

2nd century of the skyscraper

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1. 2nd Century of the Skyscraper

The third Conference on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat was held in Chicago, IL, USA from January 6 to 10, 1986. It was organized by the Chicago Committee on High-Rise Buildings in cooperation with the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat. More than 400 participants from about 30 countries attended the Conference. A characteristic with this third Conference (the first one was organised in Bethlehem, PA, USA, in 1972; the second one in Paris, France, in 1977) was that each half-day session was opened with a keynote address. The session then took place in concurrent seminars and workshops. Outstanding presentations were offered to the participants by engineers, architects, planners, developers, constructors. The viewpoints expressed by representatives from all parties concerned with tall buildings or any other major structures contributed to very interesting discussions of the conference. It is not possible here to report on the sessions; but a book will be edited and made available to all interested persons later on.

Since the city has witnessed all periods of the tall buildings development, Chicago was the perfect place for conducting such a conference. The organising

committee had also arranged friendly receptions at the Museum of Science and Industry, which presented a special exhibition «150 Years of Chicago Architecture» as well as in Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History.

Congratulations and thanks are due to the organising committees and in particular to Messrs. L.S. Beedle, John Rankine, Tom Kroeschell, Walter P. Moore, Jr. and John J. Zils.

Among different excellent addresses to the conference participants, I particularly enjoyed the one by Mr. *Paul Goldberger*, Senior Architecture Critic at the New York Times. Mr. Goldberger was awarded in 1984, the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Criticism in recognition of his architecture criticism, the highest award in journalism. The following is Dr. Goldberger's slightly shortened presentation; subtitles and choice of pictures in Chicago are from the Editor.

A. Golay
Executive Director

Architecture and Society

Paul Goldberger
Seminar Architecture Critic
New York Times
New York, NY, USA

I recall a talk given in Chicago many years ago by Philip Johnson, an architect as connected with New York as any, which he began by saying how pleased he was to be in America's first city of architecture. If I may, I would like to borrow from him and say the same thing – that I bring greetings from the second city, New York, to the first city, Chicago. In no arena more than in skyscraper design, Chicago is truly our preeminent city; to hold this conference here is as correct and appropriate in every way as it would be to hold a conference on Renaissance painting in Florence. We are here in the heart of the skyscraper culture – not, to be sure, in the only place in which it flourishes, or even in the place in which it necessarily flourishes most intensely today. But we are in the city most intimately associated with the skyscraper's birth, and as we look ahead to a second century, we could not get quite the same perspective from anywhere else. So it is with special pleasure that I say how pleased I am to be here – pleased to be at this conference itself, and doubly pleased that it brings all of us to Chicago.

Triumphant symbol and unwelcome intruder

Not only in Chicago, but now in every American city, the skyscraper is at once the triumphant symbol and the unwelcome intruder. We seem, after a full century of them, still not fully at peace with tall buildings; they shatter scale and steal light, and it is no surprise to hear them denounced as monstrous constructions. Yet we also hold them dear – what brownstone has ever been the symbol of New York that the Empire State Building is, what lakefront Park the icon of Chicago that Sears Tower has become? To visitors and natives alike, these buildings are these cities, as much as the Cathedral of Notre Dame is Paris or the Houses of Parliament are London. They are absolutely critical to the identities of our cities. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that in many cities, the skyline is the image – that the body of skyscrapers a city possesses is, collectively, that city's symbol, more than any individual building is.

Although the skyscraper has taken on in the last generation an international presence, it is still a fundamentally



The skyscrapers today ... and yesterday

What is different about skyscrapers today – what makes the question of the skyscraper and its social significance different now, as we begin the second century of tall buildings, from what it was in the first century?

