

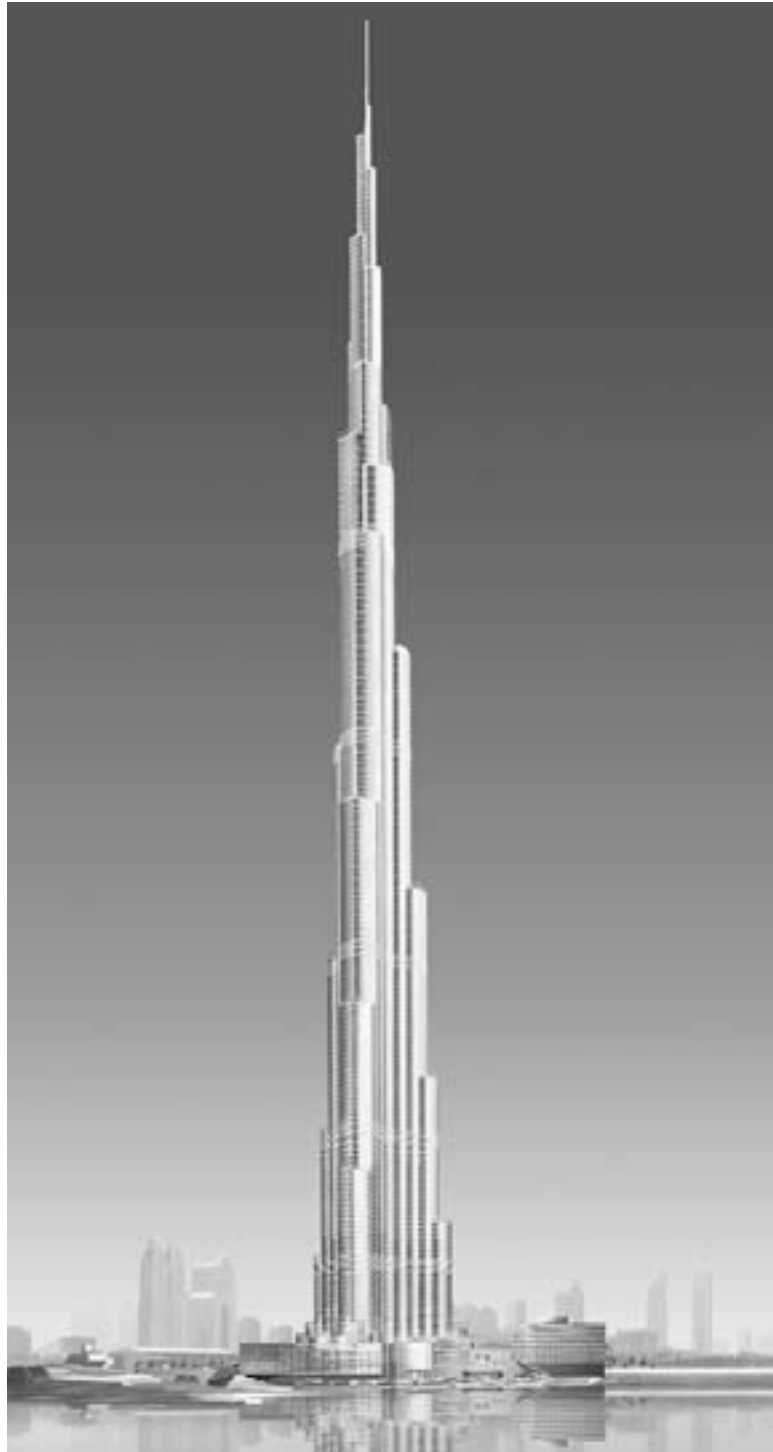
## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

## Tall Tale

**THE SOURCE:** "Lust for Height" by Philip Nobel, at *American.com*, Jan.-Feb. 2007.

THE HEIGHT OF THE BURJ Dubai, the Persian Gulf megaskyscraper slated for completion in 2009, is a closely guarded secret, but it is rumored that the structure will soar more than 160 stories, to around 2,600 feet. So much for fears that the World Trade Center attacks doomed tall-building construction. Freedom Tower, to be built at Ground Zero, will stand a symbolic 1,776 feet tall—408 feet more than the original towers. Even a mile-high building—proposed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the 1950s—no longer seems preposterous. According to Philip Nobel, author of *Sixteen Acres: Architecture and the Outrageous Struggle for the Future of Ground Zero* (2004), "The technologies are waiting for the money and the willing client."

