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## How Donald Trump's towers explain his politics

Edwin Heathcote

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Donald Trump is a builder. He builds towers. He builds hotels. He builds golf courses. He wants to build a 2,000 mile wall between the US and Mexico. So, with the nomination tantalisingly close for the Republican frontrunner ahead of the South Carolina primary, what do Trump's towers tell us about Trump the politician?

It helps to look back to his youth in an affluent development in the borough of Queens in 1950s New York. He rarely talks about his background; to do so would call into question the all-American myth of the self-made man. In fact, his fortune is based on his father's suburban empire. Fred Trump was a developer, too, starting with modest family homes and expanding into supermarkets and large residential complexes for the working and middle classes. They are not architectural masterpieces but they addressed the nation's postwar housing shortage and have become part of the fabric of New York. But Trump Jr's eyes were on the big city — the Manhattan skyline across the water.

By 1983, and not yet 40, he had completed Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue, his best known building. The 68-storey mirror-glass edifice contains the studio where *The Apprentice* reality TV show is filmed and culminates in Mr Trump's own penthouse. Adorned with gold and marble, it looks like Saddam Hussein went on a shopping spree with Liberace. At the foot of the tower is the Trump store, where fans can buy merchandise including a "Make America Great Again" baseball cap (price: \$25).

To make way for its construction, Mr Trump demolished the handsome Art Deco Bonwit Teller department store. He promised to donate its bas-relief carvings to the Metropolitan Museum of Art but it turned out they were too expensive to remove so they were smashed to pieces on site instead.

Twenty-five years later, he had perfected the Trump formula. The 64 featureless storeys of the Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas are clad in reflective glass coated in a skin of precious metal and crowned with an illuminated Trump sign. As a metaphor, could a gold-plated mirror topped with the developer's own name work any better?

Very different is the Trump Taj Mahal hotel and casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey, its onion domes and ogee arches stuck incongruously on to a modernist slab. In the old world, things shrink to a more modest scale. The Trump International Golf Links outside Aberdeen features a clumsy pavilion akin to the mating of a McMansion and a strip-mall funeral parlour. Mr Trump recently lost a long, acrimonious battle to stop a wind farm being erected near the course. The irony of the developer objecting to tall structures was presumably lost on him.

His biggest building is Chicago's 98-storey Trump Tower. Designed by the same architects as the world's tallest tower, Dubai's Burj Khalifa, it has a resemblance in the sculptural massing, the setbacks and streamlined corners. It is Mr Trump's best building but still marred by its massive sign: The Donald is always present, even when he is out.

But Mr Trump's buildings, unlike his father's, have failed to make any architectural contribution to the cities around them or address social needs. Instead they pop up like middle fingers disdainful of their surroundings. They are less architecture than marketing, with the Trump sign the most important component. Despite his appeal to legions of voters, his buildings do nothing for anyone but the super-wealthy who can afford the penthouses within.

And despite his vaunted success as an entrepreneur, his businesses have been subject to a succession of high-profile failures and bankruptcies. He has proved too big to fail. He builds big but often it is other people who pay. At least he is consistent: his wall on the southern border is to be paid for by the Mexicans it is intended to keep out.

*The writer is the FT's architecture critic*

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