



ARCHITECTURE

**One's Huge, the Other's Crazy**  
 A pair of showcase skyscrapers,  
 ready to rise, give us a taste  
 of the architectural delirium we crave.

BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON

**N**ORMALLY THIS CITY frowns on building shapes that do anything more daring than go up and down or side to side. Sure, we have a venerable corkscrew in the Guggenheim, but we don't have much truck with blobs, birds' nests, leaning towers, or glass pretzels. A pair of soon-to-be-built condos nudge at that resistance to foreign forms, though, and suggest that even a weakened housing market still has some architectural kick. These two projects—one by the Swiss wizards of the Beijing stadium, Herzog & de Meuron, the

56 LEONARD STREET  
 HERZOG & DE MEURON

23 EAST 22ND STREET  
 REM KOOLHAAS

other by the Dutch swashbuckler Rem Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture—keep their radicalism quiet, and both spring from the city's heart as well as its turf.

The more dramatic tower, if only because of its size, is Herzog & de Meuron's 56 Leonard Street, which, at 821 feet, will be a gangly outlier in the low-slung skyline north of the financial district. It wears its solitude well. Any single floor evokes Mies van der Rohe's masterpiece of almost-nothingness, the 1951 Farnsworth House, in Plano, Illinois—a transparent slice of space sandwiched between slender white slabs. Here, the architects offer a hectic revision of Miesian asceticism, adapted for a site where the Manhattan grid slackens into Tribeca's loose weave of streets. They churn out dozens of variations on the Farnsworth idea, then take all those horizontal nests and pile them giddily toward the clouds. The shaft bristles with irregularly arranged balconies. Floor heights vary and the corners keep cutting away. The tower appears to get simultaneously narrower and wider toward the top, where the blocks are fewer but bigger and set more askew. It has a purposefully haphazard look, like a stack of books of different sizes that haven't been aligned.

There's a canny intelligence behind the mess. From far away, the building looks like a pointillist notion of a skyscraper, with smudgelike windows and decks threatening to flee the lines. Zoom in on it, though, and the details snap into focus. Volumes interlock with satisfying precision, deep balconies create a painterly contest of highlights and shadows, and the tower appears to be resting nonchalantly on a shiny steel pillow sculpted by Anish Kapoor. As a gentle jab at Mies's obsessions with rectilinear smoothness, Herzog & de Meuron have scattered soft convexities in every custom detail: The steel balcony railing has a fleshy curve, as do the voluptuous bathtubs and the window frames. (It's all on view at [56leonardtribeca.com](http://56leonardtribeca.com).) Even the concrete slab edge between floors will get dressed up in precast curves. And who could resist the textured walls around the pool, a continuous mosaic of coin-size metal tiles with a mix of tiny mounds and little depressions, like so many shiny navels?

In modifying Mies with a touch of the baroque, the architects have also adapted the suburban home to a vertical habitat without losing its uniqueness. The tower's shape broadcasts an anti-cookie-cutter aesthetic; no two floor plans are identical, which will complicate the lives of construction workers and real-estate brokers

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but act as a potent tonic to New York's standardize-or-die commandment. Rem Koolhaas's 25-story condo in the Flatiron district commits a similar act of affectionate subversion.

In 1978, the same year that Herzog & de Meuron hung up their shingle, Koolhaas published his rhapsodic and epoch-making ode *Delirious New York*. In that book, he argued that this was a city of extremes, formed by constructive chaos and a fertile "culture of congestion." But while Koolhaas has since dotted the globe with hallucinatory structures, here his extravagant designs—for a hotel at Astor Place, for the Whitney, and for MoMA—never progressed beyond the seductive scale model. Perhaps he has learned something about the limits of lunacy: His first free-standing building in New York, a mid-rise condo at 23 East 22nd Street that will shortly go into construction, is more sober but not more timid. Rather than impose an auteur's vision on a recalcitrant town, he riffs imaginatively on the city's vocabulary—specifically the classic New York setback, which was devised to safeguard light and air. Rather than moving toward each other as they go up, the two sides of the building lean eastward in a

dance of setback and cantilever, like partners doing a tango dip. The move produces some minor showstoppers, such as a glass-bottomed bedroom and some similarly vertiginous balconies. But for the most part, the effect is admirably restrained. Koolhaas's building acts as the mid-rise entry to a much taller tower on 23rd Street, an unremarkable glass pillar by Cetra, and it peeks around behind its oversize partner with a silent reproach: Couldn't you do anything more interesting with New York's nifty constraints?

Half a block from the Flatiron Building, hard by Madison Square Park, and within spitting distance of the Met Life Building, 23 East 22nd Street occupies an architecturally sensitive node. Koolhaas has looked around with a panoramic eye and saluted much of what he saw. Partly for structural reasons, he opted for a solid skin with punched windows, giving the tower a feeling of old-fashioned thick-

#### BACKSTORY

Though he's had more than his share of proposals for New York, Rem Koolhaas has **never had a structure built from scratch** here. But you can go see two of his interiors whenever they're open for business. In his 2001 Prada store in Soho, he connected the street level to the basement with a hyperdramatic gesture, a wooden wave that looks as if it's for **skateboards rather than pumps**. The store nearly upstaged the merchandise, but Koolhaas can be self-effacing too. In 2002, when the Lehmann Maupin Gallery moved to Chelsea, he barely adorned the brick, putting the art in open white boxes and the offices in plywood—**and attracting hardly a review.**



ness. The double-height windows on the penthouse floors, for instance, echo the arcade in Met Life's crown. And the façade of concrete panels embedded in polished steel frames lends a little Chryslerite twinkle to the gabardine-gray exterior. Only the building's upper and lower ends are unsatisfying. The top cuts off without ceremony or embellishment, like a joke without a punch line; the bottom meets the street with the same old glass wall. This is where Koolhaas might have indulged in another wild stroke or two.

These two buildings won't open Manhattan up to a generation of rococo skyscrapers. This isn't Dubai. But they are hardy, quirky, and local enough to help future architects negotiate the relationship between their fancy and the strictures of New York. We'll take our delirium a little bit at a time. ■

*A rendering of Rem Koolhaas's tippy-looking tower at 23 East 22nd Street.*

