
The Death of the Skyscraper

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Neal Bascomb (2003). *Higher: The Historic Race to the Sky and the Making of a City*. New York: Doubleday. 342 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, \$26 (cloth).

Meredith L. Clausen (2005). *The Pan Am Building and the Shattering of the Modernist Dream*. Cambridge: MIT Press. xviii + 477 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, \$45 (cloth).

Benjamin Flowers (2009). *Skyscraper: The Politics and Power of Building New York City in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. vi + 232 pp., photographs, notes, index, \$39.95 (cloth).

Margaret Heilbrun, ed. ([2000] 2004). *Inventing the Skyline: The Architecture of Cass Gilbert*. New York: New York Historical Society. xxxvii + 306 pp., illustrations, notes, index, \$20 (paperback).

Blair Kamin (2010). *Terror and Wonder: Architecture in a Tumultuous Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. xxiv + 291 pp., illustrations, photographs, index, \$30.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by: Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, *Parsons The New School for Design, New York*
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Two recently published books exemplify a new methodological approach to the study of the skyscraper. This method focuses less on the building's design and construction and more on the meanings attributed to it in relation to its urban context, beginning with the planning stage and extending over its life span.¹ Benjamin Flowers's *Skyscraper: The Politics and Power of Building New York City in the Twentieth Century* is framed around three icons: the Empire State Building, the Seagram Building, and the World Trade Center. Meredith Clausen's *The Pan Am Building and the Shattering of the Modernist Dream* is a detailed monograph on the Pan Am Building constructed on top of Grand Central Station in New York City between 1958 and 1963. Despite their titles, neither book is an architectural history in the accepted sense, nor are they strictly urban history. "The goal in writing such a study," Clausen writes, "[is] not simply to provide an account of the building, describing who built what, when, how, and why, but also to record its critical reception, how it was interpreted, what it meant to people, what they wrote about it, and how it affected their thinking" (xvi). In more theoretical terms, flowers summarizes his subject matter as the "the role of ideology in shaping the production and reception of the skyscraper . . . how the skyscraper is deployed by the people who commissioned, financed and built it to legitimize their political, economic and social beliefs . . . the way wealth and power operate to reorganize the urban landscape" (6). In other words, the skyscraper is presented not as an isolated aesthetic or technological object whose meaning is dictated by its designer (as modernist architectural histories largely assumed) but as a component in a wider social, political, and urban landscape, one whose meaning differs to various audiences and changes over time. In many ways, this can be seen as a semiotics of the skyscraper, with the buildings in question understood as texts open to continual reinterpretation.

The basis of skyscraper design in capitalist practices of land speculation has been well explained by previous scholars, including Larry R. Ford, Robert Fogelson, and Carol Willis.² Willis in particular understands the skyscraper as a “vernacular of capitalism” whose form is primarily the result of standard real estate formulas and the building regulations and zoning ordinances of the city in which it is built. Flowers and Clausen are more concerned with the skyscraper as the image of capitalism rather than as its pure product. In this regard they follow in the tradition of the neo-Marxist Italian architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, who in the 1970s wrote of the American skyscraper as a major component of the urban “spectacle,” the world of appearances deliberately constructed in order to disguise the real socioeconomic relationships of capitalism. They are also indebted to the writing of the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, whose *Delirious New York* (1978) eloquently captured the irrational, fantastic side of the formation of the world’s premiere skyscraper city.³

