Preliminary Notes on the Late-Capitalist Skyscraper as a Morphology of Enclosure

Mariano Gomez-Luque

I.
In general terms, architectural form under capitalism is a distinct morphology of CAPITALIST ENCLOSURE. More specifically, one of the most conspicuous instantiations of the logic of architecture as enclosure is that of the skyscraper-form, especially in its late-capitalist guise—i.e., in its post-1970s phase of development.[1]

— 1. CAPITALIST ENCLOSURE — Although enclosure as such predates capitalism, it comes to achieve its basic and most robust contours and characteristics within and through the logic of capital accumulation as such. Cf. Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 116: "In the transition to capitalism, the Enclosures represented a remarkable historical creation of absolute space. As capital extends its sway, the entire globe is partitioned into legally distinct parcels, divided by great white fences, real or imaginary." In what follows here I build heavily upon scholar Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago's work on capitalist enclosure as an abstract mechanism for the appropriation of nature and the subsumption of space, as well as for the seizure of the commons. See A. Sevilla-Buitrago, "Capitalist Formations of Enclosure: Space and the Extinction of the Commons," *Antipode* 47, no. 4 (2015): 999–1020.

II.

As such, the LATE-CAPITALIST SKYSCRAPER (LCS)—through its abstract, machinic logic of profit generation out of the vertical replication of the value of commodified land [*]; the subsumption of ever-larger portions of territories and landscapes into the placenta of capitalist urbanization [**]; the gentrification (and the consequent displacement of people from neighborhoods and cities) of urban space [***]; and fundamentally, in its tendency to generate segregated, class-segmented vertical worlds that foreclose the collective capacity to imagine new urban worlds in common [****]—constitutes a historically specific MORPHOLOGY OF ENCLOSURE: specific, that is, to our own age of ubiquitous financialization, planetary urbanization, and ecological and environmental crisis.[2]

— 2. LATE-CAPITALIST SKYSCRAPER — I want to draw a parallelism between, on the one hand, the planetary-scale unfolding of capitalist enclosure as it is manifest in our contemporary world (a spatial world pertinently described by architectural historian Daniel Barber as a "planetary interior": a totalizing, technological environment that casts shadows over our capacity to represent the very idea of, or to experience, an outside; see D. Barber, *Modern Architecture and Climate: Design before Air Conditioning* [Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020]), and on the other, the unprecedented (and planetary-scale) proliferation of skyscrapers from the late twentieth century onwards—that is to say, during the historical stage of capitalist development known as *late capitalism*: hence the rationale for my denomination of this kind of skyscraper as "late-capitalist." To be sure, as "a machine that makes the land pay" (in the memorable definition by Cass Gilbert) the skyscraper has, from its very inception in the late nineteenth century, operated as a logic of capitalist enclosure, insofar as it turns or crystallizes the two-dimensional spatial procedures of land partition and commodification into a three-dimensional, radically verticalized architectural envelope. Yet the LCS, as I define it, presents a number of features that make it qualitatively different from the "iconic" American skyscraper characteristic of the early and mid-twentieth century: it is inherently global (i.e., can be found in virtually all major cities of the world); it has abandoned both its symbolic role as an "icon" of capitalist 'progress' as well as its adherence to the fulfillment of the set of use-values expressing the pre-1970s pact of labor and capital in favor of a post-Fordist, flexible spatiality emphasizing its condition as a mere commodity in building-form, and thus the supremacy of its exchange value over its own functionality and performance as a usable, inhabitable building; and it has grown significantly larger in size and technical sophistication. // On [*], see F. Jameson, "The Brick and the Balloon: Architecture, Idealism, and Land Speculation," in Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 162–189; on [**], see W. Shepard, *Ghost Cities of China: The Story of Cities without People in the World's Most Populated Country* (London: Zed Books, 2015); on [***], see D. Harvey, *Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason* (n.p.: Oxford University Press, 2018), 188–189; on [****] see R. Martin, *The Urban Apparatus: Mediapolitics and the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), especially Ch. 2, "Financial Imaginaries." MORPHOLOGY OF ENCLOSURE — Following Sevilla-Buitrago, I conceive of (contemporary) architecture in general as a concrete scale of enclosure, and the LCS in particular as a specific *morphology* of enclosure: "Enclosure works as a polymorphous technique throughout history… A range of different protocols and morphological schemes are deployed in this process—from a creative-destructive effect to a purely devastating force, from colonial land usurpation and the encroachment of the global commons, to planning and *architectural* enclosures, to bodily acts of spatial alienation." Sevilla-Buitrago, "Capitalist Formations of Enclosure," 1002; my emphasis.

III.

