

## “MY” HOUSES IN NEW YORK. APPEARANCE, UTILITY, ORIGINALITY

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### „MOJE” DOMY W NOWYM JORKU. ZEWNĘTRZNOŚĆ, UŻYTECZNOŚĆ, ORYGINALNOŚĆ

#### Abstract

The subject matter of this paper is modern large-scale architecture considered in the context of densely urbanised landscape.

A study in the United States, among them in New York, allowed the author to see in reality the objects previously known only from illustrations<sup>1</sup>. The intellectual stimulus for the publication prepared for the 15th conference “DEFINING ARCHITECTURAL SPACE”, which took place in 2016, were houses in New York and their architectural properties.

*Keywords: urban density, technological innovation, originality, identity, architectural idea, quality*

#### Streszczenie

Przedmiotem wypowiedzi jest współczesna architektura dużej skali, rozpatrywana w kontekście krajobrazu gęsto zurbanizowanego.

Podróż studialna do Stanów Zjednoczonych, w tym do Nowego Jorku, pozwoliła na namacalną bliskość obiektów znanych dotąd z ilustracji<sup>1</sup>. Intelktualnym twórczym dla publikacji przygotowywanej z okazji XV edycji Konferencji DEFINIOWANIE PRZESTRZNI ARCHITEKTONICZNEJ w 2016 roku stały się domy w Nowym Jorku oraz ich architektoniczne właściwości.

*Słowa kluczowe: gęstość zabudowy, innowacje technologiczne, oryginalność, tożsamość, idea architektoniczna, jakość*

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<sup>1</sup> The paper in part uses descriptions of objects, [in:] N. Juzwa, A. Gil, K. Ujma-Wasowicz: *Innowacyjność współczesnej architektury – tendencje ekspresjonistyczne (Innovation of modern architecture – expressionist tendencies; INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON APPLIED HUMAN FACTORS AND ERGONOMIC*, Florida, 2016, accepted for publication.

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New York has over 8 million inhabitants and is one of the most populated cities in the world. It consists of five boroughs: Queens, Brooklyn, Bronx, Staten Island and the most admired Manhattan – a densely urbanised, narrow strip of land between the Hudson River and the Ocean. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was not yet developed and through the decision of the Commissioners' Plan from 1811, it was divided into strips by 156 streets running from east to west, and 12 avenues running from the north to south with the elongated shape of the peninsula. Such rigorous shape of the urban plan created the framework for the development of human activity, which has been taking place from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and will probably continue to do so. In the centre of the densely urbanised layout, a large rectangle of Central Park was cut out – a leisure area and lungs of the city. The green rectangle, which is 4.3 km long and ca. 1 km wide, is surrounded by crowns of trees, dominated by surrounding skyscrapers. It constitutes a haven of peace in the centre of a bustling city.

The grid plan with the rigorous division into quarters of a similar size, naturally neutral, seems to be a highly intellectual creation that assumes the superiority of mental constructs over reality. The network of streets perpendicular to the longer banks of the peninsula and the long avenues was implemented in 1811. The organised linear network is intersected in many places by a road running across the Broadway. It has a length of over 53 km and it is the oldest road running from north-east to south-west. In the past, it had been called the broad-way street or the “great white way”. The most famous part stretches between the 42<sup>nd</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> West Street. Hundreds of theatre billboards are displayed there; it is the seat of the majority of theatres and entertainment institutions.

The rigorous form of the plan restricts the development of the designed objects to the inside of the boundary of the quarter; however, it allows the addition of floors. This pragmatic, authoritarian plan became the canvas for the architectural beauty of the modern metropolis.

For this publication, I selected houses whose properties allow to present modern architecture on the background of urban densification, which, according to Rem Koolhaas, generates a completely new environment “in which, as by magic, densification becomes something positive”<sup>2</sup>.

In this paper, I present: a residential building, houses serving commercial purposes, houses for gathering beauty, an intelligent house of a “weightless” geometric form; objects which seem worth remembering due to their formal originality and the material that shows technological innovation of modern matter. When viewed in the dense, urban city tissue, they reveal the beauty and uniqueness of the place.

This way, I felt the need to add myself to the list of people enchanted by the “densification architecture” of a “delirious” metropolis.

Rem Koolhaas (op. cit.) said that Manhattan “generated a shameless architecture, admired proportionally to its lack of moderation ambitious and popular at the same time”

## 1. HOUSE – A TOWER TO LIVE IN

Normally, residential buildings form the basic tissue of urban space. When travelling through the United States, it seems that its citizens prefer to live close to the ground, reserving tall buildings for work.