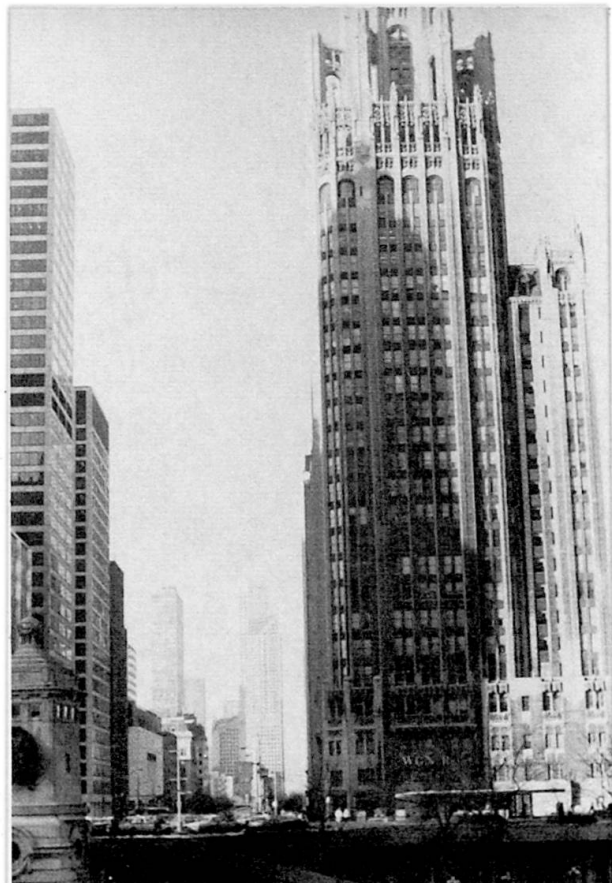
The most significant issue, surely, is quantity. A generation or more ago one had to go to New York or Chicago to see tall buildings in any significant number. They were the sign that one had arrived from the hinterlands and reached the big city. Now, this is no longer the case – the skyscraper has become a common element; there are skyscrapers everywhere, in small and medium-sized cities as well as large ones.

It is difficult to overestimate the effect of this on our perception. The tall building is no longer a truly special thing – if skyscrapers are all over the place, and so densely packed in our major downtowns, what do they signify? It is surely something different from the day in which the Woolworth Building suggested the new prominence of commerce in our national life, standing as a powerful symbol of it, or the time in which the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building stood as perfect symbols of the jazz age. The tall building is now commonplace, and this cannot fail to reduce its effect on our consciousness.

American phenomenon. In the skyscraper we see, more clearly and directly than in any other architectural form of our time, the merging of technology and energy and commerce, that rampant capitalist spirit that seems so particularly American. So I ask your forgiveness if I speak of the skyscraper primarily in American terms; this is done with full knowledge of the immense spread of skyscraper construction around the world, and with great respect for much of it. It is just my feeling that the fundamental ideas and issues skyscrapers raise are ones that come most clearly into focus on the American stage.

I concede that it may no longer be possible to say this once the extraordinary building by Norman Foster for the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank is complete in Hong Kong, an event not far away, or when the I. M. Pei tower is finished in Hong Kong somewhat farther into the future. But for now, given that most of the major towers around the world do not carry either the art or the science of skyscraper design significantly beyond their American counterparts, I will restrict myself mainly to a discussion of the issues as they appear in this country.

The skyscraper is at once a triumphant symbol and an unwelcome intruder: this double-barreled identity is nothing new to our time; it has been the skyscraper's fate for much of its existence. The skyscraper has always been the source of debate, at least so far as its social and urbanistic implications. We have never made complete peace with it, yet neither has it been consistently an enemy, either. It is both feared and admired, the source both of dismay and exhilaration.





I say this without getting into the related issue that the explosion of skyscraper construction raises, which is the question of what tower after tower does to the fabric of our cities. Let me leave that for a moment to speak of another issue more closely connected to the individual skyscraper, which is the question of height. Here, too, there is nothing so startling as there once was. Once it was 500 feet, then 700, then 792 – the Woolworth – the 1000 (Chrysler reached that threshold first), and on and up. The numbers have not continued to mount in recent years in the way in which they did in the 1930's and again in the early 1970's with the World Trade Center and then Sears Tower – although there is again talk of another leap. But in terms of height the issue seems again to be one of quantity, in that while there are not buildings continuing to cross the 100-story barrier, there are so many being built at 60, 70 even 80 stories that structures of these sizes, which once had the power to stop us in our tracks, now rate barely a glance.