When seen through the lens of political economy—i.e., not only as concrete but also as an ABSTRACT FORM, or a "machine that makes the land pay"—the LCS appears as a spatial template instrumental to the urbanization of capital: a formulaic structure whose quasi-mechanical reproduction makes the city grow upwards in the mechanical pursuit of VERTICALITY FOR ACCUMULATION'S SAKE; a generic morphology indifferently deployed across the unevenly developed, heterogeneous, (ir) rational landscapes of the capitalist world [*]: an expansive vertical vector of accumulation enclosing (i.e., commodifying [**]) segments of urban life in increasingly sealed, artificially controlled environments.[3]

— 3. ABSTRACT FORM is a term I use to read the skyscraper not only as a *material* building but also as an *economic-spatial* formula—as a bare skeleton or *framework of accumulation* whose main purpose is to accumulate capital through the vertical replication of the ground plot. From this vantage point, it is not its dimension as a cultural or aesthetic artifact that a critical analysis of the skyscraper should (only) focus on, but instead the social, cultural, and spatial implications derived from its essential function as an intrinsically capitalist form of architecture. See D. Harvey, "The Invisible Political Economy of Architectural Production," in O. Bouman and R. van Toorn, eds., *The Invisible in Architecture* (London: Academy, 1994), 420–427; C. Willis, *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995). VERTICALITY FOR ACCUMULATION'S SAKE — The history of the skyscraper makes clear that height expansion is a function of accumulation as an end in itself. If the goal-determining activity of capital can only be that of growing wealthier, i.e. of magnification, of increasing itself, then that of the skyscraper must be the imperative of *becoming ever taller*. The late-capitalist skyscraper, insofar as it works as an architectural medium through which to pursue endless accumulation and endless growth, must likewise engage in the constant drive to go beyond its quantitative limit—an endless process. Its own animation consists exclusively in that; it preserves itself as a self-validated exchange value distinct from use value only by constantly multiplying itself. See K. Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993), 270–271, from which I paraphrased directly: "value which insists on itself as value preserves itself through increase; and it preserves itself precisely only by constantly driving beyond its quantitative barrier, which contradicts its character as form, its inner generality. Thus, growing wealthy is an end in itself. The goal-determining activity of capital can only be that of growing wealthier, i.e., of magnification, of increasing itself. . . . Fixed as wealth, as the general form of wealth, as value which counts as value, it (money) is therefore the constant drive to go beyond its quantitative limit: an endless process." // On [*], see Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); on [**], see Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 260.

IV.

Behind the fetishistic image of the LCS lies a vast territory of delirious capital activity beyond the city: landscapes of extraction and logistical operations, large-scale infrastructures of production and the whole network of circulation and labor required to transmute raw materials into the shiny forms of corporate vertical space visible in cities like London, New York, or Shanghai. [*] In other words, the planetary-scale proliferation of the LCS depends on a logic of exploitation of nature—not to mention it's the key and unsustainable engine of a large carbon-based building industry—that, premised on an ongoing and largely invisibilized process of mining from remote, putative non-urban domains, is ecologically unviable and environmentally harmful: *the mine reappears in the city as skyscraper, the skyscraper in the non-city as mine.* This SKYSCRAPER-MINE NEXUS, in turn, is not only contingent on enclosing whatever remains of "nature" in order for it to be exploited and subsumed but is also utterly untenable in light of the catastrophic effects it has on the earth's biosphere, as our current and urgent climate crisis painfully demonstrates. The production of (enclosed) vertical city-space depends on the enclosure of the extended landscapes of non-city space.[4]

— 4. On [*], i.e., the phantasmagoric process that, on the one hand, operationalizes extended territories while, on the other, generates megacities populated by corporate vertical architectures and other forms of large-scale urban agglomerations, see M. Arboleda, "In the Nature of the Non-City: Expanded Infrastructural Networks and the Political Ecology of Planetary Urbanisation," *Antipode* 48, no. 2 (2016): 233–251. See also M. Arboleda, "On the Alienated Violence of Money: Finance Capital, Value, and the Making of Monstrous Territories," in "Posthuman," *New Geographies* 9, ed. M. Gomez Luque and G. Jafari (Actar, Harvard GSD, 2018), 98–105, and Douglas Spencer, "The New Phantasmagoria: Transcoding the Violence of Financial Capitalism," in *The Missed Encounter of Radical Philosophy with Architecture*, ed. N. Lahiji (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 79–94. SKYSCRAPER-MINE NEXUS — This relational concept allows thinking of the planetary interior of capital as a set of metabolic relations between city and non-city space, codified in the synthetic and mirrored forms of the skyscraper and the mine. See G. Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 70: "The mine-as-skyscraper has materialized in today's financial districts, which are nothing less than inverted minescapes reaching up from the staked claims of downtown real estate." See also, on the same theme, S. Graham, *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers* (London: Verso, 2016), 369–373.

