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New York City's Evolving Skyline

A high-rise building boom, mostly of luxury condos, has transformed New York City's skyline in recent years — and there's more to come.

By **Stefanos Chen**

Impressions: **29,984,446**



New York has long been a city in the clouds, but with 16 buildings around 500 feet or taller slated for completion this year, 2019 could be the city's busiest year ever for new skyscrapers.

For many years the city's skyline was primarily defined by the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings, both over 1,000 feet tall and built in the early 1930s. But New York's horizon has been in perpetual flux now for the better part of a decade.

There are currently nine completed towers in New York that are over 1,000 feet tall, and seven of them were built after 2007. Nearly twice that many — another 16 such towers — are being planned or are under construction, according to the Council on

June 5, 2019

The New York Times

Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, a Chicago-based nonprofit that tracks high-rise construction.

The scale of this new wave of construction is unprecedented.

New York's skyline looks starkly different than it did a decade ago, redrawn by the massive Hudson Yards project on the West Side of Manhattan; a profusion of towers on and around Billionaires' Row in Midtown; and the revitalization of Lower Manhattan, with One World Trade Center leading the way. The recent rezoning of Midtown East will cut even more of the skyline into unfamiliar silhouettes. And new heights will soon be reached in Brooklyn and Queens as well, thanks to luxury apartment high-rises.

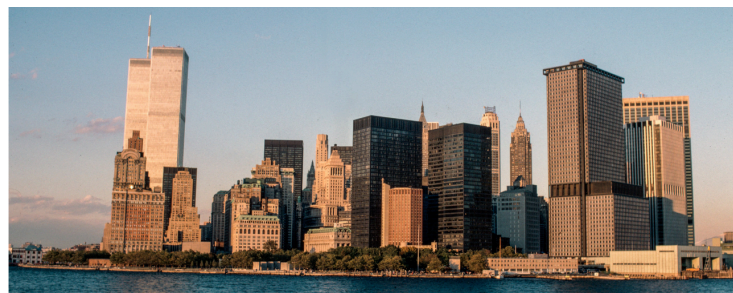
Why now? A confluence of factors, from advances in technology to a surge in luxury apartment speculation, has encouraged developers to build taller and leverage old zoning codes not designed for recent engineering breakthroughs. Some have called these zoning loopholes exploitive. New office towers like the ones that captured New York's imagination a generation ago are also rising — although they now share the roost with multimillion-dollar condos.

LOWER MANHATTAN



1925

In the 1920s, the tallest building in Lower Manhattan was the Woolworth Building.



1980

The twin towers of the World Trade Center, built in the early 1970s, gave Manhattan's southern horizon a completely new look.

June 5, 2019

The New York Times



2001

When the twin towers were destroyed in 2001, “people experienced the gap in the skyline viscerally.” Plans for their replacement were the subject of much public debate and contentious rounds of design competition.



2019

One World Trade Center, topping out at a symbolic 1,776 feet, is the tallest building in New York City, anchoring the view of Manhattan’s skyline from Brooklyn.

Gaps in the Skyline

The new skyline is surprising, in part, because of the velocity of newcomers. The Empire State Building won a closely watched, three-horse race in 1931 when it raised its much-guarded spire to 1,250 feet, outdoing the recently finished Chrysler Building (1,047 feet) and the tower at 40 Wall Street now known as the Trump Building (927 feet).

That record remained unbroken, the skyline essentially unchanged, until 1972, when the World Trade Center topped out at 1,368 feet.

The city was devastated when the Twin Towers fell in 2001, and “people experienced the gap in the skyline viscerally,” said Judith Dupré, an architectural historian and author of books on skyscrapers. It was fitting, then, that the new One World Trade Center, completed in 2014, set a record height at a symbolic 1,776 feet. (Without the spire, the roof is 1,368 feet tall.)

One World Trade remains the tallest building in the city, but it has been joined recently by a spate of other megatowers, most of them residential. This marks a major shift from

June 5, 2019

The New York Times

a skyline dominated by office space and executive suites to one increasingly focused on securing the best views for well-heeled residents.

In 1908, when the Singer Building in Lower Manhattan became the first in the city to rise above 500 feet, only 26 percent of buildings of that height were designed for residential use, according to the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat. Since 2010, 64 percent (including projects under construction) have been residential, most of them luxury condos.

“The price trend definitely correlates with height,” said Jonathan J. Miller, the president of the real estate appraisal firm Miller Samuel, who noted that unobstructed views became *de rigueur* for the most expensive apartment buildings of the last decade.

