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How green space was designed in towering London skyscraper

1 November 2022, by Rachael Forsyth

Landmark Pinnacle: green space in UK's tallest residential tower involves 13,000 plants that aim to create the illusion of a parkland setting - credit: Mark Livey

Ten years ago, architectural firm Squire & Partners approached Farrer Huxley with a vision to create Landmark Pinnacle, the tallest residential tower in the UK. If the project, situated on London's Isle of Dogs, was not complex enough already, it also envisioned green space on the 27th and 75th floors.

Farrer Huxley director Noel Farrer says this opened up questions around what can be achieved inside a building. "Can we create seasonal change? Could we create frost? What types of plants can we grow? Could you fool people into thinking that they're walking around a park?" These exploratory conversations even led to a discussion about keeping a flock of hummingbirds in the building, and while that idea was rejected, many innovative solutions did make it.

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One of the most crucial elements was, well, the elements. "Two of the reasons you know you're outside are temperature and air movement," says Farrer.

"You get this environmental change, which is necessary for plants, but it's also necessary for people."

Light, wind, humidity, temperature and pollination were all factors that needed to be considered. While temperature and light adjustment are commonplace in interiors, the other elements are not. Air change was achieved by blowing it down the floor and with the doors from the lift lobbies sealed, visitors notice this difference as they step into The Sky Terrace.

Some 13,000 plants come together to create the illusion of a parkland setting. Farrer Huxley steered clear of evergreens, instead selecting plants that would flower, change through the seasons and offer a variety of form and textures. The planting beds needed to be large, without putting too much pressure on the floor, to accommodate this planting, which included trees to create an indoor canopy. "The design narrative is to boost that sense that you are genuinely outside. The planting gives you this notion that you've got your feet on terra firma, even though you haven't," Farrer explains.

There will certainly be challenges to come, with questions around how the planting will cope 232m up in the sky. While plants that grow at altitude have been selected, a particular microclimate might exist at that height in London that may affect the plants differently. But the team is prepared for this and the garden will evolve naturally as they observe what does or does not thrive.

Credit: ©Oliver Dixon

Maintenance team

The Sky Terrace, and indeed all of Landmark Pinnacle's green spaces, benefit from one especially important thing — a maintenance team. But while we know the importance of maintenance, Farrer says many clients still do not. "In the commercial sector there is still a reluctance. It goes back to a fundamental old adage where people just assume that planting is cheap, easy, straightforward, robust and will look after itself. While clients accept there's no such thing as no maintenance, they still don't want to be spending a lot of money on it."

Price is certainly one of the biggest hurdles, with Farrer noting that housebuilders often fail to price early enough. While many look at the cheapest option, Farrer says it is down to the industry to be vigilant and speak up about

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getting involved with all of the different processes.

Although the logistics of creating a park at such a height were unsurprisingly challenging, this was not the biggest obstacle, according to Farrer. That came in changing perceptions. “We will always be trying to attack this really fundamental change of perception around accepting nature back into people’s lives,” he explains.

“The client has come on a journey. To begin with, they liked the idea of plants that weren’t messy — they wanted a clean and clear space. But eventually they realised we needed a stronger juxtaposition, more of a contrast to the refined and engineered building.”

It was vitally important to Farrer that they took a huge step away from the “green dressing” that is all too often seen in buildings. But it was Covid that really helped Farrer Huxley argue for a more organic look, as people understood the importance of green spaces for their health and well-being.

“They then wanted the plants to spill over the edge of the planters and onto the surfaces. This notion of nature being a bit messy and a bit wild actually is something that they have embraced,” says Farrer. “It’s not necessarily coming from a horticultural basis though. It’s just coming from a fundamental human emotional basis — what they would like to see and what role landscape has to play in their lives.”

Credit: Matt Livey

The role of landscape was an important concept to keep in mind during the project. While the green spaces at Landmark Pinnacle are certainly huge selling points — The Sky Terrace on level 75 and the tropical garden on level 27 — that is not the driver for Farrer. “Cedric Price said: ‘Technology is the answer, but what was the question?’ You can do these things, and we have, but what’s the question that we’re actually trying to answer?

“People need space in close proximity to their home. They need to be able to enjoy those spaces. It’s not just about what sells the flat. It’s recognising and undertaking a project that is actually meeting those needs.”

While form often points towards function, in landscape architecture Farrer believes it is important to not know what the outcomes are going to be. As he puts it: “You’re designing for possibilities.” Fundamentally, Farrer believes that the residents needs to feel free to use the spaces however they want, without the unspoken rules dictated by inside spaces — quietness in a library or church, for example.

Indeed, Landmark Pinnacle is unique in its exploration of key targets around how people live at height and the role nature can have. What is the effect on them? What is it like psychologically to live on the 64th floor of a building?

“We started thinking about this 10 years ago, when no one had done this,” says Farrer. “Since then we’ve had Covid. Can you imagine being stuck on the 65th or 72nd floor? These landscapes that were created are really important components — places where people come together. This project is pioneering not because it’s super sexy but because it recognises the importance of the proximity of nature and natural systems.”

For Farrer Huxley, Landmark Pinnacle has set a benchmark that Farrer believes will continue to be echoed in developments creating rooftops that link together as green corridors in the sky.

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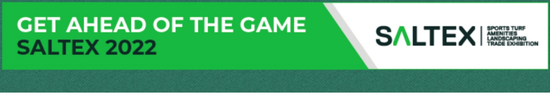
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