

ARCHITECTURE

Getting the max out of minimalism

Helmut Jahn redefines skyscraper formula with his first condo tower in Chicago

By Blair Kamin | TRIBUNE CRITIC
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Life isn't fair, and neither are the ebbs and flows of architectural celebrity.

Twenty-three years ago, Helmut Jahn was the talk of the architecture world—a pop star/fashion plate splashed on the cover of *GQ*, his cool blue eyes peering out from under a light-brown gangster hat. Today, his star has been eclipsed by such megawatt architects as Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid. Yet he's better than ever, as he makes clear in his first residential high-rise in Chicago.

That 41-story tower, called 600 North Fairbanks, is a quietly elegant wedge of glass that conspicuously out-classes all the other high-rises being built around it. It is the latest chapter in Chicago's ongoing invention of the glass house, a story that began in 1951 with Mies van der Rohe's dazzling steel-and-glass apartment buildings at 860 and 880 North Lake Shore Drive.

With its taut glass skin curving around the corner, 600 North Fairbanks undoubtedly will remind architecture buffs of Jahn's streamlined 55 W. Monroe St. (the former Xerox Centre) of 1980. Yet the building clearly reflects new technology and Jahn's maturation since his notorious "Flash Gordon" period, when many of his attention-getting exercises in postmodernism were as flashy as his wardrobe.

The svelte condo tower provides a much-needed alternative to the city-

dull phenomenon of the residential high-rise plunked atop a parking garage. And it issues an unspoken retort to a common criticism you hear today: That star architects are tools of real estate developers who use their celebrity to cram too much square footage onto too little land.

"The client expected us to take this typical mundane program ... and actually make it a more interesting building," Jahn said by cell phone from the Berlin airport, where he was waiting to catch a flight to Abu Dhabi, where he's a finalist for a new "zero-energy" building.

Developed by Noah Schatz of Schatz Development, 600 North Fairbanks was designed by Jahn with two of his associates at Chicago-based Murphy/Jahn—Gordon Beckman, who has since left the firm, and Dan Cubric. German engineer Werner Sobek, a frequent Jahn collaborator, was also part of the team.

The Schatz interests own a three-story loft office building just to the north of 600 North Fairbanks, and Jahn's initial plan called for constructing a parking deck atop the 91-year-old building, which has variously served as the home of the old Chez Paree nightclub and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's Institute of Design. A spiraling ramp would have coiled through the glass-walled base of 600 North Fairbanks on its way to the deck. Cars going up and down the ramp would have resembled kinetic sculpture. The plan was dropped, however, when engineers calculated that the footings of the older building might not be able to support the deck.

Instead, using air rights from the smaller structure, Jahn shaped a free-standing tower—essentially a rectangle, with one curving corner—that rises without interruption on its south side and performs some beguiling structural gymnastics as it turns to the north.

There, the upper floors cantilever beyond the base, making the top of the building wider than its bottom. Normally, such an inversion might seem arbitrary, exhibitionistic or simply unsettling, making passersby wonder whether the tower was about to topple over. But here, the move creates larger apartments. And Jahn boldly expresses it with a glass wall that slants outward from the 9th to the 12th floors. He thus reverses a riff at the old Xerox Centre, where it is the bottom of the building



that flares out, and recaptures some of the sculptural verve he lost when the fishbowl parking ramp was discarded.

Time-honored formula

In essence, 600 North Fairbanks recapitulates the age-old formula of the skyscraper as a three-part building with a clearly articulated base, middle and top. The base consists of a high-ceilinged, light-washed lobby and 11 floors of parking, the middle houses 24 floors of apartments, and the top holds four floors of penthouses and an amenity floor (with lap pool, fitness center and sun deck). What sets the building apart, however, is the way Jahn plays with this convention, creating a persuasive essay in minimalism.

Windows on the north and south sides consist of large sheets of extra-wide, floor-to-ceiling glass that are unencumbered by the clutter of mullions, air-conditioning units or operable windows. The concrete floor slabs are just eight inches thick, due to Jahn's use of post-tensioning cables rather than old-fashioned steel reinforcing bars. He expresses the slabs on the facade with narrow bands of extruded aluminum. Concrete columns are recessed behind the glass.





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As a result, 600 North Fairbanks looks remarkably crisp and transparent, though its see-through quality invariably will be compromised as more people move in. If Mies’ 860-880 high-rises are skin and bones buildings, clearly expressing their structural frames, this is every bit a skin building. And due to the presence of extra-thick glass, the skin is mirror-smooth, beautifully reflecting the sky, the clouds and nearby structures. That’s a welcome shift from the fun-house mirror distortions of other high-rises.

Cloaking the underwear

Jahn’s inventiveness is truly on display, however, in the building’s base, where he screens the parking garage with a layer of aluminum mesh set behind an outer wall of glass. The silver mesh glints when the sun hits it, offering an almost fabric-like texture instead of the monolithic bruteness of a typical parking garage podium. The garage’s white fluorescent ceiling lights provide a subtle accent and take their part in Jahn’s distinctive, layered look, which neither hides the activity in the garage nor lets it all hang out, as at Marina City.

“He didn’t want the underwear showing,” jokes Jahn’s spokesman, Keith Palmer.

I’m not so keen on the way the fluorescent lights shine through the mesh at night—a bit too much underwear there. But the materials and visual rhythms of the base make it seem as though the glass envelope of the apartment floors has been drawn downward like a curtain. Meanwhile, the deeply recessed balconies of the penthouse floors join with large openings in the glass at the amenity floor to effectively punctuate the building’s top. The result is a pleasing sculptural continuity that’s wholly absent from most condo tower-parking garage combos.

Of course, the visual comeliness of 600 North Fairbanks would ring hollow if Jahn had ignored the needs of the building’s occupants. But a tour of several floors shows that not to be the case. Indeed, the elegance of the outside is an expression of what’s inside—high-ceilinged, loftlike units with generous expanses of glass (and views) that make the units seem bigger than they really are.

Odds and ends

Inside the apartments, fan-coiled heating and cooling units eliminate the need for ducts and dropped ceilings. Hardwood floors offset the industrial coolness of the glass and concrete. Island kitchens are placed near the windows, which is smart because that’s where everybody spends their time.

Yes, the minimalist aesthetic comes with certain rules and quirks: You must have an off-white window shade. Some of your concrete walls may have plug holes from the building’s form-work. The absence of operable windows on the north and south sides means that apartment dwellers there will have to nudge their balcony doors open to get fresh air. And, in a small number of units, residents will have to draw the shades to obtain privacy while in the bathroom.

Units going fast

None of these restrictions seem particularly annoying, however, and, besides, there are plenty of mansard-roofed condo towers out there for those who wish to be cosseted in traditional luxury. The 229-unit building, where prices range from \$395,000 for a one-bedroom to \$2.1 million for a three-bedroom penthouse, is more than 95 percent sold.

While 600 North Fairbanks won’t add to Chicago’s growing number of officially certified green buildings, Jahn insists that he has used many of the same energy-saving features that are expected to win his other buildings the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) seal of approval from the U.S. Green Building Council.

His real contribution in this time of look-at-me, “wow” buildings is to remind us of the virtues of a restrained, exquisitely detailed architecture that is equally attentive to its users and its set-

ting. Back in Jahn’s fashion-plate days in the mid-1980s, no one would have expected an architecture critic to write a sentence like that. But Flash Gordon has grown up and the cityscape is the better for it.