Skyscraper is staged in three parts, representing the beginning, middle, and the end of the twentieth-century fascination with the skyscraper in the United States. Completed on the eve of the Great Depression, the Empire State Building was intended as a symbol of the success of the American corporate model (developer Jacob Raskob worked for both General Motors and Du Pont). An enormous structure taking up an entire city block, the Empire State Building had no major client or intended function except as a container for rental office space. Though it was not initially successful, sustaining huge losses in its early years, the Empire State Building inaugurated a new way of thinking about the American city as “a landscape disposed to support the needs of a modern, corporate, and capitalist republic” (36). Flowers presents the Seagram Building, completed in 1958, as the symbol of postwar corporate recovery and success in the face of the instability of the Cold War, the product of a refined consumer economy “in which abundance assures social and political stability” (94). While these two buildings are subject to perceptive critique, for a book so concerned with the image of the skyscraper, the chosen illustrations seem somewhat of an afterthought and are not well integrated into the text. Flowers’ final case study, the World Trade Center, is treated in significantly less detail than the other two, and the book ends abruptly. However, this final example is more than sufficiently potent to successfully conclude a tripartite treatment of twentieth-century skyscraper history. As Flowers summarizes, the destruction of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, was widely understood as the beginning of a new era in global history.

The place where Flowers ends his book—the failure of a monumental skyscraper—is where Clausen begins hers. Flowers places that failure in the early twenty-first century, while Clausen locates it in the 1960s. Common to both is the argument that the very characteristics that made the skyscraper so awe-inspiring in the first half of the twentieth century—its huge size, its association with capitalism, and its ability to radically alter the experience of the city—spelled its doom in the second. Originally called “Grand Central City,” the Pan Am Building was planned by developer Erwin Wolfson as a mega-skyscraper terminating Park Avenue on the site of Grand Central Station. This proposal was hugely controversial from the start because of concern about the growing density of midtown New York, the banal character of modern office buildings, and the probable urban impact of the proposed building on Park Avenue. On completion, the Pan Am Building was the largest building in the world in square footage. The structure was never considered a success, despite its monumental scale and its association with famed Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius. Clausen begins by repeating the received evaluation of the building as “mediocre,” of “minor significance,” and “putative banality.” In her estimation, such criticism makes a study of the Pan Am Building valuable. For Clausen, the Pan Am Building is the public symbol of the failure of the “modernist dream” of the city, a “telling symptom of changing attitudes and the growing dismay that led to the profound disillusionment with modernism’s ideals . . . a flagrant

example of private interest riding roughshod over public concerns . . . emblematic of what had gone wrong with the modernist vision” (xv).

The Pan Am Building and the Shattering of the Modernist Dream is a well-written, well-illustrated, and comprehensive (one might even say exhaustive) explication of this argument. However, Clausen perhaps overburdens her subject with too much meaning. For years, the demolition of the Minoru Yamasaki’s Pruitt Igoe Towers in St. Louis was used as the single image stand-in for the end of modern architecture. One might ask if it is any fairer to ask the Pan Am Building to carry that symbolic weight?

If the skyscraper is to be understood, in semiotic terms, as a text, it is reasonable to assess the architect as its potential “author.” Since the late nineteenth century, critics and historians have wavered between presenting the skyscraper as having no author at all (being simply the product of new construction technologies and predetermined real estate formulae); an architect-author who is largely irrelevant (merely a window dresser); or a heroic genius architect-author who is alone capable of translating raw technology and bald real estate formulae into art. As Flowers notes, the infamous literary example of the heroic architect is the character of Howard Roarke in Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* (1943). Rand depicted the fictional Roarke as an uncompromising visionary, a hero for postwar America who “champions the values of capitalist democracy” (91). Flowers and Clausen provide fascinating accounts of the ways in which a single “architect-author” in the mold of Roarke was in a sense manufactured in order to lend prestige to high modernist skyscraper projects during the 1950s. In the case of the Seagram Building, Phyllis Bronfman (with the help of Philip Johnson) explicitly sought out one of the “top three” modern architects—Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe—to build a high-profile headquarters for her father’s distilling company. She believed an architectural star of this caliber would give legitimacy to Seagram’s, tainted by recent Senate hearings into the corruption of big business by organized crime. Once Mies was hired, the Seagram’s publicity office orchestrated a highly successful campaign to promote an image of the German master as the father of the modern skyscraper and the Seagram Building as its most perfect realization.

