



Emmanuel Petit

# Metropolis Now

A century ago the City of New York adopted its 1916 Zoning Resolution to regulate the massing of buildings. The impulse was to preserve access to light and air, and therefore to counteract the tendency of new construction to occupy an entire lot and then simply extrude upward. While the legacy of these regulations was gradually reflected in the spatial quality of Manhattan, it wasn't until the 1920s, when architect and delineator Hugh Ferriss translated these formulas into a series of atmospheric renderings representing the New York of the future, that the meaning of zoning was truly imprinted on the collective consciousness. His drawings softened the contours of buildings and replaced the expected stepped silhouettes with a theoretical maximum bulk rendered as a series of eroded semitransparent shapes with sloped envelopes. He made the metropolis look like a fantastic but eerie urban mountainscape, thus reviving the stories of Washington Irving's "Gotham City" in the popular imagination. Ferriss turned the pragmatism of urban regulations into the poetry of nature with an inhabited setting of artificial mountains and canyons.

VIA 57 West, Bjarke Ingels Group's building overlooking the Hudson River in Manhattan's Midtown West, seems to spring directly from Ferriss's *Metropolis of Tomorrow*. This is not simply because BIG plays with the distribution of the building's mass on the site to open up views and let in light, but also because the architects use a particular type of narrative and imagery that evokes architecture at the scale of landscape: mountain, butte, oasis, harbor, and the like. The simple and archetypal shape of BIG's building visually detaches itself from the urban fabric; it stands out at the scale of the whole city. The skewed morphology of VIA 57 West seems more on the scale of geology than that of architecture, or at least it oscillates between the two. It should therefore not be surprising that the garden courtyard inside the block reproduces the proportions of the largest piece of man-made nature in Manhattan, Central Park. In the most cartoonish and direct way, image and narrative are fused: VIA 57 West becomes a microcosmic simulation of the city and its artificial nature.

Bjarke Ingels Group, VIA 57 West, New York, 2010–2016. Photo: Iwan Baan.  
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