



# The International Highrise Award 2020

## Internationaler Hochhaus Preis 2020

### INTERVIEWS WITH THE PRIZE WINNER

Press information October 29, 2020

**Reinier de Graaf (Partner Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA)) in Conversation with Peter Cachola Schmal (Director Deutsches Architekturmuseum (DAM)),  
Video-call, June 2020**

**Peter Cachola Schmal: Mr. de Graaf, are you still working from your home office?**

**Reinier de Graaf:** Today I'm at home. I work partly from home. We have alternating shifts. In the Netherlands, we are allowed to have only a limited number of people in the office at the moment. I go to the office three days a week; two days of the week I work from home. And I've discovered that working remotely is quite effective in certain cases. When all of this is over, I will probably not travel as much as I used to, because I think there was a certain amount of unnecessary travel. You can have meetings via the screen that are equally productive. It's just the creative process, when you design, when you make models, when you walk around, when you look at things with the design team, that really needs physical presence.

**PCS: With the TVCC (Television Cultural Center) in 2008, De Rotterdam in 2014, and the MahaNakhon in 2018, OMA was a finalist for the International Highrise Award three times but never won it. Until now.**

**RdG:** I'm very happy we made it this time.

**PCS: We were quite taken with the Norra Tornen. In a previous interview you called it a "Plattenbau for the rich."**

**RdG:** That's the tagline, yes. To be honest, this was a name I gave it later. We won the competition in 2012. In 2014, I wrote an essay for *Baukultur in Deutschland: Von der Architekturqualität im Alltag zu den Ikonen der Baukunst* [published by Wüstenrot Stiftung]. They wanted me to write an essay about building culture in Germany. I chose to write about the *Plattenbau* in the former East Germany as a kind of tongue-in-cheek twist of fate, because it was something that had been discarded as building culture in Germany and was being demolished. The essay is also part of my book *Four Walls and a Roof* from the sixth floor up – floors, walls, and façade elements –, I saw that analogy and thought it was also a very good selling point. One of the things I learned when doing the research for the essay was that a lot of the parts, a lot of the panels, were actually produced in Finland, and some in France, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, where one can also find *Plattenbau*. I thought it was quite nice that the technique survived the political system it's most commonly associated with, and that the technique apparently survives any notion of class struggle. It was a tongue-in-cheek name, but people picked it up and it started to lead a life of its own.

**PCS: It is very catchy. And is it really a building for the rich?**

**RdG:** I have the distinct impression whenever I go to Sweden – I'm from the Netherlands – that almost everyone is well off. It's a country that seems to be doing pretty well. In Norra Tornen, apartment prices vary. Presumably, the penthouse is very expensive, but there are also a lot of smaller and more reasonable apartments. So, I don't think it's per se for the rich. It's not a luxury project, and I also don't like to think of it as a luxury project. I like to think of it as a residential building.

**PCS: What are the advantages of using a prefabricated construction system?**

**RdG:** The prefabricated system we used for Norra Tornen has the advantage that construction could carry on throughout the entire year, including the winter months, when pouring in-situ concrete would be difficult and is very costly. From a design point of view, prefabrication allowed us to achieve maximum variation with the least number of details, which again was more economical compared to traditional construction methods. As such, Norra Tornen can serve as a model for other projects.

**PCS: What does the recurrence of a *Plattenbau* mean to you personally?**

**RdG:** I grew up in a *Plattenbau*. When we had relatives visiting us, they would often comment that the anonymous and repetitive apartment buildings were disconcerting. But I was quite happy there. There was a sense of familiarity. To me and my parents the equality of the buildings was reflecting the equality of their inhabitants.

**PCS: Has the developer sold all the apartments in Norra Tornen?**

**RdG:** At least in the Innovationen tower. There are some units left for sale in the second tower, Helix. It's a nice location. And the apartments are nice, too. I don't know how COVID-19 has affected the whole thing, but I think it sold well.



# The International Highrise Award 2020

## Internationaler Hochhaus Preis 2020

**PCS: Is your client still involved in operating the building?**

**RdG:** Yes, Oscar Properties are still involved and they are very hands-on and good to work with. The Helix tower, however, is being managed by another developer.

**PCS: Is it one person that represents the client or is it a board that you work with?**

**RdG:** The client is Oscar Properties, and I mostly work with Oscar Engelbert (CEO and founder). I have a very direct contact with him. The real estate company bears his name, and he's really the face of it. That has been quite pleasant.

I never have to go through an entire board, and votes, et cetera. We discussed the design with him, he liked it, and then he went for it. There are certain benefits to this type of leadership.

