

# The Skyscraper City

with Andrew S. Dolkart

## ART DECO

### Exposition

In 1925 something else very important happens that would affect the look of skyscrapers—the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris. With this exposition the French government intended to showcase the latest in French modern design, though it was an international exposition, as other countries were invited to open up pavilions exhibiting their modern design. The United States was one of the countries invited to have a pavilion, but the government's response was that the nation had no modern design, so there was no United States pavilion. Ultimately, however, this exposition *des arts décoratifs* from which the term *art deco* comes, had a tremendous influence on American design. Many Americans attended—architects, builders, even the general public. They either traveled to the fair itself or read books about it. So the exposition eventually had a tremendous impact on the look of the city.

Now before we look at art deco buildings, we should note that this style is not synonymous with the setback office building. Very often, buildings like the Barclay-Vesey and the Fred French are called art-deco buildings, though technically they are not. They use different types of ornament. Art deco is a style of ornament imported from France after the 1925 exposition that provided an ornamental overlay on office buildings that were built under the 1916 zoning law. So it is important to note that the style is not synonymous with the zoning law but with a type of ornament that was used after 1925 on buildings in New York. The buildings that Americans saw

when they attended the Paris exposition were very small scale, like this one, which was built as the Pavilion Bon Marchè for the Bon Marchè department store in Paris. But they had a highly ornate decorative quality—using, for example, stylized sunbursts, frozen fountains, and zigzag ornaments—and it was this style of ornament, used on both the pavilions and the modern decorative arts shown at the fair, that the Americans brought back with them.

## Cheney Silk

Almost as soon as they returned, the Americans began to incorporate these motifs in their buildings. And in some cases—as here at the Cheney Silk Company's offices and showrooms—they actually imported French decorative arts. This showroom opens in 1925, and it is actually the first instance of this art deco style to appear in New York. Cheney was a New England silk company that had very strong relations with France, from which they imported a lot of silk. So when Cheney was opening its showrooms on Madison Avenue and Thirty-fourth Street, it had the French metalworking company Ferrobrandt design the showroom's storefront. It was the first example that all New Yorkers could see of this new French decorative style. You can see on this storefront, which miraculously still survives, the frozen-fountain motif over the doors—a motif eventually used on many of the city's buildings. And here at the great bronze doors, you can see organic ornament being used in a very stylized way. Note the curving and also the very pointy forms juxtaposed with one another. These motifs will start to appear all over the city as New York architects begin using the French art-deco motifs.

## **Deco Skyscrapers**

### Chanin Building

One of the first great examples of a building that uses the French-inspired art-deco motifs is the Chanin Building, located on the southwest corner of Lexington Avenue and Forty-second Street. The architect, Irwin Chanin, had built Garment Center loft buildings and a number of other buildings in New York. He planned this one for his own offices and as a speculative venture—that is, his private offices were on the top floor while the rest of the building was open office space. Construction began in 1927.

Chanin trained at Cooper Union as an architect, but in 1927 he was not yet registered. He eventually became a registered architect, but that year he worked with the architectural firm of Sloan and Robertson. The firm had worked on the Fred French Building and was involved in many different office buildings in New York. Chanin worked with Sloan and Robertson to come up with a spectacular design (which is very closely modeled on Eero Saarinen's plan for the Chicago Tribune Building) that features a massive, horizontal base, soaring setbacks, strong verticals, and buttresses. The building soars above the corner of Forty-second Street and Lexington Avenue, right down the block from Grand Central Terminal. And the light bounces off its façade. So this building was highly visible.

Besides being a spectacular ornament on the New York skyline, the building is filled with French-inspired ornamental detail. Chanin had visited Paris in 1925 and toured the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes. He was so inspired by it that when he came back, he almost immediately started using these French-inspired forms. A building like the Chanin was designed not only to attract your attention from a distance but also to be both enjoyable and even educational on the ground floor. And it was designed so that on the lower stories it would attract not only pedestrians but also potential tenants. The detail on this building is some of the most exquisite art-deco ornament ever created in New York. There is a band of stylized terra-cotta with curving and angular leaflike forms not unlike those on Ferrobrandt's Cheney Silk Company doors. There is a frieze over the storefronts that was meant both to entertain and to educate. It depicts the theory of evolution. The frieze starts with amoebae and then, as you move along, the amoebae become jellyfish, the jellyfish become fish, the fish become geese, and yet there it stops. At that point, the theory became too controversial.

There are also dynamic storefronts covered with zigzag patterns. This design has come to be probably the most popular ornamental detail that people are familiar with from art-deco buildings. But one of the interesting things about the use of this pattern on such buildings is that the zigzag almost never appears by itself. The angular, geometric, mechanical zigzag is almost always overlaid with ornate, curving flower petals. This combination of the mechanical and the natural overlaying each other creates a very complex iconography on these buildings.

## The Chanin Lobbies

The lobbies of this building are among the most interesting in the city. They tell a story about New York as the city of opportunity. And the city of opportunity was Irwin Chanin's life. Chanin was a poor immigrant who was able to find success in New York because it offered him abundant opportunity. He became one of its great developers and believed there was opportunity for all in both intellectual and physical pursuits. With its two main lobbies, one dedicated to each type of pursuit, the Chanin articulates these beliefs. Both lobbies also house a stylized figure that represents some aspect of either the intellectual or the physical life. And below each figure is a bronze grille that represents this same force in an abstracted way. So you see a figure striding forward atop its abstraction below. This is probably the first use of abstract ornament in an American building. Chanin designed it with the assistance of the artist René Chambellan, who specialized in architectural sculpture and was very popular in 1920s New York. The plaster figures have this kind of stylized, almost hypermasculine form and they are somewhat cubist in detail. It was a style that was very popular in the 1920s and the early 1930s. You can see the impact of European modernism on these sculptures. And so in each one of these lobbies, there are four of these groupings—four physical pursuits and four intellectual pursuits.

