

World Trade Center Back on Top

Skyscraper Council Affirms 1,776-Foot Measurement; Willis Tower Back to No. 2

By Eliot Brown

The World Trade Center is back on top, securing the designation of the country's tallest tower as its spire was ruled part of the building's architecture. The nonprofit Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat—the accepted arbiter on matters of skyscraper height—on Tuesday ruled that the spire atop One World Trade Center counts toward the official "architectural" height, making the new tower the tallest building in the U.S., at 1,776 feet.

"We determined the structure above the mass of the building was in fact a spire," said Timothy Johnson, the council's chairman. In the years after the Twin Towers were destroyed in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, New York leaders vowed to build the country's tallest tower in their place as a show of resilience. The bragging rights to America's tallest tower became clouded over a design decision last year to remove from an architectural shell for the mast, leaving behind steel beams and maintenance platforms that weren't meant to be seen. At the time the building's lead designer, David Childs, criticized the decision. At issue was whether the One World Trade's 408-foot steel mast is considered a "spire" that is part of the building's architecture. A structural spire counts toward the height; but an antenna doesn't.

The council's guidelines are brief, calling for buildings to be measured to their "architectural top," including spires but not antennas or other functional equipment. Last week Mr. Childs flew to Chicago to urge the council to count the mast as a spire, saying the symbolic height was a key part of the design. The developers of One World Trade, the site's signature tower that's set to open in 2015, say the Skidmore Owings & Merrill LLP-designed building measures 1,776 feet. With the council affirming that measurement, the new tower will be 325 feet taller than the roof of Chicago's Willis Tower, formerly the Sears Tower.

The Chicago-based skyscraper council is considered the global referee on such height issues, and caused something of a stir in Chicago in the 1990s, when it ruled that the Petronas towers in Kuala Lumpur rose higher than the Sears Tower to become the world's tallest. Since the Petronas ruling, spires have become commonplace. And they are getting taller: The tall buildings council recently released a report noting that many account today for more than 30% of the total height, up from less than 10% in the 1970s and 1980s.