



Andrea Gluser

VERTICAL EUROPE

The Sociology of High-rise Construction

campus

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The Sociology of High-rise Construction

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I Introduction

1 Point of departure, research question

“Skyscrapers are in again” proclaimed the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* newspaper in 2009, reporting on *The Invention of the European Tower*, an exhibition at the Pavillon de l’Arsenal in Paris (Zitzmann 2009). Though its fortunes have changed over the years, the high-rise plays a prominent role in current debates about urbanity, urban development, and architecture, and it is a conspicuous feature of the modern cityscape. More high-rises have been built worldwide over roughly the past twenty years than ever before (Museum für Gestaltung Zürich and Janser 2011; Matzig 2017; Wood 2010). Particularly in Asia—and especially China and the Gulf region—metropolises are shooting toward the sky. But such projects are multiplying in Europe, too—where, with the exception of Frankfurt, most city centers have long lacked high-rises, with vertical accents being placed mainly by steeples, chimneys, and the towers of town halls. Now even small cities in rural regions are developing high-rise concepts and introducing measures to promote the construction of tall buildings (Ackermann 2011).

This move toward a more verticalized cityscape is highly controversial, however. Opinions are sharply divided as to how high-rise architecture can or should be implemented in European cities. High-rise debates usually revolve not just around individual building projects but, more fundamentally, around questions of “desirable” urbanity and power in urban spaces. Vertical construction involves conflicts of interest and goes hand in hand with a variety of promises and difficulties. When the talk turns to high-rise construction today, references to population growth and the increasing urbanization of social life are usually not far behind. The stacking of space is supposed to generate additional room and put a stop to urban sprawl. Vertical construction is often billed as a strategy for preserving green areas and open spaces—a truly modernist leitmotif (Fromonot 2008, 16). Such discussions focus mainly

on office and residential space, but not exclusively. In Brazil and Israel there are high-rise cemeteries, for example, and New York has led the way with the concept of vertical farming in skyscrapers, the techniques of which have been debated and tested for some time (Despommier 2011; Frazier 2017). Calls for “efficient” land use through high-rises are ultimately also tied to questions of financial returns. Wherever building regulations allow for the increased utilization of property through the stacking of space, economic interests have a central bearing on high-rise construction (Willis 1995).¹

Vertical construction rouses visual desires as well. Municipal governments and businesses alike rely on striking architecture to send “signals” and display or simulate a sense of prosperous urbanity (Bodenschatz 2000). The projects now being developed for city-center locations are typically prestige buildings *par excellence*. They represent what is often referred to as a “glamorous” building style, which combines economic and artistic-architectural capital and is usually technically ambitious as well (Foster 2011; Peters 2003, 10; Sklair 2010). There is clearly more to these dazzling monuments than mundane functional concerns. Because they are so conspicuous, however, high-rise buildings are often also perceived as a “disruption” (or imposition), particularly in the context of historical cityscapes (Glauer 2016; Rodenstein 2006).

The idea that high-rises should be located far from historical monuments is certainly not an exclusively European way of thinking. Even in New York, as various sources testify, skyscrapers built near churches were a source of irritation. In *The American Scene*, for example, Henry James complains that Trinity Church (“poor old Trinity”) had suddenly been surrounded by such buildings, “monsters of the mere market” (James [1907] 2000, 375, 378). High-rises are considered difficult neighbors inasmuch as they literally overshadow their surroundings. They also pose special safety and financial challenges, since the expenses associated with them typically rise disproportionately to the building height (Peters 2003; Zaera-Polo 2007). The building regulations of many European cities strictly limit the possibility of increased property utilization through verticalization. But even experts are divided as to whether these regulations (such as those that prevent land speculation) are appropriate. Finally, the energy consumption of office towers is also a matter of debate. Tall buildings are frequently criticized as being “energy guzzlers” that are impossible to reconcile with the goal of climate protection (Paquot 2008a; Wood 2010).

