**Building Community: New Apartment Architecture**

Michael Webb

There is an urgent need to build many more apartments—to relieve an acute shortage of housing, to use land more economically, to save the energy wasted on long commutes to distant suburbs, and to revitalize cities abandoned by an earlier generation. Indeed, from Sydney to Los Angeles, young people are moving back into urban centers and giving them a fresh jolt of energy. The very notion of suburbia has been discredited as a wasteful delusion: neither city nor countryside, increasingly isolated by traffic congestion.

Multiple housing in urban centers is clearly a better option. But, even as rents and condominium prices soar, the choices remain depressingly narrow. Nearly all apartments are shoehorned into generic blocks and towers: faceless, placeless, and differing only in the expense of the decorative veneer. Claustrophobic cells, as uniform as those in a cheap hotel, open off double-loaded corridors. Light and air come from one side only, and balconies are usually vestigial. “Luxury,” a word beloved by property owners, has lost all its meaning: upscale condos are nearly as uniform, cramped, and shoddy as those endured by mere mortals. Kenneth Frampton, a New Yorker by adoption and a leading historian of modernism, admitted, “I have never lived in a modern building of quality in my entire life, never.”

Risk-averse developers, concerned only with making a quick profit, seek an easy way through the labyrinth of municipal regulations, and a chorus of Nimbyism greets every departure from the norm. The box, horizontal or vertical, is always a safe option. A few glimmers of creativity relieve the gloom. Social housing, even shelter for the homeless, has challenged idealists to break out of the box, and augment minimal interiors with shared spaces and greenery. From low-rise urban villages to terraced towers, there are scattered initiatives at every level of size and price. Some buildings reach out to the neighborhood, others open up to leafy courtyards. Rigorous geometries alternate with expressive forms that create urban sculptures and shape the living spaces within.

In my book, I have selected thirty recent examples from around the world to demonstrate the huge but largely unrealized potential of the apartment building. There is a mix of large and small, tall and ground-hugging, frugal and costly. All were completed in the past ten years, and a few future projects are included in the final chapter. The common thread is creativity: finding new ways to shape and share space while maintaining a balance between community and privacy. These themes are addressed in commentaries by five American and European architects.

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