
This book is a major contribution to urban, architectural, and technological history. In focusing on the formative years of the New York skyscraper, Landau and Condit not only present a wealth of new material but also suggest how historians might approach skyscrapers in later periods and other cities. The authors skillfully present an appreciation of the buildings’ external form and style, as well as their materials and ornamentation; many readers will find delight enough here. Yet Landau and Condit also pay close attention to the evolving technologies (e.g., elevators, foundations, wind-bracing, plumbing), to the role of engineers, construction firms, and financiers, and to the persistent but ineffective attempts by New York city to regulate skyscraper height across this period. Their findings significantly revise the traditional view that Chicago architects by the early 1890s had “solved” the problem of skyscraper design. Instead, they show that New York skyscrapers were built with a variety of framing techniques and a mix of historical and functional styles. Indeed, the authors appreciate that the economic and technical constraints of building tall office buildings in a crowded urban setting left little room for architects to treat them as purely artistic creations. A skyscraper, in architect Cass Gilbert’s words, was “the machine that makes the land pay.” (p. 272) Throughout, there are magnificent period engravings and photographs, as well as engineering drawings, floor plans, panoramas, and maps.

Landau and Condit begin with two chapters that review the multiple contexts of building skyscrapers in New York. In concise and clear terms they discuss economic growth, urban expansion, technological developments, even the geological profile of Manhattan. Three contextual chapters later in the book also aim for a broader portrait of the city and its development.

But the heart of this book is a focus on Manhattan’s principal tall office buildings themselves. It begins with the Equitable Building of 1870 (deemed the “first skyscraper”) and proceeds to the Woolworth Building of 1913. The building-by-building discussion presented in seven chapters draws on the authors’ impressive research in archives and technical journals. The results are detailed and authoritative. For each building -- and there are 90 discussed at some length -- the authors present a “formalist” description of its style, ornament, and other significant architectural features as well as background on the architect, construction firm, and financing. This much is common for the best architectural writing. Where the authors break new ground is in adding an informed discussion of the buildings’ technical features and, where appropriate, relating these to the architectural features. Foundations are the focus for some buildings; for others the spotlight is on innovative framing, wind-bracing, fire-proofing, elevators, plumbing, or air circulation. The special problems of designing and erecting buildings for newspaper publishers or on sites over subway or railroad tracks also receive full treatment. By force of evidence, the reader understands that skyscrapers were custom-built creations.
Over the years critics swayed by modernism have faulted New York’s skyscrapers for not following Louis Sullivan’s dictum that a skyscraper’s external form should be expressive of its internal structure and function. Yet Landau and Condit maintain that stepped designs with horizontal divisions (such as in the Corn Exchange Bank and American Tract Society buildings) were “structurally expressive,” in that they reflected changes in wall thickness mandated by the city’s building code. The authors also suggest that architectural treatment often expressed the building’s intended functions. For corporate headquarters (such as Manhattan Life’s) separate architectural treatments often distinguished the rental portion of a building from the floors containing the company’s own offices. Architectural treatments were generally more uniform for the speculatively built office buildings, built solely to generate rental income from paying tenants (especially, it seems, lawyers).

Like New York city itself, this handsome book can be appreciated on multiple levels. Historians of science will find merit in at least two additional aspects. First, the authors give a noteworthy instance where expert knowledge interacted with public policies. Scientific and engineering research, especially on the strength of metals at high temperature, directly informed the city’s building code. Second, the authors make a powerful argument that understanding the metropolitan culture of New York requires appreciating how the city’s development was structured by the rise of skyscrapers. These were the years, they conclude (p. 396), “when architecture was put securely in the service of engineering and the profit motive, and when the identity of New York City became inextricably associated with its skyline.”

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