This book revolves around the question of how European cities are seizing the opportunity for vertical construction and how high-rise buildings are

interpreted in this context. What is the logic behind the distinction between desirable and quasi-illegitimate buildings, “possible” and “impossible” locations, and the potential or actual conflicts surrounding them? What does the high-rise represent in each city? How is a high-rise defined in the first place, and what are the (explicit and implicit) rules for dealing with this type of building?² I am interested in looking at the parallels and differences between urban building practices and discourses, and in contextualizing the various arguments found between globalized models on the one hand and individual city histories—or urban specificity—on the other. I want to pay special attention to urban planning—that is, the actions of the individuals and organizations responsible for developing strategies and for implementing and concretizing legal regulations. Municipal planning offices do not have the same characteristics or carry the same weight in all European countries, but they generally play an important role in European urban history, and they are instrumental in shaping the boundaries and possibilities of the built order (Albers 1997; Altrock and Schubert 2005; Siebel 2004a; Sutcliffe 1981; Weber and Crane 2012). Because the high-rise is more polarizing than almost any other type of building, it is enlightening to explore how vertical construction is approached by these authorities, which are supposed to work on behalf of the city as a whole and, ultimately, in the interest of the common good (Burckhardt [1974] 2012; Burckhardt [1981] 2013; Dröge and Magnin 2010, 105; Häussermann 1997).

This study’s point of departure is the observation that in many cities—particularly European ones—debates about high-rises are usually arguments about a city’s image, meaning the materialized (or reconstructed) history of a place. As a result, one of the key reference problems in urban planning is the relationship between the historical cityscape and conspicuous new buildings. Principles of local historic preservation and institutions such as UNESCO also play a significant role in the vertical development of a city. It is important to bear in mind that when the preservation of local heritage is used as an argument against high-rise construction, international organizations are often involved in such positioning. The defense of the “local” against globalized construction models is not exclusively or even primarily the domain of local actors; instead, it is driven largely by globally organized interest groups (Betts and Ross 2015a; Boyer 1994).

While vertical construction has been intensively researched in the fields of architectural history, the history of urban development, and geography, it has so far been only of passing interest to sociologists. The sociological dis-

discussion of this phenomenon has been limited to a few isolated studies—such as studies of high-rise life (Beng Huat 1997; Herlyn 1970), skyscrapers in the context of Ground Zero (Jones 2006), and vertical urban development in Europe in the twentieth century (Rodenstein 2002, 2006).³ What are the arguments for paying more attention to this phenomenon from a sociological perspective instead of leaving such questions to historians, cultural geographers, and architects?

First, precisely because it is contentious, vertical construction is a promising starting point for reconstructing current concepts of urbanity and discussing contemporary issues. In disputes about building projects, viewpoints are articulated regarding the ideals of a city and, ultimately, of society—thus making it possible for researchers to pick up on them. In this respect, European cities—which could be dismissed as rather uninteresting in terms of global building height records—are just as illuminating as metropolises where high-rise construction is pursued enthusiastically and the world's tallest towers soar toward the sky.

Second, vertical construction is an interesting phenomenon in light of discussions about globalization and world society. Originating with construction practices in the USA, high-rises have spread around the world over the last century or so. But the approach to this building type always has a local slant and is tangent to local problems, conflicts, and discourses (King 2004; Ren 2011; Scharfenort 2009; Taillandier et al. 2009). In this respect, each city tends to have its own unique relationship with high-rise construction (Museum für Gestaltung Zürich and Janser 2011). Examining vertical construction thus promises to reveal insights into the interplay of globalization and localization—or the local reconfiguration of globalized models (Czarniawska [2002] 2010, 7ff.).⁴ The simultaneous homogenization and heterogenization associated with this has only been intermittently explored with respect to spatial and architectural phenomena (cf. Diener et al. 2015; Jacobs 2006; King 2004).

The study at hand does not reconstruct either the global expansion of the high-rise or the conditions of possibility behind such processes of expansion; the focus of the book would clearly have to be very different to address these issues.⁵ Instead, the primary interest here is the question of how actors interpret the globalized practice of high-rise construction in specific urban contexts and which forms of meaning production are associated with this. This type of perspective has been promoted in recent years and put to productive use especially by representatives of the approach known as Scan-

dinavian institutionalism. Their studies have shown that globalization (also) involves differentiation and diversification and does not result solely in structural alignment (Alasuutari 2015, 162ff.; Czarniawska [2002] 2010). Such a perspective particularly lends itself to the debate surrounding tall buildings, as the spread of skyscrapers is frequently held up as a prime example of the growing uniformity of the world. The following case studies will reveal that the situation is much more complicated, even in European cities alone. One of the most interesting questions here is how the materiality of built structures affects the reception of high-rises in specific contexts.

