

Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2016)

Heft: 29

Artikel: The urban shim phenomenon

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-918817>

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THE URBAN SHIM PHENOMENON

Job Floris



fig. a Eidlitz & McKenzie, *The New York Times Building*, 1903

The intriguing typology of thin, shallow, and wedge-shaped buildings emerged in several densified urban environments in Europe and the United States. These unusual architectural objects appear for several reasons, in general not being consciously part of the serving urban strategy, but exceptions and cause fascinating urban moments where the merge of urbanism and architecture might be the most challenging. These triangular anomalies can be perceived both as a strange architectural object and as the ultimate obedience to the urban plan. By following the rules of urbanism all the way, buildings with striking proportions arise, of big importance, since these indispensable pieces are enforcing the urban pattern.

Observing the appealing shape of the Flat Iron Building in New York raises several questions, such as: which were the conditions that led to the realization of this exceptional triangular structure? The Fuller Building, as originally named, was completed in 1902 and designed by the architecture firm led by the great Daniel Burnham. The triangular shape of this building was caused by the intersection of 5th Avenue and Broadway—the historic road which was upgraded to the big exception in the progressive grid of Manhattan. The ‘Commissioners’ plan’ of 1811 had set this blueprint of a rectangular grid, being both foreseeing and strict.¹ The leading role of the urban plan was not at issue in these special moments of deviation. The rectangular grid perimeter proved to be demanding and firm in maintaining its uniformity, hence just collided with the meandering Broadway, causing a sequence of triangular plots throughout Manhattan. The change in geometry was at the expense of conventional architectural conditions, as the meeting of Broadway and the grid provoked plots with very acute angles. The economic climate must have built up such pressure on the available land that it eventually led to raising buildings on off-standard plots. Still up to this day most meetings of Broadway with the grid have been vacant and used as small triangular parks, still available for more of these wedge-shaped buildings to appear. The urban shims therefore confirm a climate of economic pressure at its top during the time of the Fuller Building’s planning.

Nearby to it there is another example, the New York Times Building at 1 Times Square, located north along Broadway (fig. a). It was designed by Eidlitz & McKenzie in 1903, and unfortunately was killed softly due to various reconversions. This grand tower was genuinely celebrating the escape of the narrow footprint into vertical directions. Forming a hybrid building, by combining a monumental cathedral and an office block, showed consciousness of both the designers and commissioners of the potentials of the plot. Ingeniously they overcame the issue of the triangular site issued into high inefficiency on the ratio floor versus elevations.

While the Flat Iron Building is probably the best known example, the theme of unconventional urban shims transcends New York. Situations of urban rules occasionally squeezing architecture into extraordinary building-types, are to be found in other places as well. The phenomenon appears in several densified cities throughout the world, differing merely in the causes of its development. The observation of unconventional typologies of thin, shallow, and wedge-shaped buildings gives rise to the exploration of exceptions or flaws in the logic of urban plans. They emerge as a consequence of the meeting of an implemented urban plan into an existing city fabric, and appear in overheated economic conditions.

In the city fabric of Paris, this phenomenon of urban shims seems to have reached a climax. Here it developed in a more complex manner, to be divided into several categories. A plurality of wedge-shaped buildings was created due to the implementation of the 'Haussmann-plan', between 1853 and 1870. The star-grid caused triangular building blocks on purpose, all of which were deliberately planned instead of being an exception (fig. e). The overall parallel with New York is formed by an architecture that was subordinate to the rules of urbanism. And eventually, this longing for a new, modern urban image led to a richly varied amount of housing typologies.²

You can find situations where the old and the new structures are having a *rendez-vous*, culminating in the form of slender, towering shims. In even more situations, in order to obtain a coherent street-profile, even the smallest gaps were filled (fig. b–d). The formal emphasis of the new *avenues* had to proceed to the extreme, in spite of practical issues on the scale level of architecture. The charm lies in the autonomy of these objects: they behave as unhinged parts of a bigger block, clearly recognizable as family members, as their facades blend in completely, almost camouflaging their unusualness. Their proportions, however, stand out as they are vertically elaborated, forming an ambiguity between a bloated house and a reduced urban block. Nevertheless, they form an indispensable part of an urban gesture, while challenging architecture to simultaneously behave like filling mastic and obeying the representation of urban formality.

