society more diverse.

Overall, the population growth caused by immigration and childbirth has led to an increase in the number of high-rise buildings in cities, and their use has also expanded from office buildings to residential buildings. In the documentary "History of Skyscrapers," there is an argument that "according to statistics, after 1970, the use of high-rise buildings was not limited to offices, but became residential due to population growth.

### 3. The evolution of high-rise buildings

We just discussed the main reason for the increase in high-rise buildings: population issues. But at the beginning, I mentioned a conclusion: the first building truly defined as a high-rise appeared in 1884. The real impact of population is the increase in the use and quantity of high-rise buildings, as well as the transformation of major urban buildings. So how are high-rise buildings designed?

The building in the picture below was built in 1870 and is located in New York City. This is the first building equipped with elevators, which also laid the groundwork for the appearance of high-rise buildings in the future (Image source from the documentary "History of Skyscrapers" Harvard Online).



**(Fig3)History of Skyscraper. Harvard Online  
1870, Build in New York City**

We just mentioned that this building was the first in history to be equipped with elevators, and the impact of elevators on buildings is enormous. In the documentary "History of Skyscrapers," it was mentioned that "the emergence of elevators is very important because only with elevators can tall buildings be built, and no one is willing to spend a lot of time climbing stairs.



**(Fig4)History of Skyscraper. Harvard Online  
Daniel Burnham and John Root ,19century  
Chicago**

The final highlight of the documentary "History of Skyscrapers" is the high-rise building built by Daniel and John between the 19th century. They are both known

as the fathers of skyscrapers. This type of building is equipped with elevators and has a floor height exceeding 10 floors. It is a standard high-rise building.

#### 4. The impact of the emergence of high-rise buildings on us

In the previous discussion, we discussed the impact and advancement of human population growth and culture on high-rise buildings, but the topics of discussion all started with us. And for this topic, I want to discuss the relationship between high-rise buildings and society.

Imagine a scene: some people standing on the road at a loss, some people standing on the roofs of low floors looking up, some people standing at the top of high-rise buildings, looking up at the sky or looking down. It can be seen that this scene divides people into three parts. What can be seen from the different behaviors of these three parts? you 're right! Due to the differences in social classes, I would like to take you to understand the impact of the emergence of high-rise buildings on social classes.

Firstly, when we observe current cities such as Shanghai, New York, etc., we can find that most high-rise buildings are located in the city center. The characteristic of the city center is that it has a good geographical location at the center of the city and enjoys the best commercial districts. Generally, those who possess these characteristics, whether they are residential or office buildings, have one characteristic - expensive prices. So generally, those who can own property in such areas are wealthy people. In this era, high-rise buildings have gradually become representatives of the wealthy. The higher you live, the richer and more powerful you are. The middle class can only live in ordinary buildings and areas, while the poor are even homeless. This scene is very evident in the movie "Blade Runner"<sup>2</sup>, which tells the story of the changes that will happen in Los Angeles in the future. There is a scene where the rich live in high-rise buildings and control technology and the economy, while the poor can only live next to the bottom garbage dump and be slaughtered.



(Fig5)Blade Runner Scott, Ridley, director.

In the scene we just described, there are some people  
 2 Scott, Ridley, director. The Ladd Company, Shaw Brothers, Blade Runner Partnership, 25 June 1982.

from the middle class who also want to live in high-rise buildings. In other words, they also want to become a high class group and control everything like them. But is this necessarily a good thing? Don't those wealthy people face greater pressure? Next, I will introduce two questions to you: the duality of living in high-rise buildings and the issue of happiness index.

Firstly, research on happiness index is very common as it is often used to reflect the popularity of a city. Regarding our research direction, do people living in skyscrapers necessarily have happiness? This has been studied and statistically analyzed in the literature "Happiness of the Very Wealthy".

"First, those with money can afford fun and pleasurable activities to a much greater extent."<sup>3</sup>(Diener,Horwitz,Emmons263)Upon careful consideration, many problems in the world today can be solved with money. For example, wealthy people do not have to worry about daily expenses and their entertainment costs, which can help them avoid some accidents and bring more connections and resources. In today's society where interests come first, they will link these with their self-esteem, and the problem often arises here.



(Fig6)Penthouse (2020)

Broadcasted by SBS, with production by Studio S and Green Snake Media

"Money is often gained at the expense of other glued things such as spending time with one's family and close

3 Diener, Ed, Jeff Horwitz, and Robert A. Emmons. "Happiness of the Very Wealthy." \*Social Indicators Research\*, vol. 16, no. 3, Apr. 1985, pp. 263-274. Springer, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27521290>.

friends. It usually takes the majority (or all) of one's time and energy to accumulate wealth." (Diener, Horwitz, Emmons 2013) That's right, as it is very common in real life and is well reflected in the Korean drama 'Penthouse'. The theme of the TV drama revolves around a 100 story high-end apartment building, which is one of the wealthiest residences in South Korea, and the occupants of the highest floor represent the highest power holders of this class. Everyone covets this position, but not everyone is qualified. Observing the poster, we can see that all the characters are looking up at the lights above their heads, which echoes the theme of 'the highest represents everything'. The setting of this TV series is that the competitors are already living in the upper echelons of society, but they are willing to give up their families and devote themselves wholeheartedly to their work in order to obtain the right to live at the highest level. However, losing the companionship of family and friends often leads to excessive stress, mental illness, bankruptcy, and complete failure. And their behavior of linking status, wealth, and self-esteem can make it difficult for them to adapt to the life of the lower class, leading to suicide. This is very similar to a Chinese proverb that reflects the current situation: 'The higher you stand, the worse you fall.'<sup>4</sup> So are they happy? Their material world is very fulfilling, but they are destined to face more difficulties and unknown dangers than ordinary people.



**(Fig7)Penthouse (2020)**

Broadcasted by SBS, with production by Studio S and 4 Penthouse (2020). Directed by Joo Dong-min and Park Bo-ram, SBS, Green Snake Media

Green Snake Media

The appearance of the "high-rise apartment" in the drama, with two wing like golden buildings on the top floor, highlights luxury and unknown dangers.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis and exposition of high-rise buildings, from the first building to the current impact of high-rise buildings on us. Firstly, we discussed the mutual influence between us and high-rise buildings, the increase in high-rise buildings caused by population growth, and social development. And the appearance of the first high-rise building, followed by an overview of high-rise buildings from different historical periods. Then, the discussion shifted to their contemporary significance. Regarding the level of urban development and social class, it replaced the low rise and luxurious ancient buildings of the last century. Nowadays, high-rise buildings are crucial to urban life, promoting the improvement of urban standards and serving as a hub for ancient history and modern culture. They not only provide better living resources and convenience, but often reflect the image of the city and the story behind it.

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