Then you walk into the main lobby and find beautiful elevator doors that use the same geese motif used outside. You could take one of the elevators all the way up to the top floor, to Chanin's office. But before you entered the office, you had to pass through a pair of bronze gates that were every bit as much a part of the building's story. The gates represented the greatness of the city, with its art and commerce and its tremendous dynamism. You notice their gears, which signify the industrial prominence of a great city like New York. And, at the top, in the center, you see a violin that splits in half, indicating the cultural life of the city. Then you spot these very dynamic bolts that shoot through, indicating the city's dynamism. Or perhaps you might interpret them as representing New York, the communication empire. Note, though, that none of this would have been possible without a great deal of money and so these gates rest on piles of gold coins. So he designed these

gates to sum up for you what the city was all about, before you entered his private offices, which were also elaborately designed with art-deco details.

## The Chrysler Building

The Chanin Building was completed in 1929. The year before, located diagonally across the street, construction began on probably the most famous art-deco skyscraper in New York, the Chrysler Building, a building that, like the Flatiron and the Woolworth buildings, became a romantic iconographic symbol of New York. The building was designed by William Van Allen, a little-known architect, and mostly built by Walter Chrysler. But this was never the headquarters for his company. Chrysler's name was prominently displayed on the building, and it was designed to be so noticeable on the skyline that it would be, like the Woolworth and the Singer buildings before, a nonstop, 24-hour-a-day advertisement for the company. The building is actually quite interesting because it has a very dramatic base and probably the most spectacular top of any office tower ever built, with its shiny stainless-steel surface and its soaring spire. It was designed to be the world's tallest building, which it was for a very brief period. The middle section of the building, however, is not so interesting, but somewhat mundanely done in white brick with white marble trim. So you are supposed to look at the bottom, or at the very top, or at some of the setbacks, including the main setback that has these silver-winged forms, which are the hood ornaments from 1929 Chryslers. If you look very carefully at that setback, you will also notice silver circles—those are the hubcaps of stylized racing cars, sculpted in brick, that race around the building. They were designed to be a marketing tool. You were supposed to look up at these from the street and think very positively of the corporation, then of course go out and buy a Plymouth or a Chrysler.

## The Chrysler Interior

The entrance to the building was also treated in a most spectacular manner. The surface is black granite with scintillating bluish and silver insets, so it really captures your attention. The building is white, whereas the entrance is black—a dramatic combination. You enter beneath a giant, crystal-shaped arch, finding yourself in a transitional space between the street and the lobby. This arch is about three stories high, so you sense that the lobby inside will be a vast space. But they

are not giving anything away because the windows looking into the lobby are translucent, so you cannot actually see the interior. If you want see it, you have to pass through a low revolving door, then you burst into a space of spectacular drama. Though it is not actually three stories tall; in fact, it is considerably lower than that. The builders did not want to waste space that could be rented to office users. But the space is so colorful and so dramatic that you do not even notice it is lower than expected. Once inside you are carefully channeled through a space with beautiful red marble walls, yellow marble floors, and ceiling murals near the elevator banks—the most beautiful elevators, I think, ever created. You see stylized papyri on the doors and note six different elevator-cab designs, which are still intact. Exotic woods were imported from all over the world to create one of the most spectacular skyscraper interiors. Again, the building was used as a marketing tool, so it appeared frequently in Chrysler advertisements. Here you see a Plymouth juxtaposed with the Chrysler Building. You are supposed to think of how beautifully built the Chrysler Building is, and how solid and sturdy. And then, of course, you are supposed to read that into the Chrysler car, too.

## The Empire State Building

The Chrysler Building only remained the world's tallest building for about a year, until the Empire State Building was completed. The Empire State Building was 100 percent a speculative venture. It had no corporate name attached. Though built on Fifth Avenue and Thirty-fourth Street because this was thought to be a good location, midway between Pennsylvania Station and Grand Central Terminal, ultimately this did not prove to be such a good site after all. Both the subways and the rail terminals are a long walk away, so it was not a huge economic success. The building was carefully designed to be the world's tallest. When the team that built it sat down with its architects, the firm of Shreve, Lamb, and Harmon, they decided they wanted to top the Chrysler. And because it is located in an area where there are very few other tall buildings, the Empire State is still, to this day, one of the most noticeable buildings on the city's skyline.

The building's lobby is just as dramatic. When you pass through the main entrance on Fifth Avenue, the first thing that you see straight ahead is a map of New York State, known as the Empire State, with a model of the building on it. In fact, many of these art-deco skyscrapers had the building's image in their lobbies. The

assumption seemed to be that the building was so big, you could not actually grasp the whole of it from outside, so you were given a little model in the lobby in order to see what it was that you had just walked into. The Chrysler Building, by the way, is also painted in a mural on its lobby ceiling.

## Empty State Building

These buildings—the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, and the other great towers of the late 1920s—were erected during a period of constant construction in New York, one of the periods in the city's history when a vast amount of office space was created. Most of these buildings were completed after the stock-market crash in 1929, and most of them suffered badly. In fact, the Empire State Building was known as the Empty State Building for many years because the owners simply could not get tenants. Only the admission fees from the observatory really saved the building from bankruptcy. So these buildings went on the market at a very bad time. It was not until the late 1940s and early 1950s, after the Depression and World War II, that most of them filled up.

