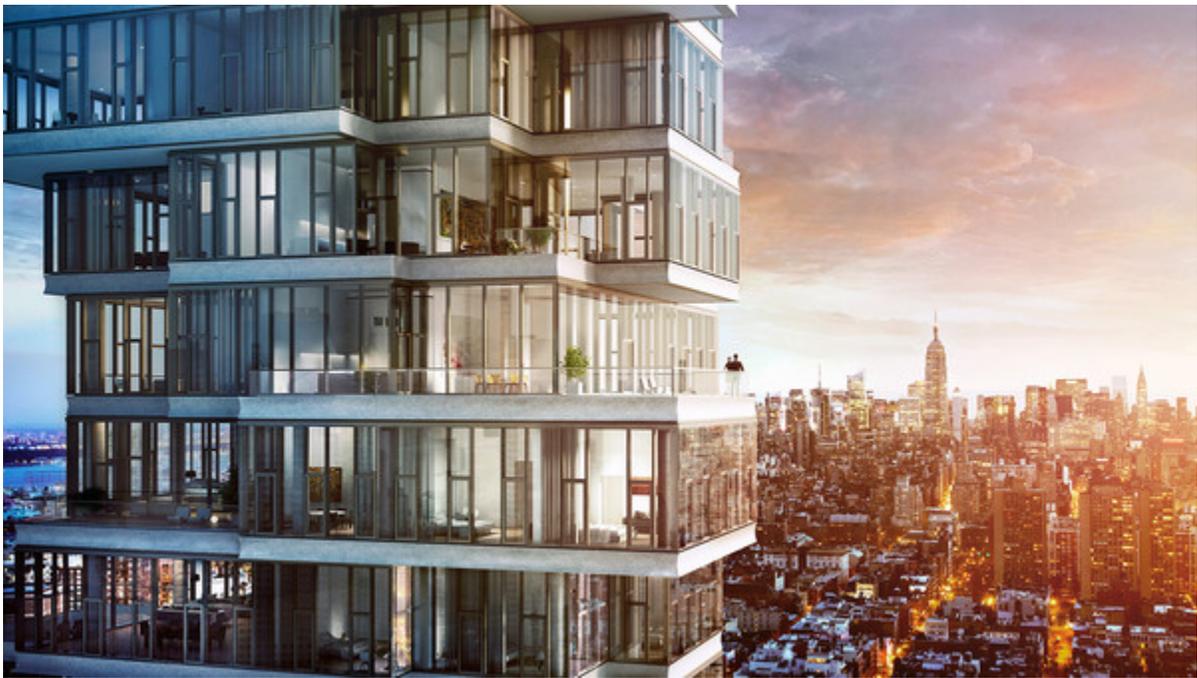


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The skyscraper architects who find inspiration in disintegration

Edwin Heathcote
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Stacked apartments and terraces at [56 Leonard](#) in New York's Tribeca

Our experience of the city is fragmented, piecemeal — stuttering. We perceive only bits, discontinuous routes and flashes of detail and intersection. It was through this experience that modernism emerged, not as an overarching anti-emetic to the nauseous effects of urban motion and uncertainty — but as a thrilled response to this new way of understanding life as a series of disconnected images.

Whether we think of the angular fragmentation which is the basis of cubism or the dreamlike incoherence of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, it is clear that the art of the modern city emerged from an understanding of the essence of the city as an incoherent place of limitless possibility, of the juxtaposition of tragedy and ecstasy and the drudge in between, in which experience declines into boredom and the mind wanders into fantasy.

Yet this nature is only rarely acknowledged in architecture. Instead it is left to film-makers, artists and writers to explore the city of bits. Planners and architects instead appear to yearn for some kind of harmony, for repose and restfulness, the idea of a building as an object or a sculpture to be appreciated as a whole. The disruptive works which did erupt in the postwar period, the Brutalist concrete arts centres and flyovers, the tower blocks sprouting from low-rise terraces, are now celebrated as nostalgia for a lost age of welfare state ambition — but their ideas are now as much of the past as Georgian squares and Victorian workers' housing.

For a brief moment in the 1980s, an architecture of deconstructivism emerged to address this gap between the ideal and the city as experienced and lived. Derived from the literary theories of deconstruction and the collapse of hierarchy, it as an intellectually rich, usually pretentious but occasionally explosive moment that led to a rash of wonky structures and corners and jutting steel beams you could hurt yourself on. Coop Himmelblau, Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid, Peter Eisenman, Bernard Tschumi and Lebbeus Woods and even Frank Gehry proposed an architecture of uncertainty, construction stripped of its internal and cultural logic. But when some of these architects started to build, their constructions often ended up as fluid, surprisingly coherent — they became more interested in capturing an idea of movement, as had the baroque sculptors, than in the desire to deconstruct.