**PCS: What sort of developer is he or his firm? What does he stand for?**

**RdG:** He's a young developer. He does a lot of residential projects and also many conversions of older buildings into modern residential buildings. He's part of a young modern breed of developers, a post-Donald Trump type of developer, for whom not just Excel sheets and profits count, but also social issues, recyclability, sustainability, and actually architectural quality. That's how I would describe him. I have a couple of clients like him, younger property developers, who of course need to make money, but they're not motivated exclusively by it. These guys are a lot less cut-throat than the previous generations.

**PCS: That sounds like he is an interesting partner to work with. The beginning of the project was an international competition that you won, right?**

**RdG:** I don't remember how international the competition was, to be honest. I think Wingårdhs was part of the competition and three or four other parties. Each pitched for the project with their own developer. We presented the project to the municipality a number of times, took in their comments, and then we were awarded it. The project started with two envelopes drawn on the site by the city architect [Aleksander Wolodarski], who had meanwhile retired, but the envelopes, which looked like two church pipe organs standing up straight, had been fixed in the binding local plan. Therefore, we had to operate carefully not to break that envelope. However, we didn't like the envelope; we didn't like the style or the aesthetics that it suggested. So, we took the envelope, left the even floors as they were, and flipped the odd floors. In this way the design resulted in a kind of pixel system and made it look completely different than the initially prescribed envelope, while at the same time completely respecting it. Therefore, we didn't have to go through the whole procedure of getting permits again. The form is partly a result of a manipulation of something that was given, then we standardized it and turned it into this hammered concrete system.

**PCS: It reminds me of structuralism of the 1960s and 1970s, especially of Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67 in Montreal, Canada.**

**RdG:** It's a big compliment, because that's a very beautiful project. I think this is still a very interesting period. It's been a period that has been ignored for a long time but that is increasingly rediscovered. I wrote a lot about it in my book *Four Walls and a Roof*.

**PCS: For Stockholm the project is quite high – currently the highest building in the city – and of course quite different from its surroundings. In spite of that, and beyond the immediate physical, how does it relate to a larger political, societal, or economic context?**

**RdG:** First of all, the composition of twin towers flanking a major thoroughfare is not new in Stockholm. Take for example the Kungstornen built in the 1920s. Moreover, Norra Tornen is located at a traffic intersection, which merits a special approach to both design and building height. But again, these were the givens from the city's urban planning department.

**PCS: In your book *Four Walls and a Roof* you wrote a chapter about *The Box* mentioning that “the box is where architecture stops being a matter of individual creation” and that “only one in 12 487 boxes has the hope of being a beautiful box”. How does this apply to the stacked boxes of Norra Tornen?**

**RdG:** Norra Tornen is many boxes, so maybe we maximized the chance.

**PCS: When will the second tower be completed?**

**RdG:** This year. We watch the construction process on a webcam. At a certain time, in the case of the first tower, every six days a floor was completed. It was progressing so fast. This is quite interesting, because the materials and the detailing are not cheap. They are actually quite sophisticated. But as a whole, the building is not extravagantly expensive, because whatever you spend on materials you earn back in construction time. And, of course, construction time, particularly in Western Europe, is a very big factor in the cost of buildings.



## The International Highrise Award 2020 Internationaler Hochhaus Preis 2020

**PCS: What sort of amenities or common facilities, compared to residential towers in America or Asia, can the owners of the apartments use?**

**RdG:** There's a fitness studio in the basement of the tower. There's a shared lobby. But that's about it. It's not an Asian tower which has so many facilities that – in theory – you never have to leave the building. That's not the culture in Sweden. You have your neighborhoods there. Particularly in the center of the city you have all the things you need around the corner.

**PCS: Do you have contact with anybody that has bought an apartment?**

**RdG:** I did, but I haven't spoken to them in a long time.

**PCS: What did they tell you? How do people feel in the building as residents?**

**RdG:** When I spoke to them, and they knew my role in creating the building, they were always very nice to me, obviously. They seemed happy. They spoke of it fondly. I don't know whether that's the case for all of the residents. I haven't been to Sweden in quite some time, and COVID-19 might prevent me from doing so in the near future. I think it's actually a very nice building to self-isolate in, because you have such a terrific view. If Sweden had had very strict lockdown measures, the building would have been perfect.

**PCS: Do people buy apartments as a means of investing money like they do in London?**

**RdG:** No. The Swedish housing market was very good for some time, but it has fluctuated quite a bit. So I don't think you see what you have in Vancouver, for example, where property is an investment and stands empty. People in Sweden buy apartments or houses to live in them.