For example, the RCA Building at 30 Rockefeller Plaza in New York, the centerpiece of Rockefeller Center and in some ways the finest commercial office tower of the 20th century, for generations held sway over the imaginations of architects, urbanists and, most important of all, the general public. Now, there is nothing exceptional about its 65-story height, and while its design is remarkable, it is almost lost amidst the chaos of mid-Manhattan, saved only by the breathing space of the low buildings of the Rockefeller Center grouping which surround it.

Design and «computer esthetic»

What do architects do at a time in which tall buildings are so commonplace that they can no longer hold the power over our imaginations that they once did? There are two separate ways in which to move.

The first route is one of **design** – to emphasize the building as an esthetic object, and to make it stand out in a way in which it would not otherwise do, given the competition on the high-rise front. We have seen this going on now for at least a decade, for it is surely that long since the banal and chilly glass boxes of the modernist generation began to fall out of favor, and architects began to search for more distinctive visual forms.

It is always a bit odd to stand in the city of Mies van der Rohe and speak of the failings of the glass box, of the International Style which Mies came to symbolize, but the International Style was always much more than Mies, and most of what it was after Mies was not very good. It is no disrespect to Mies van der Rohe to speak of the horrors of Third Avenue in New York or La Défense in Paris; these are dreadful places, testaments to the absence of any real humanistic impulse in a certain kind of large-scale, commercial modernism. They are without sensual meaning, and without urbanistic coherence. It is small wonder that by the late 1960's and early 1970's our most sensitive architects were beginning to search for ways in which to make large-scale, tall buildings that spoke a somewhat different language.

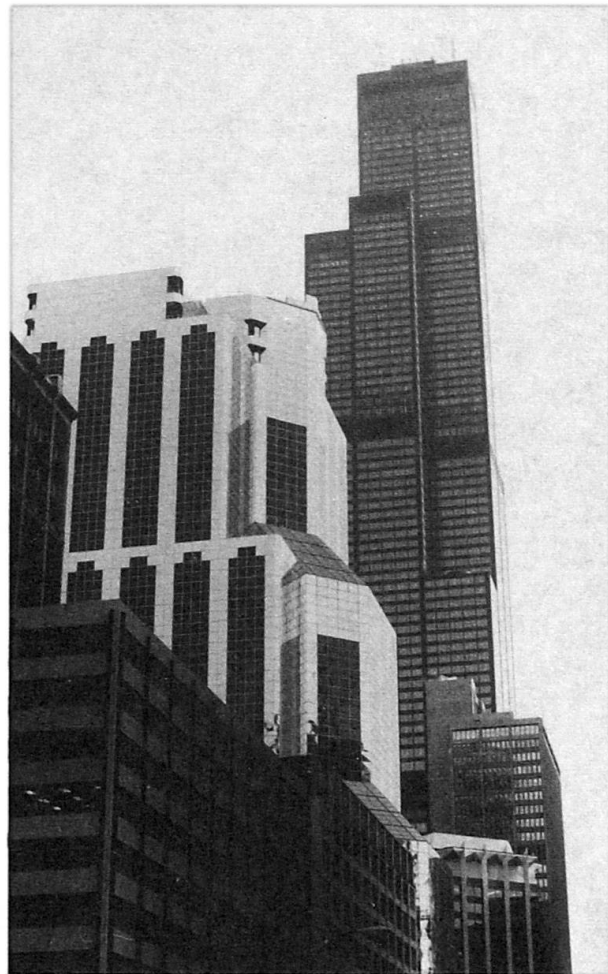


One of the ways in which we began to react against the banality and austerity of the International Style was to attempt to make the tall building a more appealing social presence in the city, to integrate it into the economic and social life of a city in a way in which most International Style towers, which were so determined to stand aloof, could not do. The leader of this generation, the model, is a building too often forgotten these days; it is Johnson and Burgee's IDS Center in Minneapolis, which contains a glass-enclosed court, a kind of roofed town square lined with shops and a hotel. Now, with even Citicorp Center in New York almost a decade old, such mixed-use projects are old-hat, but they were an important component of the reaction against the international style.

