

Diagrammatic Urbanisms

Museum Plaza—Louisville, Kentucky

With the emergence of the skyscraper typology in late nineteenth century Chicago, so too emerged the now familiar trope of the tall building—with its programmatic diversity, sheer capacity and density—as a microcosm of the city. This metaphorical urbanism, however, does not mean that skyscrapers nurtured a more intimate relationship with the city. More often, the conventional parti of a mixed-used skyscraper is segregated with the public programs in a base plinth and the private office and residential programs in the tower. The effect of this typical plinth and tower parti is twofold—first, the bulk of the architectural effort is spent articulating the icon of the tower on the skyline; second, the metaphor of the skyscraper as “a city within a city” exists only at street level.

Museum Plaza in Louisville, Kentucky, designed by REX, exemplifies the archetypal urban mixed-use project. It contains offices, a hotel, apartments, and public entities including a contemporary arts complex, the University of Louisville MFA program, and an associated auditorium. Rather than adhering to the orthodox architectural solutions of this typology, the architects redefine the relationship of the tower to its urban context by locating the public spaces at the vertical midpoint of the project, connected to the street level by a diagonal shuttle. This striking diagrammatic maneuver inverts the typology of the skyscraper, first, by giving the public spaces iconic presence on the skyline and second, by folding the city street into the middle of the building.

—FREDERICK TANG

