

## New start for an urban form

By Edwin Heathcote

Published September 16, 2008



The latest skyscraper proposal for Manhattan looks as if it may achieve something impossible, perhaps even absurd: the synthesis of a number of entirely contradictory architectures.

Herzog & De Meuron, the Swiss architects behind Tate Modern and the Beijing Olympic Stadium, have designed a tower that somehow manages to combine the urban intensity and density of a tight skyscraper full of lofts and a series of interlocking glass villas that is as free-flowing as any of California's classic modernist houses.

The 57-storey proposal, to be slotted into the gritty grid of lower Manhattan's Tribeca, echoes the classic deco skyscraper in its tripartite composition. A solid, geometric base knits it tightly into the urban fabric of the city block, while a smoother shaft takes it up into orbit and a crown begins to dematerialise and reduce its volume as it hits the sky. The surprise here, though, is the lack of a sheath, the smooth envelope, whether boxy or rocket-like, within which skyscrapers are usually contained. Here the architects have stacked a series of irregular boxes, 145 separate and unique apartments – each a response to what is

going on inside – and formed and jiggled them into an extraordinary tower.

Each apartment relates to the city outside in a different way. In a sly echo of the Woolworth Tower a few blocks away the building is set back in a series of steps – but, rather than forming a stepped profile, it simply seems to get looser, with the elements freer and more random in their disposition, almost like a pixellated image blown up too large.

If the effect on the skyline is startlingly dematerialised, its presence at street level is made manifestly material by the inclusion of a huge sculpture by Anish Kapoor. The London-based artist has worked with the architects to create a strange, super-shiny blob that appears to be being squeezed out from under the skyscraper. Building on public art language that Kapoor has been assiduously developing in his "Cloud Gate" in Chicago's Millennium Park and the recent and hugely popular "Sky Mirror" temporarily installed at the Rockefeller Center, the Leonard Street blob both reflects and repels its context, bringing sky down to street as the images of a moving city distort absurdly round its edges.

This latest offering from Herzog & De Meuron – 56 Leonard Street – joins a remarkable set of potential skyscrapers by avant-garde European architects, notably Jean Nouvel (beside MoMA) and OMA (East 22<sup>nd</sup> Street), designers steeped in the culture of the city’s architecture and keen to develop and move it on rather than to pastiche it.

It is not the first time Herzog & de Meuron have tackled the city – they built a chunky block of lofts bounded by a graffiti-derived, cast aluminium fence for the hotelier and developer Ian Schrager in SoHo’s Bond Street. But the tower will exert a far greater impact on the city and perhaps on the typology of the skyscraper itself.

The world is being filled with wacky towers such as David Fisher’s rotating tower in Dubai, a proposal in which each floor revolves individually to almost countless organic, morphing shapes, but this is a design that is somehow paradoxically rooted in both US and European avant-garde traditions. It is a new start for an urban form that was on the brink of becoming aesthetically defunct – a vehicle for primitive “iconic” forms designed as easy-to-grasp developers’ logos.

Refreshing, startling and just absurd enough, this cascade of modernist villas is destined to be one of the most extraordinary piles in a city already dense with surprise and architectural incident. East coast finally meets west and they embrace above Manhattan. Excuse them, while they kiss the sky.