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# In The Future Skyscrapers Will Be Built Out Of Timber (And You Can Get A Sneak Peek At This Exhibit)



Jonathon Keats, CONTRIBUTOR

I comment on art exhibitions worldwide. [FULL BIO](#)

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Several years ago, the Vancouver planning commission received an unusual request. An architecture firm wanted to build an 18-story skyscraper out of wood. In Canada, like most of the world, building codes restrict timber structures to four stories, six at most. [Brock Commons](#), which will house more than 400 University of British Columbia students beginning next Fall, is an order of magnitude larger than most wooden architecture, and currently the tallest wooden building on the planet.



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An important new [exhibition at the Martin-Gropius-Bau](#) highlights the environmental advantages of building in wood and also surveys the extraordinary range of innovation in contemporary timber architecture. Dozens of new and envisioned buildings are shown in elegant wooden models and further elaborated in photographs and renderings.

By many standards, Brock Commons is conservative. The architects opted for a hybrid structure, with a concrete core for sturdiness, and abundant use of drywall as protection against fire. Neither of these concessions was strictly necessary. (For instance, thick slabs of timber naturally prevent fire from spreading by charring when exposed to flame.) The motivation for including conventionally modern materials was primarily psychological: to reassure planners and future residents that the building is safe.

Eventually, these inhibitions will be overcome. Timber structures will emulate conventional skyscrapers with increasing fidelity, eliminating ever more steel and concrete. Yet the greater potential is to conceive entirely new architectural forms that take advantage of wood on its own terms, addressing the material qualities of timber with advanced structural analysis and fabrication techniques.



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The Kaeng Krachan Elephant Park compound at the Zurich Zoo. Photographer: Marius Thessenvitz, Leipzig, Germany.

The Marin-Gropius-Bau exhibition includes several examples of buildings built on arboreal thinking. For instance, the [Kaeng Krachan Elephant Park](#) in Zurich is sheltered by an undulating timber shell that exploits woodgrain to distribute force. The shape is partly informed by the materials.

The notion of form following function is often associated with Modernism, but actually it's as ancient as building. Gradually abandoned over centuries of embellishment and ornamentation, it was reclaimed at the moment that the material substance of building became fully artificial. With

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The notion of form following function is often associated with Modernism, but actually it's as ancient as building. Gradually abandoned over centuries of embellishment and ornamentation, it was reclaimed at the moment that the material substance of building became fully artificial. With the return to wood in the age of structural engineering, Modernism can take on new vitality.

Wood affords new constraints. Those constraints will result in new forms of beauty.

*Follow me on Twitter, read about my latest project at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, order my new book, You Belong to the Universe: Buckminster Fuller and the Future, published by Oxford University Press, and read a book review in New Scientist Magazine.*

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