## Irving Trust Building

To my mind, the greatest of all the buildings that were built during this period—and, in my opinion, the greatest skyscraper ever built—is the Irving Trust Company's building at 1 Wall Street, probably the greatest address in the world. Irving Trust, which was a very prominent, powerful bank, understood the importance of address. It was no accident that Irving bought this site. They wanted this address at the corner of Wall Street and Broadway. And because they had purchased, at enormous expense, such an important address, they also wanted to build a skyscraper that would be a masterpiece. They hired Ralph Walker, the architect who, a few years earlier, had designed the Barclay-Vesey Telephone Company Building. And in 1929 Ralph Walker designed his masterpiece. It is a building that towers over Trinity Church and over Trinity Church Cemetery, and is capped at the top by this huge crown—this very angular, crystal-shaped crown with huge windows inside it that light what was called the Observatory Room, which was not a public observatory but was a place where the board members and special guests of Irving Trust could go up and see the view of Lower Manhattan and the harbor. The building was designed to be extremely dramatic. It was designed to tower over the older

buildings of the city. And here in Chester Price's great drawing of the building, you can see it rising up above Trinity Church—Trinity Church signifying the old New York and the Irving Trust Company Building signifying everything that was new and progressive about New York.

The building was very expensive. It has a steel-framed structure, but it is covered entirely in white limestone. There is no brick on the façade; it is entirely limestone, and limestone was, of course, much more expensive than brick. And each block of limestone was custom cut. The whole building undulates so that you have these concave window bays here, and these were very expensive to cut. In fact, the undulating wall was compared to the wall of a curtain; and skyscrapers—steel skeleton—frame skyscrapers—were often referred to as being curtain-walled buildings, because you were hanging the façade of the building as if it were a curtain that you were hanging on your windows. Ralph Walker said that his design gave new meaning to the term *curtain wall*, because, in fact, the entire building was a giant curtain of undulating limestone, and the entrance is as if the curtain is parting. It is as if you are at the Metropolitan Opera House and the double curtain is beginning to part, allowing you to walk into some of the most spectacular interior spaces in New York.

## The Irving Trust Reception Hall

Now the Irving Trust Company Building was not a savings bank like the Bowery Savings Bank, where poor immigrants came to do their banking. This was where corporate presidents came, and enormously wealthy people had accounts at Irving. So you would walk into this palatial room, you would sit, and you would meet with a receptionist here before you were ushered upstairs to meet with your private banker.

This room was designed by Ralph Walker with a very important artist of the era, Hildreth Meiere, who had worked with many architects in designing the ornament on buildings. She worked very closely with Walker to come up with one of the most dramatic mosaic spaces in America. This room has a red marble wainscoting and red marble columns. Then, above the marble, the room is entirely in mosaic. It starts with deep red, with a web of gold going through it, at the base. And as you go up the colors get lighter and lighter, the web of gold gets more intense, and this

makes the room appear much taller than it actually is—until you get to this angled and faceted ceiling of orange and gold. There you have natural light and indirect, artificial light coming in and bouncing off of the mosaics to create this spectacularly scintillating space. The tesserae (the individual mosaic pieces) are all different shapes and all different textures so that the light will bounce off of them in different ways. And the mortar actually changes color, from black to blue, as it goes up. These glass mosaic pieces were made in Berlin at the Ravenna Mosaic Works, which was the leading mosaic company in the early twentieth century, so named because Ravenna was the site of the great early Christian mosaics. And they were assembled in Long Island City in Queens, where they would assemble huge pieces of the mural. They would assemble them on the floor of a warehouse. They would glue all the pieces onto paper. Then they would bring them to the site, and they would put cement on the wall, and they would put the entire piece up on the wall. Then they would pull off the paper, and they would wash off the glue. So this was preassembled very carefully—it was not done piece by piece on site. And they were able to do this with relative rapidity.

This room is still intact. Unfortunately, the main lobby, which had abstract murals that Hildreth Meiere also worked on, is no longer extant. Nonetheless, this remains one of the great buildings of its era. On the top of the building is this observation room, which had to be even more dramatic than the public room at the base. It had Aztec-inspired fabrics on the walls, carefully designed furniture, and a ceiling that is angled and faceted, and gets the light coming in through these huge windows. The light bounces off a Philippine cap of shells. These are seashells, imported from the Philippines, that have this shiny, white quality to them. The whole thing is alive with light bouncing off the space.

## Canyons of Wall Street

Now this is Bryce Canyon in Utah; this is clearly not New York City. But I think that one of the most important and interesting things about the skyscrapers of this era is how they captured the romantic imagination of the whole country. So New York became synonymous with progress. This was one of those rare periods in American thought when the city was looked at in a relatively positive way. People began to view New York as this dynamic, powerful city, and as this great symbol of America. The tall skyscrapers and the streets, with their narrow canyons lined with tall

buildings, became an image of the city that was looked at very positively. And here is Bryce Canyon, which became a national park to which more and more tourists began coming in the 1910s and the 1920s, as the railroad brought them. The canyons needed names. And this is the canyons of Wall Street. And I think it is a good indication of how the image of New York had become so powerful all across America that when you saw a tall, dark canyon, it conjured up images of New York. And, in fact, this was an image not only in places like Bryce Canyon but in cities all over the United States: In cities all over, skyscrapers began appearing that looked like New York City skyscrapers. They looked like they were built under the New York zoning law, even though these cities had no zoning laws at all. So here you have the Lincoln Leveque Tower in Columbus, Ohio, which looks as though it belongs on Wall Street. It has the vertical massing; it has the setbacks; it has the prominent tower. Or, here, on the skyline of Seattle, Washington, is another building that looks like it has been shipped out from somewhere in Lower Manhattan. And you can find this in Detroit, in Chicago, in Los Angeles, in cities all over the country where buildings are being built to look like New York skyscrapers, even though there was no requirement in these cities that they use the forms that were popular in New York.