**PCS: In Sweden, you have severe winters, and therefore you need insulation to meet the energy saving rules. Compared to the *Plattenbau*, how much insulation material is inside the walls?**

**RdG:** We used a sandwich panel system. The recessed balconies have sliding doors with insulated frames. Almost all windows are uninterrupted by transoms or mullions. Mullions are, even when insulated, always the weak parts in terms of energy efficiency. Therefore, we chose to use a single sheet of glass to improve the thermal qualities of the building. A *Plattenbau*, of course, is notoriously energy inefficient and notoriously noisy. In Eastern Europe, you had buildings planned to be completely prefabricated and then built from bricks. Even though they are supposedly more basic, this was the luxurious version. It is ironic that brick has outperformed the supposedly more sophisticated concrete paneling. But this is no longer the case in the 21st century.

**PCS: I read that the exposed gravel in the concrete should let it look like bricks. Why not just use bricks then?**

**RdG:** The brown of the façade is a contextual reference to the color of Stockholm's buildings, not literally to their material. Besides, made of brick, Norra Tornen would not have been a "*Plattenbau* for the rich".

**PCS: How do the balconies and the concrete perform in the very severe Swedish winters? If they still have severe winters, that is.**

**RdG:** What I like is that there is a culture of balconies in Scandinavia even though the winters can be severe. In winter you don't use it the way you use it in summer. You have the liberty to not use it. If you look at Russia, they had a law in Soviet times that every apartment should have a balcony. But the first thing people did was to close them and use the area as storage space. Obviously, that would be quite difficult to do with the balconies in Norra Tornen. Another interesting thing about Norra Tornen is that the rooms with the large, uninterrupted sheet of glass, which is not operable, are ventilated through the concrete ribs. The ribs are used to conceal an operable window lateral to the façade.

**PCS: Is it like forced ventilation that is always on?**

**RdG:** No. It's an operable part that can be opened. It's like ventilating a room in a normal housing unit, except you don't see it. There are certain ribs that are open. We built one apartment on site before the construction of the tower started, and tested many concrete panels. We tested all the details until they were absolutely right. There was a lot of back and forth, looking, trying, checking. Then once it worked, the construction company could roll out the thing without us. You could say we had a kind of mini villa on a nearby site that was our construction site before there was a proper construction site, where we tested everything extensively. It was a very pleasant collaboration with the client. He knew how important the detailing was, and no energy or money was spared on working on this mockup. A lot of clients would say that a mockup is expensive and decide against it.



## The International Highrise Award 2020 Internationaler Hochhaus Preis 2020

**PCS:** If he was going to reproduce it a thousand times, then he'd better do it right.

**RdG:** I can guarantee you that there are a lot of clients that reproduce elements a thousand times without feeling any urge to test them. While we consider this is a normal thing to do, it's less common than you might think.

**PCS:** So, are there any plans to continue the collaboration in the future?

**RdG:** I think fondly of the client, and I can only hope he thinks the same of us. Maybe this award will help continue the collaboration.



# The International Highrise Award 2020

## Internationaler Hochhaus Preis 2020

**Oscar Engelbert (Oscar Properties) in Conversation with Peter Cachola Schmal (Director Deutsches Architekturmuseum (DAM)), Stockholm, August 2020**

**Peter Cachola Schmal: Congratulations on the International Highrise Award 2020 and on the winning project Norra Tornen by OMA. This mock-up piece of the façade made of concrete is wonderful to touch. But the realized version is not exactly like this. What was wrong with this sample? Was it a lot of manual work?**

**Oscar Engelbert:** No, this is one of many, many samples. No matter what we did, it was a lot of manual work. We were striving for perfection. And I think this sample was a bit too edgy. The final building is more brown, almost sandy.

**PCS: Are the people, owners and residents happy with this brutalist concrete?**

**OE:** Well, I think most of them are. Especially the owners are very happy with the building and the result of the architecture. I get a lot of positive feedback. People approach me because they love it. I get a lot of text messages or mails, like "I love what you do for Stockholm", and "these buildings are fantastic". But then you follow the social media feed and you see someone posting on Twitter, "this is the ugliest building I've ever seen in my life", or "how can we have this brutalist architecture in Stockholm, it is terrible". And on Instagram, you constantly get pictures from people who like the project and from those who don't like it. That is a successful building to me – when some people hate it and some love it and there are different feelings about it. Because this is what should happen when you do something – especially in architecture. It's like looking at a piece of art. Some people love it and some people hate it. If we would live in a city where everything looks the same that would be boring. And I think in many cities or in some parts of Stockholm, a lot of new neighborhoods look exactly the same. In my opinion, a new development or a new neighborhood should consist of many different types of buildings to be interesting. It's the mix. There are many things about social media I don't like, but I like these tags that you can follow up, because I can see what everybody writes about the project, and that's really great.

