



*Downtown New York: The Architecture of Business, The Business of Buildings.* Skyscraper Museum.

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## The Tall Building Artfully Reconsidered

Upon entering the Skyscraper Museum's first exhibition, "Downtown New York: The Architecture of Business, The Business of Buildings," one is presented with a view of an I-beam through ornate elevator doors salvaged from a nearby skyscraper. The prominence of the I-beam and the elevator, the Adam and Eve of many skyscraper Genesis stories, suggests that the exhibit will comfortably continue the long line of architectural histories rooted in technological determinism and the aesthetics of functional expression. But a glance to one's right begins to reveal another agenda and presages the quietly revolutionary character of both the exhibit and the museum itself. On the wall is a list of the Board of Directors, headed by the founder and director, Carol Willis, an architectural and urban historian who has worked for over two years to establish the Skyscraper Museum. To this end, she has enlisted the advice of the architects, architectural and urban historians, planners, and developers who constitute the Board, and the support of downtown real estate and financial interests. This was, by all accounts, no easy task, and has succeeded because Willis has built her own "skyscraper," a vision of skyscraper and city history standing upon new avenues of research and supported by a conceptual frame that elevates the "business of buildings" to the heights previously dominated by technology and aesthetics. <p> This article is a review of both a show and of the larger project of establishing a museum devoted to the skyscraper. The explicit goal of "Downtown New York" is to document and explain the New York skyscraper as a form of city building. To this end, the show establishes broad themes: "Location," "Height," "The Business of Building," "The Office," "Real Estate Cycles," and "Architecture" to organize the information for

a wide audience including, according to Willis, "tourists, construction workers, stock brokers, school kids, and academics," and the show is accessible, clear and lively enough to appeal to all. But between the lines of the exhibit one may discern other, even more ambitious, goals: institutional, academic and historiographic. "Downtown New York" is not only an exhibit, but a "debut event" designed to stimulate interest in the Skyscraper Museum and help establish a permanent home for the new institution, now residing in donated space. Beyond this institutional goal is the desire to call previously unexplored historical sources to the attention of the academy. Documents often overlooked by architectural and urban historians—such as occupancy surveys, rental brochures, construction documents, advertisements, period photos and colored postcards—constitute much of the exhibit, creating a quiet manifesto for both the preservation and investigation of sources that have been ignored or considered relevant only to real estate or business history. Finally, the exhibit makes a subtle, but unmistakable, historiographic argument for viewing both the skyscraper and city as the products of commercial speculation as much as, if not more than, products of artistic design. <p> Leaving the vertiginous experience of downtown New York's skyscraper canyons to enter 44 Wall Street, the notion of a "skyscraper museum" might seem something of an oxymoron: Skyscrapers are big, hard to contain, larger than life, the product of a heroic attempt to wed art and technology. They stand as testaments to the present, torn down and built anew as contemporary demands dictate. But for Willis, the question from the beginning was not "why" a skyscraper museum, but "why not," for she had already begun to view the

skyscraper differently. Much traditional architectural history presents the development of the skyscraper as a litany of great architects in pursuit of the perfect synthesis of style and structure. Inspired by the architect Louis Sullivan's <cite>The Tall Building Artistically Considered</cite>, whence came the famous, if often misinterpreted, "form follows function," and early interpreters of the skyscraper such as Montgomery Schuyler, the emphasis of criticism and history has been upon the manner in which skyscrapers reconcile the requirements of technology and art.[1] Willis' recent book, <cite>Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago</cite>,[2] has re-situated the skyscraper as a product of the local economic forces that control city-building: real-estate speculation, construction techniques and office requirements. In so doing, she retrieved arguments made by many of the speculators, builders and designers who created the skyscrapers. The buildings themselves became less hermetic artistic objects than products of a specific, and historically contingent, process. They became, in essence, historical documents, thus a "skyscraper museum," as a venue for presenting skyscrapers as part of this larger process of making cities, makes perfect sense. Indeed, one wonders why it has not been done before. <p> The institutional program for the museum is straightforward: "Downtown New York" is the template for a permanent display which will introduce the visitor to the New York skyscraper, to downtown, and to the notion of a permanent museum devoted to the skyscraper as an aspect of city building. Once established on a permanent basis, the museum will add temporary exhibits on specific issues, questions, buildings or periods that might, or might not, draw upon the general themes presented in this show. Thus the experience of the show is that of listening to an overture; while there are many titillating specifics, the main goal is to make the case for a skyscraper museum, to provide the broad strokes of an argument about the skyscraper, and to preview the themes to be pursued in further exhibits once the museum finds its long term home. <p> The exhibit is constructed not only to present the New York skyscraper but to provide a visceral experience of the skyscraper and New York's downtown. Once past the elevator doors, originally from the American Trust Building at 150 Nassau Street (built 1894), and the I-beam, salvaged from the Munson Building at 67 Wall (1920), the show becomes a series of "rooms," each about the size of a standard office space, laid out along a "street" under panoramic "then and now" photographs of Broadway, one showing the west side of the street in 1909, its partner the east side in 1996. The exhibit is organized