2 Research design—Methodological approach, empirical material

The conviction underlying this book is that in order to understand how the meaning of the high-rise is produced (locally), it is especially relevant to look at the level of individual cities. With this in mind, the research design consists primarily of contrasting case studies of three metropolises. The focus is on the high-rise and city image policies of Paris, London, and Vienna, with all their converging and diverging aspects. The places analyzed in this way cannot and should not be considered representative of *all* European cities; such strategies have rightly been criticized in the past in light of the heterogeneity of European cities (cf. Schubert 2001). Instead, these specific cases have been chosen to shine a light on certain constellations that seem especially interesting in terms of current concepts of urbanity in (Western) Europe and in view of the intersection of globalization and localization. By “especially interesting,” I do not mean particularly spectacular building projects, but rather the lines of conflict here—namely, how old metropolises grapple with new skylines and the paths they take in doing so (Hoff 2009).

With its case studies of Paris, London, and Vienna, this book examines three cities in which vertical construction has been a particular source of unease in recent years. Efforts to open up construction practice to include more tall buildings have proven to be distinctly controversial in various ways. These three cities were also chosen in the context of theoretical sampling because there are revealing contrasts between them. These become all the more pronounced when viewed against the backdrop of certain shared traits. All three cities are not only popular tourist destinations, they are also

capitals that dominate their respective national contexts, while additionally functioning as important economic, political, and cultural centers on a global scale—with differing priorities. Their current cityscapes are the result of complex processes of formation stretching over many centuries, making them the product of different phases of construction and the social constellations on which they are founded.

These cities have attracted the attention of urban researchers primarily because, in the second half of the nineteenth century, they became the stage for radical, standard-setting urban transformations (Cohen and Frank 2013; Csendes and Opll 2006; Fehl and Rodríguez-Lores 1995; Frisby 2001; Harvey 2003; Olsen 1988). This is particularly true of Paris, the “Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (Benjamin [1935] 2006). Around 1900, all three cities—with London leading the way—were among the most populous worldwide and the epitome of modern metropolises. London and Paris were the centers of the largest colonial empires at that time, and Vienna, too, was the capital of an empire, though not a colonial one in the strictest sense. Today the architectural heritage of Paris, London, and Vienna has become the focus of (re-)staging efforts and occasionally the object of excessive management. At the same time, municipal actors in all three cities are eagerly striving to create a modern cityscape and taking different paths to achieve this. The characteristic approaches to historical and contemporary architecture in these cities have many idiosyncratic traits that are worth examining more closely with respect to their having “historically developed as they did and not otherwise” (Weber [1904] 2012, 114).

Paris is central to the debate about high-rise construction inasmuch as the city has tried many different and almost contradictory strategies, which have generated significant impetus for vertical urban development elsewhere. This is particularly true of the construction of the Eiffel Tower for the 1889 World’s Fair and the establishment of the La Défense business district in western Paris—outside the city limits, but directly connected to the city center. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, a determined effort was made to transform the city into a veritable high-rise metropolis even *intra muros*. This resulted in the construction of numerous towers that were among the tallest in Europe at the time. These vertical ambitions came under heavy fire, however, and since the mid-1970s the city has enforced relatively strict height restrictions, which effectively amount to a high-rise ban. The restrictions have been slightly eased in recent years; following tough, heated debates, the municipal authorities have sporadically approved the construction of individual

buildings of a moderate height in an attempt to upgrade and densify urban “problem zones” (Taillandier 2009). But the city’s actual building policy is still clearly guided by the notion that the city center should be dominated by historical structures, with striking new buildings tolerated only on the literal margins of the city. The prevailing view of Paris—which is also relevant to urban planning—is that the city is a kind of artwork of exceptional historical beauty that must be protected from any potential threats. The city limits, which have been materialized in a peculiar way in the form of the Boulevard Périphérique ring road, function as a “picture frame” in the sense of Georg Simmel’s definition ([1902] 1994). Anything that is not clearly unique or that evokes associations of quantity over quality—clusters of high-rises, for example—is generally relegated to the suburbs.