V.
The global production of LCS turns the city—the very spatial background of commodity exchange—into a commodity in its own right. [*] On the ground, this means not only the homogenization and gentrification of vast segments of city life and their transmutation into segregated vertical worlds of real estate, but also the displacement or expulsion of larger groups of people across cities from all over the world—mostly people of color, sexual minorities, the urban poor [**]. Capitalist enclosure segregates [***]: some people are allowed to be included within its domains, while others (most) are systemically expelled from them.[5]

VI.
On a yet more general but equally consequential level, this "becoming abstract" of the city—its commodification through the production of SKYSCRAPER-SPACE—forecloses the (our) collective capacity to imagine other, postcapitalist forms of urbanization and urban worlds in common. Instead, it institutes an *urban imaginary* through which late capitalism's "weakening of historicity," its recursive ideology of "no alternative," [*] and the new symbolic values of a transnational elite power are narrated and naturalized by a radically verticalized architecture that, despite its recurrent appeal to formal innovation, is devised to ensure that *nothing really changes*. [**] The enclosure of the city as a vertical landscape of accumulation is a form of appropriation of the urban commons by spatial means, which in turn entails the suppression of other possible (socially just, radically democratic, environmentally sane) modes of urbanization.[6]

VII.
Synthesis: Capitalist enclosure is a spatial logic through which nature and space are subsumed and exploited, and the commons are appropriated—a logic instrumental to the myth of endless capital accumulation that is enacted, at the scale of architecture, by the late-capitalist skyscraper as a historically specific morphology or formation of enclosure (I–II). As such, the LCS operates not only as a concrete but also an abstract form: a spatial vector through which accumulation unfolds and space is commodified (III). The enclosure (i.e., the commodification) of the city through the production of skyscraper-space—which in turn entails the enclosure of non-city space by the mine, the skyscraper's mirror- or inverted image (IV)—racializes segments of the urban population and expels them from the city (V) while it naturalizes late capitalism's ideology of 'no-alternative' and forecloses the possibility of articulating other (postcapitalist) forms of planetary urbanization (VI). Yet the question is not whether enclosure—as a logic of spatial transformation of the world and of the production of nature—is desirable or susceptible of abolition in and of itself, for it might well be a structural feature of human inhabitation and of urbanization as such [*]: the problem lies rather in the hegemony of a modality of enclosure that is driven by accumulation: *capitalist* enclosure.[7]

Postscript
Can we therefore imagine other forms of enclosure, ones that are defined not by (the) abstraction (of accumulation), by the subsumption and exploitation of nature, and by the seizure of the commons, but instead by the explicit acknowledgment of our *constitutive* common interdependency—the interdependency and interrelationality of human and nonhuman lives, of environments, infrastructures and buildings? [*] What would be the implications of this radical claim about the entanglements of beings, landscapes, and material infrastructures for architecture and design in general? What kinds of common spatial worlds could be collectively designed and organized around a postcapitalist enclosure mode of urban life? What types of tall buildings and forms of (vertical) architecture could emerge whose principles of design/spatial organization recognize and take seriously "that we are not 'in' the global environment as self-subsisting beings, but subsist only as long as the planet does"?[8]

— 5. On [*] I paraphrase F. Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," 260: "The new postmodern informational or global cities . . . result very specifically from the ultimate deterritorialization, that of territory as such—the becoming abstract of land and the earth, the transformation of the very background or context of commodity exchange into a commodity in its own right." On [**], see S. Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). On [***], see A. Brown, *The Black Skyscraper: Architecture and the Perception of Race* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

— 6. By SKYSCRAPER-SPACE I refer to the volume of urban space that is subtracted from the public realm to become private space through the medium of the skyscraper-form. // On [*], see F. Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," *New Left Review* 92 (2015): 101–132; on [**], see M. Kaika, "Autistic Architecture: The Fall of the Icon and the Rise of the Serial Object of Architecture," *Society and Space* 29 (2011): 968–992; R. Martin,"Financial Imaginaries."

— 7. On [*], see M. Gomez Luque and G. Jafari, eds., "Posthuman," *New Geographies* 9 (2018); see also R. Williams, *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), especially pp. 187–213; P. Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital* (n.p.: Polity Press, 2013).

— 8. On [*], see J. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020), especially pp. 227–228: "We can assert in a general way that social interdependency characterizes life. . . . What each depends upon, and what depends upon each one, is varied, since it is not just other human lives, but other sensate creatures, environments, and infrastructures: we depend upon them, and they depend on us, in turn, to sustain a livable world." Quote at end from ibid, 184. See also V. Gago, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (London: Verso, 2020).