## **Non-Office Buildings**

### The Garment Center

It is also important to remember that commercial buildings are not limited in New York to just office buildings. Now certainly the office economy was a crucial part of New York, but there were other parts of the commercial economy as well. New York in the early decades of the twentieth century remained a major industrial center. And the 1920s were the period of the development of the Garment District in New York, when high-rise garment factories began to take advantage of skyscraper construction. The Garment Center moved to the western part of Midtown, in the twenties and thirties on Seventh Avenue, and on the streets to the west. So you get tall, garment-center loft buildings with setbacks—because they had to follow the zoning law, too—and large windows to allow as much light to come into these buildings as possible. These two are very traditional in their detailing. They often have classical or Renaissance ornament on them. And on the rarest occasions, they will have ornamental details that have something to do with the garment industry. Maybe a peacock or a woman looking into a mirror or spools of thread will appear

on some of these buildings. But high-rise buildings also begin to be used for the industrial sector of New York.

## Art Deco in the Neighborhood

Art deco also becomes very popular for low-scale commercial buildings in New York's local neighborhoods. It was used in particular for building types where it was important to draw attention to the buildings, to try to attract clients to come into the building. One of the major users of art-deco ornament on its buildings were Horn and Hardart Automats. The automat was a popular kind of restaurant where you would actually buy food out of a machine. You put your money into a slot, you opened a little glass-and-bronze door, and you took your sandwich off of this little shelf. Or, if you wanted a cup of coffee, you took a coffee cup, you put a nickel in a slot, you held your coffee underneath a spout that was shaped like a dolphin's head, and the coffee came out. Well, these were early fast-food restaurants that needed to attract large numbers of people to come in, and they used architecture, very pizzazzy architecture, to draw attention.

This is a Horn and Hardart, or it was a Horn and Hardart restaurant on Broadway at about 103rd Street. And it had a giant two-story window on the ground floor. So if you were walking by this building you could look in, and you could see how bright and cheery it was, and how everybody was having a good time, and you would go in and spend some money. But if you were across the street, you could not actually see into that two-story window. So the building is highlighted at the top with polychrome, terra-cotta art-deco ornament, and this ornament drew your attention to the building. So you have these organic and geometric forms in these giant panels over the windows, and at the very top of the building you have this zigzag band, where the zigzags are overlaid over organic flower petals. All this is very colorful; it draws attention to the building and draws you inside the building.

## **European Modernism in New York**

### Starrett-Lehigh Building

This is also a period when European modern ideas are very slowly beginning to filter into New York. European Modernism developed in the 1910s and the 1920s,

but New York was a very conservative city and preferred to use much more conservative architectural forms. But by about 1930, some European modern ideas begin to appear in New York, nowhere more dramatically than at the Starrett-Lehigh Building, from 1930 to 1931, on the Hudson River waterfront. This building was designed by the firm of Cory and Cory, which specialized in industrial buildings, working, interestingly, with a Japanese immigrant architect named Yasuo Matsui, who was involved in a lot of skyscraper design in New York as well. This building has the horizontal massing, the ribbons of windows, the exposed concrete floors, the industrially made products, like concrete-and-steel windows—all of these industrial ideas that were imported to New York for one of the first times from Germany. These came from German ideas of exploiting the beauty of industrially made products to create something that is very dramatic. Now of course you were building it in New York, and it had to follow the 1916 zoning law. So you see that it has some setbacks, especially on the right-hand side of the building, which were a reflection of the requirements of the law. And then you have these spectacular horizontal ribbons of window, alternating with ribbons of brickwork, alternating with ribbons of exposed concrete flooring—and no applied ornament. This is almost the antithesis of the art-deco buildings, which were popular at this time because they were filled with beautiful, applied-ornamental detail. But here there is no applied ornament. The beauty and the drama is just the industrially made products.

## McGraw-Hill Building

You are looking at Raymond Hood's McGraw-Hill Building from about 1931, just a year after the Starrett-Lehigh Building was begun. It, too, has these horizontal ribbons of windows—steel windows—and they alternate with bands of green terra-cotta. The blocks below the windows are industrially made terra-cotta that is glazed green. (Raymond Hood was very interested in the use of color in architecture.) So this is a very modern building; even the setbacks that were required by the New York zoning law are kept at a visual minimum. Rather than cascading setbacks, as on the Chanin Building or the Fred French Building, these setbacks are very strongly horizontal. So if you are actually standing in front of the building, you are supposed to think that there are no setbacks, because the setbacks are done in this very subtle manner. And it is not until the top of the building, which had a giant sign that said "McGraw-Hill" on it, that you get to something that is very much of the New York of the late 1920s and early 1930s, because it was used as an

advertisement for the McGraw-Hill Publishing Company. And, although it was originally bright orange and was very visible, the words McGraw-Hill are still there. They have been painted out, but if you look at the top of the building very carefully, you can see the original sign is still there.

The McGraw-Hill Building is located on Forty-second Street between Eighth and Ninth avenues. So it is further west than that core of office buildings that had been built and was being built in the area around Grand Central Terminal. The reason for this is in another part of the zoning law of 1916, which established separate-use districts in New York. There was an office-use district, and there were residential districts and manufacturing districts. And the McGraw-Hill Building was both the offices of the McGraw-Hill Publishing Company and a place where they actually did publishing, where they actually did printing. So it had to be located in an area that was zoned industrial, and that had to be west of Eighth Avenue. That is why Raymond Hood designed a building for a site that was so far west, and it remains one of the only skyscraper office buildings that is west of Eighth Avenue.