London makes for a suitable comparison in that, both currently and historically, this city has been *the* central point of reference for municipal actors in Paris—not least when it comes to questions of urban development. The British capital, too, has paved the way for more vertical construction in recent years, though in a much more radical form than Paris. For a good fifteen years, London’s municipal authorities have banked on nothing less than the verticalization of the historical and economic center of the city (Grubbauer 2011b; Tavernor 2004). In and around the City of London, and now in many other boroughs as well, numerous towers which are among the tallest in Europe have been erected in a veritable *tour de force*. London stands alongside Moscow, Istanbul, and Frankfurt as one of the few European cities integrating entire clusters of high-rises into its urban fabric, even in central locations. It has thus distanced itself from the widespread notion in other European cities that the city center should be dominated primarily by its architectural heritage (although this concept defined the appearance of London, too, into the 1990s). It is notable that local actors mainly justify this approach by arguing that London is one of the most important “global cities,” along with New York and Tokyo, and that towers are an “adequate” expression of London’s position as a major center of finance and a world metropolis. Admittedly, even in London, high-rise construction has been very controversial. But the verticalization of the city and the interpretive model just described have been remarkably successful. This model serves largely as a substitute narrative for the concept of London as the “Heart of the Empire” (Jacobs 1994, 760; Liedtke 2006, 8).

The approach to vertical construction in Vienna in certain respects lies somewhere between the urban development and high-rise policies of Lon-

don and Paris, and there are revealing parallels and contrasts with the situations in these two cities. Vienna is also an instructive example in view of current conflicts frequently involving the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. High-rises became a widespread phenomenon in the Austrian capital particularly after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a period often referred to as the “second *Gründerzeit*.” Based on the (visual) semantics of internationalization and the concept of Vienna as a “hub between East and West” (Grubbauer 2011a: 20), the municipal government initially pursued an ambitious vertical construction strategy in the 1990s. This called for the erection of high-rises even in central locations, much like in London. But efforts to mesh historical and striking contemporary architecture soon collided with the strategy of having the entire city center recognized by UNESCO as a world heritage site and thus a universally important artifact. The city’s consecration as “world heritage” resulted in the refortification of the city center. Against this backdrop, Vienna’s high-rise strategy moved closer to that of Paris. It is important to bear in mind, however, that high-rises have very different connotations in these two cities, primarily on account of divergent historical experiences. Moreover, the dominance of historical structures in the center of Vienna is a controversial issue, and attitudes toward it are ambivalent. This is apparent not least in the ongoing cat-and-mouse games with the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and the fact that the “Historic Centre of Vienna” was ultimately placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger (the “Red List”) in July 2017 on account of a planned high-rise.⁶ It is somewhat ironic that while high-rise construction in Vienna is closely tied to the establishment of the (vertical) UNO City complex, it is the UNESCO World Heritage Committee that is largely responsible for the municipal government’s current relatively cautious strategy of concentrating high-rises in peripheral locations—if not consistently, then at least much more heavily than originally planned.

My study of these cities and their high-rise policies is based on grounded theory methodology. This methodology follows the socio-philosophical tradition of pragmatism and involves the use of analytical tools to develop an object-based theory of vertical construction (Bryant and Charmaz 2010; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin [1990] 1998; Strübing 2008). The grounded theory approach is characterized by a close connection between theory-driven data collection and material analyses. The research process calls for relatively extensive data to be collected first and then reviewed for potentially relevant categories (“open coding”). In the following stages, this review becomes more specific. The data is analyzed in a targeted way

with an eye to specific categories and their conditions, consequences, and contexts (“axial coding”). Finally, the core categories are selected and the relationships between these and other categories are determined (“selective coding”) (Strauss and Corbin [1990] 1998, 101–61). Based on this approach, I deliberately refrained from defining dimensions for comparing high-rise practices and debates from the outset and from comparing cities in a standardized way. Instead, my first step was to establish which cities lent themselves to such a contrast by identifying which construction strategies could be found where and how these strategies were discussed. I then looked more closely at the respective high-rise practices in each city and the categories and contexts relevant to them. I also paid attention to city-specific models in the sense of materialized structures and regulations as well as relations of observation and imitation. My ultimate goal was to bring these three cities together in a dialog and enlarge upon the debate by highlighting parallels and differences.

