

Lara Menzel

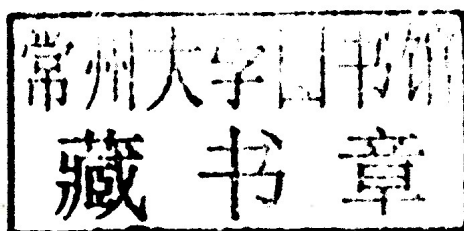
Facades

Design
Construction
Technology

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8 Preface

Culture/Public

- 12 Zenith Music Hall
Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas
- 14 LaM – Lille Museum of Modern, Contemporary and Outsider Art
Manuelle Gautrand Architecture

16 Medical Library Oasis
HPP Architects

20 Carl-Henning Pedersen & Else-Alfelt Museum
C. F. Møller Architects

21 House of Prayers in Černošice
Fránek Architects

22 Rhine Falls Visitor Center
Leuppi & Schafroth Architekten

24 Moderna Museet
Tham & Videgård Arkitekter

26 City Hall Zaanstad
Soeters Van Eldonk architecten

27 MAS | Museum aan de Stroom
Neutelings Riedijk Architects

28 Mora River Aquarium
Promontorio

30 Parish Center in Rivas-Vaciamadrid
Vicens + Ramos

32 ABC Museum
Aranguren & Gallegos

36 Harpa Reykjavik Concert Hall and Conference Center
Henning Larsen Architects

40 Red Sun Pavilion
Ateliers Jean Nouvel

42 Ordos Museum
MAD

44 Festival Hall Plauen
CODE UNIQUE Architekten

46 Forum Schönblick
Klaiber+Oettle

48 Örsta Gallery
Claesson Koivisto Rune Architects

49 2010 Taipei Flora Exhibition – Far Eastern EcoArk
Miniwiz

50 NO99 Straw Theater
SALTO architects

52 Pantheon Nube
Clavel Arquitectos

54 White Chapel
Jun Aoki & Associates

56 Pavilion 21 MINI Opera Space
Coop Himmelb(l)au

Education/Research/Health

58 Center for Sustainable Energy Technologies
Mario Cucinella Architects

62 Adaptonic Transfer Center
JSWD Architekten

64 Käthe Kollwitz School
Schmucker und Partner Planungsgesellschaft

66 Villaverde Health Care Center
estudio.entresitio

68 Kekec Kindergarten
Arhitektura Jure Kotnik

70 ASU Walter Cronkite School of Journalism & Mass Communication
Ehrlich Architects

72 Martinet Primary School
Mestura Architects

74 Kindergarten Ajda 2
Arhitektura Jure Kotnik

75 Nursery in the Park
Santiago Carroquino architects and Gravalos Di Monte architects

76 Santa Isabel Kindergarten
Santiago Carroquino architects

78 Center for Dialysis
Nickl & Partner

80 Cib – Biomedical Research Center
Vaíllo & Irigaray + Galar

82 Smarties
Architectenbureau Marlies Rohmer

84 Institute for Ornithology
adam architekten

88 TU Chemie Graz
Zinterl Architekten

90 Secondary School
4a architekten

92 Lecture Hall and Department of Real Estate Business
Ferdinand Heide Architekt

94 BioMedizinZentrum Bochum
hammeskrause architekten

96 ZET – Sustainability Lab
knerer und lang

100 Public Secondary School
Schulz & Schulz Architekten

102 Oslo International School
Jarmund/Vigsnæs AS Architects

104 Center for Pediatric Medicine Angelika-Lautenschläger-Klinik
Nickl & Partner

Industrial

108 Floodwater Pumping Station
Dirk Melzer landscape architecture + v-architekten

110 Booster Station South
Group A

111 Primary Substation – 2012 Olympics
NORD

112 CUSWC – Central Urban Solid Waste Collection
Vaíllo & Irigaray + Galar

Living/Hotel

114 Residential Complex Granatniy 6
SPEECH Tchoban & Kuznetsov

116 Aloft London Excel
Jestico + Whiles

120 Suites Avenue Aparthotel
Toyo Ito & Associates, Architects,
UDA Arquitectos

122 Residential Multi-family Home
Halle 58 Architekten

124 Hotel Quai de Seine
Chaix & Morel et Associés | JSWD Architekten