Today's tallest building—a 101-story tower in Taipei standing 1,666 feet—will be eclipsed next year by the Lotte World II Tower in Busan, South Korea, which "will edge seven feet higher," Nobel reports. The Dubai tower will then claim the title, almost guaranteeing that another future building in nearby Doha "will likely make little news: At 1,460 feet it is a baby—only 10 feet taller than the Sears Tower."



The precise height of the Burj Dubai, a 162-story hotel, office, residential, and retail tower in the United Arab Emirates, is a secret, but it is expected to be the world's tallest building—at least temporarily.

According to Nobel, such gigantic structures are built for only two reasons: “to make money, responding to existing demand, or to advertise and flaunt the money one already has.” Tellingly, six of the 10 tallest buildings in the world are in China, and in booming Shanghai nearly 100 buildings over 500 feet tall were built in the past decade. The twin Petronas Towers, which took the world’s-tallest title from the Sears Tower in 1998, “were built primarily to make visible the roar of Malaysia’s Asian Tiger.” A planned new tower at the Shanghai World Financial Center, though it will not surpass the Burj Dubai, may reach 2,200 feet and snatch “Asia’s tallest” back across the Taiwan Strait.

The original catalyst for skyscrapers was population density, Nobel says. “Limited space to build forced land values, and therefore building heights, through the roof.” Such forces still drive some of the megabuildings in the high-

growth cities of Asia. Not so in the Middle East, where oil-rich countries such as Dubai are building big partly just to make a statement. But the Burj Dubai project will also make money. “It filled in three days when space went on sale several years ago,” says Nobel.

Commercial success often eludes such huge projects; the Petronas Towers, for example, “didn’t make a dime, and they still stand largely vacant.” Likewise the Empire State Building “so outstripped economic necessity that for years it was referred to as the Empty State Building.” More often, Nobel concludes, “we see the most primal motivation for skyscraper construction: to stake a claim, to mark the land, to show how your power (read: money) can change the world. . . . Nothing says ‘I am the master of the universe’—the natural, societal, and financial universes—more clearly than the erection of a tall building.”

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

## Mind Traveling

**THE SOURCE:** “Head Is as Good as Feet” by Mark Lawson, in *The Guardian*, Feb. 9, 2007.

“WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW.” IT’S the gospel preached in today’s many fiction-writing workshops. The reading public’s appetite for nonfiction—biography, memoir, histories of everything—also encourages novelists to rely on factual material. Imagination, once free to roam distant continents, is relegated to conjuring up the interior life of the odd character. Obviously made-up stories risk consignment to “slightly disreputable bookshops, or academic categories called ‘fantasy’ or ‘magic realism,’” writes *Guardian* commentator Mark Lawson.

Occasionally, however, a book tacks against the prevailing literary winds. This year, debut novelist Stef Penney won Britain’s prestigious Costa Book of the Year Award (previously the Whitbread Prize) for *The*

## EXCERPT

## Latin Divorce

*A certain issue prowls the tricky by-paths of Latin American culture: the abysmal contradiction between its social and political reality and its literary and artistic production. . . . While cultural elites were modernizing, opening themselves to the world, renewing themselves by constant intercourse with the great intellectual and cultural centers of contemporary life, Latin American politics, with*

*very few exceptions, remained anchored to an authoritarian past of caudillos and cliques who practiced despotism, looted public funds, and kept economic life frozen in feudalism and mercantilism. A monstrous divorce resulted: Small redoubts of cultural life—tiny spaces of liberty left to their own fate by a usually dominant political power that disdained culture—stayed in contact with modernity, evolving and producing writers and artists of high quality, while the rest of society remained practically immobilized in self-destructive anachronism.*

—MARIO VARGAS-LLOSA, novelist and former Peruvian presidential candidate, in *Salmagundi* (Winter–Spring 2007)