

Skyscrapers: Icons of Modernity

Background Notes

Beth Taylor – 16 September 2015



The Flatiron Building, New York, 1902



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Skyscrapers

Although the term “skyscraper” was first used in 1883 to describe buildings of over 10 stories in the United States, the history of tall buildings dates back thousands of years – the Great Pyramid of Giza was built between 2589 and 2504 BC, for example. From their beginnings, tall buildings were intended to be eye-catching and signified power and dominance. They also provided protection or, in the case of Gothic cathedrals, pointing to and reaching for the heavens. Not all connotations of tall buildings were positive: Peter Brueghel the Elder’s depiction of *The Tower of Babel* (1563) was symbolic of hubris – an excess of ambition, ultimately causing ruin.



The early twentieth century skyscrapers in New York were not just a response to the high price of land in the city’s commercial centre, but were representative of the ambition of American capitalism. Along with the Statue of Liberty (another tall edifice), they became an icon for the city itself.

Constructing New York's skyscrapers

By the late 19th century, Manhattan Island was the USA's financial and commercial capital. Expanding companies sought to have their headquarters there. The Island is basically granite and as technology permitted – the invention of the safety elevator, the use of steel frames and curtain walls – and New York's zoning laws changed in 1892 to remove the requirement for masonry fireproofing in buildings, ground breaking skyscrapers like the Flatiron Building (completed in 1902) began to go up.

Iconic skyscrapers of the early 20th century

The Flatiron building 1902, intersection of Fifth Avenue and Broadway.

Designed by Chicago architect and urban designer, Daniel Burnham (1846-1912) as a vertical Renaissance Palace with Beaux-Arts styling, this triangular shaped skyscraper, designed to fit a wedge-shaped site, was clad in white terracotta, and stood 21 stories high.

The Singer Building 1906-1908, Liberty Street and Broadway.

Designed by another exponent of the Beaux-Arts style, the architect Ernest Flagg (1857-1947), this 41 storey headquarters building for the Singer Sewing Machine Company was the world's tallest building in 1908. Clad with bright red brick, light stone and terra cotta, with a bulbous top and a luxurious lobby, it was demolished in 1968.

Beaux-Arts architecture

This style evolved in the later 19th century. Taught at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris – where many important American architects trained – it was influential in American architecture between the 1880s and the First World War. A late form of neo-classicism, it was typified by massive and grandiose construction, symmetrical facades, classical elements, and lavish decoration. Considered to be an architecture to reflect the growing wealth and prestige of the USA, it was used for public buildings like Grand Central Station, the New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Woolworth Building 1913, 233 Broadway

This neo-Gothic style office building, designed by the architect Cass Gilbert (1859-1934), was 60 storeys high, with more than 5,000 windows. With lavish interior finishes, it was called “The Cathedral of Commerce”. The tallest building in the world until 1930.



Neo Gothic architecture in the 20th century

A style inspired by Gothic cathedrals and other medieval architecture or in the case of the Woolworth Building by the Gothic Revival *Houses of Parliament*. Applied to modern skyscrapers in the early 20th century, it was characterized by strong vertical lines and height, decorative tracery, gargoyles and other carvings.

American Radiator Building, West 40th Street 1924

Designed by John Howells and Raymond Hood, this is 38 storeys high with a set back pyramidal silhouette. The façade was of black brickwork, with the pinnacles and terra cotta friezes coated in gold. The neo Gothic ornamentation of the building coupled with its sleek geometrical designs anticipated Art Deco architecture.

Art Deco architecture

A style characterized by precise geometric shapes, bold colour and outlines. The style was particularly prominent between 1925 and 1935 and was considered elegant, functional, and modern with its long, bold, and tall geometrical shapes, raised, exaggerated, or strong lines, and sweeping curves

Chrysler Building 1930

Considered a leading example of New York art deco style, this was designed by William Van Alen as the headquarters of the Chrysler Motor Company. The architectural details were modelled after Chrysler car ornaments such as radiator caps. It is renowned for its terraced summit, clad in stainless steel in a radiating sunburst pattern.

The Empire State Building, Fifth Avenue 1931

Another famous art deco building, designed by William F. Lamb. Its construction was part of an intense competition in New York for the title of the “world’s tallest building” which it won by means of a pinnacle atop the art deco tower. It was the first building to have more than 100 floors. The lobby is three storeys high and featured an aluminium relief of the skyscraper and ceiling murals inspired by the sky and the machine age.