126 The Integral House
Shim-Sutcliffe Architects

127 Jurčkova
Enota

128 zC Houses
Vaíllo & Irigaray + Eguinoa

132 House 77
dIONISO LAB

134 W London Leicester Square
Jestico + Whiles

135 Chrome Hotel
SANJAY PURI ARCHITECTS

136 Apartment House in Chelsea
Ateliers Jean Nouvel

138 House p
fischer berkhan architekten

140 Town Hall Hotel
RARE Architecture

144 Trojan House
Jackson Clements Burrows Architects

145 House on Henry's Meadow
Shim-Sutcliffe Architects

146 Hotel Courtyard by Marriott
Zechner & Zechner

148 Block 16
René van Zuuk Architekten

150 Sotelia
Enota

152 Town Villas Siesmayerstraße
Jo. Franzke Architekten

154 Residential Suites Linienstrasse
Gewers & Pudewill architects designers engineers

158 Duplex House
Arndt Geiger Herrmann Zurich

Mixed-Use

160 Kraton 230
Mei architecten en stedenbouwers

162 Mixed-Use Affordable Housing
Patrick T I G H E Architecture

164 Hotel + Office Tower
Vaíllo & Irigaray + Eguinoa

166 Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision
Neutelings Riedijk Architects

167 8 House
BIG – Bjarke Ingels Group

168 Rose am Lend
INNOCAD Architektur

170 Residential and Commercial Building GKS Architekten+Partner	202 Four Elements Thomas Pink Petzinka Pink Architekten	236 Capricorn House GATERMANN + SCHOSSIG
172 “The Wave” Hon.Prof. Johanne Nalbach, Nalbach + Nalbach Architekten	206 Origami Office Building Manuelle Gautrand Architecture	238 Conference and Finance Center of the VW Bank Architekten BKSP Grabau Leiber Obermann and Partners
174 Le Monolithe MVRDV	208 Office Block Philippe Samyn and Partners, architects & engineers	242 ADA 1 – Office Building “An der Alster 1” J. MAYER H. Architects
176 Revitalization WestendGate Just/Burgeff Architekten with a3lab	210 Galilée Studio Bellecour Architects	244 Im Zollhafen 22, Rheinauhafen GATERMANN + SCHOSSIG
180 Mixed-Use Development Renzo Piano Building Workshop	214 IBA DOCK Prof. Han Slawik	248 Commercial Center Punto Bregaglia Renato & Reto Maurizio
182 Airspace Tokyo Faulders Studio	216 Lighthouse Thomas Pink Petzinka Pink Architekten	250 The New York Times Building Renzo Piano Building Workshop with FxFowle Architects
Office	218 Kontor 19 in the Rheinauhafen GATERMANN + SCHOSSIG	254 Kuggen Wingårdh Arkitektkontor
184 The Orange Cube Jakob + MacFarlane Architects	222 Cinetic Office Building Valode & Pistre architectes	Retail/Showroom
188 Office Building SPEECH Tchoban & Kuznetsov	224 spectr[a]um LAB[au], laboratory for architecture and urbanism	256 New Façade of Galeria Kaufhof ANGELIS & PARTNER
190 Fin House Thomas Pink Petzinka Pink Architekten	225 Reiss Headquarter Squire and Partners	258 John Lewis Department Store and Cineplex Foreign Office Architects
194 S11 “Steckelhörn 11” J. MAYER H. Architects	226 The Crystal schmidt hammer lassen architects	262 Zeilgalerie – Façade Redesign 3deluxe in/exterior
196 Euro Space Center Philippe Samyn and Partners, architects & engineers	230 Q1 in the ThyssenKrupp Quarter JSWD Architekten Chaix & Morel et Associés	264 Placebo Pharmacy klab Architecture
198 German Embassy, Warsaw Holger Kleine Architekten	234 Transoceanica Headquarters + arquitectos	266 Grukšovje Enota
	235 weather.tower LAB[au], laboratory for architecture and urbanism	