For the social skyscraper – the skyscraper that is part of a mixed-use project, the skyscraper that contains a public plaza or atrium or retail space or a cultural facility – is a significant advance in our time. My feeling is that a great many of these buildings are dreadful as works of architecture, and many of them emerge out of zoning laws that granted excessive bonuses in exchange for the provision of these social amenities, thus making the buildings far larger than they should have been, but that is beside the point. The point is that the presence of social amenities has become expected in large-scale building in our time. We no longer expect the skyscraper to be an isolated element so far as the living patterns of the city are concerned, existing only for people to live and work in during a set period of hours. Those of us who neither live nor work in a major tower now expect to have some sort of involvement with it, and this must be considered a good thing, whatever the architectural results.

I do not want to speak too much about pure esthetics this morning, but if we are talking about the reaction to orthodox modernism, it is impossible not to do so, at least briefly. Post-modernism has brought a generation of skyscrapers that rely heavily on historical architectural elements, sometimes taken literally, more often re-interpreted, sometimes put together into an eclectic mixture, sometimes used in a more narrow stylistic framework. Philip Johnson and John Burgee's A.T.&T. Building in New York, the notorious Chippendale skyscraper, stands as a kind of symbolic parent of this generation of buildings, and its notoriety has made it the most important, though it is by no means the best – indeed, even Johnson and Burgee's own Transco Tower in Houston and Republic Bank Tower in Houston are significantly better, as are many of the buildings by Kohn Pedersen Fox; Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Cesar Pelli and numerous others who have come in recent years to follow a similar path of allusion to historical form.