The empirical analysis is based on various survey methods and materials. In order to view each city’s characteristic architectural structures and lines of sight, it was necessary—particularly in the early phases of the research process—to make extensive forays and expeditions. Lucius Burckhardt ([1995] 2015a, [1996] 2015b) aptly describes this methodology as “strollology.” As an ethnographic methodology, this approach is committed to an epistemic style based on “discovery” (Amann and Hirschauer 1997, 9). The study is additionally based on 23 thematic, non-standardized interviews that I conducted with actors in the fields of urban policy and planning as well as architecture and historic preservation in Paris, Vienna, and London, and in cities in Germany and Switzerland, between 2010 and 2012. On the one hand, these discussions had the character of expert interviews inasmuch as they primarily served to tap into the field and the debates at the start of my study. On the other hand, the interviews were themselves part of the object under investigation, and they were analyzed to determine the extent to which they documented city-specific patterns of argumentation. My investigation of these three cities is also based on a wide-ranging document analysis. The relevant source texts comprised a variety of published and unpublished documents which are central to the respective high-rise debates and strategies, including legal principles and rules (building regulations), high-rise concepts, urban development studies, documents relating to monument preservation and cultural heritage, political position papers, and articles in the press. Studies of the history of these metropolises and of urban development issues were

also critically important to my investigation of construction, interpretation, and discussion practices in Paris, London, and Vienna.

3 Structure of the study

To begin with, I explain the concepts and theoretical debates to which my study refers. My point of departure is Georg Simmel's sociology of space, which inspired this project in a fundamental way. Simmel attributes critical importance to the engagement with spatial phenomena, going so far as to view such engagement as a kind of epistemological trick, a key to tracing relevant social patterns. In view of these deliberations on the sociology of space, I turn my attention to the phenomenon of the city. The study at hand is guided by the conviction that it is necessary to take account of both the heterogeneity of urban life and the particularity of individual metropolises. One prominent point of reference here is a theoretical perspective that emphasizes the "inevitable specificity of cities," an idea that has been fleshed out in recent years at the intersection of architecture, sociology, and geography (Diener et al. 2005, 2015; Schmid 2015). My case studies of Paris, Vienna, and London are largely geared toward this perspective. To better grasp the relationship between urban specificity and globalization, I also address debates about world society and the entanglement of globalization and localization. The urban sociology perspective is supplemented with aspects borrowed from Scandinavian institutionalism, a perspective that encourages closer examination of the observation and imitation relations of the actors involved (Alasuutari 2015; Czarniawska [2002] 2010). Comparatively "tangible" aspects of cities—namely, built structures—also play a central role in this study. I first address these aspects in my explanation of the concept of the specificity of cities and then explore them in more depth with an eye to recent debates about the sociology of architecture. Special attention is paid here to existing sociological research into high-rise construction. Such research has generally been characterized by a deep and rather unproductive bifurcation. To overcome its constraints, it is helpful to employ research designs that take account of the unique aspects of each context while also making consistent use of comparisons and contrasts.

The third section, which is the empirical heart of the book, covers the case studies of Paris, London, and Vienna. The focus here is on the ten-

sion between globalized horizons of observation and comparison on the one hand, and the specific practices of individual cities on the other. The three case studies are fundamentally structured in the same way and driven by theoretical considerations. After introducing each city, I turn my attention first to the most important characteristics of the built urban landscape—the “urban territory” (Schmid 2015, 291). This is the material starting point for further urbanization processes and thus for high-rise and city image policies. This dimension also encompasses the architectural evidence of past high-rise strategies. Particular attention is paid to demarcation processes as well as to how (formal or informal) rules have been established in the urban space.

Against this backdrop, I look at the current debates over high-rises and city image in the respective cities and discuss which promises and nightmare scenarios are associated with high-rises in each case and what this building type represents overall. The strategies pursued by urban planners in Paris, London, and Vienna, and the way that these actors publicly justify the expansion of high-rise construction, are also of interest here. Of course, such justifications are not to be equated with the actual reasons behind these strategies. Such attempts at legitimation are interesting primarily in terms of what they say about contemporary issues. I am working on the assumption that social order—including built order—is subject to an “imperative of justification,” and that this justification is typically expected to refer to conventions geared toward the common good (Boltanski and Chiapello [2005] 2007, 10, 22; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).⁷

This justification imperative is inextricably linked to the possibility of criticism—another issue addressed in this study. To what extent have the high-rise strategies in question been criticized? Who uses what arguments to oppose these strategies? I investigate the reconstructed debates in more detail by means of a two-pronged analysis. First, I am interested in city images—that is, the prevailing definitions of cities that crop up as central logical points of reference in the respective high-rise strategies and justification models. I will show that these highly selective shorthand descriptions, which (are supposed to) encompass the characteristic aspects of a city, are often shared by both proponents and opponents of high-rise construction and circulate as largely unquestioned, self-evident facts. Second, I trace the observation and imitation relations in each city. These insights help explain how urban actors orient themselves and how vertical construction has found its way into each city. One key finding is that the fields of observation in urban policy are remarkably narrow and largely follow well-established lines of sight.

