Design and Theory of Building Types

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European Skyscraper IV
IAAD Design Project

[12 ECTS]

The use of the word “skyscraper” is first recorded roughly 120 years ago in reference to certain newly erected buildings in Chicago. The motivation for them was an idea of innovation (which would have been inconceivable without technological invention), and the desire of commercial companies for self-presentation in an urban context. It is therefore, therefore, that the high-rise building that emerges in Chicago and New York at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century is the rise of American “cathedrals of commerce”.

At all events, the architecture of skyscrapers is regarded as a development that took place on the other side of the ocean. While most US churches, museums and banks were monumental representations of European ideals, the skyscraper was a native product and a symbol of the American spirit, according to the US architectural critic Claude Bragdon. The direct relationship between this type of building and the American ideology of progress and success is probably an important reason why it is still regarded with such suspicion in Europe.

These quotes are a convincing reflection on one aspect of the history of skyscrapers. Does this mean, however, that European architects were less enthusiastic about a building type that has always seemed antagonistic to the established concepts of the European town? There is very little evidence for this supposition, as there are many notable European architects who designed skyscrapers: Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Adolf Loos, Tony Garnier, Auguste Perret and Antonio Citterio. The first generation of modern architects on both sides of the Atlantic worked on proposals for high-rise buildings regardless of whether they were designing for Chicago, New York, Berlin, Paris or Milan. Even those architects who belonged to the second and third generation, those who have defended the European town against the concepts of modern town planning, like Peter and Alison Smithson in Great Britain or Oswald Mathias Ungers and Hans Kollhoff in Germany, have designed high-rise buildings. In contrast to the first generation, some members of the second and third generation have taken great pains to reflect upon the situation of the European town with its rich historic layering of urban ideas.

Students taking part in this year’s IAAD design project will be asked to give thought to the special history of the skyscraper in a European context, the changing place of monumental public functions and public space, the relationship between the urban public space and the spatial principles of organizing public functions vertically.
The lectures deal with the historical evolution of public buildings and public spaces. Two aspects are important: function and architectural ideas. History has shown that programmatic ideas and spatial ideas correspond within their own time, but that form does not always follow function. In many cases, typical spatial forms are capable of coping with a diversity of functional requirements. Today, function can be implicit as well as explicit; how could we otherwise reuse older buildings.

Public buildings and public spaces are as much a result of conflicting programmatic ideas as they are of conflicting spatial ideas. The lecture course supports the idea that the spatial concept will be explored with the help of perspective drawings; by distilling and comparing and stripping away irrelevant circumstances, we would like to discover universal principles involved in the design of buildings.

The exercise is compulsory for all students taking part in the IAD design process. Architectural drawings are an abstraction, a method to investigate an architectural principle, the programmatic idea and an urban or natural situation. The design process encompasses analysis as well as synthesis. Clear-cut methods and rational procedures can only be applied to a degree. Often accidental and unintended deviations, often unmeant, obstacle helps to show up the right principle.

In this seminar, we will be looking for permanent, essential and characteristic architectural attributes inherent in plan, section and façade. It is the timeless and universal qualities that we are after. The aim of this seminar will be to articulate fundamental architectural principles by drawing; by distilling and comparing and stripping away irrelevant circumstances, we would like to discover universal principles involved in the design of buildings.

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