In the case of the Pan Am Building, events were even more complicated. One can question if the building even has an “author” in the accepted sense. Responding to criticism of early plans drawn up by Emery Roth and Sons by influential critics including *New York Times* architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable, the developer bought in Walter Gropius and Pietro Belluschi to redesign the building’s facade. Under the terms of the agreement, Gropius and Belluschi were responsible for the public spaces and the “skin” of the structure, while Roth was charged with the interiors and the working drawings. The developer’s publicity wing made much of the fact that this would be the former Bauhaus Director’s first American skyscraper. In this case, however, the campaign backfired disastrously for both the architect and the company. Gropius ended up shouldering much of the blame for its critical failure, even though he was responsible for only a small part of the completed building. In highlighting these questions of authorship, Clausen presents a challenge to the dominant narrative of the tall building type constructed in the early part of the twentieth century, one in which social and economic progress is reflected in, and measured by, technological innovation.⁴

Neal Bascomb’s *Higher: The Historic Race to the Sky and the Making of a City* is an example of this dominant modernist narrative. With breathless prose and hyperbole, Bascomb tells the story of the “race to build the tallest skyscraper in the world,” a race that he compares to other historic “races” involving better and bigger technology—the race to complete the transcontinental railroad, to discover the North Pole, to scale Everest, to land on the moon, etc. *Higher* epitomizes what one might call the “screenplay” school of history writing—a method of writing that requires a narrative arc, heroes and villains. Here the architect is the unquestioned hero, an

explorer conquering the “new frontier” of the sky. The three buildings in question are the Chrysler, the Manhattan Company, and the Empire State Buildings, all in New York City. Bascomb is most concerned with the first two, and frames his argument in terms of a “bitter rivalry” between two architects who had formerly been in partnership, William Van Alen and Craig Severance. In this account, the Chrysler and Manhattan Buildings are largely the result of individual ego. As one perceptive Amazon.com reviewer noted: “The author drives home the point that form and function follow personality and willpower.” Popular books such as this tend to reinforce dominant narratives rather than challenge them. *Higher* is aimed at a general audience, and it is not difficult to understand why the publishers believed this story might capture the imagination of an audience primed by previous bestsellers such as Erik Larson’s *The Devil in the White City*. Unfortunately Bascomb’s *Higher* is not as good as Larson’s.⁵ Besides being dated in its understanding of the process of architectural design and full of clichés, Bascomb’s chosen protagonists are just not very interesting, certainly much less interesting than the buildings themselves, the “personalities” each assumed as icons on the skyline.

The presence of the skyscraper on the skyline is of vital importance. As the symbolic as well as the literal product of capitalism, the skyscraper exists not only to fulfill demand for office space but as the primary component of the urban spectacle. The creation of that spectacle is the work of a large number of people, not only the architects, patrons, and building developers who decide the building’s form but also the critics and public relations people who construct stories around and about it. *Inventing the Skyline: The Architecture of Cass Gilbert* contains a valuable case study of one the earliest and most famous spectacular skyscrapers, the Woolworth Building, completed in 1913. The catalog of an exhibition held at the New-York Historical Society in 2000, the book contains essays on Gilbert’s major projects, his work as a planner, and his use of architectural drawings. The final essay by Gail Fenske focuses on Gilbert’s three New York City skyscrapers, concisely outlining the argument she expands on in *The Skyscraper and the City: The Woolworth Building and the Making of Modern New York* (University of Chicago Press, 2008). As she explains, the Woolworth Building is best seen as a collaboration between company founder Frank Woolworth and architect Cass Gilbert. Woolworth envisioned the spectacular nature of the new building. Although he had no functional need for such a huge volume of office space (the Woolworth Company occupied only a floor and a half of the sixty-story building), Woolworth understood the value of architecture as advertising: the signifying function was more valuable than the rental return. In terms of aesthetics, Fenske counters the modernist mythology of the skyscraper architect as a design innovator. Gilbert, responsible for some of the most famous Beaux Arts monuments in the country, was not radical but conservative. He insisted on continuity of styles, not rupture, adapting medieval forms to make the Woolworth Building a picturesque tower. From the start he planned the skyscraper not only as a container for commercial offices but also as an urban image, with an eye to enhancing the increasingly popular views of the lower Manhattan skyline.