Herzog & de Meuron's **56 Leonard** (left) and a CGI of The Spiral, at 66 Hudson Boulevard, New York

In recent years, however, there has been a resurgence in ideas of fragmentation, pixelation and randomness, a collapse of the certainty in the straight line and the solid block. It is still only fledgling but it is interesting enough to warrant attention because it seems counterintuitive in what is still a conservative industry. When people buy a home, you might think, they want to see permanence, solidity,

not collapse. So how are architects using these aesthetics to inform an architecture that can be both commercial and provocative?

The finest example might be Herzog & de Meuron's **56 Leonard** in New York's Tribeca. This extraordinary tower appears to begin to disintegrate as it rises, fading from a solid extrusion to an ethereal crown, solid melting into air. It is an ingenious solution to one of architecture's great conundrums — what to do with the top of a tower. In the art deco glory days the solution was simple — a tapering crown with decorative details that gave an often undistinguished shaft its identity: a hat — think the Empire State or Chrysler buildings. This approach is now seen as unacceptably decorative so the question is how the structure can be tailored to a natural pinnacle. Herzog & de Meuron has done this by increasing the staggering of the individual apartments, emphasising their separateness within the overall structure. In giving definition to the living unit as an individual element they not only address the difficulty of defining the individual dwelling within the megastructure but also create terraces. As the building becomes less dense, it appears to dematerialise into the sky. It is also a highly practical approach. The staggering of the units — which appear almost as stacked containers — create a sense of individuality, each pointing in a particular direction. They are separate and distinct, more like houses than flats, and give the building a striking appearance with the roof of each apartment becoming a terrace for the one above.

Buro Ole Scheeren has used a similar approach for different reasons in Bangkok. Here his MahaNakhon tower appears to dematerialise as it hits the streets. If Herzog & de Meuron's building is a response to the skyline, Scheeren's structure is a reaction to the frenetic, fragmented Thai streetscape. This is an attempt to break up its mass to address the nature of the south-east Asian street — the booths and stalls, the noodle shops and holes in the wall.

When a big building hits the ground it usually crushes the street, bringing the bland globalised aesthetic of corporate commerce with it. Scheeren's ingenious design allows the mass to break up as it meets the ground and for the particles that shoot off the building to be absorbed again into the city grain. It allows for a variety of use and a diversity of scale while still referring to the mother-ship tower. The pixelation then continues up the building, spiralling round the shaft in what resembles a screen image breaking up. The digital and visceral imagery combines to create a fragmented architecture tailored to a digital age in which we still desire a very analogue experience at street level.

Bjarke Ingels' practice BIG has also adopted a breaking of the profile via a strip of green terraces twisting up through the shaft of the tower in his designs for The Spiral, a skyscraper planned beside New York's High Line.

The approach hasn't always proved a success. Dutch architects MVRDV's the Cloud was a proposal for an apartment block in Seoul in 2011. Its twin towers connected by a mass of fragmented, randomly stacked tissue. But commentators picked up on its remarkable resemblance to the images of the planes exploding into the World Trade Center and the plans were quietly abandoned. More successfully, the same architects' speculative plans for a "Folie Richter" in Montpellier expanded these ideas with a stack of units that emphasised the endless flexibility of these stacks in creating the long yearned for (but actually unattainable) "vertical village".

Scheeren, Ingels and MVRDV all emerged from OMA, the office founded by Rem Koolhaas, which itself recently completed an intriguing structure, occupying a territory somewhere between pixelation,

fragmentation and modularisation — the Timmerhuis in Rotterdam. This mixed-use building was intended to combine town hall, shops and affordable apartments and although it failed to attract the intended tenants its modular nature allowed it to be repurposed. The pixelation of the Timmerhuis is more basic — but it is clearly there in the stacked glass cubes. There is something in it that recalls the parent of these stacked, bitty structures — Moshe Safdie’s Habitat 67, the apartment building designed for the Montreal 1967 Expo. Safdie admits he used “all the Lego in Montreal” to model the project in his studio. These structures also recall Kisho Kurokawa’s magical metabolist Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo (perennially under threat of demolition). Yet the idea seemed to fall from fashion for a generation. Clearly, it is now back.

Perhaps inspired by the success of *The Lego Movie* (2014), or of the game *SimCity*; perhaps by the transformation of global trade into ubiquitous stacks of containers — and the subsequent adaptation of those containers into pop-up shopping malls and informal housing — stacking and the fragmentation of architecture seems to have captured the imagination. But perhaps most important of all it seems to reflect a vision of a faltering screen, a sudden glitch in the matrix. There is something in all these buildings that appears to suggest the possibility of collapse — the Jenga-like challenge of balance — but which also embodies a questioning of our increasing dependence on digital. They represent an aesthetic rupture, a momentary loss of faith. That diversion from the certainty of much construction is intriguing, a sense that ultimately architecture is play, at its most basic a thrill in the stacking of one element on top of another. Perhaps what appears to be a foreboding of fragmentation and fear is, in fact, a rediscovery of a sense of joy.



Edwin Heathcote is the FT’s architecture and design critic

Photographs: Ossip van Duivendobe; Tomio Ohashi; GraphicaArtis/Getty Images; Bjarke Ingels Group; **56 Leonard** Tribeca; MVRDV; Safdie Architects; OMA