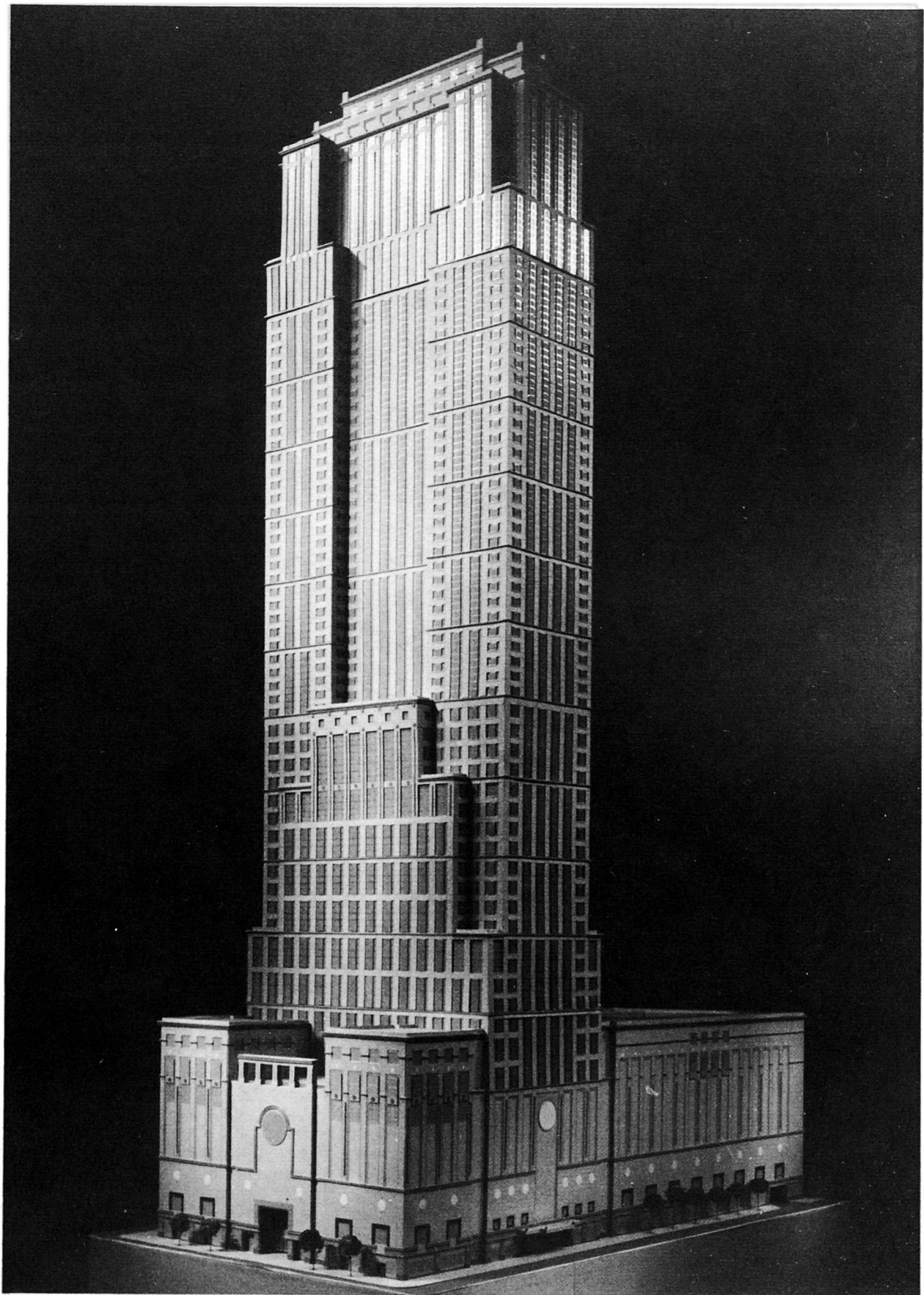
Not the least of the benefits this movement has given us is its restoration of the idea that a skyscraper should have a top – that it deserves a beginning, a middle and an end: Louis Sullivan, whose buildings were flat-roofed but by virtue of their extraordinary cornices made the same point, understood this, of course, but most modern architects since Sullivan (and, to be fair, Frank Lloyd Wright) did not. I suppose whatever else can be said about post-modernism, it should always be praised for restoring the tops to towers – for recognizing that the way in which a skyscraper meets the sky can be as



important as the way in which it meets the ground, that the profile a tall building makes on the skyline can be as important as the impression it makes close up.

There are other ways in which architects have attempted to break away from the boredom and banality that turned out to be the sad legacy of a way of making architecture that in Mies's own hands could yield greatness, but in the hands of so many others yielded much less. Some – and I think here most particularly of Kevin Roche, Cesar Pelli and Edward Larrabee Barnes – have stayed within the modernist vocabulary, but made it less rational, less dogmatic, less rigid, even more picturesque if you will, using the modernist vocabulary of sleek surfaces to what might almost be called post-modern ends, seeking pure visual pleasure above certain rationalist goals. This approach is something I have elsewhere called the **«computer esthetic»**, and it seems right, for these utterly sleek, smooth buildings seem not so much to have been constructed as to have been whirled out of some microchip. The sense of metal and glass placed one piece onto another, which in Mies's buildings is as clear a sign of the feeling of construction as the sense of stone in a much older building, seems to disappear.

These two strains – the historicist strain and the computer esthetic, which others, most notably Charles Jencks, have called «late modernism» – have shown signs of coming together in the last few years in numerous



Project «900 N. Michigan» (Perkins & Will and Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates)

buildings which employ sleek, modern materials, but use them to echo historical form. Cesar Pelli's World Financial Center towers at Battery Park City in New York, Helmut Jahn's addition to the Board of Trade in Chicago, perhaps Johnson and Burgee's Transco Tower, and surely much of the work of Kohn Pedersen Fox, all are examples of this phenomenon. It is best called romantic modernism, and as such it seems to express the feeling of this moment best – a time in which we want to be romantic as opposed to rationalist as the International Style appears to have been, and yet a time in which we do not want to cut all ties to modernism either. Romantic modernism does not deny the heritage of modernism; indeed, it exploits it through a knowing and willing use of modernist materials, technology and engineering. Yet it seeks to merge this with at least some of the romantic esthetic that history presents us with.

