

# Opinion: 2 skyscrapers and the Calif. imagination

By Joe Mathews

This is a tale of two cities and two new skyscrapers.

The Wilshire Grand Center, a project of the conglomerate that owns Korean Air Lines, towers 73 stories and 1,100 feet over downtown Los Angeles, making it the tallest building west of the Mississippi River.



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The soon-to-open Salesforce Tower, named for the cloud computing giant that will be its signature tenant, rises 61 stories and 1,070 feet over San Francisco, making it the second-tallest building west of the Mississippi.

Each building has changed its city's skyline. Considered together, however, they make a more earth-bound and less flattering point about the state of the California imagination.

The Wilshire Grand, like Los Angeles, is skinny and well-lit. But up close, it feels remote even though it's in the middle of a metropolis. Reaching the Wilshire Grand on foot isn't easy, given how it's cut off by traffic on the 110 freeway and Wilshire Boulevard and Figueroa Street. And when you enter, you're pointed in the direction of an elevator that takes you

up to its most significant space the public can access – the 70th floor lobby of the Intercontinental Hotel.

While the lobby offers great views, the whole structure reveals the city's weaknesses. L.A.'s relatively stagnant economy has left a glut of office space that has made the building tricky to lease. And the building's Korea-based ownership serves as a reminder that L.A., for all its size, is more an overgrown outpost than a capital of anything. Its signature institutions – from the *L.A. Times* to the Dodgers – are owned by out-of-towners.

By contrast, Salesforce Tower is very San Francisco, both for better and for worse. Like the Bay Area's tech industry, the skyscraper is a dominant, almost menacing presence hanging over the city. The tower's city connections are deliberate: A bridge connects it to a park atop the under-construction Transbay Transit Center and the building has a public street-level plaza and a giant lobby opening right onto Mission Street.

But the Salesforce Tower also embodies a San Francisco paradox. This place that connects the world can feel small and insular. Between the new skyscraper and two buildings across the street, Salesforce is creating its own campus within the city, with retail and stores to satisfy workers' every need. "It's all right here. Right now," boasts the tower's publicity.

The preciousness of the project cries out for parody. The building literally breathes, with "innovative outside air intakes on every floor" that "provide outdoor-fresh air to each occupant to support health and wellness." The interior is also expected to include "mindfulness zones."

Such touches fit the only-from-San Francisco corporate culture of Salesforce, which wraps relentless acquisitiveness (now more than 24,000 employees and \$8.4 billion in annual

revenues), in touchy-feely corporate language that appropriates the Hawaiian concept of “Ohana,” or extended family.

An excerpt from the most recent annual report: “We are the #SalesforceOhana, a trusted family of employees, customers, partners and communities, united around delivering success to all of our stakeholders and improving the state of the world.”

For all the municipal differences that the two skyscrapers reflect, their similarities are even more striking.

Both are glass towers designed for maximum environmental sustainability and earthquake safety. And both make themselves appear taller than they really are. The Wilshire Grand gets its extra height from a 295-foot tall spire on top, while Salesforce has 170 feet of open space on the top that won't have any people in it.

Neither building makes you say “wow.” In fact, both buildings were supposed to be bigger—Wilshire Grand was originally planned as two taller towers, and Salesforce as a 1,200-foot-tall giant—but were downsized for economic reasons. And neither structure matches the public esteem for the towers they now top. In L.A., the U.S. Bank building, also known as the Library Tower, sits on Bunker Hill and thus looks taller than the Wilshire Grand. In San Francisco, the hulking presence of the Salesforce Tower seems out of scale compared to the graceful Transamerica Pyramid, 200 feet shorter.

But to protest these new skyscrapers is pointless, because both buildings reveal a hard truth about power in California: Despite our boasts about creating new modes of business and living, our corporations still stand the tallest. Korean Air's logo lights the Wilshire Grand's crown. And San Francisco has agreed to rename the Transbay Transit Center and the park on top of it for Salesforce.

But these two competent corporate buildings don't seem to be

about much more than branding. And if California is going to build giant monuments above faults, then why can't our skyscrapers offer edges that incite love or hatred, that provoke us to aim higher?

Structures that tall really should stand for something.

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