**PCS: Norra Tornen is very unique. Stockholm is not a high-rise city, and now there is this gate of two towers standing out. Did you develop the idea of the gate yourself?**

**OE:** No. The master plan was developed by Aleksander Wolodarski, an architect who worked for the city. But the architecture was very different; I did not like what he had done. Luckily, the city and the developer couldn't reach an agreement. The moment I saw this in the news, I instantly contacted the head of the city and kept calling every three or four weeks to see what was going on. Six or eight months later, they launched a competition where many developers got the opportunity to bid for the property. It was one of the first times in Stockholm that the department that owns the land and the planning and development department worked together. Therefore, the competition was not only about money, it was also about what the towers should look like and what they would contribute to the city. For this reason, it was very clear to me who should be the architect. There have always been two architectural firms I wanted to work with: OMA and Herzog & de Meuron. We were already doing a project with Herzog & de Meuron, and for this particular site I thought OMA would be the right choice. Because they are very analytical about the way they look at each site and its difficulties and use architecture to solve the problem. The problem with this site was that the envelope was very small and the surrounding roads are very noisy. So, the architecture you see is an architecture that was based on solving the noise problem. And that's why you see all the balconies, so the sound wouldn't creep into the apartments.

**PCS: Reinier de Graaf as the project architect told us how he further developed the given scheme. Whose idea was it that it should be a prefabricated brutalist building, which is not the first thing you think of nowadays?**

**OE:** Of course OMA came up with the suggestion, and afterwards there was a lot of discussion about how to manufacture it and adjust the costs to achieve our targets. As in all cases, a good development is the result of the conversation between the developer and the architect.

**PCS: We think that the Norra Tornen apartments are in the upper segment of the market. What is the standard price for these apartments per square meter?**

**OE:** The average is about 11–12 000 euros per square meter. In the area around the towers, the average price today is 9500 euros. We are 15–20 percent above the average, which is still within reason. There is a range, of course. If you want to buy on the first ten floors, the price is anything from 8500 to 9800 euros. If you want to live on the top floor, it's going to cost more. If it wasn't for the fact that there are over 300 apartments, it would have been more expensive.



# The International Highrise Award 2020

## Internationaler Hochhaus Preis 2020

**PCS: Interesting! What sorts of people buy these apartments?**

**OE:** I stopped analyzing that. You just have to develop a great product. You have to stick to your feeling of what is good design and what is not. We have our own design team. So, everything you see in the apartments like kitchens, bathrooms, and floors has been designed by us. It is about finding the right balance to do something that is outstanding and really looks fantastic but also attracts a lot of buyers.

**PCS: But your buyers are local, aren't they?**

**OE:** Yeah, absolutely local.

**PCS: There is no international investment, like we see it in Frankfurt?**

**OE:** No. People buy apartments to live in them, which is good.

**PCS: What kind of amenities do the buildings offer?**

**OE:** In the first building, there is a gym, a sauna, a yoga space, a small cinema, a conference and dining room, and a small apartment for guests.

**PCS: There are a few stores in it as well, right?**

**OE:** Exactly. There is already a sunglasses store at Innovationen, the first tower. In the second one, Helix, we are aiming to have a deli, and we might have a restaurant on the 16th floor. So everyone will be able to see the building from inside and enjoy the view. But these COVID times are not the best time to find a restaurant that wants to expand and take this place. So, we have to think creatively and see what other things we can develop.

**PCS: These buildings seem very well suited for someone who wants to work remotely on the own balcony in these times.**

**OE:** Yes, that's right. And we were very lucky; in many countries construction just came to a halt. I didn't even want to think about the consequences of stopping construction works. I had to do it once, and it's really difficult to start construction after it has been stopped for six months. We were able to get the last deliveries from Italy before they locked down. We just shipped everything here, stored it, and so we were able to maintain construction during the whole lockdown.

**PCS: Reinier de Graaf told us that you did a mockup on site to test the prefabrication methods.**

**OE:** Not a whole apartment, though. Well, in two different ways we did: there were mock-ups of the façade, we did like five, six or eight different versions. That's how we came to the conclusion what the façade should look like. But for internal purposes and for the sales office, we then created an apartment in a rented office space, where you had the kitchen, the bathroom and the balcony to see how it feels.

