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Meredith L. Clausen. *The Pan Am Building and the Shattering of the Modernist Dream.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005. 477 pp. $48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-03324-4; $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-262-53283-9.

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Urban Gantlet

Critics attacked the Pan Am Building as a behemoth of steel, concrete, and unmanaged congestion beginning in its earliest stages of design development and during its 1990s reinvention as the Met Life Building. Critics Ada Louise Huxtable, Peter Blake, and Douglas Haskell (among numerous others) viewed the Pan Am building as "severing" the Park Avenue streetscape and "tarnishing" the reputations of its designers–Walter Gropius, Pietro Belluschi and Emery Roth and Sons. Ultimately, as Meredith Clausen's new book makes clear, the Pan Am building is not only a physical behemoth, it is also what we might term a "discursive behemoth," a building that attracted and continues to attract an enormous amount of fervent criticism and public debate surrounding the relationship between modern architecture and the American urban real-estate economy.

Clausen's book recounts the history of the Pan Am Building as part of what she terms a "micro-history" approach to architectural analysis (p. xvii). In this role, the book is a major accomplishment; the book's four hundred pages of text focus on a remarkably small site and time period to paint a portrait that now appears central to contemporary architectural discussions. The book's most striking sections are structured around the writings of architectural critics and commentators and the reactions of the building's architects to these pointed critiques. Through these sources Clausen advances the Pan Am as a central site in the formation of American postwar architectural criticism and the public debates surrounding the postwar development of cities. It is a convincing argument that positions the Pan Am building as a powerful historical marker of change at both architectural and urban scales.

Clausen begins the book by describing the role of the Grand Central Railroad Company in the urbanization of the Central Business District, articulating how the Pan Am building emerged from the continuous development of the surrounding sites. Distinctive features of Park Avenue, such as the park that extends down the center of Park Avenue or the "terminal city," a conglomerate of uniform buildings developed around the main terminal, demonstrate the impact on the area by the railroad and its real estate holdings. In the late 1950s, Robert Young, the chairman of the New York Central Railroad, engaged in an ambitious project to increase the Railroad's waning revenues by redeveloping the property surrounding the Grand Central Terminal. Soliciting proposals from developers William Zeckendorf and Erwin Wolfson, the Railroad explored the development of office buildings either directly over the Grand Central Terminal or directly north of the Terminal. Some of these proposals have been published in recent secondary sources but several others provide rare glimpses into the ambitious "air rights" development proposals of transit sites by postwar developer/architect teams.[1] Zeckendorf and I. M. Pei proposed demolishing the Terminal and replacing it with a double-conical-shaped tower; it would have been one of the tallest buildings in the United States if built. Several other teams either proposed destroying the station or they proposed towers that used the station as a base for a steel and glass construction system.

The coarse imagery of these proposals brought the criticism of Douglas Haskell, the editor of the progressive *Architectural Forum* magazine and a central figure of Clausen's book. Clausen suggests that Haskell's criticism of the early Grand Central developments played a key role in the saving of the station and its eventual protected status. Through accessible architectural criticism with a strong urban and ethical bent, Haskell and the *Architectural Forum* he led re-articulated the relationship between architectural criticism, the profession, and the public (broadly defined). The critiques of the Grand Central proposals set the stage for more "modest" redevelopments of the Grand Central site–a very relative term in this context. The team of Erwin Wolfson and Emory Roth and Sons proposed a low base attached to the orig-

inal Grand Central Terminal with a fifty-story east-west tower above the low base. This latter proposal was more favorably received, although this proposal, like the earlier and later proposals, was critiqued for its contribution to the Midtown "congestion problem." The building would house over thirty thousand employees and bring twenty-five thousand visitors per year, as it engaged with an already taxed rail, subway and automobile infrastructure. Despite skepticism regarding the development of the site, the team of Erwin Wolfson and Emery Roth and Sons secured a contract to develop the site. Wolfson brought in architects Pietro Belluschi and Walter Gropius to obtain a more "aesthetic" design for the building and eventually brought in the Pan Am corporation as the prime tenant.

Through a documentation of the design and construction process, Clausen portrays the complex subtleties of the collaboration between Gropius, Belluschi, Wolfson, Juan Trippe of Pan Am, the engineers who tackled the construction problems of the building, and the artists who developed installations for the building. Readers will enjoy reading about the debates surrounding the orientation of the tower; the strategies of the engineers who developed the complex structural system that engaged with the rail platforms below; the hesitancies of corporate executives toward the "modern art" installations in the building; and the projection of the ideals of the burgeoning airline industry into the form of the office tower. In this latter role, the Pan Am became the first office building to successfully incorporate mass air travel through its busy heliport, an image of modernist planning that extends out of the work of urbanists Le Corbusier and Eugène Hénard.