Apart from examples in Paris, in general it is hard to interpret these urban anomalies as conscious, deliberate parts of an urban strategy. Without a doubt, these collisions are causing fascinating urban moments, where the merge of urbanism and architecture is challenged. The anomalies can be perceived both as an alienated object and the ultimate obedience to the urban plan. By following the rules of urbanism to the extreme, buildings with remarkable qualities arise, gaining importance as indispensable pieces of enforcement of the urban pattern.

Seen from the perspective of the urban planner, the formal logic of the shims seems evident. Conversely, considered from the perspective of the architect, they evoke quite a few challenges. For instance, the anomalies in the urban morphology require an architecture that is completely subservient. The building-envelop is being manipulated into an inconvenient position of the non-optimal, inefficient, and highly expensive appearance by the force of urbanism. The urban shims are totally off-standard and cause complex ground figure plans. Likewise, the restricted dimensions of the plan also offer distinctive apartments of an entire floor. The sharper the angle of the building, the more challenging it gets as the building starts to act like a thinning slab – up to point zero – causing all kinds of intriguing architectural problems, like the ratio between the serving and served spaces. Luckily, the historical layout of the Parisian apartment typology suited this odd shape perfectly, like the *enfilade*-principle with long linear arrangements of rooms and the elimination of corridors. The core being automatically directed to the deepest part of the plan causes difficult plans and room proportions (fig. f).

The phenomena of the urban shim are to be considered both as pivotal actors within the urban strategy and as alluring building types. Discarding would cause an undesirable

big exception that would weaken the urban fabric. Their role can be compared to a breeching block. Therefore their elevations have to blend in, according to the formal rules of the street. In many cases, this makes the shims barely visible. Simultaneously, the conditions of the plot are intrinsically difficult. The allure being encrypted in the shallowness of plots that offer space for merely a thick facade, suggesting the idea of a Potemkin-village, a cardboard building, a huge publicity sign, or a 'Decorated Shed'. Since the performance of the elevation and the floor plan is detached, they are both building different narratives, which offer unlimited opportunities for architects. Unfortunately, in today's urban environments such examples of challenging settings are rarely to be found. It may be that the contemporary urban plans tend to be primarily efficient, hence lacking the sensitivity to address both scale levels, avoiding urban shims to appear.

- 1 Richard Plunz, 'A History of Housing in New York City', Columbia University Press 1990.
- 2 Jean Castex, P. Panerai, Ivor Samuels, 'Urban Forms: The Death and Life of the Urban Block', Routledge 2004.

fig. b Parisian shim on the crossing of Rue Vieille du Temple, Rue Debelleyne, and Rue de Poitou, drawn by Monadnock

fig. c Parisian shim on the crossing of Rue du Louvre, Rue Hérold, and Rue Étienne Marcel, drawn by Monadnock

fig. d Parisian shim on the crossing of Avenue de la République, Rue des Trois Bornes, and Rue de la Folie Méricourt, drawn by Monadnock

fig. e Map of the implementation of the Haussmannian grid, by Agulhon, M. & Duby, G., in: 'La ville de l'âge industriel: le cycle haussmannien', Editions du Seuil, 1983

fig. f Georges Sinell, Rue des Petits Pères, Paris 1908, in: Georg Ebbing, Christoph Mäckler (Ed.), 'Der Eckgrundriss', Deutsches Institut Für Stadtbaukunst, Bücher zur Stadtbaukunst 2, Niggli, 2013