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<sup>2</sup> Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, Karakter, Kraków 1978, p. 139.

This fairly obvious statement only to a small degree applies to New York, even less so to Manhattan. The so-called Greater New York was created in 1898 when Manhattan and the remaining four boroughs were connected to give one city. A few years later, the first underground line was built. Today, the city has over 8 million inhabitants. A great majority forms a conglomerate of races and cultures. When the plan of the city and the characteristics of the building type are considered, the neighbourhood of ethnic diversity undergoes constant movement. The common characteristics of this diversity is a continuous rush and lack of time. Such characterisation of the inhabitant influences the shape of residential houses.

With the exception of Brooklyn, rows of brown, brick residential houses with a typical porch and entrance staircase, so well-known from movies, cannot be often found in New York. Already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, next to tall office buildings, residential towers were erected.

**San Remo Apartments** designed in 1931 by Emery Roth, are an example of the historically important for the architectural image of tall housing buildings. This construction consists of two twin towers growing out of a massive base of neoclassical architecture. The building has a steel construction, which in its lower part has a façade made from white limestone. The towers are finished in brick and terracotta facing. The interior and elevation decoration seen from the side of the street are in art-deco style.

The building houses 122 luxury apartments and most of them have a view over the green of the Central Park. The house, except impressive looks, possesses a great address fit for top stars of film and business who lived here: 145–146 Central Park West. On the “Top Ten” list, New York City occupies number in the category of housing buildings. Equally beautiful views from its luxurious apartments’ windows has the Gehry’s living tower that was built 80 years later. This is the main. If not the only similarity of the two buildings.

### **BEEKMAN TOWER (8 Spruce Street) New York, Gehry Partners LLP and Kreisler Borg Florman construction, 2010.**

The multifunctional block of apartments of a rectangular base authored by Frank Gehry was built in the Lower Manhattan in the vicinity of the Brooklyn Bridge and the Woolworth Building (2006–2010). The object, known as the Beekman Tower or Gehry Tower, is the tallest residential building of the western hemisphere (267 m of height, 76 floors). The author is known for designing the Bilbao Museum, “the dancing house” in Prague and other buildings of a complicated architectural geometry inspiring to a deeper reflection. This time, he implemented his reflections concerning formal and technological innovation in a housing object. It seems that the laureate of the Pritzker Prize in 1989 and other prestigious prizes, also this time responded appropriately to the demands of modernity.

The geometry of the plan and the interior are surprisingly conservative. Up to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, the base is a trapezoid and reflects the shape of the plot. Above, it has the shape of the letter “T”. The first 5 floors house a primary school for 600 pupils (9300 sq. m). On the roof of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, there is a recreation and exercise area. Above, there are 903 luxury apartments of 48–149 sq. m for rent; the public area occupies about 1000 sq. m. In addition, within the object’s base, a hospital occupying 2300 sq. m is planned.

The residential floors are repeatable consisting of corridors to which apartments are connected in a way know for hotel rooms. The high standard of interior solutions, localisation



and great vistas from the windows result in the building being one of the most expensive in NY.

With its height, the building dominates its surroundings; however, the greatest impression is provided by its shiny, iridescent exterior, which expresses its author's liking of soft, nonlinear form. Gehry admits himself his fascination with "folding":

*I've always been fascinated with folds. All Artists through the ages have spent time on the fold. Michelangelo had stacks of drawings fabric. At 8 Spruce, we're using Bernini's folds to inspire the façade. I look for ways to express feeling in a building without using historic decoration.*<sup>3</sup>

New Yorkers call the Gehry Tower *Rippling Building*. The façade, which seems to flow, is made from individually shaped stainless steel panels. The characteristic folds in the geometric form of the individual panels reinforce the impression of a large, sculpted, rippling form. The façade panels are not only the facing, but it is actually a ventilated wall with installed panoramic windows.

The beauty and expression of the large tower is particularly strongly visible when the building appears in the frame of narrow Manhattan streets.

## 2. HOUSE WITH A COMMERCIAL FUNCTION

The majority of the dense Manhattan building development serves commercial office functions. In the dense development, I would like to single out two buildings: the *Hearst Magazine Building* and the glass *Apple Store*. Both are located near the Columbus Circle, in the neighbourhood of the entrance to the Central Park and both stand out thank to their glass exterior structure.

