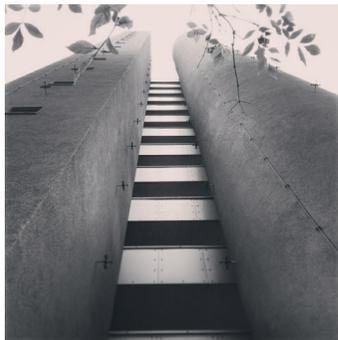


# John Hejduk's Berlin Tower – A Shape Called Home

Shumon Basar

## PRIMARY ELEMENTS AND THE CONCEPT OF AREA Primary Elements



I've been living in a special slice of building made from squares, cylinders, rectangles and triangles. These shapes can be child-like or Platonic; abstract, or figurative. For the architect, John Hejduk, they are probably all of these.

Hejduk will be well known to those within the architectural field but not to those outside it. He built very little in his lifetime; not because he couldn't, but rather, because he chose not to. Instead, he made scratchy drawings of carnivalesque objects wandering Europe. His work constituted a diaspora of subjects and objects. A cast-list of melancholia. He wrote many, many poems. He constructed strange installations – also comprised of collages of primary shapes but wrought into animistic life.

He taught, lots. In fact, he said, "I don't make any separations. A poem is a poem. A building's a building. Architecture's architecture. Music is music. I mean, it's all structure. It's structure." And yet I find myself residing in a tower where separation is apparent I've been residing on the 10th and 11th floors of a former social housing block in Berlin that he architected, where separation is apparent: each room exists in its own independent tower, linked to each other by short, punctuated walkways. The gaps are vantage points from which the city enters the building, or, you embody the city.

Again, AND, not OR. The apartment oscillates between spaces that seem "too big" and "too small." It reminds us we only become conscious of space when it is either too big (a cathedral, a palace) or is too small (a railway cabin, a prison cell). For most of us, lived space happens in the middle ground and, as such, washes over us quietly. But not here. There are only seven apartments in total in the building. Fourteen floors. It's utterly irrational – no other developer would condone it – and therefore utterly compelling.

Commissioned by the IBA (Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin) initiative, and finished in 1988 a year before the (nearby) Berlin Wall came down, this piece of pure auteurship stands alone, apart, even from itself. Metallic stars protrude from the outer walls, silently and regularly arrayed. Why? The most convincing story I've heard is that: "They're grips for angels to hold onto when they climb the sides of the tower." (Hejduk was a scholar of angelology.)

Every day when I wake up inside this piece of literature masquerading as architecture, a spectral pulse runs through me. This has been home. I have been a character, another primary form amongst others, visible and invisible. Life here is enchanting and unnerving. It is the force of incisive simplicity, the crisp composition of singular ideas.



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