These special points of reference, which are distorted by taboos, are closely tied to questions of legitimacy and, because they are a form of “identity and alterity construction” (Czarniawska [2002] 2010, 16), they are a truly political issue. This mode of observation and comparison differs fundamentally not only from the way that large numbers of cities are related to each other in rankings, for example, but also from the comparison practices of the globally active architects who are responsible for most of the shimmering new towers in the European cities examined here and elsewhere. This section of the book aims to identify the local tinge to the high-rise debates and building practices in Paris, London, and Vienna, and to explain the conditions responsible for this.

The fourth and final section of the book returns to the most important findings from the case studies and dives deeper into the analysis of the forms of use and symbolism of high-rise buildings. I contend that a universal theory of the meaning of the high-rise is doomed to fail because the meaning of such buildings is largely (co-)produced in local contexts. I also look at several other noteworthy aspects that emerged in the case studies, including the role and perception of globally active “iconic architects” (Sklair 2010) and the relationship between high-rises, capitalism, and the finance industry.

II Theoretical points of reference

1 Simmel's concept of "spatial form" as a starting point

The idea of exploring the interplay of globalization and localization processes in the analysis of a spatial-architectural subject was motivated largely by Georg Simmel's deliberations on the sociology of space. For Simmel, spatial issues are not just one of many points of interest. His work on space is based on the conviction that studying spatial orders can provide insights into social life that would be almost impossible to acquire in any other way (Simmel [1908] 2009, 544). In connection with this, it is his concept of "spatial form" that is most interesting here.¹ Simmel interprets space as a form of condition and possibility distinguished by certain "foundational qualities [...] with which forms of social life must reckon" (Simmel [1908] 2009, 545). In the possibility of merging with a "certain expanse of ground" (1), of dividing up and delimiting portions of space (2), of spatial fixation (3), of "perceptible nearness or distance" (4), and of changing places or moving (5), he identifies five spatial dimensions that are potentially relevant to social life and are used selectively (Simmel [1908] 2009, 546–600). Based on numerous examples, including the state and the Catholic Church, he discusses how different social interrelations position themselves with respect to these spatial qualities, which concrete spatial constructs arise from this, and how they influence social life in return. According to Simmel, certain forms of social interrelations cannot come into being in the first place without the corresponding spatial orders. For example, the social construct of the state is inconceivable without the possibility of merging with a given expanse of ground ("exclusivity of space," Simmel [1908] 2009, 545). The key factor here is that Simmel does not attribute a direct effect to these foundational qualities of spatial form. Instead, as he sees it, socially constructed spatial orders are what shape social life. In this respect, he clearly gives primacy to the social.

Observing the social uses of these spatial foundational qualities functions as a kind of epistemological trick for revealing relevant social differences. In sociology, according to Simmel, spatiality is primarily a problem of the comparative reconstruction of spatial relevancies, which manifest themselves in different selections and syntheses, the social preconditions and consequences of which must be explored. Simmel's deliberations on the sociology of space are a fruitful starting point for studying high-rise construction. Simmel never explicitly mentions the possibility of stacking space or of vertical construction, but this dimension—like the other qualities mentioned—can be used to observe and investigate social mechanisms and interrelations. My primary focus is on different cities and how they refer to and justify the possibility of vertical construction. I am interested in the selectivity with which this possibility is approached and how this can be explained. My study starts from the assumption that, in order to understand the points of convergence and divergence in how cities handle high-rises, global observation and communication contexts are just as critical as local, city-specific constellations, with path dependences relating to built structures potentially carrying particular weight here (Bourdieu 1999; Schmid 2015).

Although the phenomenon of the high-rise is a fairly marginal topic in sociological discussions, there has generally been a lively debate about the relationship between architecture, cities, and society, one which also touches on questions of vertical construction. In particular, the trend toward spectacular, monumental architecture has frequently been the subject of sociological interpretation. Revisiting some of these ongoing debates should reveal the models that currently dominate the thematic discussion of cities and (high-rise) architecture and how the study at hand relates to them. Because the number of highly differentiated discussions of urbanity and the built environment has grown to unwieldy proportions, this foray is inevitably selective; it deliberately highlights certain themes that are especially significant to the high-rise issue and its conception in this context.