None of this is in any way a prescription for how to design. Nothing is worse than seeing style in this fashion, or talking about it as if there could be prescriptions. One of the reasons I have tried to stand somewhat aside from the stylistic debate that has swirled around the profession in the last few years is that I do not believe that any one style either guarantees good architecture or prevents it. There are much deeper, much more difficult things that determine the esthetic success or failure of a tall building. Proportions, scale, texture, materials – these things are entirely specific, and they depend entirely upon how they are used in a particular situation.

A building succeeds or fails esthetically not on the basis of its style, but on the basis of much more fundamental things – how good its elevations are, how good its plans are, how well scaled, how well proportioned it is.

A single element . . .

In each case here I have spoken of the building as if it were a single element in the city, disconnected from everything that is around it – a pure sculptural object, as it were. Unfortunately, all too often that is precisely how architects and developers see buildings. Even the buildings that make certain social gestures toward their surroundings in the form of public space tend to be aloof and isolated as formal objects. The reason for this is clear. The one real problem that the resurgence of interest in the skyscraper esthetic has brought us is the tendency to want to make every building a foreground object, to believe that each and every building must stand out in a way that is all its own – to be a kind of prima donna on the landscape. Prima donnas do not go very well next to each other; you cannot make a whole opera out of them. But now, architecture is marketed by real-estate developers, who proudly fill their ads with architects' names and talk of their structures as «significant architectural events», and when that is what is being done, there is little care about what is next door. Each man to his own, each block on its own, each building a thing unto itself.

It is an odd price indeed to pay for having a public and a commercial marketplace, become interested in architecture. It is not what I would have expected back when so many of us cried out for for years for more interesting architecture, as real-estate developers tended to produce only the most banal and dreary skyscrapers; now that they are confirmed converts to architecture, we are suffering an unexpected fate, that of having to cope with all kinds of buildings that seem desperate to make an esthetic statement, and which shriek excess at us all the time.





... or a part of the city?

This issue of the building as a kind of prima donna is critical because, contrary to the impression so much of our architecture today gives, no building in a city really does stand alone. Every tall building is but a building-block in a larger composition, and that composition is the city. If there is anything that we should be coming to realize as we move into the second century, it is that – that the tower is not as envisioned by Le Corbusier and even by Frank Lloyd Wright, as a proud and separate thing; it is part of a larger whole, connected to what is around it both sociologically and visually. It cannot be seen apart.

Buildings did seem to make a coherent whole for the first 50 years or so of the skyscraper's first century, but this was almost unconscious – it was not out of a real knowledge of the problem. For much of the first half-century of skyscraper construction, there was a highly consistent vocabulary of materials, mainly masonry. While there were significant stylistic differences most particularly between the more structurally expressive Chicago School and the more decorative, theatrical New York school, the common vocabulary of materials tended to obscure these differences – we can see it clearly in the many instances in which Chicago-like skyscrapers were built in New York, and New York-esque skyscrapers went up in Chicago. In neither case were they a jarring presence.

Beyond common materials was a common sense of scale. Even when towers were permitted to grow very large, as at Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building, the scale was not overwhelming, and it was able to render the buildings compatible with much smaller structures adjacent. A third reason the city seemed to be coherent was the utter and complete respect for the street line. Virtually all construction was built out to the street, keeping an even line; think of Park Avenue in New York, of Michigan Avenue in Chicago, of virtually every downtown all around the country.

All of these things began to fall apart in the post World War II era. I do not want to fall into the trap of blaming orthodox modernism for all of our esthetic and urbanistic problems, but it is difficult not to consider it highly culpable here. The common vocabulary of materials was the first to go. At the beginning its loss was actually quite pleasing, even exhilarating – how dull Park Avenue had begun to look by 1950, and how exciting, how full of promise of a new age did it look when Lever House's glass slab came to it instead! No one could know at that point how poorly glass worked in terms of making an entire city, how it could not yield the kind of texture and scale that is necessary to make a city of background as well as foreground structures.