## **Rockefeller Center**

### The Genesis

After the success of the McGraw-Hill Building and several other office buildings that Hood designed, he was asked to become one of the architects for one of the largest construction projects in New York—Rockefeller Center. Hood was responsible for the design of its major buildings. Rockefeller Center is not only great architecture but is great urban design and great urban planning. It is a complex of buildings extending over several blocks. This complex has been imitated in other cities, but the others have never equaled how spectacular Rockefeller Center is. The genesis of Rockefeller Center was an interest by the Metropolitan Opera in having a new opera house. The Metropolitan Opera House was located on Broadway at about Fortieth Street in a building that had been erected in the 1880s and was really out of date. So they were looking for a new home. And John D. Rockefeller Jr., who was very interested in the civic realm in New York, became interested in helping the Metropolitan Opera find it. He had a proposal for them: He would build a complex of buildings that would include a site that he would give to the Metropolitan Opera, and then they would raise the money to build the new opera house. So this was a way for the Met to get a site, basically, for free. And the Metropolitan Opera in the

late 1920s, during a period of economic boom, thought this was a really good idea.

So Rockefeller arranges to lease land along Fifth Avenue south of Fiftieth Street from Columbia University, which owned the property between Fifth and Sixth avenues. It was a long-term lease, and he brought together a series of advisers, including several architects and economic advisers, who were helping him to decide what kind of office buildings to build. And a decision is made that they will build a complex and the Metropolitan Opera House will be right in the center, in the core of this development. The stock market crashes in October of 1929, and shortly thereafter the Metropolitan Opera realizes that they're never going to be able to raise the money to build an opera house, so they bow out of the project. But Rockefeller has a long-term lease on the site; he has to do something with it. So he and his advisers decide that they are going to create a great office and entertainment facility. And it is going to be a spectacularly beautiful place that will attract the public, but will also make an enormous profit—these office buildings and the theatres and the shops are going to be profitable.

He begins the design and planning of this complex, and it was planned in a very interesting manner. Along Fifth Avenue there would be low-rise buildings, because Fifth Avenue at that time was basically a low-rise street. There were still many residential buildings, many mansions, located on Fifth Avenue, so Fifth Avenue was going to have low-rise buildings. Then in the center of the complex, where the Metropolitan Opera House was supposed to be, would be the largest office building in the complex, the one that became known as the RCA Building. Around it would be smaller office buildings, and there would be shops on the street and shops underground that would connect people to the new subway that was being built on Sixth Avenue. There would also be theatres that would attract people in the evenings. So you would have a community of office workers and shoppers during the day and theatergoers during the evening.

## The Plan

The plan was very sophisticated. You would move from Fifth Avenue down a major promenade, and it would take you to a sunken plaza—now an ice-skating rink but originally a shopping plaza. From there you would go underground through shopping arcades. Then you would go to Sixth Avenue where the subway was, or if

you did not want to go underground, you could walk along the streets, as all the buildings would have shops along the street. So you would be spending money in the shops as you went along, and you would have all this office space that was being rented to corporations.

Rockefeller pitched this new complex to two different kinds of businesses. He was very interested in the idea that you could have world peace through international trade, so he hoped to attract a lot of companies involved in international trade. The small buildings on Fifth Avenue were going to be given over to the great economic powers of Europe. There would be a British Building, a French Building, an Italian Building, and a German Building. And the tall building behind would be known as the International Building; it would be for the offices of trade organizations from other countries all over the world. His other interest was in technology, especially in communications technology. He hoped to be able to rent space to modern, up-to-date technology companies, so RCA, the Radio Corporation of America, was an obvious tenant for him. And he was able to attract RCA to move into the tallest building in the complex.

This complex was built during the Depression, but Rockefeller was able to attract tenants, even though it was not fully rented. He was able to attract paying tenants because, of course, members of the Rockefeller family were on the boards of directors of a number of these corporations. So he was able to lure some of these companies to move into this new, very modern complex.

You enter the complex along the promenade, and it separates the British Empire Building from the French Building, so immediately people in New York began calling this the Channel Gardens, as if it were the English Channel separating England from France. Even to this day, although the sign at the entrance says Promenade, it is actually called by most people the Channel Gardens.

Here is a fountain with plantings in the middle. The Rockefeller group was very interested in making this complex as beautiful and dramatic as possible. But the fountain is not in the middle just for beauty. This promenade is as wide as a city street, so if there were no fountain here, you might be strolling up the middle of the street, which meant you were not window shopping and you were not going into the stores. So this is placed right in the middle so that when you walk down this promenade, you are close to the shops, and so that you have to see what is for sale in these shops, and hopefully you will go in and spend some money. You are

also on axis here with the RCA Building, the tallest, most dramatic building in the complex.

## The Ornament of Rockefeller Center

This is a very French-inspired, Beaux-Arts plan. The planning here is very traditional; everything is on axis. You are carefully moved through the space, just as you are moved through the space at a traditional Beaux-Arts building, like the New York Public Library.

Also, as on most of the great Beaux-Arts public monuments, like the New York Public Library or the U.S. Custom House at Bowling Green, the ornament on this building is very traditional. It is almost all allegorical. It is always almost entirely symbolic of ideas that Rockefeller was interested in. For example, on axis with the Channel Gardens is *Wisdom, shown parting the clouds of ignorance*. The Rockefeller family was very interested in education, so the family funded a large number of educational projects. And because they were very interested in this idea, it is given a prominent place in the complex.

Their interest also in world trade is very evident at one of the entrances to the International Building, where you have symbols of trade, of the New World and the Old World, and of the northern and the southern hemispheres. You have a clock at the top that is actually a sun, and the sun is shining on Mercury, the god of commerce. Just below the sun is Mercury. You can always identify him, because he has a little, winged helmet on. To the left and right of Mercury are the four elements: earth, air, water, and fire. Below him are symbols of technology and industry. That is flanked by a mosque, signifying the Old World, and a Mayan or an Aztec temple, symbolizing the New World. Below is a ship of exploration, and the ship is going between the castles of Europe and the industry of America. And below that are figures of the four races that are identified by racial characteristics. To the left and right are the eagle of the New World and the lion of the Old World. So all of this is about the different parts of the world and about world trade because of Rockefeller's view that through trade you would have international understanding, and all the peoples of the world would come together.