268 “Nowy Swiat” Shopping Center
Progress Eco

270 Leonardo Glass Cube
3deluxe in/exterior

274 Hard Rock Cafe
Architectkidd

276 Star Place
Ben van Berkel / UNStudio

278 Sportalm Flagship Store
Baar-Baarenfels Architekten

280 Eurospar Vorkloster
Dietrich | Untertrifaller Architekten

282 Breuninger Fabric Façade
DITTEL | ARCHITEKTEN

284 Showroom Kiefer Technic
Ernst Giselsbrecht + Partner

288 Galleria Centercity
Ben van Berkel / UNStudio

Sports/Leisure

290 Greenpix Zero Energy Wall
Simone Giostra & Partners

294 Temporary Bar
LIKEarchitects

295 New Holmenkollen Ski Jump
JDS/Julien De Smedt Architects

Traffic

296 Car Park Two at Chesapeake
Elliott + Associates Architects

298 Santa Monica Civic Center Parking Structure
Moore Ruble Yudell Architects & Planners

300 Parking Garage
Inbo

302 Car Park One at Chesapeake
Elliott + Associates Architects

304 HTCE Parking Lot
Inbo

306 Gnome Garage Almere
Mei architecten en stedenbouwers

308 Architects Index

319 Picture Credit

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Contemporary and Outsider Art
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HPP Architects

