

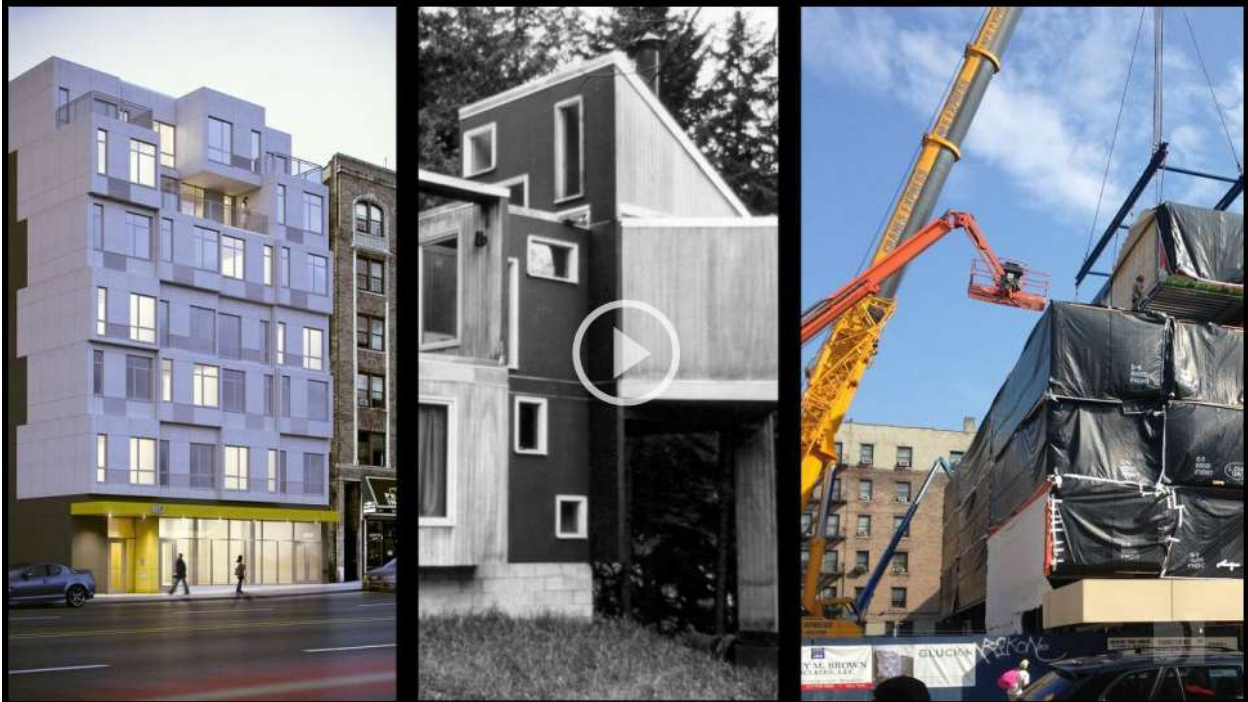


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TWO THOUSAND
AND THIRTEEN

This Prefab Building Is A First For New York

THE STACK, A MODULAR MANHATTAN APARTMENT TOWER DESIGNED BY GLUCK+, MAKES US WONDER WHY THE CITY WAITED SO LONG.



When architect Peter Gluck built [his first prefabricated project](#), it was for a small cluster of vacation condos in Vermont. Nearly four decades later, he's returned to the technique with a highly urban application--and a place in New York architectural history.

[The Stack](#), a seven-story, mid-cost apartment tower in Manhattan's Inwood neighborhood, is the first prefabricated residential project ever undertaken in the city.

The building consists of 56 modules, completed offsite and shipped for construction and assembly to the northernmost tip of Manhattan, where a crane lifts the modules into position. Over the course of four weeks, the 12-foot-wide parallelepipeds were stacked and secured together by bolts. ([Watch video of the stacking here.](#))



"It's really exciting," Gluck, principal of [Gluck+ architects](#), says, as the building blocks are hoisted overhead. Standing at the edge of the lot, we discussed the history of modular and prefabrication building methods, and why they are again relevant. "This is all about urbanization, the moving back to the cities," the architect tells Co.Design. "Now the technology and the methods for doing it have evolved."

Gluck's generation of architects was reared in the shadow of the late modernists, whose oversize urban panaceas and all-encompassing treatises they'd begun to aggressively critique. An inclination toward viewing architecture less as an art form and more as a high-tech solution to society's problems marked a shift in thinking for Gluck and his professional peers. What they came up with--entirely modular cities, nomadic homes, free housing--drew on, and in some cases expanded on, the revolutionary potential built into these concepts since their inception in the mid-1920s.

The new dose of idealism in building design of course ran into some hard walls of realism. "They had spent millions of dollars with model projects, and they built some, but very few," Gluck recounts of his involvement in Lyndon Johnson's Model Cities program. The late 1960s initiative was an attempt at large-scale urban renewal, waged in some of America's most poverty-stricken metropolises. For Gluck and other participating architects, low-cost housing lay at the heart of the enterprise. But something stood in the way: the flight from city centers.



"The world at the time was suburbanized and suburbanizing, and no suburban communities wanted low-cost housing," Gluck tells Co.Design. "So the means were there to build, but the desire was not." He pauses to rephrase the distinction: "The desire was there on a political level, but not on the market level."

Today, onsite in Inwood, Gluck believes the conditions for prefabricated housing are once again ripe. An important first step in public acceptance this time around, he emphasizes, is to correct the misconception that this type of housing is "just a product," with the usual mass-industrialized, government-subsidized overtones. "Forget the boxes and look at it like any other building," he urges. Gluck points out that each unit of The Stack was designed and built to be structurally independent--before it left the Pennsylvania factory. When the modules are stacked and lined up alongside each other in their new Manhattan neighborhood, they become very flexible, yielding an open floor plan where the architect can insert interior partitions to customize at will.

But given the building's pixelated facade reminiscent of Lego, forgetting about boxes when staring down The Stack might be akin to asking someone not to think of elephants. The architects created a push-pull design that accentuates the building's modular bones, its block components extending to and retreating from the sidewalk.

"THE BUILDING TECHNIQUE CAN BE APPLIED AT ALL LEVELS, IN ALL CITIES, AT NEARLY ANY SCALE."

Overall, the form of The Stack both draws from and complements the neighborhood, a relatively sleepy, relatively undiscovered far northern reach of Manhattan populated by six-story brick tenements and discreet commercial storefronts. Tom Gluck, Gluck+ principal and Peter's son, explains that the building preserves the scale of its surroundings without compromising its fundamental contemporary stylings.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of The Stack--and what will qualify it as a future case study for practitioners, developers, and students--is how the coupled building technique can be applied at all levels, in all cities, at nearly any scale. The architects are currently at work on a large tower, as well as a school, that use the same methods. A house or a skyscraper can benefit as well from the time-effective building strategies that The Stack ushers in.

This approach, in turn, can open up huge swaths of the urban landscape that had previously been barred from improvement. Peter Gluck points out that real estate developers have the resources and government support to amass and build out large sites, but development on such frontiers is often unwanted or impossible.

"What's interesting about this method," the senior Gluck says, "is that we can go into mid-blocks anywhere in the city, and with minimum effort we can build." This is exactly what New York needs, he says, citing all of the "substandard" housing wasting away in the middle of blocks. Modular and prefabricated building--the precedent of The Stack--creates opportunities where there existed none. "It allows the flexibility with sites that normally resist that smaller, but necessary, development."