## **The International-Style Skyscraper**

### The Long Hiatus

Now Rockefeller Center was built during the Depression, when very little new construction was occurring in New York. So with the exception of the center's buildings, there was a long hiatus in the construction of commercial buildings in New York, first because of the Depression and then because of World War II. During the 1930s, many of the great modern masters of Europe came to America. When the Nazis closed the Bauhaus in Germany, many of the Bauhaus masters, like Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, came to America and began teaching at architectural schools. By the late 1940s there were many graduates of these schools who were no longer interested in art-deco ornament or in the planning of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, but they had been inspired by European Modernism. So when building begins again in New York, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the older ideas are no longer satisfying. Now, European modern ideas come to the forefront.

One of the ironies is that, at the Bauhaus in Germany, much of this modern design was used to further a socialist agenda. A lot of it was for reform housing, for the creation of household arts that would be industrially made and beautiful and affordable to the people. But in America, where this becomes popular in about 1950, Americans could not have cared less about the philosophy behind the Bauhaus ideas. Instead of being a vision for a socialist future, it becomes a vision for a corporate future. The modernist, or international, style becomes synonymous with American corporate towers, and some of the most beautiful modern buildings are built as the headquarters for American corporations. Interestingly, though, the two greatest early monuments of modernism in commercial architecture in New York were built not by American corporations but by an Anglo-Dutch corporation (Lever House) and a Canadian distilling company (Seagram). Yet they become symbols of New York, and its modern outlook, as a great city moving into the future.

### Lever House

Lever House—which was designed by Gordon Bunshaft, a partner in the firm Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, and completed in 1952 on Park Avenue—really establishes the idea of European modernism as appropriate for corporate buildings in America. It was built on Park Avenue, which was a street that was being redeveloped from a street of traditional red-brick and limestone apartment buildings and institutional buildings into a commercial street of great office buildings. In order to appreciate just how dramatic Lever House was, you have to look at an old view of it. Here is this spectacular glass building with its clear glass and its blue glass panels that set at a right angle to the street. It does not hug the street wall; it is set at an angle to the street and set up on stilts so that it sort of floats over the street. And there it is on a street of traditional brick buildings. So it is very difficult to imagine today just how dramatic this floating-glass, modern building must have been on this street of brick and limestone buildings. It is as if Lever House were moved today to Park Avenue and Seventy-fourth Street in the midst of all of those luxury apartment buildings, because that is what Park Avenue south of Fifty-ninth Street looked like in the 1920s through to the early 1950s. So Lever House not only was a new kind of architecture, but was placed in a traditional environment, which made it an even more dramatic structure in New York.

## A Deceptively Simple Design

It looks so easy to design. Yet using these industrial materials in the most perfect proportions is such a difficult thing to carry off. You need to look at this building as if it were a Mondrian painting. It looks so easy, but it is so complex and so difficult to carry off in such a perfect way. The Lever company uses the building as an advertisement. Lever made soap and other cleanliness products, so what could be a better advertisement for the company than a transparent glass building shaped almost like a soap bar?

This building was a great marketing tool for Lever, which occupied it until the late 1990s, but it also established a new idea for corporate identity in America—not only for corporations whose names would be attached to buildings, like Lever or Seagram, but even for the speculative builders that would erect skyscrapers to

imitate Lever House.

## Seagram Building

Lever House was followed a few years later by the Seagram Building, diagonally across the street from it on Park Avenue. The Seagram company purchased this site with the intention of building a corporate headquarters, but they were not particularly interested in architecture to start with. They hired a local, not particularly talented, firm that designed a building of great banality. So Phyllis Lambert, who was the daughter of Seagram's president, went to her father and said, "You cannot do this. This is going to be the corporate headquarters in New York. You really have to design a great building."

So her father let Phyllis choose the architect. Cost was really no object. And Phyllis, who was a trained architect, went to Mies van der Rohe, the great Bauhaus master, who was teaching in Chicago. Mies van der Rohe designed one of the great buildings of the twentieth century. It is a building of extraordinary complexity in its design. It is a slab and has no setbacks. So how, for example, under the 1916 zoning law, which was still in effect in the 1950s, did this building—and indeed Lever House—get away with building a slab? The reason is that these buildings occupy only 25 percent of their lot, and in the zoning law you could build a tower of any height on 25 percent of your lot—thus the slender tower on the Chrysler Building or the Empire State Building, and thus the slabs with no setbacks on the Seagram Building and on Lever House. Because cost was no object, Mies van der Rohe was able to clad this building in bronze, actually a bronze that is given a dark tint. The bronze is not actually structural, but it covers the structural members of the building and gives it this very solid, dramatic quality on Park Avenue. The entire bronze slab is set back on a plaza with very subtly designed shallow fountains in the front, so that as you go into the building, you are walking through this beautiful, simplified landscape into the lobby. Then the lobby, in contrast to the dark quality of the building's exterior, is done in magnificently cut white travertine. So you have this wonderful contrast between the outside and the inside.

The building is also very complex in its geometry. You have these tall, rectangular windows and below is a spandrel panel of bronze. If you look at the spandrel panels below the windows, you will notice that there is a channel running around each, so

it appears that the spandrel is floating. The same thing is true of the windows. There is a recessed channel going all the way around each window, as if each element is freely floating on the building. So these transparent, floating glass windows and floating bronze panels relieve the massiveness of the structure. Mies understood that the geometry of his building would be perfect until people got involved. Once people moved in, they would be putting ornamental things along the window sills, they would be hanging all different kinds of curtains, and it would destroy the geometry. So there are no window sills; there is no place for you to put plants on the window. He supplied every single office with curtains, and all the curtains are exactly the same. And he supplied every window with venetian blinds, and the blinds open all the way, or they close all the way, or they stop halfway—those are the only places you can stop them, because he did not want venetian blinds everywhere or blinds set at angles. He wanted to try to make the building a useable one that people would want to be in, but he also wanted to protect the grandeur of its design.