according to six themes: "Location, Location, Location," "Height," "The Business of Building," "The Office," "Real Estate Cycles," and "Architecture," each topic forming one of the rooms along "Broadway." While pride of place is reserved for the traditional technological determinants of the skyscraper, the elevator and steel frame, the first "room" lays out Willis' challenge to the traditional academic formula. <p> "Location, Location, Location" is the punch-line to the well-worn joke "what are the first three rules of real estate development?" Location drives real estate value. It is also the bottom line of the show, introducing Willis' attempt to "re-locate" the meaning of the skyscraper. The literal location under investigation is Lower Manhattan, a center of skyscraper construction from the early 1900s to today. The heart of American finance since Alexander Hamilton helped found the first stock exchange in 1792, Lower Manhattan became the headquarters for the "robber barons" of the Gilded Age and by the 1890s was sprouting its first "skyscrapers." The importance of proximity to the centers of financial power drove intense competition for choice locations. A 1903 map of property values illustrates the enormous premium placed on sites in New York's financial district, the "capital of capitalism." At its heart, Wall Street from Broadway to Broad Street, property was valued at \$350-\$450 per square foot, with prices dropping off precipitously only a few blocks away. With the innovation of steel frame construction (pioneered in Chicago by William Le Baron Jenny) permitting the vertical multiplication of the building site, these land values drove buildings higher and higher. Cass Gilbert, architect of the Woolworth Building, summarizes the relationship between location and the skyscraper in the pithy phrase, "A skyscraper is a machine that makes the land pay." <p> In the panels on "rent," Willis' fundamental challenge to tradition becomes clear. While architectural historians have treated skyscrapers as aesthetic objects, corporate icons, or cultural symbols, Willis presents tall buildings as commodities. While corporations, such as Singer (Ernest Flagg, 1908), Metropolitan Life (Napoleon LeBrun, 1909) and Woolworth (Cass Gilbert, 1913) did put their names on buildings, most office towers have been speculative, designed to rent single offices or suites to small businesses. Even in towers bearing the names of large corporations, such as 1 Chase Manhattan Plaza (Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, 1960), sponsoring companies occupied only a few floors of their eponymous building, renting out most of their headquarters to smaller businesses. For Willis, and the show, the most important determinant of skyscraper production is real estate speculation and the changing means of maximizing profit. And yet,

as the words of the builders, architects and real-estate speculators quoted in the show attest, this is not so much a “revisionist” analysis of the skyscraper as a recuperation of the explanations provided by the original creators of the New York skyscraper. <p> “Height,” too, is re-located according to this financial calculus, split into two varieties: engineering and economic. No exhibit on the skyscraper would be complete without re-telling the tale of the competition for the label of “world’s tallest office building,” and one wall is dutifully donated to a well-presented chronological comparison. Standing, as if at a police line-up, are New York’s tallest from the Singer Building through the World Trade Towers (Minoru Yamasaki, 1970), along with the usurpers, Chicago’s Sears Tower (SOM, 1974) and the recently completed Petronas Tower in Kuala Lumpur. In an effective attempt to help the viewer experience an aspect of “engineering height,” a wall exhibiting the means of achieving such heights—“foundations, structure, bracing and facades”—evokes New York’s last champion by recreating the actual spacing of one of the World Trade Towers’ elevations. But far more provocative is the discussion of “economic height.” <p> Economic height is not determined by what is physically possible, but by what is economically desirable. Technology may make things possible, but the pursuit of profit makes it happen. Although the exhibit here is a bit thin on visual materials, the sources used are compelling. From construction records we learn that Charles Knox, an elevator consultant for the Equitable Building (Ernest Graham, 1915) determined that a forty story height would permit the most efficient elevator service at the lowest cost, even though the building, constructed before the landmark 1916 Zoning Resolution required setbacks, could have risen much higher. In choosing between a thirty- and sixty-five-story building on the same site in the 1920s, developers’ construction cost charts tell us that the extra steel required for wind bracing and carrying extra weight adds forty cents to the per-square-foot cost of construction. Such added expense would have to be offset by the income from the increased space. Here, and elsewhere in the show, Willis also employs statistics from a fascinating source, the 1930 book, <cite>The Skyscraper: A Study in the Economic Height of Modern Office Buildings</cite>, in which building professionals choose a 200 by 405-foot lot at a value of \$200 a square foot and set about calculating the economic height at contemporary rental rates. Neither available technology nor artistic considerations, but cold economic calculations determine the perfect height of sixty-three stories. Such presentations, while sometimes less visually compelling than those based in tra-