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C. F. Møller Architects

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Fránek Architects

22 Rhine Falls Visitor Center
Leuppi & Schafroth Architekten

24 Moderna Museet
Tham & Videgård Arkitekter

26 City Hall Zaanstad
Soeters Van Eldonk architecten

27 MAS | Museum aan de Stroom
Neutelings Riedijk Architects

28 Mora River Aquarium
Promontorio

30 Parish Center in Rivas-Vaciamadrid
Vicens + Ramos

32 ABC Museum
Aranguren & Gallegos

36 Harpa Reykjavik Concert Hall and
Conference Center
Henning Larsen Architects

40 Red Sun Pavilion
Ateliers Jean Nouvel

42 Ordos Museum
MAD

44 Festival Hall Plauen
CODE UNIQUE Architekten

46 Forum Schönblick
Klaiber+Oettle

48 Örsta Gallery
Claesson Koivisto Rune Architects

49 2010 Taipei Flora Exhibition – Far Eastern EcoArk
Miniwiz

50 NO99 Straw Theater
SALTO architects

52 Pantheon Nube
Clavel Arquitectos

54 White Chapel
Jun Aoki & Associates

56 Pavilion 21 MINI Opera Space
Coop Himmelb(l)au

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Mario Cucinella Architects

62 Adaptonic Transfer Center
JSWD Architekten

64 Käthe Kollwitz School
Schmucker und Partner Planungsgesellschaft

66 Villaverde Health Care Center
estudio.entresitio

68 Kekec Kindergarten
Arhitektura Jure Kotnik

70 ASU Walter Cronkite School of Journalism &
Mass Communication
Ehrlich Architects

72 Martinet Primary School
Mestura Architects

74 Kindergarten Ajda 2
Arhitektura Jure Kotnik

75 Nursery in the Park
Santiago Carroquino architects and
Gravalos Di Monte architects

76 Santa Isabel Kindergarten
Santiago Carroquino architects

78 Center for Dialysis
Nickl & Partner

80 Cib – Biomedical Research Center
Vaíllo & Irigaray + Galar

82 Smarties
Architectenbureau Marlies Rohmer

84 Institute for Ornithology
adam architekten

88 TU Chemie Graz
Zinterl Architekten

90 Secondary School
4a architekten

92 Lecture Hall and Department of Real Estate Business
Ferdinand Heide Architekt

94 BioMedizinZentrum Bochum
hammeskrause architekten

96 ZET – Sustainability Lab
knerer und lang

100 Public Secondary School
Schulz & Schulz Architekten

102 Oslo International School
Jarmund/Vigsnæs AS Architects

104 Center for Pediatric Medicine Angelika-Lautenschläger-Klinik
Nickl & Partner

Industrial

108 Floodwater Pumping Station
Dirk Melzer landscape architecture + v-architekten

110 Booster Station South
Group A

111 Primary Substation – 2012 Olympics
NORD

112 CUSWC – Central Urban Solid Waste Collection
Vaíllo & Irigaray + Galar

Living/Hotel

114 Residential Complex Granatniy 6
SPEECH Tchoban & Kuznetsov

116 Aloft London Excel
Jestico + Whiles

120 Suites Avenue Aparthotel
Toyo Ito & Associates, Architects,
UDA Arquitectos

122 Residential Multi-family Home
Halle 58 Architekten

124 Hotel Quai de Seine
Chaix & Morel et Associés | JSWD Architekten

126 The Integral House
Shim-Sutcliffe Architects

127 Jurčkova
Enota

128 zC Houses
Vaíllo & Irigaray + Eguinoa

132 House 77
dIONISO LAB

134 W London Leicester Square
Jestico + Whiles

135 Chrome Hotel
SANJAY PURI ARCHITECTS

136 Apartment House in Chelsea
Ateliers Jean Nouvel

138 House p
fischer berkhan architekten

140 Town Hall Hotel
RARE Architecture

144 Trojan House
Jackson Clements Burrows Architects

145 House on Henry's Meadow
Shim-Sutcliffe Architects

146 Hotel Courtyard by Marriott
Zechner & Zechner

148 Block 16
René van Zuuk Architekten

150 Sotelia
Enota

152 Town Villas Siesmayerstraße
Jo. Franzke Architekten

154 Residential Suites Linienstrasse
Gewers & Pudewill architects designers engineers

158 Duplex House
Arndt Geiger Herrmann Zurich

Mixed-Use

160 Kraton 230
Mei architecten en stedenbouwers

162 Mixed-Use Affordable Housing
Patrick T I G H E Architecture

164 Hotel + Office Tower
Vaíllo & Irigaray + Eguinoa

166 Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision
Neutelings Riedijk Architects