### **HEARST TOWER, New York, West 57th Street on Eight Avenue**

**Josef Urban 1928**

**Sir Norman Foster 2004**

The headquarters of the Hearst Corporation, apart from its glass tower, distinguishes itself by being a vertical extension of a building that was built in the 1930s. The architectural base of the new tower by Sir Norman Foster is a six-storey building by Josef Urban. It was built in 1928, and already then, it was considered an architectural landmark of Manhattan.

Recently, the building has been expanded in a curious manner. While retaining the geometric form of the old building, Foster "inserted" the new building of a totally different architectural expression and form into the old contour. In 2006, the object was named the best skyscraper and received a gold designation from the United States Green Building Council's LEED certification program. Sir Norman Foster received in 1999 the Pritzker Prize; he is known for the development of high-tech idea and a growing number of commissions; he is still best recognised thank to the London City Gherkin. Also, in the case of the Hearst Corporation Headquarters, he fulfilled the expectations of the client. The novelty of the Hearst Tower lies in the architectural concept and in spatial and functional solutions. The

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.archdaily.com/129680/interv-with-frank-gehry>



office space is distributed over 48 floors and is 182 m height. However, when walking on the street, a 19<sup>th</sup> century building is seen, only when we raise our heads we see a building of a totally modern architecture – a glass tower cut by a diagonal network of lines that ensures stiffness of the building.

The building, like an architectural joke, positively positioned itself in the urban development. It continues, in an altered form, to be a recognisable landmark of the city.

**APPLE STORE, New York. 5th Avenue  
Buhlin, Cywinski, Jacson, construction E. O’Callahan, 2011**

A small, transparent building of a fully transparent, glass envelope, supported on a glass structure is situated on the axis of the General Motors skyscraper. The symmetry of the object is amplified by two pools with water located on both sides of the entrance to the skyscraper. The street running in parallel to the glass cube of the Apple shop becomes very busy. It is the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue at the crossing with the Columbus Circle. The transparent, small cube of a 10 m edge is very well inscribed in the context of the architecture of the surroundings. The building is real, but makes the impression of not being present.

The interior of the glass parcel encloses the entrance to the shop that is located in the basement. The spiral staircase made from frosted glass and the glass box of the elevator supplement the impression of invisibility. The floor of the glass box is also transparent; it lets light into the actual interior of the shop. A similar concept of transparent architecture and a shop entrance with an apple is located not far away, in the East Avenue, at the level of the Lincoln Centre. The transparent structure with a laconic detail, decorated by an image of an apple, became a very recognisable sign of the company.

The immateriality of the Apple store’s architecture, the real one that seems unreal, allows to concentrate one’s attention on tiny, formally beautiful, technologically perfect, brand products that are exhibited and sold in the shops.

**House “pretending” to be weightless  
SCIENCE BUILDING OF COOPER UNION COLLEGE New York,  
Tom Mayne MORPHOSIS ARCHITECTS, 2009**

The university building Cooper Union is an expansion of the Cooper Union College Campus existing since 1859. The school resembles the London AA. The school’s concept, unifying colleges of architecture, art and engineering, was created in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Until today, it has remained a small school with a great number of candidates per place. There are many architects among its alumni. The idea of Thom Mayne from the Morphosis group was to create a place that would be an intellectual “connector” of the cultural and technical environment of the old university. The architect, who was a 2005 laureate of the Pritzker Prize and winner of the AIA Gold Medal in 2013, is also the author of other architecturally interesting objects, including educational ones, in Los Angeles. Here, in Manhattan, he created an object, which more than a building, resembles a large, extravagant sculpture. The object of a non-orthogonal, seemingly unstable form is supported at its entrance on large columns in a V-shape, which act as a counterbalance.





The non-orthodox geometry makes the object stand out from the environment. The external shell looks in places like a torn-apart skin, magnifying the architectural form.

Contrary to this impression, the form of the plan is compact and well organised. A photograph from the construction time (2006–2007) shows a compact, nine-storey cube with orthogonal divisions of the interiors. The only extravagance is the middle patio, open through the whole height of the building. The patio is surrounded by spatially open schools, galleries, auditoria and the main staircase that connects the 1<sup>st</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> floors in the so-called skip-stop system. The last floor concludes with a terrace and a green roof.

The architectural geometry of the object is the result of the envelope – semi-transparent, double so-called “skin” of the object, which surrounds the functional and construction structure of the internal form.