Central Park Tower, a 1,550-foot skyscraper under construction in Midtown, soon to be the tallest residential tower in the city, is hoping for total sales in excess of \$4 billion — the most ambitious sellout in New York history. And an apartment at 220 Central Park South, a condo skyscraper that promises some of the best views of the park, closed in January for a record \$238 million.

EAST SIDE OF MANHATTAN



1931

After the Chrysler Building was completed, it stood at 1,046 feet and was briefly the tallest building in the city. The splendid skyscraper is still a major landmark, of course, but it sold in March for a mere \$151 million, a fraction of the price paid in 2008, a reflection of investors' changing priorities.



1960

The eastern view of Manhattan was transformed when the United Nations Headquarters was built in the early 1950s on the East River. Its architects saw the complex, a highly collaborative design effort, as an opportunity to show the world that modernism could transcend national and cultural differences.

June 5, 2019

The New York Times



2019

The skyline as seen from Queens has not changed as much as other views over the years, although some buildings along Billionaires' Row have claimed a prominent place. The recent rezoning of Midtown East will change that, however, with a building proposed there that could rise to 1,551 feet.

A Shift at the Top

The phenomenon is recent. In 2003, the sale of a \$43 million apartment at 25 Columbus Circle, a 750-foot tower overlooking Central Park, set a record and helped spur the luxury condo boom in Midtown. The unit sold for \$2,630 a square foot, according to StreetEasy, when \$1,000 a square foot was considered optimistic.

By 2007, some developers were getting \$3,000 a square foot, often on the strength of the views. In 2012, Dmitry Rybolovlev, a Russian billionaire, paid a record \$13,049 a square foot for an \$88 million penthouse at 15 Central Park West, a limestone high-rise with panoramic city views that pushed prices, and competing buildings, further skyward.

"You can't even start residential occupancy below 20 floors in a lot of these buildings, because the view has already been blocked," said Daniel Safarik, an editor with the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat.

Residential high-rise construction has taken off just as some commercial sites face headwinds. The renowned Chrysler Building sold in March for just \$151 million, a fraction of the price paid in 2008, when a sovereign wealth fund from Abu Dhabi bought a 90 percent stake for \$800 million. Part of the price cut was attributed to an expensive ground lease, but it also reflects investors' changing priorities.

In 2012, Alchemy Properties bought the top 30 floors of the 792-foot Woolworth Building, once the world's tallest building and referred to as the cathedral of commerce, for \$68 million — to convert the office space into 33 luxury condos, starting at about \$3.6 million for a one-bedroom. The 9,710-square-foot "pinnacle" penthouse, inside the copper-clad peak, was last listed for \$110 million.

"There is a lot of ego involved in being a developer," said Kenneth S. Horn, the president of Alchemy Properties, referring to some of his peers' preoccupation with

June 5, 2019

The New York Times

height. Despite no longer being the tallest in the city, let alone the neighborhood, the Woolworth still has panoramic views of the city, he said, which was a key factor in the residential conversion.

Engineering Feats

Motivation aside, it is technology that has enabled the height of the latest towers.

"It's because we can," said Stephen V. DeSimone, the chief executive of DeSimone Consulting Engineers, who has worked on a number of new supertall buildings.

Stronger concrete, faster, more efficient elevators and sophisticated computer modeling have allowed developers to build taller and skinnier on sites that used to require much wider bases, he said. A better understanding of aerodynamics has produced skinny towers that can sway from four to six feet in any direction at the top.

A mechanical device called a damper — a kind of shock absorber typically installed on the roof of towers to reduce the queasy feeling of building sway — was rarely used before 2005, he said. Now he estimates that about a dozen are in use in New York buildings.

Engineering solutions have also meant zoning loopholes. Developers are generally constrained in New York by a land-use calculation that determines the allowable height and bulk of a building. The ability to build thinner, and therefore cover less of the lot, has allowed developers to create very tall projects in some neighborhoods "as of right," without petitioning the city and going through a lengthy review process, said Frank E. Chaney, a lawyer with Rosenberg & Estis, a real estate law firm.

One popular way to achieve greater height is to buy the unused development potential, or air rights, of adjacent properties, to amass a larger building.

"If you go back 10, 15 years, it was not nearly as common as it is now," Mr. Chaney said of these mergers. "Now everybody and their brother is doing this."

Critics argue that some new towers have also exploited the zoning code by creating excessively tall mechanical rooms that do not count toward a developer's allotted square footage, but nonetheless effectively push apartments skyward for higher premiums.

June 5, 2019

The New York Times

"I call them fake floors," said Gale Brewer, the Manhattan borough president, who estimated that 16 buildings have used this strategy to gain height. Some builders claim that the large mechanical or structural spaces are needed to service increasingly complicated buildings.