**PCS: Are there any aspects of the prefabrication, which might come up again in other projects? Or are they really special, unique for this project?**

**OE:** Personally, my mood right now is to develop buildings that are going to be competitive in the segment of rental apartments for people who don't really have the money, and to build them all over the country — and to use prefabrication because from the moment you start construction, the building is up in two to three months. I'm very interested in exploring good architecture combined with prefabrication, which can be produced so fast. This is something I am working on right now. One floor took about one week to complete. The first five to six floors were made on site because there was a lot of concrete coming in to set up the base section. After that, it started to go faster. Eventually it was on average one floor per week, which was very fast. And then we used prefabricated bathrooms from Italy. They were just put in and that was it. So, yes, to answer your question, there are many things to learn from. And I think prefabrication offers so many good opportunities.

**PCS: We think of Scandinavian construction as being prefabricated wooden modules. Do you do that as well?**

**OE:** We are working on one such project. Beside that, one idea that we explored earlier was to build the Gasklockan project in timber or in wood. But we couldn't make it happen, because using wood you can't build too high due to the fire risk. We couldn't find a way to prevent the wood from taking fire. Well, this was two years ago; now there is probably a way to do it.

**PCS: Is there something about the project you would do differently today?**

**OE:** Well, there is one thing I don't like. When you enter the lobby, there are two furniture elements for the mail boxes, which I don't like.



## The International Highrise Award 2020 Internationaler Hochhaus Preis 2020

**PCS: We see that the highrise movement in Europe is, of course, different from Asia and the US. Is there a highrise movement in Stockholm? Or is Norra Tornen seen as something very unique?**

**OE:** We had a tower that we were going to build with Herzog & de Meuron. But then the City of Stockholm didn't want to decontaminate the land, a former gasometer site. And since we couldn't come to an agreement with the city, the project is now terminated, unfortunately. But it would have been our last contribution of a highrise to the city. I don't think there are many more places in Stockholm that are suitable for a highrise.

**PCS: You have not only been working with Herzog & de Meuron on the Gasklockan tower, but also with BIG on a low-rise project. It looks like you prefer international star architects. What do local architects think of that?**

**OE:** We work with many young architects, too. The ones we haven't worked with are the medium and big-sized in between. We did a development in Hammarby sjöstad, for example. It was a very nice plot close to the water. However, my problem with the area was that most of the surrounding projects looked exactly the same, no difference, no variation. So, we bought a large site there for almost 200 apartments, and we did a competition for young architects who had just graduated, instead of going to the big star architects or the mid-sized firms. In the end, we completed those buildings in 2015 and created something totally new. Most of these architects still thank me for giving them the opportunity. We really enjoy working with young creative minds.

**PCS: How would you describe yourself compared to the rest of the developers in the city?**

**OE:** I think we have always been the upcoming developer, because the other developers have not liked us. Because we do something new. In Sweden, we had a housing shortage. We therefore created a new niche by buying commercial buildings and converting them for residential use. Beside that we did new developments. From 2012 to 2017 we grew from doing 112 apartments per year to 1500 apartments, which is significant. But we could only do so because the demand was there. It was a golden era for a lot of developers because prices were just going up. There were a lot of new developers coming up and bidding for land. As a consequence, land prices went up, and in parallel, it became more difficult to take out a loan to buy apartments. As a result, the demand, and therefore our operation, has decreased in the last two years, and we've been focusing on developing our portfolio and the projects we actually have.

**PCS: Are you only working in Sweden?**

**OE:** For the moment, yes.

**PCS: On your homepage you wrote "What motivates me is to help improve the city landscape in whatever way I can." What does that mean?**

**OE:** It means in my opinion that in the last 30, 40 years—with the risk of sounding pretentious—there wasn't a lot of great architecture in Stockholm. I think there have been a few buildings here and there that are great. But for the last couple of years, all developments have been done by the big construction companies. And they lack vision, their whole idea is to industrialize and make everything look the same. That way, you can make money and you don't have to push for a great product. If you want to do something that looks a little bit different, they think it is going to cause cost overruns, and they don't want to do it. Consequently, these big developers have been lacking vision. I think most of these new developments look the same. By coming in and doing something new and different, you push other developers to become better as well. There have been a lot of new developments where the product is actually better, because people realize that if you create a good product, people are willing to pay more money. I really think that we have pushed others to do better. Of course, we are in this game to make money, but it's great to be able to make money doing something that you love and also contribute to the city.

**PCS: Do you live in one of your own projects?**

**OE:** No. Part of me would have wanted to live in each project, because I love each project so much, but I am happy where I live, I don't have to move.



# The International Highrise Award 2020

## Internationaler Hochhaus Preis 2020

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