ditionally aesthetic or technological explanations of the skyscraper, clearly illustrate the academic and historiographic agenda undergirding the exhibit. The show is a gentle but insistent manifesto for appreciating economic documents as historical sources and using such documents to interpret the skyscraper as a product of speculative city building. <p> With the room devoted to “The Business of Buildings,” Willis’ call to academics becomes even clearer. Devoted to the actual logistics of constructing a tall building, this room is composed exclusively of primary source quotes and large photos of buildings under construction, without the mediation of interpretive texts. The quotes are indeed powerful, such as that of developer Col. William Starrett’s ode to the heroic nature of skyscraper construction: “Building skyscrapers is the nearest peace-time equivalent of war.”[3] Yet both the photos and the quotations could benefit from some explication, and, as this is the only section without accompanying explanations, on first glance the absence of analysis seems like an oversight. But the juxtaposition of historical quotes and photos serves a purpose. It is a manifesto, directed at academic historians, for using visual material as a primary source, rather than as mere illustration for written history. Add this to Willis’ exploration of economic documents, such as occupancy surveys by the Real Estate Board of New York, real estate records, marketing surveys, and construction documents. In person, Willis is passionate and convincing about the value of such sources, many of which, as Willis puts it, “are one retirement away from the dumpster.” <p> There is much more to this exhibit, including an enlightening discussion of the office environment and the effect of florescent lighting technology on office layout, and a thorough review of zoning laws as determinants of skyscraper form, but it is the last “room” which raises the most interesting question about Willis’ approach. “Architecture” has no text at all, only illustrations and photos of some of the iconic skyscrapers of Lower Manhattan. For those of us raised in the architectural historical tradition of Vincent Scully, Carl Condit, Leland Roth, et al., this room is designed to be the payoff. Like a rogue’s gallery of usual suspects, the famous skyscrapers line-up: Cass Gilbert’s Woolworth Building, the “Cathedral of Commerce,” Hugh Ferriss’ evocative renderings of setback skyscraper forms, the “glass boxes” of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (decried by Tom Wolfe in <cite>From Bauhaus to Our House</cite>). But here the absence of text reveals a lacuna in the logic of the show. While an economic focus is necessary, indeed invaluable, to creating a comprehensive and usable history of the skyscraper, it is not sufficient. The su-

perfidial treatment of the question of style, of the art of making tall buildings, of the intentions of architects and the cultural symbolism of skyscrapers might lead some to wonder whether the economic focus may be too reductive, too deterministic. After decades of focusing on the aesthetics of skyscrapers, at the expense of the economics, has the pendulum now swung to far in the other direction? <p> The answer is no. The noted historian Richard Hofstadter once explained, “every good idea deserves a forceful overstatement,” but Willis’ argument is by no means overstated. The show is open-minded, with no soap boxes in evidence. The argument presented in this review is only latent in the exhibit. Willis herself denies that she is attempting to advance an argument with this show, and viewers without an investment in academic architectural history will find an even-handed, compelling and informative presentation of the rich history of downtown skyscrapers. For the general public, the “Skyscraper Museum” will be a valuable and edifying experience that, one hopes, will encourage us all to recognize the connection between speculation, city building and the skyscraper, and to appreciate the rich history of these monumental edifices. For those with a longstanding investment in architectural or urban history, the particular perspective of “Downtown New York” should serve as inspiration. With this show, Willis throws down the gauntlet for researchers, pointing out that a wealth of untapped sources hold a bounty of useful information. The debut exhibit of the Skyscraper Museum opens up many avenues for new re-

search into the built environment, and, one hopes, a permanent venue for further exploration of this rich topic. <p> Notes: <p> [1]. The emphasis on formal analysis of the skyscraper as a synthesis of form and structure begins with Louis Sullivan’s, <cite>The Tall Building Artistically Considered</cite> and the work of period critic Montgomery Schuyler. This approach, grounded in viewing the skyscraper as an attempt to “solve” the aesthetic “problem” of the skyscraper, forms the main strategy of architectural historians ranging from the modernist polemicist Sigfried Gideon seeking “structural honesty,” in <cite>Space Time and Architecture (1941), to Carl Condit documenting the technological aesthetic of the “Chicago School,” to the breathless and insightful prose of Vincent Scully praising the “pyramidal massing” and “attenuated mountains” of Lower Manhattan skyscraper design in </cite>American Architecture and Urbanism<cite> (1988), which also addresses questions of cultural symbolism and meaning. More recently, Daniel Bluestone has explored the cultural meaning of the Chicago skyscraper in </cite>Constructing Chicago\_ (1973). <p> [2]. Carol Willis, <cite>Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago</cite> (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995). <p> [3]. Col. William Starrett, <cite>Skyscrapers and the Men Who Build Them</cite> (1928) as quoted in “Downtown New York: The Architecture of Business / The Business of Building.” <p>

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