

## **Constructing city ambitions – the building project as a narrated time folding machine**

By Kjell Tryggestad (kt.ioa@cbs.dk)  
Copenhagen Business School, Dept. of Organization

Abstract prepared for the SCOS Conference in Manchester 1-4 July 2008

### **Abstract**

Can cities have ambitions? Can their buildings have ambitions? Or is it only humans that can? And how do ambitions emerge and become a possession? The aim of this paper is to inquire into this question on the emergence and distribution of ambitions by drawing upon a case study of the construction of the skyscraper Turning Torso in Malmö city Sweden. In organization- and culture research, technologies and artefacts like a building have since long been treated as a '*symbol*' (Schein 1992) of an already given culture, and as a faithful means to reinforce its identity (Meyer et al.1994). Although sensitive to the value dimension, notions like symbol and means tends to treat the technology like a passive object that reflects ambitions already existing somewhere else (in the city, society or culture). The technology is not allowed to make any difference. Architects have since long made similar claims regarding the role and significance of the high rising building. Cass Gilbert, the renowned architect of the 1913 Woolworth building claimed the skyscraper to be a machine that makes the land pay, first horizontally by occupying space on the ground, then vertically by means of spatial repetition and standardization capturing returns from economies of scale. Carol Willis (1995) claimed that 'Forms follows Finance'. Höweler (2003) goes along with the general assertions above by claiming the skyscraper to be "calibrated to market forces and technological efficiencies"(p.9). The skyscraper is considered "representative of the driving forces of the twentieth century" (p.9), and "serves as a barometer of contemporary culture" (p.8). As a barometre and instrument, the skyscraper cannot make any difference, except to faithfully represent the 'forces'. The claimed role for the artefact as being a faithful representation of already existing cultural and economic forces is a rather common one, but also one that deserves further discussion. What other roles might the skyscraper assume? Can it even assume more active (and unexpected) roles and participate in the production and transformation of cultural and economic 'forces'? As observed by Weick (1987), a technology can also make an unexpected difference, even in a situation in which goals and

ambitions have become painfully clear. In Weick's example, the wrong map allowed a lost party in severe danger to be safely guided down the icy Swiss Alps without loss of life. It was not until the safe arrival that the discovery was made that the lost party had enacted the wrong map as the right one. What is important in Weick's intriguing example is the unexpected role a technology of representation can assume as a calming device and thus in holding the collective together: Without a map – any map, coordinated collective action would have been hampered and loss of lives would most likely have followed suit. “Strategic plans are a lot like maps”, the author wisely argues (p.222). Weick's example rightly points to the important role of devices in accomplishing particular collective goals and ambitions. But the example does not take into account two possible complexifications. Both the goal and the map are kept stable in this example. In a construction project, the architectural drawing can perhaps assume a similar role as in the example with the map. Yet, the architectural drawing might also be revised along the way and there can also be several other devices involved in representing the construction, like the prototype model and the budget. To add some further complexifications to the case and argument, goals might not be so stable and as clearly defined as in the example provided by Weick. As argued by March (1978), goals, ambitions and associated value expressions might as well be (re) constructed through the course of action. This recursive argument, on the emergent and endogenous nature of ambitions, deserves further attention. Dynamic notions like re-symbolization (Czarniawska, 1991), de-scription (Akrich, 1992), narrative production (Czarniawska 1998), re-enactment (Latour 1987) and interesement (Akrich, Callon and Latour 2002) points towards this issue. In the authors' performative perspective, technologies are allowed to play a more active role in (re)constructing collective ambitions, and hence to assume a more active role in the production of culture. The performative perspective is also well known in organization- and management research (e.g. Law 1994, Czarniawska and Sevón et. al 1996, Holm 2001, Kreiner and Tryggestad 2002, Czarniawska and Hernes et al. 2005, Helgesson, Kjellberg and Liljenberg et.al 2004, Callon and Muniesa 2005, Tryggestad 2005a, Tryggestad 2005b, Czarniawska 2007, Hernes and Weik 2007). The perspective urges both research and practice to consider in some more detail the unexpected role that technologies might assume. Rather than assuming the building to be faithful expressions of already given ambitions, the performative perspective suggests that buildings and technologies might participate in more active and unexpected ways in the construction and distribution of ambitions. It is in this recursive and explorative sense that the present paper aims to make a contribution.

Ambitions might be more or less global or strategic. But the important task is how to explain such outcomes. In this work, the focus is on the emergence of particular ambitions and design strategies in city planning and construction. One important mechanism for setting design trends is the architectural competition (Kreiner, 2006). As Höweler (2003) notes, the 1922 competition entries for the Chicago Herald Tribune building was decisive in defining the appropriate style for the future high-rise building. The entries were varied, and somewhat unexpected; it was the second-place entry that turned out to play the major strategic role in defining the future trend in skyscraper design. Suggestive in this early case of skyscraper trend setting are the uncertainties regarding the outcome. As the case turned out, more than one winner emerged, and even more judges. In the case of Turning Torso, the building, or more precisely, the “Sculpture-study for Santiago Calatrava’s Turning Torso” (Höweler, p.115) is considered to be a representative of the *Kinetic* design strategy, that “visually and physically *inscribe* a process of movement and transformation into a static structure” (Höweler 2003, p.112. Emphasis added)<sup>1</sup>. Yet, there might be several design strategies at play in the Turning Torso case. For example, the “...glocal skyscraper is one trend that attempts to mediate and articulate the complex negotiations between universal building type and local cultural *associations*... becoming a large-scale signifier of identity and community.” (Höweler, 2003 p.17-18. Emphasis added). The glocal skyscraper then, is one design strategy with a particular strategic ambition; to negotiate the relation between global and local identities in a unique innovative way<sup>2</sup>. If design strategies for cities and their buildings are much like maps (recall Weick, 1987 above), then the researcher should pay close attention to the materials these strategies are made of. Further more, if these materials can participate in performing coordinated action, then the researcher should pay close attention to their particular roles. For example, does the architectural drawing perform the role as a calming device, in a way similar to the map example provided by Weick (1987)? Can architectural drawings also participate in changing collective goals and ambitions as well? Also the skyscraper’s contextual conditions might perhaps change in the process of devising a design strategy. These are all questions concerning how particular design strategies emerge. They are also questions concerning the city as a *process* (Czarniawska and Solli et al. 2001), rather than as a back-drop structure. As such the questions might further the exploration of how connections between processes of globalization and urbanization are established, perhaps

---

<sup>1</sup> Kinetic: “movement, dynamics, bodies in motion” as opposed to static (Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus, 1988). See also Knox et al. 2007 on the airport building as a particular case of (kinetic) flow.

<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the notion of globalization emphasizes the “*institutionalized construction* of the individual” (Robertson 1992, pp. 104-5. Original emphasis).

even changed, as an integral task of local city management. As also noted by Short and Kim (1999), much work on globalization remains on a stratospheric level, while failing to pay much attention to how globalization *takes place*, i.e., the process of localizing the building in time and space. Perhaps a city management, being adequately equipped with a design strategy, can be part of the answer.

In the next section, the reader is introduced to the case-base methodology. The following section accounts for the process of constructing the skyscraper Turning Torso. The final section summarizes the findings. In particular, the unexpected role of the building prototype as a *narrated time-folding machine* is emphasized. Such unexpected instances of time-folding are important to emphasize because they profoundly challenge the more conventional notion of exogenous time in organization- and management theory and practice.