2 Tracing urban specificity

Max Weber's famous text on "The City," which was first published in 1921 in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (Archive for Social Science and Social Policy), tellingly begins with the terse observation that "the no-

tion of the 'city' can be defined in many different ways" (Weber [1921] 1978, 1212). In fact, social scientists have tried—and continue to pursue—a variety of approaches, each of which highlights different dimensions of the city depending on its perspective. In "classic" works—first and foremost, Georg Simmel's essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" ([1903] 1997)—the defining characteristics of the big city are sounded out primarily in terms of how they differ from life in the country, in a village, or in a small town. More recently, however, this type of contrast has become less prominent. On the one hand, researchers have called for better and more precise analyses of how metropolises are intertwined with their supposed opposites. These authors draw attention to the complex relationships between city and countryside—between metropolises and small towns, suburbs, or villages—and argue that urbanity cannot be identified solely with city life.² This perspective was championed early on by Louis Wirth in "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (1938) and Henri Lefebvre in *The Urban Revolution* ([1970] 2003). Based on his diagnosis of the "urban society," Lefebvre ([1970] 2003, 1ff.) said it was important to take account not of the city in the strictest sense but rather of the "urban fabric": "This expression, 'urban fabric,' does not narrowly define the built world of cities but all manifestations of the dominance of the city over the country. In this sense, a vacation home, a highway, a supermarket in the countryside are all part of the urban fabric." His appeal to not stop abruptly at the (political) borders of a city when thinking about urbanization has lost none of its urgency.

On the other hand, the weight given to city/country contrasts has been counterbalanced in recent years as attention has increasingly turned to the differences *between* cities. This interest in different varieties of city is certainly not new—it characterizes the analyses of Max Weber ([1921] 1978), for example—but such analyses have received an unprecedented boost in the context of debates about globalization. Not least as a reaction to assessments that link globalization primarily to urban conformity and the loss of "authentic" urban structures,³ many writers in recent years have drawn attention to opposing trends and insisted that globalization leads to remarkable differentiation in urban realities (cf. Soja and Kanai 2007; Schmid 2015).⁴ The relevant diagnosis here, to put it briefly, is that "globalization has not ironed out differences; on the contrary it has heightened them" (Herzog 2015, 9).

This increased interest in differences between cities and their specific contours touches on fundamental questions about the object of sociological urban research which are central to this study. Opinions are sharply divided

as to whether or to what extent the unique aspects of individual cities are sociologically relevant at all. Some researchers clearly downplay the social-scientific importance of urban uniqueness and believe that the “actual” mission of urban sociology is to analyze different types of cities and/or typical urban phenomena. But a growing number of researchers have recently dedicated themselves to the study of the specific traits of individual cities, arguing that important aspects will otherwise be overlooked. The purpose and possibility of categorizing different types of cities is rarely fundamentally called into question, but these scholars urge that such categorizations should be approached not in terms of the logic of subsumption, but rather on the basis of wider engagement with specific urban constellations. In conjunction with this demand, programmatic research perspectives on the study of urban “particularity” have been developed in recent years. The aim of doing so is to place the corresponding debates on a theoretical foundation and define perspectives for conducting empirical studies (Berking and Löw 2008; Frank 2012; Gehring 2008; Schmid 2015).

The perspective I have adopted emphasizes the “inevitable specificity of cities” and has been developed over a long period of time at the intersection between sociology, architecture, and geography (Diener et al. 2005, 2015; Schmid 2015). This approach is particularly well-suited to my research project for a number of reasons. First, it is almost unsurpassed in its acknowledgment of the materiality of urbanization, and it draws attention to the way that the city—as a built structure—is created, reproduces itself, and develops a social impact. These conceptual deliberations are useful for analyzing vertical construction in different urban constellations. They open up analytical lines of sight and shed light on critical aspects of the perception, formation, and effect of the urban body. This perspective is also pertinent to the study at hand in sharing important basic assumptions of Simmel’s sociology of space and of Scandinavian institutionalism (to which my study also refers) and acting as a productive complement to them. The central contours of this approach and its implications in this research context will be explained in more detail in the following.