And so scale, too, began to slip away, considered less important by orthodox modernism. The signs that relate parts of a building to each other and to the size of the human figure were lost in an onrush of abstraction, in a desperate search for pure, sculptural form. And finally, after the splendid plaza of the Seagram Building opened in 1958, came the fallacious belief that because this plaza worked well, then plazas everywhere were a good idea, and the street wall meant nothing at all. By the mid-1960's, the sense of urban coherence, the kind of

unwritten contract that had brought buildings together, had begun to fall apart – its demise hastened, by the revised zoning code New York adopted in 1961, which specifically encouraged the breakdown of the street wall.

We are now in a period of reaction to all of this. Respect for the street wall is coming back, and respect for scale and texture, factors that are absolutely critical to the esthetic success of any tall building, and which are vastly more important than style. But we are only beginning to understand that the problem really is on of background and foreground, one of making cities which are wholes and not merely disparate, competing parts. In any good city the whole is something much more than the sum of the parts, but in too many of our cities, the whole is not more at all – it is vastly less.

To build taller?

The current scheme for the Upper West Side of Manhattan, the project called Television City, includes six 76-story towers and one 150-story tower which, if built, would be the tallest skyscraper in the world. It has a certain excitement to it – who could fail to be moved, even today, by the words «the tallest building in the world»? For the entire history of skyscraper construction, height has had a power over architects, builders, everyone. To build taller seemed, for so long, to be the goal, like winning a race, and not only like winning it, but like winning it better than anyone had won it before. One generation could produce the four-minute mile, the next could produce a miler who could run it in 3:50, and so it would go – from 80 stories to 110, and now, isn't the logical thing to go on to 150, just as we keep trying to run the mile faster and faster, keep on shooting for the moon, keep on trying to do everything?

Such a building is plausible technologically, and indeed, that even taller buildings than 150 stories could be built. The structure is not the problem. But I submit that the whole analogy of the race, of the record, of getting bigger with each generation is false. It gets us far away from architecture, far away even from engineering, and into something else altogether. I think there is a grave problem with a 150-story tower, despite the allure it undoubtedly has, despite its ability to hold sway over our imagination.

For if architecture and the building of cities mean anything, they have to do with making civilized places for people to live in, use, be inspired by, be uplifted by. The proposed 150-story building for New York does cause the heart to beat faster for a moment, and I grant it due credit for that. But I fail to see where building 150 stories worth of condominium apartments in a tower that, by virtue of its vast bulk must contain 2,600 separate apartment units, will be anything other than comic book fantasy. And while a comic book may be fun to contemplate for amusement, in real life, which the middle of New York City all too certainly is, it would be more of a science fiction nightmare.

It would seem like a nice leap – what a wonderful way, in fact, to commemorate the beginning of the skyscraper's second century than to be able to make this jump in magnitude to an entirely different kind of building. And I

will, just to be fair, concede that Helmut Jahn's plan here, which would put the building on a large, relatively open site, makes more sense than many earlier schemes for buildings of this great height in denser parts of Manhattan. But these things provide only momentary appeal; in real life, such a building would be otherwise, a case of technological ability completely and entirely outpacing common sense. Because we could build it, in other words, I do not believe we should – I am not convinced that it would deepen and enrich the experience of urban life at all.

If anything, the quest for the 150-story building comes directly out of the numness as a result of skyscraper glut that I alluded to before, the excess of tall buildings that has, by now, made it so difficult to become excited by any of them. It is almost as if we need stronger drugs to stimulate us, so numb have we become to the drama and excitement tall towers can provide. If we build this building, we are conceding a kind of addiction, an addiction to technological determination and to the thrill of height, and we are allowing these things to become far more important than other things that make up a true city.