167 8 House
BIG – Bjarke Ingels Group

168 Rose am Lend
INNOCAD Architektur

170 Residential and Commercial Building
GKS Architekten+Partner

172 “The Wave”
Hon.Prof. Johanne Nalbach,
Nalbach + Nalbach Architekten

174 Le Monolithe
MVRDV

176 Revitalization WestendGate
Just/Burgeff Architekten with a3lab

180 Mixed-Use Development
Renzo Piano Building Workshop

182 Airspace Tokyo
Faulders Studio

Office

184 The Orange Cube
Jakob + MacFarlane Architects

188 Office Building
SPEECH Tchoban & Kuznetsov

190 Fin House
Thomas Pink | Petzinka Pink Architekten

194 S11 “Steckelhörn 11”
J. MAYER H. Architects

196 Euro Space Center
Philippe Samyn and Partners,
architects & engineers

198 German Embassy, Warsaw
Holger Kleine Architekten

202 Four Elements
Thomas Pink | Petzinka Pink Architekten

206 Origami Office Building
Manuelle Gautrand Architecture

208 Office Block
Philippe Samyn and Partners,
architects & engineers

210 Galilée
Studio Bellecour Architects

214 IBA DOCK
Prof. Han Slawik

216 Lighthouse
Thomas Pink | Petzinka Pink Architekten

218 Kontor 19 in the Rheinauhafen
GATERMANN + SCHOSSIG

222 Cinetic Office Building
Valode & Pistre architectes

224 spectr[a]um
LAB[au], laboratory for architecture and urbanism

225 Reiss Headquarter
Squire and Partners

226 The Crystal
schmidt hammer lassen architects

230 Q1 in the ThyssenKrupp Quarter
JSWD Architekten | Chaix & Morel et Associés

234 Transoceanica Headquarters
+ arquitectos

235 weather.tower
LAB[au], laboratory for architecture and urbanism

236 Capricorn House
GATERMANN + SCHOSSIG

238 Conference and Finance Center of the VW Bank
Architekten BKSP Grabau Leiber Obermann
and Partners

242 ADA 1 – Office Building “An der Alster 1”
J. MAYER H. Architects

244 Im Zollhafen 22, Rheinauhafen
GATERMANN + SCHOSSIG

248 Commercial Center Punto Bregaglia
Renato & Reto Maurizio

250 The New York Times Building
Renzo Piano Building Workshop
with FXFowle Architects

254 Kuggen
Wingårdh Arkitektkontor

Retail/Showroom

256 New Façade of Galeria Kaufhof
ANGELIS & PARTNER

258 John Lewis Department Store and Cineplex
Foreign Office Architects

262 Zeilgalerie – Façade Redesign
3deluxe in/exterior

264 Placebo Pharmacy
klab Architecture

266 Grukšovje
Enota

268 “Nowy Swiat” Shopping Center
Progress Eco

270 Leonardo Glass Cube
3deluxe in/exterior

274 Hard Rock Cafe
Architectkidd

276 Star Place
Ben van Berkel / UNStudio

278 Sportalm Flagship Store
Baar-Baarenfels Architekten

280 Eurospar Vorkloster
Dietrich | Untertrifaller Architekten

282 Breuninger Fabric Façade
DITTEL | ARCHITEKTEN

284 Showroom Kiefer Technic
Ernst Giselbrecht + Partner

288 Galleria Centercity
Ben van Berkel / UNStudio

Sports/Leisure

290 Greenpix Zero Energy Wall
Simone Giostra & Partners

294 Temporary Bar
LIKEarchitects

295 New Holmenkollen Ski Jump
JDS/Julien De Smedt Architects

Traffic

296 Car Park Two at Chesapeake
Elliott + Associates Architects

298 Santa Monica Civic Center Parking Structure
Moore Ruble Yudell Architects & Planners

300 Parking Garage
Inbo

302 Car Park One at Chesapeake
Elliott + Associates Architects

304 HTCE Parking Lot
Inbo

306 Gnome Garage Almere
Mei architecten en stedenbouwers

308 Architects Index

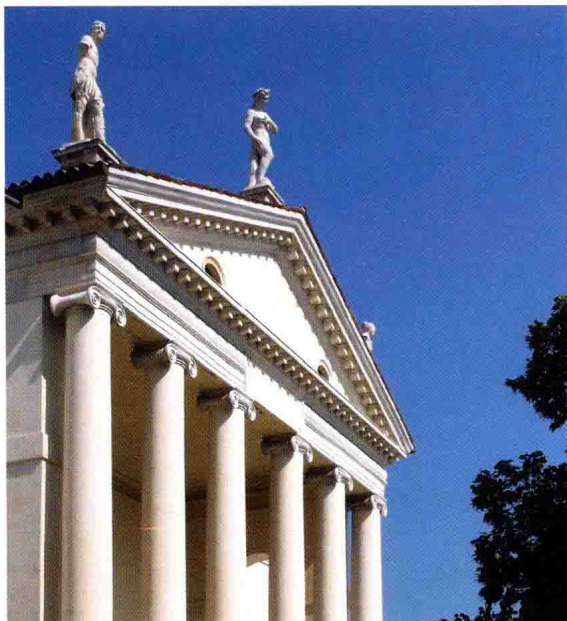
319 Picture Credit



Facing the Front

by Chris van Uffelen