The perspective that is developed in the book *The Inevitable Specificity of Cities* starts with the conviction that cities have specific traits and, as outlined above, these traits are not eliminated by globalization processes (Diener et al. 2015). The authors of this book—much like Czarniawska ([2002] 2010) and other Scandinavian institutionalists—account for the simultaneity of the homogenization and heterogenization tendencies seen in connection with

urban development by arguing that globalized models encounter a variety of local conditions and (must) adapt to them: “The confrontation of general tendencies with local conditions leads to the formation of the most diverse urban situations” (Schmid 2015, 305). The specificity of cities is understood to be something that provides structure to processes of urbanization over long periods of time. This specificity is traced along three analytical dimensions represented by the terms “territory,” “power,” and “difference,” which act as lines of sight that guide the study of the unique aspects of cities (Herzog 2015, 11; Schmid 2015, 291). The term “territory,” which defines the first line of sight, refers to the materialized urban landscape that has emerged as a kind of “second nature” through engagement with the original natural space (Schmid 2015, 291f.).⁵ This socially constructed urban territory, as Schmid argues with reference to David Harvey, functions as a central point of departure for further urbanization processes. These territories, in the sense of built structures, are said to nudge such processes in a certain direction and thus, in a seemingly paradoxical way, both enable and limit them:

“The production of the built environment, with its material structures, creates new possibilities of communication, interaction, and cooperation—yet at the same time these structures fix the material characteristics of the territory on a long-term basis, they hinder or preclude many alternative possibilities of development and thus also determine the broad outlines of any future development.” (Schmid 2015, 291)

From this perspective, engagement with the built, materialized urban space—its historical development and structuring influence—is said to be of prime importance to understanding urbanization. Longer-term inscriptions should be given particular attention. Schmid emphasizes that the urban territory displays a remarkable inertia, so urban development is shaped quite heavily by path dependencies: “[T]he built environment cannot be changed overnight, or at least not without causing massive destruction and devaluation of existing investments. Thus an urban fabric arises that can often barely be fundamentally changed and can only be adjusted with considerable efforts” (Schmid 2015, 295).

A second dimension is associated with the term “power.” Its meaning is revealed more indirectly, through the use of the term, and it necessarily remains rather vague in view of the wide range of aspects it encompasses. The primary focus is on the forces that are pivotal to shaping a particular urban territory and the way that urbanization is steered and controlled (Schmid 2015, 291). Special attention is paid to all of the rules and procedures that are critical to forming the built environment. As Schmid argues, these can oscil-

late between the poles of “formal/informal,” “legal/illegal,” and “traditional/modern.” Considering the broad palette of potentially relevant aspects, the question arises as to how this formative power can be empirically grasped and analyzed. One promising approach involves starting with the constitution of borders; yet this does not exclusively mean political-administrative borders, but rather comprises demarcation processes in various forms (Schmid 2015, 297). In terms of high-rise construction, this focus turns our attention to the question of how urban planners define and demarcate (im)possible sites for vertical construction and how these decisions are justified. The question of demarcation can also be applied to the approach to building height regulations, making it possible to analyze how these are stipulated and how a distinction is made between desirable visual conditions and what are effectively undesirable visual compositions.

The focus on demarcation is closely tied to an interest in the way that the respective (demarcated) territories are described and defined. “No city exists apart from the multitude of discourses that it prompts,” according to literary scholar and sociologist Priscilla Ferguson (1994, 38), who argues that the relationship between the narrated and the built city is complex and not at all consistent. What discursive and/or visual representations that are central to urban practice shape our understanding of a particular urban space? Insofar as these representations are always selective and not simply “neutral,” they are key starting points for understanding how an urban territory is regulated (Schmid 2015, 297ff.). They encompass ideas (articulated in a self-evident way) of what fits with a particular city and what does not, what types of urbanity are worth pursuing, and what is considered beautiful or ugly. These descriptions are relatively durable and must be viewed in their respective historical and social contexts. When it comes to questions of power, it is also necessary to note that such descriptions can solidify into practically unquestioned “certainties” and stereotypes. One important example of this is the contrast between Paris *intra muros* and the *banlieues*, which has a heavily normative tinge (Firley and Gimbal 2011, 216; Schmid 2015, 298).

How does all of this relate to vertical construction? This perspective prompts us to investigate the explicit and implicit rules that have a bearing on high-rise construction in different cities and that are potentially or actually contested. These include not only legally binding provisions (such as building regulations) or explicit recommendations (such as general principles for high-rise construction), but also the informal logic behind the approach to striking architecture. Furthermore, it is instructive to look at the