My own opposition to this building project has not come without anguish – the skyscraper is as much the center of my life as it is yours, and it would be pleasing to be able to endorse with enthusiasm a chance to push the frontier onward. But that is just the point – I am no longer sure that such a building really does push the frontier onward, despite how it appears at first. For I am less and less sure that height alone really is the frontier anymore, that getting taller and bigger really is the issue. It was the Thing for a long time, and it was done.

The real issue

But now that we can go high, far higher even than this 150-storey proposal, perhaps the real issue that we must face is not all the way up in the sky, it is closer to the ground – back to the whole question of making a civilized city, of trying to see the tower not as an isolated object, but as a part of a larger whole, as something that seems to grow organically from everything around it, enriching its surroundings and in turn being enriched by them.

This is still, for all the imperfections of so much of what is being built and being proposed, a great time for the skyscraper. The most encouraging thing is that we have begun, after years of uncertainty, to settle into a relatively clear esthetic direction, that of romantic modernism, which is an attitude or impulse more than a style, and that is just how it should be. As we move into the late 1980's we are going beyond the excesses of the early years of reaction to modernism; there is no longer a foolish sense on the part of some architects, as there was a few years ago, that modernism was an evil best purged from our culture. We see it now as a great cultural and technological heritage, just not as one that we need take literally, but more as a resource, a language, that we should be reinterpreting and re-using in our own ways.

The passion to be interesting, which has both enlivened skyscraper design in the last 10 or 15 years and turned it into a sad free-for-all, is beginning to settle down, to

mature, and this, too, is encouraging. I think a lot of the esthetic excesses of the last generation were inevitable results of the reaction against modernism's excessive restraint, and as the esthetic pendulum swings more toward the middle, a certain degree of common sense will prevail. We see it in the best of the romantic modernist buildings now under construction or proposed, the buildings that make strong esthetic statement yet do not seem frivolous, tired one-line jokes, the buildings that relate to the greater stream of architectural history without being directly or simplistically imitative.

The best architecture comes always out of specific circumstances, not out of ideological predisposition. This is a time when we are looking to advance the art of skyscraper design by looking not only at the tallest and most technologically advanced, but also at the buildings that seem to emerge out of the cities of which they are a part and, in turn, enrich those cities. I find it encouraging that Rockefeller Center is turned to constantly as a model for admiration by architects today; so is Carrere & Hastings's splendid 26 Broadway in lower Manhattan, or Holabird & Root's Board of Trade in Chicago, or Van Alen's Chrysler or McKim, Mead & White's Municipal Building or Hood's Chicago Tribune.

These are all buildings of strong personality, of strong image and character, yet they are all buildings that exist to make a statement about the life of the cities of which they are a part, and they are not isolated objects. Some connect to their surroundings more than others, but it is impossible to imagine any of them existing anywhere except precisely where they are – on pieces of land in the midst of cities that they have come, by now, to have a deeply symbiotic relationship with.

And so it should be with every tall building. The skyscraper has, in the end, a special responsibility. Its image is powerful, and if handled well, it can be among the most compelling visual experience architecture can provide us with. The Monadnock, the Wainwright Building, the Woolworth Building, the Chrysler Building, Rockefeller Center, Seagram – these greatest of tall buildings belong on any list of the greatest of all American buildings. But as we have lived with tall buildings for a century, we by now should know that they alone, for all their glory and power, do not in and of themselves make a city.

In King's Dream, the celebrated drawing of a tower-filled New York by Harry M. Pettit published in King's Views of New York in 1908, the vision is one of bigger and bigger buildings, all one connected to the next, with bridges and arcades between and airships above, and the promise is of a more and more glorious city. We have learned, now that the image of King's Dream has become, at least in part, a reality, that it is not so easy. The magical city, the Jerusalem of towers, does not come by itself; even the greatest of skyscrapers do not automatically make a city a civilized place. If there is any urgent mission for the second century of the skyscraper, it is not, then, to go bigger – it is to turn back, inward in a sense, and to struggle to find ways to make of the towers the great city we were promised long ago, the coherent urban world that was always the dream of every skyscraper architect, the civilized city that, so far, has eluded our grasp.