While four of the books reviewed here are concerned with the twentieth-century history of the skyscraper, Blair Kamin’s *Terror and Wonder: Architecture in a Tumultuous Age* might be described as an architectural history of the immediate past. Kamin, the architecture critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, has collected more than fifty of his columns published in the first decade of the twenty-first century. He divides his subjects up into broad categories, including “disaster,” “security,” “excess,” “infrastructure,” the “spectacular,” and “sustainability.” The columns are naturally biased toward Chicago, though they include reviews of projects across the United States and some overseas. The “tumultuous age” to which the title refers begins with the World Trade Center attacks and goes on to address the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Underlying everything is the building boom that began in the 1990s and combusted so dramatically in 2008. As Kamin’s columns attest, the desire for spectacular skyscrapers did not die on 9/11, but rebounded almost immediately. His survey of recent so-called super tall

buildings includes several in Chicago, including Donald Trump's Trump International Hotel and Tower, the Fordham Spire and the Waterview Tower (both unbuilt), and the ultimate global skyscraper, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. As his assessment of these buildings attests, when building a spectacular skyscraper, the value of the "authorship" remains high: a great deal of the value of the Trump Tower depends on its association with "the Donald" himself; the twisting Fordham Spire was to be the most audacious of Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava's sculptural constructions; and the architect of the Burj Khalifa is Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, princely heir to the legacy of the "Chicago School" of architecture. Kamin's essays reinforce Clausen's argument about the power of the critic to give shape to urban form, although he does not question the legitimacy of the architect-author. The design of several important Chicago buildings, including the Trump Tower, was altered partly in response to his critiques. He also claims a hand in altering Chicago's building regulations, which were redrawn in the wake of criticism of the banal products of the late twentieth–early twenty-first century skyscraper boom. Kamin's columns are lively and educational for the lay reader. Regarding the future of the skyscraper, he is a booster—he is optimistic, asserting that contemporary skyscraper designs are more sophisticated than their predecessors, and that their designers are more attuned to the urban context and environmental consequences of their tall building projects. If we are to believe Kamin, rumors of the death of the skyscraper have been greatly exaggerated.

Notes

1. In this category, we can include Robert Brueggemann, *The Architects and the City: Holabird and Roche of Chicago 1880–1918* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Joseph Siry's writing on the work of Louis Sullivan including, *Carson Pirie Scott: Louis Sullivan and the Chicago Department Store* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) and *The Chicago Auditorium: Adler and Sullivan's Architecture and the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Katherine Solomonson, *The Chicago Tribune Tower Competition: Skyscraper Design and Cultural Change in the 1920s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); and the valuable essays in Roberta Moudry, ed., *The American Skyscraper: Cultural Histories*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
2. Larry R. Ford, *Cities and Buildings: Skyscrapers, Skid Rows, and Suburbs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880–1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001); Carol Willis, *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995).
3. Manfredo Tafuri, "The Disenchanted Mountain," in *The American City from the Civil War to the New Deal*, ed. Giorgio Ciucci, Francesco Dal Co, Mario Manieri-Elia, and Manfredo Tafuri; trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979). M. Christine Boyer's, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983) is another valuable source on the mythologies surrounding the formation of the capitalist city.
4. Siegfried Giedion's *Space Time and Architecture, the Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941) is the chief source of this narrative.
5. There are other, better, books on these subjects, including Carol Willis, *Building the Empire State* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), and David Stravitz, *The Chrysler Building: Creating a New York Icon Day by Day* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002).

Bio

Joanna Merwood-Salisbury is Associate Professor of Architectural History at Parsons The New School for Design. The author of *Chicago 1890: The Skyscraper and the Modern City* (University of Chicago Press, 2009) and a co-editor of *After Taste: Expanded Practice in Interior Design* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), she sits on the Editorial Board of *AA Files* and the Scholarly Advisory Board of the Chicago Architecture Foundation.