The form and structure of the envelope create the sculptural character of the form amplifying the impression of expression. At the same time, multilayer glass and aluminium panels of the external chassis ensure transparency and a comfortable use of the interior. In the summer, it reduces the temperature increase, in the winter ensures sunlight access.

Despite its non-standard architectural beauty, the sculpturally formed building, situated at the boundary of the East Village, not far from the Washington Square Park, the Cooper College seems to be located at the right place.

The quaint, middle-class character of the district, apartments, bookstores, cafes and galleries, co-create the seemingly perfect, academic surroundings of the object, and the full of expression form of the college seems to be an excellent supplement of the middle class character of the district.

### 3. HOUSE FOR PRESENTATION AND STORAGE OF ART

In New York, there are many houses devoted to collecting artworks. I would like to concentrate on two of them, whose architecture seems to correspond with the general idea of this paper and with the time and place of considerations. They are the 1950s Guggenheim Museum and, the built in recent times, Museum of Modern Art.

#### **SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUZEUM, Manhattan Down Town, Fifth Av.-88th Street, Frank Lloyd Wright, New York, Upper East Side, 1959**

When writing about the modern, architectural innovation, the building authored by Frank Wright from the 1950s is still worth attention.

The foundation for *Non-Objective Painting*, aiming at spreading the ideas of paintings by Kandisky, Mondrian and other rebellious creators, was laid in 1937. The building itself was erected after the war, in the years 1957–1959, and commissioned 6 months after Wright’s death. It is located among the beautiful green of the Central Park. According to the idea of its founders, it serves showing the world the thoughts and dreams of the artists who often have to overcome the conventional concepts of art. The idea accompanying the creation of the foundation translates into the formal concept of the building.

The relatively tall (70 m) building of a round geometry, so well known from history of architecture, is located close to the Central Park, in architectural opposition to the standard,



19<sup>th</sup> century beauty of the grand Metropolitan Museum of Art, known as the MET. In this relation, the arrogant in its architectural expression Guggenheim building resembles a rolled-up, white ribbon widening towards the top. It can be said that the building in comparison to the dignified MET “looks like a Protestant barn” – such was the artist’s intention.<sup>4</sup>

The dome that crowns the vast interior of Guggenheim does not let inside a sufficient amount of light; the rounded walls are also not of the best form for displaying pictures. The paintings suspended on strings away from the walls do not help the exposition, hence the building was criticised in the first years after its construction. The geometric and functional defiance in the first years of its existence did not meet with general approval neither.

The uncommon beauty of the Museum, and in particular the beauty of the spiral interior, was initially appreciated by the cinema. Many movies show scary scenes accompanied by the beauty of the spiral interior covered by a large, glass dome.

The façade was renovated in the years 2005–2008, and in 1992, a new, taller tower was added to the building, which met with clear criticism. Especially that the building had become a symbol and icon of the city.

Today, the architectural beauty of the place seems undeniable. The geometric nonlinearity of the main part of the building strikes with the simplicity of form, also in modern times, the time of seeking innovation of form, it remains architecture that is fresh in its formal statement.

## **NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, New York, Bowery str., 2007 SANAA; Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa**

Architects from the Sanaa studio Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa are Pitzker Prize laureates from 2011. It seems that this prize is an increasingly clear sign of their recognition. However, they became famous through the design of the flagship Dior store in Tokyo in 2003 and of the Management School *Zollverein* in Essen, Germany two years later. When they received the commission for the design of the New Museum in New York the locality was controversial for them, but it was clear to them that they had to create a grand building that would be a response to the density of the district. At the same time, it could not minimise the architectural importance of the surrounding houses.<sup>5</sup>

The building, original in its form, was localised in a not particularly interesting frontage of the Bowery street in Lower Manhattan. The concept of seven “boxes” stacked upon one another was created by the authors quickly and intuitively. The idea created a situation in which the building “walked out to meet the city” creating a new spatial situation in the dense urban tissue. The seat of the museum became not only an incubator of art, but also of new ideas for the place and district.