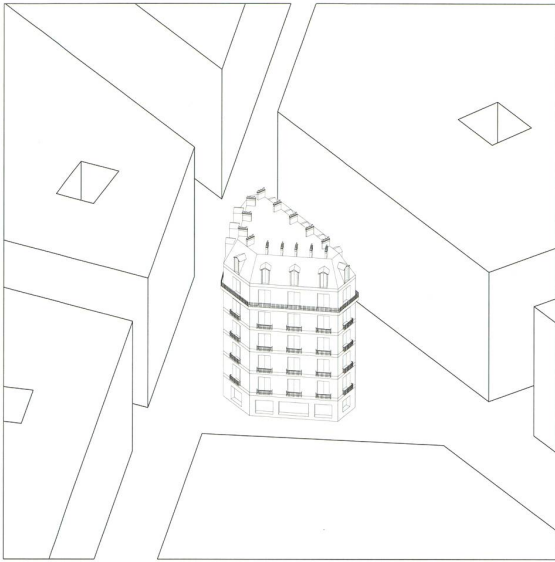


fig. b

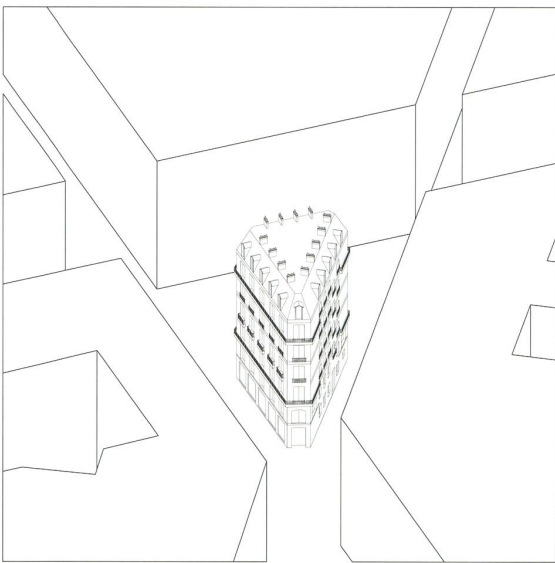


fig. c

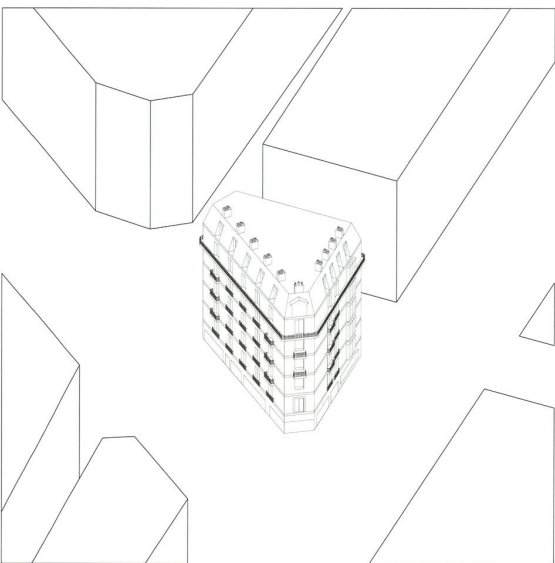


fig. d

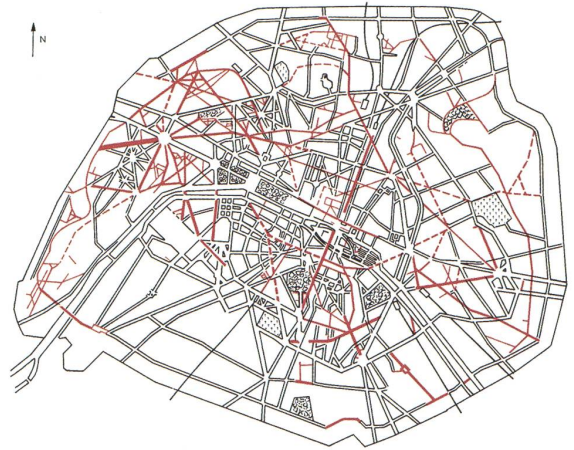


fig. e



fig. f

Job Floris, born 1974, is an architect and co-founder of MONADNOCK—a Rotterdam-based office for architecture, urbanism, interior, and research. He was trained as an interior and furniture designer at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and as an architect at the Rotterdam Academy of Architecture. Job Floris is head of the Master's course of Architecture at the Rotterdam Academy of Architecture. He is editor of OASE Journal and writes about architecture for various media. As a visiting lecturer he lectures at various architecture institutes throughout Europe.