## International Style

Lever House and the Seagram Building were followed by other office buildings, some better than others. The simplicity of international-style design, the perfection of its geometry, and the necessity to choose very carefully the most beautiful materials and juxtapose them with one another was very sophisticated. Yet it was so easy to debase this idea. And there are so many ugly international-style buildings, which really are, I think, what gave modern architecture such a bad name. People tended to forget the great buildings like Lever House and Seagram and only look at the speculative buildings that went up around them on Park Avenue and other streets of the city.

Some speculative buildings rose above the average. This is the Time-Life Building on Sixth Avenue, part of the expansion of Rockefeller Center to the west. And although Time-Life gave its name to the building, this was a speculative office building that was built in part by the Rockefeller interests. It was built in the late 1950s and, like Seagram and Lever, it occupies only 25 percent of its lot area and has plazas around it with fountains. These all became wonderfully popular public spaces in New York. It was this building and the success of the building like this that led the city to change the zoning law in the early 1960s. The city did away with

the setback massing and the slender towers that had been required earlier, and went instead for the requirement of slabs on plazas that would give a lot of open space and light and air to the densely built-up commercial areas of New York. And when planning decisions were in the hands of designers or builders who really cared about such things, you were given beautiful plazas, as you have with Time-Life or the Seagram Building. But, for the most part, when the speculative builders started erecting these buildings under the zoning law, the plazas were hidden in the shadows and became really bleak places. So, unfortunately, a lot of uninteresting plazas were created.

Buildings like Time-Life also used beautiful lobbies in the same way, in a sense, that the Chanin and the Chrysler and the Irving Trust Building did. They wanted to impress you when you walked in. But with modernism, with the international style, it was done in a different way. Instead of adding applied ornament as part of the structure, instead of having murals that were part of the building or mosaics on the walls, many of the best modern buildings purchased or commissioned works of art that are removable. They were placed in the interior to be a part of its drama, not designed structurally as part of the building's interior. The Time-Life Building is a good example of this. It has very dynamic terrazzo floors, as you can see. And there are murals that were commissioned and placed on the wall. But if this building were ever to be torn down, which I certainly hope it will not be, this mural by Fritz Glarner could be picked up and moved out and placed someplace else.

## **New Models for Skyscrapers**

### Returning to Style

Unfortunately, the late 1950s and the 1960s were a period when a lot of mediocre architecture was built in New York. The builders began forgetting that architecture was a good marketing tool—something that was clearly understood earlier in the twentieth century when the skyscraper really flowered. So you get a lot of very poor-quality buildings in New York. But by the 1970s it was realized again that if you spent a little bit of money on building good architecture, you could get a larger return on your investment; that people really wanted to be in beautiful buildings; that tenants wanted to be in beautiful buildings because it reflected well on them (when clients came, they would come through a great lobby and think very positively of a tenant); and that if a company's name was going to be on the

building, it was better if the building was a beautiful one.

The first building that tried to return to the notion of architecture as an important visible symbol on the skyline was the Citicorp Center, which was begun in 1974 during a period of economic downturn in New York. It was really a statement by Citibank and Citicorp that they had faith in the future of New York. They purchased a very large site on Lexington Avenue and commissioned a Boston architect, Hugh Stubbins, to design a new building. It would not be a building with a flat roof, like most of the buildings of the 1950s and 1960s, but, like the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building, it would have an unusual shape that would be highly visible on the city's skyline. Now I personally do not think this building is a great aesthetic success, but I think it marks a change in the notion of architecture. Now architecture was again going to play an important role in the streetscape of New York. It was also going to be the first major building in New York to have an interior mall with a shopping arcade and restaurants. And it was going to be a building that would display the drama of its structure. So it stands on these stilts at the base so when you walk by, you are in awe of its structure. This is something that the architects of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were very aware of, that structure was important, and now again in Citicorp there is an effort to really dramatize the structure of the building.

## Millennium United Nations Plaza Hotel

Another alternative that architects began using in the 1970s was what came to be known as late modernism. It was to take the idea of the international-style glass skyscraper, but turn it into something that was much more sculptural. So here at the Millennium United Nations Plaza Hotel, designed by the firm of Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo Associates in 1976, the building almost looks like it has been shaped by a glacier. It creates a very dramatic shape on the skyline but using the ideas of European modernism, using industrially made products with no applied ornament, but now done in a very sculptural manner. And this kind of late modernism became very popular in the 1970s—trying to see how we can take modern ideas a step further without getting rid of the beauty of the vision of the modern skyscraper. Like hotels in the nineteenth century, the Millennium United Nations Plaza Hotel was a conscious effort to use architecture to create a building that would be highly

visible on the skyline and would attract attention.

## Postmodernism

Another development of the 1970s was a return to the architecture of the past in what came to be known as postmodernism, which appears for the first time in a commercial building in the old AT&T Building, now the Sony Building, which was designed by Philip Johnson and John Burgee in 1978. AT&T wanted a new headquarters. They purchased a very prominent site on Madison Avenue between Fifty-fifth and Fifty-sixth streets. And Philip Johnson designed a building that really raided the history of architecture for its ornamental details. It has a top that looks like that of an eighteenth-century Chippendale clock and, in fact, the building became known as the Chippendale Skyscraper. So it uses an eighteenth-century form at the top, but the base of the building is designed with this Renaissance arcade with ocular windows at the end which are wider on the outside of the circle than they are on the inside. This was a form borrowed from the Duomo in Florence, from Brunelleschi's great early-Renaissance dome on the main church in Florence. So Philip Johnson is looking to the architecture of the past to create a postmodern style that becomes very influential on skyscraper architecture all over the country in the late 1970s and in the 1980s. Many of these buildings were even designed by Johnson.