The building is 50 m tall and visibly higher than the surroundings; however, it does not create a monolith thank to the shift of the boxes. Some of the windows are clearly visible in the smooth “box”. The light wall of the chassis is clad in seamless, anodised, expanded aluminium mesh. The finesse of the external material amplifies the impression of elegance of

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<sup>4</sup> [www.nyc-architecture.com/TEN/TEN-NYC.htm](http://www.nyc-architecture.com/TEN/TEN-NYC.htm)

<sup>5</sup> [www.tenzakademie.2014.tumblr.com/post/fasade-detail-sanaa-new-museumnew-york](http://www.tenzakademie.2014.tumblr.com/post/fasade-detail-sanaa-new-museumnew-york)

the form. The anodised, external layer of the panels can change, display images or change the colour of the façade. All the properties create the architectural image of the object.

The column-free construction of the boxes of varying height allows to implement any functional program. The first five floors are open to the public, the 6<sup>th</sup> houses offices, the 7<sup>th</sup> is a public space with a beautiful view of the surroundings. The staircases, lit from above, enhance the expression of the interiors. The light greyness of the concrete of the external walls reflects the neutral greyness of the interiors.

The building, erected in an architecturally “uninteresting” district, changed the urban image of the place and in 2008 it received the title of one of the “New Seven Wonders of the World”.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. SUMMARY

The presented “houses in the city” are expressions of the search for geometric innovation of form and novelty stemming from technical and technological possibilities of the architectural matter. The novelty is expressed in height, use of technology and the admired “oddity” of form. This includes not only the value of the presented architecture, but also the global importance of the architects – the creators of the objects.

The modern architectural creations are designed by teams of designers; the value of the creations lies equally in the works as in the teams and the schools that educated the designers, the critics who propagate their systems of evaluating art. An equally important criterion seems the general popularity of the creations. The value of the architecture can take varying forms: institutional, symbolic, financial. These values are translated into pieces of art, also architecture. As a result, the cultural capital of a city, especially of such a metropolitan city as New York, becomes a bridge between the symbolic value of creations and the international trade and monetary system. In this way, the “brand” of an architectural work is also utilised as a brand of the quality of a city.

*Since the times of Vitruvius, the basic material of architecture is an idea, but an idea itself does not constitute architecture. An architectural design in the form of a drawing or a mock-up is still only a thought, necessary for the transformation of the material into a real form of an object<sup>7</sup>.*

When analysing the presented works, it can be seen that in modern times, a worldwide sign of success is not guaranteed by interdisciplinarity of the process of searching and shaping a creation; increasingly important is the correlation or cooperation between the sum of factor, which indicate the success.

When architecture is still considered an area of art, it can be said that modern times push the artist of the pedestal of creating the work, but it remains, or becomes increasingly important for work of the architect to enter the public discussion. As explained by the sociologist P. Bourdieu “The game of art is, from the standpoint of the business world, a game in which “that one wins who loses”. In the world of this reversed economy, one is not allowed to earn money, recognition in short, any symbols of world success in this world not compromising

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cntraveler.com/stores/2008-03-25/New-seven-wonders-of-the-world>

<sup>7</sup> L. Niemojewski, “Uczniowie cieśli” (Pupils of masters), Trzaska, Ewent., Michalski, Warsaw 1947 (reprint 1999), p. 6–7.

one's safety in the other world. The basic law of the paradoxical game is that the players have an interest in selflessness. The love of art is a crazy love, at least from the standpoint of the norm of the "normal" world"<sup>8</sup>.

The growing ability to freely combine contents: functional, aesthetic, familiarity and identity, showing prestige, recognising technology, continuously searching originality and innovation, does not influence the importance of the idea in an architectural concept. It could be even said that an idea – thought has a key meaning for the success of a development.

The value of an idea is initially expressed in the drawing, especially in the case of concepts, which seem difficult or even impossible to realise at a given time. The drawing creates a balance between showing a dream contained in a manual sketch and the process of erecting an object. Next, it allows for a pain free transition to a new reality. A futuristic city in the drawing of the young Sant'Elia from the early modernist period shows how dreams are fulfilled.

When writing about the "density" of Manhattan, it seems important to remember the idea of "density", which Zaha Hadid incorporated into her drawing submitted to the Peak Hong-Kong competition from the 1980s. Today, the transition in time and architectural space seems symbolic.

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<sup>8</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Reguly sztuki; geneza i struktura pola literackiego* (*Rules of art; genesis and structure of the literary field*), Kraków, 2006, str. 46. Cited after A. Klimek “Ewolucja problemu gwiazdorstwa w architekturze – próba zdefiniowania zjawiska” (The evolution of the problem of stardom in architecture – an attempt to define the phenomenon) PhD thesis, Łódź Technical University, supervisor Marek Pabich, 2015.