The word façade is derived from the Latin term “facies”, or outward appearance. It connotes the outwardly visible surface structure of buildings – in a narrower sense only the appearance of the front side of a building even. This is usually the side of the main entrance, in Christian churches, for example, mostly the western side. In highly visible locations, for example on a hill overlooking a city, a different side can also serve as the front side. However, the main façades with the main entrance generally face public urban sites (city, square) and dominate the appearance of the building. Nevertheless, side façades such as those of Gothic naves or Baroque palace gardens can be designed as elaborately as the main façade with its dominating building structure. The other sides of buildings were usually designed more simply, even though architectural history includes examples of all-round prestigiously designed buildings, the most famous example being the Villa La Rotonda (1571) by Andrea Palladio.



Today's architecture differentiates less among the different façades – many buildings have a different appearance on all sides and often only the entrance indicates the main façade of the entire building's skin. Contrary to the concept of the outer wall, the term façade primarily denotes an architectural and not a constructional principle. It refers to the outermost building layer and the ones behind, if they are visible. The outer wall denotes the constructive unit, while the façade describes the visual surface of the building's skin.

The differentiation between the outer wall and the façade is especially crucial in situations where they are separated from each other. The façade can become an independent structure that completely obscures the look of the building behind it by exhibiting a completely different structure. While most Romanesque era façades immediately revealed the structure of the building's architectural parts, or narthexes and westworks served as independent entrance structures, the double-tower façade of St. Etienne in Caen initiated the development of Gothic façades as independently structured front sides. In the Gothic era, screen façades also evolved, which were placed as thin layers in front of the actual buildings (Salisbury Cathedral). Veneered façades (Palais Bourbon, Paris) provided new looks to hide outdated old buildings. Façades

did not completely cover the building behind them only in rare cases, such as Leon Battista Alberti's Sant'Andrea in Mantua. This building is a particular vivid example of the façade's design and proportion – a combination of a triumphal arch and a temple front – dominating the dimension of the building situated behind it. During the Renaissance era, the conceptualization of façades had a key significance. The shapes and proportions of antiquity were used as models to be emulated. The horizontal division into a plinth section, main section and terminal top section became canonical and had to be brought in sync with the functions, while the vertical division of the main section had to also fit in harmoniously. Andrea Palladio devised the 'giant order' as prototype solution to the latter requirement in his monumental design of the Palazzo Valmarana-Braga in Vicenza. With his design of the façade of Il Gesù in Rome during the early Baroque era, Giacomo della Porta was even able to establish a façade style that became binding for the entire Jesuit order. The church building by Giacomo Vignola located behind it was the initial building of the Baroque. Baroque façades often feature an unprecedented three-dimensional quality. Convex and concave elements simulated movement in the building fronts and had a much more powerful effect on the urban space than the comparatively planar façades of the previous eras with their orthogonal projections and bays. In this era and the subsequent Rococo the colorfulness of façades also reached a vividness that had not been seen

↖ | West front Salisbury Cathedral, England, 1258.

↖ | Villa Rotonda, Italy, 1571.

since Antiquity. The subsequent Neoclassicism required a new appearance based on the assumption that antique temples were bright white and the return to traditional façade proportions.