Of the collaborations described by Clausen, the Gropius/Wolfson/Trippe relationship is key to understanding the future controversy of the building. One of the central conceptual errors of Gropius was to believe that he could temper his corporate clients' desires for a massive, high-profit-generating building with the aesthetics of a "monumental" modernism. Gropius wished to employ a form that symbolized collective social life with a powerful physical and environmental presence– to "locate" the city-dweller in an increasingly alienating urban environment. Gropius's attempts to monumentalize the massive floor plates of the building drew the most criticism and produced the lingering sense of alienation between the building and its immediate context.

Clausen does not engage with discussions of American skyscrapers within postwar architectural theory, but the book could have been well served by a further analysis of Gropius's conceptualization of the tall building as a massive, mute monument. This, of course, becomes a central theoretical problem for the analysis of postwar American skyscrapers written by the Italian Marxist architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri.[2] Tafuri viewed the efforts of postwar American architects to develop monumental towers for their corporate clients as a reflection of their increasingly alienated role in the future structure of the capitalist city. Clausen's book begins to give us some more empirical material with which to evaluate this theoretical concept, but this important "critical" theory (so in dialogue with Clausen's observations) is not present within her book.

The architectural critics of 1960s New York viewed Gropius's monument as a "monstrosity." In addition to Haskell's critiques, which continued throughout the development of the building, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (a former colleague of Gropius at the Bauhaus), Ada Louise Huxtable, Wolf Von Eckhardt, Peter Blake and other prominent critics identified the Pan Am as a failure physically and conceptually. The critics who attacked the building often asked how an architect who stood for the advancement of "basic human needs above economic requirements" (p. 157) could develop the largest commercial office building in the world in one of the most congested and historically significant spaces in the metropolis. Gropius's late attempts to work with the more modest Belluschi to "humanize" the monumentality of the Pan Am building failed. For example, Gropius wanted the window mullions of the building to extend past the roof line so that the building's outline appeared a bit softer, but even this simple gesture was dashed by his clients.

Clausen provides an excellent historical examination of the rise in the visibility of architectural criticism as a profession due to proposals such as the Pan Am Building and the effect of the architectural criticism surrounding the Pan Am building on Gropius's career. Critics gained enormous respectability in fighting the Pan Am Building. For instance, Clausen discovered that Ada Louise Huxtable was appointed the architectural critic of the *New York Times* largely based on her criticism of the Pan Am building. Gropius's followers either ignored or overlooked the role of the Pan Am in the formation of his architectural career. In several speeches given in honor of Gropius or the biographies of Gropius from the 1980s, writers did not mention the Pan Am building; others simply passed it off as a failed collaboration among equals.[3]

The forceful criticisms of the Pan Am building recounted by Clausen are also interesting because, if we

look at them closely, we realize that these criticisms often employed the language of modernist urban planning. They lacked the ironic inflections of post-modern discourse. Critics attacked the Pan Am Building's severing of the "spatial continuity" of Park Avenue; the building's impact on the "circulation" of people; and its effects on the "congestion" of urban space. These terms figure prominently in the vocabulary of modern architecture, and suggest that in the 1960s modernist developments were not necessarily attacked because they employed modernist ideals but because they did not.[4]

The building's controversies were exacerbated by a helicopter crash on the building's heliport in the late 1970s; the dismantling of the airline and the eventual sale of the building; and the mediocre remodeling of the building's lobby in the 1980s. An illustration of the building appeared on a 1987 *New York Magazine* cover with a wrecking ball smashing into its pre-cast concrete skin; over this image appeared the headline "The Buildings New Yorkers Love to Hate." Ultimately, Clausen claims, the Pan Am became a "favorite modernist whipping boy" (p. 377). At the end of this informative book, Clausen asks if it is time to reappraise the Pan Am. What is interesting about this question at this particular moment is how much the profession of architectural criticism so vividly described by Clausen has changed. The "professional" criticism that appeared in architectural magazines and journals of the late 1950s and early 1960s has dissipated; several magazines have folded or have massively restructured in recent years. In efforts to engage a broad public, many architectural critics working for large print newspapers have shied from the technological problems of urban development, problems that were key in debates over the Pan Am Building.[5] When we ask if it is time to reappraise the building, what we might really wish to ask is what types of questions do we ask about this and other buildings that oscillate between our historically situated technological fantasies and urban nightmares?

Notes

[1]. See Robert Stern, Thomas Mellins and David Fishman, *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997), pp. 357-369.

[2]. See Manfredo Tafuri, "The Disenchanted Mountain: The Skyscraper and the City," in *The American City: From the Civil War to the New Deal*, ed. Giorgio Cucci et. al. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1983), pp. 389-528.

[3] Clausen primarily explores the problems with the biography by Reginald Isaacs, *Gropius: An Illustrated Biography of the Creator of the Bauhaus* (Berlin: Mann, 1984).

[4]. For more on the language of modern architecture, see Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

[5]. One recent notable exception being Nicolai Ourousoff, "How the City Sank," *New York Times* (October 9, 2005).

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