"No one ever thought the technology would get us this far, but here we are," said Elizabeth Goldstein, the president of the Municipal Art Society, which wants to close the loopholes and have more public oversight of some new towers.

The City Council's land use committee recently approved a zoning amendment to address excessive voids, but critics say the loopholes remain. Ms. Goldstein noted that the rule only applied to residential buildings in certain zoning districts, and that unenclosed structural voids, expanses of outdoor space that some have likened to stilts for condos, would not be affected.

WEST SIDE OF MANHATTAN



1931

The Chrysler Building pierced the sky in 1930 and was followed by the Empire State Building the following year. They were part of a closely watched three-horse race for height, along with the tower at 40 Wall Street now known as the Trump Building. The Empire State's spire, still under construction here, secured it a notable victory.



1984

For decades, the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings were the most prominent skyscrapers on the Manhattan skyline. The urban profile remained essentially unchanged from the time they were finished, in the early 1930s, until 1973, when the World Trade Center was opened.

June 5, 2019

The New York Times



2019

Construction along the Far West Side since the mid-2000s has redrawn the western view of Manhattan, with major developments at Hudson Yards, in the 30s; a number of new towers in the Times Square area; and a profusion of activity at Billionaires' Row, in the 50s.

On the Horizon

Even amid the flurry of new construction, which includes a number of innovative designs, some complain that there isn't the same sense of wonder there once was for skyscrapers.

"The awe that accompanies a new supertall is now tempered by the economic reality for many city residents that they simply can no longer afford to live in their beloved city," said Ms. Dupré, the architectural historian.

Others fault the glassy sameness of many new towers.

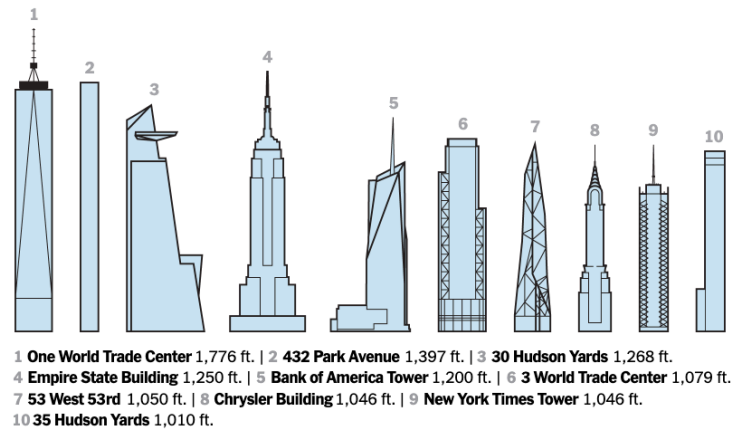
"If you ask somebody, 'How many residential buildings are over 800 feet?' they'll say one, or two, or too many," said Anthony E. Malkin, the chief executive of the Empire State Realty Trust, which owns the Empire State Building. (The answer is 10 — six of which may be completed this year.)

Manhattan's 10 Tallest Buildings

By the end of 2019, several of the tallest new buildings in New York City will be residential high-rises. All but two of the 10 tallest buildings were built after 2007, and they will soon be joined by other super-tall towers.

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Mr. Malkin, of course, is partial to the old skyline, before his building competed with new office buildings in Hudson Yards and Lower Manhattan for tenants and tourists. The new 1,268-foot mixed-use tower at 30 Hudson Yards, with its jagged peak that resembles a cut stalagmite, will have the Western Hemisphere's tallest outdoor observatory deck, at 1,100 feet.

To keep up with the times, Mr. Malkin's team has done a major renovation of the Empire State Building, with higher energy-efficiency standards and upgrades to the observation decks. The changing lights display, a beacon for the city's mood and remembrances, still asserts its dominance in the night sky.

Nearby, more competition is looming. A proposed building in Midtown East called Tower Fifth, to be developed by Macklowe Properties, could rise to 1,551 feet, topped by an observatory with a 60-foot transparent slide.

"I'm not even going to comment on the subject of Tower Fifth," Mr. Malkin said.

But there are signs that the supertall boom may be slowing, at least in the short term, said Mr. Miller, the appraiser. Much of the recent development was driven by the luxury condo market, which peaked around 2016, and there is a glut of new unsold apartments.

At the current pace of sales, Mr. Miller said, it would take nine years to sell those 9,000 unsold units.

Enough time, perhaps, for developers to plan the next wave of megatowers.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/05/realestate/new-york-citys-evolving-skyline.html>