Due to the very strict shape codex of the Neoclassicism era, there were particularly frequent clashes between the desired look and functionalities, which is clearly apparent on numerous churches where the Christian tower dominates the heathen temple (Allan Dreg-horn's St Andrew in Glasgow). After Historicism and Eclecticism had utilized the entire scope of previous elements during the 19th century, the question of the relationship between the outer wall and the façade suddenly took on a whole new dimension: for the Monadnock Building in Chicago, Burnham and Root had to render the ground floor walls almost 2 meters thick to enable them to carry the weight of the 16 floors. However, the suitable solution was already present at the time: Iron (Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace in London 1851) and steel lattice formwork (Jules Saulnier's Menier factory in Noisiel 1871) were thin and resilient. Louis H. Sullivan, who established the new dimensions of Chicago's steel frame construction high-rises by adjusting the plinth, main part and terminal section, uttered the far reaching statement "form follows function." In conjunction with the honesty discussions of 100 years earlier, Adolf Loos' "Ornament and Crime", and Le Corbusiers "Five points of architecture" (including ribbon windows and free façades), this led to the sober façades of Classical Modernity. Nevertheless, these façades were far from being as free of "intentional shapes" as they claimed to be. The whitewashing itself was already a deliberate style feature, often hiding the rather outdated building methods (Erich Mendelsohn's Einstein Tower made of brick).



At around this time the media façade was born – creating a second appearance with nightly neon signs and illumination, and – much more consequential – the curtain wall. Initially created for factories (1903 Steiff toy factory in

Giengen; 1911 Walter Gropius' Fagus factories), this type of façade that was no longer bearing but resting on the bearing structure conquered the whole world through the Dessau-based Bauhaus movement and remains to this day among the most popular façade types, in addition to the continuously used punctuated façade (solid construction with openings) and million and transom (half-timbered) styles. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe conceived a perfect curtain wall design for the Seagram Building in New York, resolving the corner conflict between the static system and the façade rhythm, which was already a concern during Greek Antiquity. The curtain façade and other element and system façades (Egon Eiermann's honeycomb tiles for the Horten department stores of the 1960s) dominated the post-war era. The self-supporting concrete shell (Felix Candela) was also given a new impetus, resulting in three-dimensional external expressions of engineering architecture the likes of which had not been seen since the Baroque era. Today, the glazed curtain façade, the most popular kind of this façade type, competes with structural glazing for the greatest possible transparency. In this process, the glass panes are glued, giving the impression of a vast pane without fixtures. The continuously popular exterior insulation finishing system (EIFS), however, has often resulted in an unattractive uniformity of building's outward appearance.



The design of the Centre Pompidou in Paris (by Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers and Gianfranco Franchini, 1977), opposed the uniformity and technical perfection of the post-war façades by placing the supply technology on the outside, while the post-modern style (also of the 1970s) revived the decorative façade elements known since Antiquity (tympanum, attached column) in an abstracted and often ironic fashion. In 1987, Jean Nouvel's Institut du Monde Arabe caused a stir by integrating blinds into glass façade elements to shade the interior, promoting the development of façade modules with integrated functions.



The latest architecture focuses on technical consideration in an unprecedented way: the design is affected by necessity and awareness and currently also by the economic viability of ecological construction. The double-skin façade creates a climatic buffer between an interior and a frequently glazed exterior façade layer that at the same time allows natural ventilation even of large high-rises. Vertical gardens (Patrick Blanc) not only visually enliven the urban landscape, but also improve the structural physical properties and the local climate by hydrating the air and reducing dust. Essentially, the suspended, rear ventilated façades are a return to the "apron architecture" that Classical Modernity sought to eliminate – albeit due to functional and ecological considerations. The double-skin façade is contracted to the closest possible distance, and the exterior layer takes on the representative and protective function, while the insulation and the static function are handled by the "interior exterior wall". However, technology is excellently accounted for in the current style of second modernity, which can be described as new elegance. Following the architectural historical tradition of Mies van der Rohe (Barcelona Pavilion), architects are seeking high-quality surface materials and unconventional patterns that provide the buildings with an exclusive look, creating a prestigious exterior without the traditional façade elements of Post-Modernity. Almost all buildings of this book can be seen in this context, even though the variety of applied materials and shapes are not found anywhere in architectural history.



↗ | Centre Pompidou, Paris, France, 1977.
→ | Façade of Institut du monde arabe, Paris, France, 1987.
→→ | Openings create an ornamental play of light and shadow.

