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A Conversation With Helmut Jahn, the Architect Behind One Liberty Plaza in Philadelphia

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Mr. Jahn, 75, is a German-born architect based in Chicago whose work around the world includes the Sony Center in Berlin and One Liberty Plaza, one of the tallest buildings in Philadelphia. He is currently working on 50 West, a luxury condominium tower in Lower [Manhattan](#).

Interview conducted and condensed by

VIVIAN MARINO

Q. *What kind of year was 2014?*

A. It was a little tougher, but toward the end everything turned out O.K. We worked on some big projects in the Mideast, in China, and we just started some interesting projects in [Europe](#).

Q. *How many projects are you working on?*

A. Active, maybe about 10.

Q. *Let's talk about one of them — 50 West, your first project in New York in more than 20 years.*

A. Yes, I think the last building we finished was 720 Lexington Avenue.

It's about 790 feet, and obviously a long time in the making. We started in 2006 and they wanted to start construction, and they actually did. There was some foundation work and then the crisis came. Then Francis — Francis Greenburger of Time Equities — changed it. He made it more on the luxury side. We made the floor-to-floor height bigger; we had bigger apartments; and we had to adjust the building with a new code.



Earl Wilson/The New York Times

Q. *Well, the market has changed a lot since 2006.*

A. Yes, it's a luxury market. And I think people will see when the building goes up the facade is exquisite. The facade is stainless steel. It has a very transparent glass so it lets a lot of light in, and the corners of the building are huge sheets of curved glass. The stainless steel gives it a little different texture. Closer to the ground it gets more flat. As the building rises, it becomes more reflective.

The idea is always that a building like this in a particular light merges with the sky. The building is on a very small site, and has a very small footprint. There was a requirement from a planning point of view, which we fully supported and were actually happy about, that we had to provide a plaza on the ground floor. And that's actually why the building toward the base, it pulls in its belly and it slopes so that the urban space is adequate and a required size.

Even now with the building about eight stories up you can see that it's very dynamic and elegant.

Q. When is the building scheduled to be completed?

A. I think the building is going to be done by the middle of '16.

Q. Did its proximity to the World Trade Center influence your design?

A. The buildings we did in Midtown — all those office buildings — there was a totally different intent. In this tight context of Manhattan, I was very interested in making a reference to the traditional New York buildings. But they also make a statement about a different time. In the neighborhood of the World Trade Center, the height of the tower is close to 800 feet, which makes it essentially a part of it. And we felt that this is now not the old New York — this is the new New York. And that's why this building is of a totally different language.

Q. It's also a more technical building.

A. We had, by that time, advanced. We got familiar with new technologies — technologies about all the parts that make a building. We were interested in the performance of buildings, and improving the living conditions.

What can you do in an apartment building? Higher heights, more glass, which gives you more daylight, which makes the space brighter. We have glass now that almost performs like an insulated wall. The glass is not as dark anymore or as reflective. The glass is more transparent, but it doesn't let the unwanted [solar energy](#) go through and insulates better.

You live healthier and not have the heating or air-conditioning on all the time. You've got to let the building do some of the work.

Q. Will you be buying a condo there?

A. No, I already have a place, on 59th and Park Avenue.

Q. How would you describe your architectural style?

A. The style, especially since the mid- to late-'90s, we actually describe as archi-neering — a combination of architecture and engineering. We believe that integration drives the performance and the quality of the building, and at the end it determines the aesthetic.

Q. Do you have anything else planned in New York City?

A. I can't talk about it, but I just had a presentation. It's not a very big building, but I think a very important building. It's a residential building combined with some other.

Q. What's your outlook for 2015?

A. I think we're going to be a lot busier. One of the most interesting projects is a master plan in Ufa, Russia, around three hours east of Moscow. We're doing a master plan for 15 million square feet. Eighty percent is housing — housing of a totally different caliber than what we're doing here. And that's why I found it very interesting. The typical size of the apartments is 230 to about 800 square feet, and the 800-square-foot apartment is a three-bedroom. It's more difficult to do that right than to build something expensive where somebody says it doesn't matter what it costs.

Q. What do you do in your spare time?

A. I've been sailing competitively for about 12, 13 years. We have six or seven regattas a year. Two years ago we were the world champions on Lake Michigan.