## World Trade Center

Part of the expansion of New York in the 1960s and early 1970s was the construction of the World Trade Center towers, which were built to top the Empire State Building and be the world's tallest buildings. These were buildings that carried on the idea of the skyscraper as an iconic image of the city. They became a powerful symbol of New York to people all over the world who identified these towers with the city, probably because they're very tall and because there were two of them. But from the point of view of architecture, they do not really move it forward in any great direction. They were never considered notable works of architecture; they were considered more iconic images. And now, since their tragic destruction, they even more consciously have become an icon of New York.

## World Financial Center

A few years after the World Trade Center buildings were completed, on the landfill that was created with the excavation of the World Trade Center, construction of the World Financial Center began. The World Financial Center was an effort by the architect Cesar Pelli both to put the World Trade Center into a scale within the city and also to create what he claimed would be a late-twentieth-century version of Rockefeller Center. It would be a complex of office buildings centered around a great public space, and the great public space was to be the Winter Garden, this great, domed glass space. Pelli looked at the old skyscrapers of New York and what it was about them that captured the romantic imagination of people. Why did people love the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building, or both? Of course because of their soaring silhouettes, but also because of their unusually shaped tops. So each building at the World Financial Center was given a different-shaped top so that each building would have its own identity.

But these were not going to be old buildings. They were going to be modern buildings, so at least on the tops of the buildings, they are all glass. And they are incredibly bulky buildings, because with the advent of air-conditioning and florescent lighting, it no longer mattered whether you had windows or not. You could have artificial lighting and have artificial air, so you could be as far as necessary from a window, whereas in the earlier years, as at the Empire State Building or the Chrysler Building you needed to open up the windows, and you needed to get natural light inside because incandescent light was not quite as strong or shadowproof as fluorescent lighting is. Also, with the advent of computers there was a demand for large floor spaces so you could have all the technological equipment on a floor. So you get these buildings with a massive bulk. And although they turn back, in one sense, to the architecture of the past with their different tops, they have the large floor plates and bulky massing, which is what is in demand in the late-twentieth and the early-twenty-first century. In an effort to dissolve the bulk, or at least to attempt to dissolve it, they start as stone on the bottom and as they go up there is more and more glass. So there is an effort to create transparency, but of course the glass is really not transparent at all, so you read these as huge bulks. And although the zoning did not require it, there are setbacks here, so it looks a little bit like the older buildings in New York. So buildings are very new and modern and yet hark back to the tradition of the New

York skyscraper.

## **The New Millennium**

### Times Square

In the latter part of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s there was an economic downturn and there was very little skyscraper construction. So many buildings had been erected in the 1960s and early 1970s that there was a glut of office space. It was not until the second half of the 1990s that office-building construction really picked up again. And a lot of the new buildings center on Times Square, where there was a major push to clean up and redevelop the area with office buildings. There are attempts again not only to work with both modernism and modern ideas, to use new materials and to use glass in innovative ways, but also to try to capture the dynamism of the city—something that had been a very important part of the architecture of the late 1920s during the art-deco period. This is very evident at the Condé Nast Building, which was designed by the architectural firm of Fox and Fowle, on the corner of Forty-second Street and Broadway. The building reflects on the hybrid character of New York. New York is a city with sedate business areas and dynamic entertainment areas, and the east façade of the Condé Nast Building, which faces Fifth Avenue and the Grand Central Terminal, where lots of office buildings are located, is very calm. There is a rhythm of windows and there is not a lot of applied ornament. But then you get to the side that faces Times Square. It is a riot of light and advertising and a reflection of the popular culture, which created the dynamic spirit of Times Square. So you have lighted signs, you have a curving façade, you have lots of different materials almost clashing with one another on the design. This is evident during the day and even more evident at night, when signs like the NASDAQ sign are lit up and the building almost appears to be taking off like a rocket ship. And this idea of the hybrid, dynamic quality of New York and the fractured quality of life in the city is that as you move through the city, you are constantly experiencing different environments and seeing different kinds of people, and there is a rush to move through the city.

LVMH

This kind of idea—of the fractured quality of urban life—becomes a very important element in more recent skyscraper design. It is here in Fox and Fowle's Condé Nast Building and on other new buildings that are going up in the Times Square area. At its most sophisticated, it is evident at the LVMH Tower, which was designed by Christian de Portzamparc—one of the great French architects of our time—who designed a modestly scaled building for a purveyor of luxury goods. It is on Fifty-seventh Street, a very sedate street. The building has angles of glass that intersect with one another to create this almost fractured look, which not only is an indication of perceptions of contemporary life but also, of course, draws attention to the building. On this sedate street of stone buildings, you are looking at this fractured building, which changes from the day to the night and is most dramatic when it is lit up. Portzamparc understood that New York skyscrapers were often about marketing. It is evident here, too, that he wants you to focus on this building and, of course, on LVMH (Louis Vuitton), and the other products that this company makes, just as Chrysler wanted you to focus on the Chrysler Building.

## New Forms

The history of the skyscraper now stretches back over 125 years, and here in the early twenty-first century we are still evolving new forms for the skyscraper. This great art form is still something that really is a very potent symbol in New York. Several great new buildings are in the planning stage, and some of them are designed by architects of international stature. Lord Norman Foster has designed a new building for the Hearst magazines that will be built on Eighth Avenue at Fifty-seventh Street as this grand, faceted-glass tower. The Italian architect Renzo Piano has designed a transparent tower as the headquarters for the *New York Times*, which will add to the grandeur of New York's skyline, and will again place New York in the forefront of the development of the skyscraper.