Artists and skyscrapers.

George Bellows (1882-1925)

A painter associated with the Ashcan School, Bellows painted a number of images of construction work in New York which in a realist and expressive style depict the harshness of the work of the excavators preparing the foundations for the new tall buildings.

Charles Demuth (1883 – 1935)

American painter who visited Europe in the early twentieth century, becoming interested in cubism. His paintings of the modern urban and industrial landscape, on the other hand, are tightly controlled, hard, and exact. Aply called Precisionist, these works show the influence of European Cubism and Futurism, but their sense of scale and directness of expression seem entirely American.

Hugh Ferriss (1889-1962)

American architectural artist whose utopian ideas for buildings were profoundly influential. Composed of ordered, geometric elements, they convey both rationality and romanticism. He responded to the requirement to design stepped back buildings with imaginative buildings which imbued the skyscraper with monumental three-dimensionality.

Albert Gleizes (1881-1953)

French painter, printmaker and writer. His early work was impressionist in style but in 1909 he took up cubism and published the first book on the movement in 1913. He visited America in 1915-1919 and made striking faceted images of New York's skyscrapers.

Childe Hassam (1859-1935)

Painter and printmaker, one of the premier American Impressionists, Hassan used bright colours, and vigorous brushwork in his paintings of New York. His street scenes in the early twentieth century show skyscrapers in the background and include a number of celebratory flag paintings made from 1916 to 1919, documenting the patriotic spirit in New York.

John Marin (1870-1953)

American painter and printmaker, he painted city views in a vigorous semi-abstract style. His work combines impressionist visual effects, expressionist emotional intensity and cubist fragmentation of forms. After the Armory Show, he integrated devices from cubism, futurism and expressionism to depict the explosive energy of metropolitan New York.

Georgia O'Keefe (1887-1986)

O'Keefe's paintings of New York skyscrapers, made when she lived in the city with her husband, Alfred Stieglitz in the 1920s, have been termed 'precisionist' in style because of their clear simple forms. However, they have a semi-abstract quality, contrasting sharp edges with sweeping colour areas, more interpretive works which explore her reaction to the size, grandeur and complexity of the city.

Joseph Pennell 1857-1926)

An internationally known etcher and lithographer, his images evoke the era's cities. Pennell's style was bold, atmospheric and descriptive. He as intrigued by the interaction of the relatively unassuming buildings of the past with the enormous skyscrapers.

Charles Sheeler (1883-1935)

American painter and photographer who made several trips to Europe between 1904 and 1909 and was influenced by the work of Cezanne. Working as a commercial photographer from 1912, the precision and clarity needed in such work helped to transform his painting style. From 1920 into the 1930s he painted urban subjects and is recognised as the finest painter in the precisionist style.

Joseph Stella (1877-1946)

Italian born, naturalised American painter best known for his futurist influenced images of New York's architecture. In New York during the 1920s, Stella became fascinated with the geometric quality of the architecture of lower Manhattan. In these works he further assimilated elements of Cubism and Futurism.

Max Weber (1881-1961)

Russian born, American artist who studied in Paris. Returning to New York in 1909, he used Cubism to capture the modernity of the city, depicting them in sharp edged, faceted forms. As his style developed, he painted synthesized images of skyscrapers, evoking the sensations produced by the dynamism of the metropolis.

A note on Precisionism

Widespread in the 1920s and 1930s, precisionism promoted visual objectivity over self-expression. The style emphasised clear, precise forms drawn from urban and industrial subjects but almost always devoid of human presence. Precisionism's practitioners wanted to create a modern and distinctive American art. Disillusioned with the Old World after the chaos of WW1, Precisionism expressed the post war period's faith in scientific seeing and thinking as keys to better social and spiritual conditions for Americans. The style has also been called 'machine abstraction' and 'cubist-realist'.

Useful sources

The Oxford Dictionary of American Art and Artists

Merrill Schleir *The Skyscraper in American Art 1890 – 1931*

http://nyarchitecture.edu/0242_2/0242_2_5-6_tr.htm

plus the web sites for the individual buildings.

Georgia O'Keefe *Radiator Building-Night, New York 1927.*



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