

DAY TWO KEYNOTE: ARCHITECTS, ARTISTS, AND THE MAKING OF CITIES— THE SKYSCRAPER, PUBLIC SPACE, AND URBAN IDENTITY IN THE 1920S



Two recent skyscrapers, 432 Park Avenue in New York City (Rafael Viñoly, 2010–15) and the St. Regis Chicago (Jeanne Gang, 2014–20), suggest two very different notions on how to relate the skyscraper to the public spaces of the city. The former stands isolated in Midtown as the tallest residential “super-slender” and at its base features a privately owned sidewalk-level forecourt isolating it from the public life of the city. The latter, Chicago’s third-tallest skyscraper, anchors a new cluster of skyscrapers just to the northeast of the city’s Loop, houses a hotel and condominiums, and incorporates an array of public spaces in its lower levels, linking Wacker Drive to the city’s Riverwalk and Lakeshore East residential enclave.

These and other recent designs lead one to ask: How might the skyscraper contribute to the public life of the city? More specifically, what are the types of public spaces that builders and designers of skyscrapers might consider in effectively relating their designs to the urban surroundings, thus enhancing the public experience of the city?

A historical perspective is useful for evaluating such questions, and shows that architects and the enterprises for whom they designed as well as artists — the photographers, printmakers, and illustrators that both appreciated and inspired those designs — focused on the skyscrapers’ relation to a variety of public spaces, ranging from a city’s streets to public squares, rooftop terraces and observation decks, and equally important, the varying ways in which such tall construction shaped skyline views, crystallizing the very identity of a city.

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She is author of *The Skyscraper and the City: The Woolworth Building and the Making of Modern New York* (University of Chicago Press, 2008) and co-editor of *Aalto and America* (Yale University Press, 2012). She is currently preparing *Skyscrapers: Landmarks in American Cities* for publication with the Library of Congress. She is also the author of several essays in books, among them *Skyscraper Gothic* (University of Virginia Press, 2017), *The American Skyscraper: Cultural Histories* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), and *The Landscape of Modernity* (John Hopkins University Press, 1997), as well as more recently, the bibliography “Skyscrapers” for *Oxford Bibliographies in Architecture, Planning, and Preservation* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

She has recently served as Book Review Editor, the Americas, for the *Society of Architectural Historians Journal*; in the Office of Secretary, *Society of Architectural Historians*; and on the Board of Directors for the *Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative* (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and MIT). At Roger Williams University, she has served as Director, Program in Art & Architectural History for the Cummings School of Architecture, as well as serving on the Honors Advisory Council, Faculty Senate, and the Foundation to Promote Scholarship and Teaching.

The First Skyscrapers

From the design of New York's very first skyscrapers, noted among them the Tribune Building (Richard Morris Hunt, 1872–75), which featured a proud central tower, and the World Building (George Post, 1889–90), crowned with a gilded dome, the architects and builders of the city's tallest and most monumental of skyscrapers aimed to establish their importance in public life. Both served as the headquarters of newspapers that faced the public open space of City Hall Park and both projected a civic aura through their relationship to the City Hall. The World cultivated its relationship to the city's crowds with a new feature, a publicly accessible observation deck, which afforded all visitors a spectacular panorama of the city and the surrounding waterways. Similarly, in Chicago, when constructing the Masonic Temple (Burnham & Root, 1891–92), the city's tallest, the Illinois order of Freemasons conceived it as a "civic skyscraper" and aimed to establish the city through its design of "the highest of all roof gardens" as "the pivotal center of the continent."



New York Skyline, view from Hudson River. Postcard, ca. 1900.



Chicago's Waterfront 1912. Kaufmann, Weimar, and Fabry Co., photographer. Prints & Photograph Division, Library of Congress.



"Ernest Flagg, City of Towers," 1908. O. F. Semsch, *A History of Singer Building Construction* (New York, 1908).

Chicago and New York Circa 1900

Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, designed as a model city by D. H. Burnham, Charles McKim, Richard Morris Hunt, and others brought national attention to the significance of urban design in structuring and enhancing the public spaces of the city. The exposition's Court of Honor set the standards for the American city's public open spaces, as did the Design's prescription of a uniform cornice line for all buildings, which had important implications for any city's streets. Burnham & Bennett's later *Plan of Chicago* (1909), designed in accordance with the now widespread City Beautiful ideal, featured spacious sunlit boulevards with plantings and fountains, defined by tall buildings rising to a uniform cornice height of six to ten stories.

In Chicago at the twentieth-century's turn Burnham's vision of a City Beautiful carried the day, as shown by D. H. Burnham & Company's design of some of the city's most important skyscrapers, among them the Railway Exchange

(1903–04) and People's Gas (1910–11) buildings, both of which exceeded the *Plan of Chicago's* specified heights — the city had implemented in 1902 a new height restriction of 260 feet — but still showed respect for the plan's commitment to the public spaces of the city. With their uniform cornice lines and well-lit light courts, they infused their urban surroundings with a classical order and urban decorum, speaking to the importance of such design to the city's public life.



Ernest Flagg, Singer Tower, New York, 1906-08. Postcard, 1908.

During the same years, New York City developed a wholly contrasting urban identity, that of the world's first "signature skyline," in which the skyscraper assumed a newly powerful role in the profile views of the city. After the completion of the World Building, New York's architects, who showed the same concern as the Chicagoans for the quality of the city's public spaces, had repeatedly attempted to pass a height restriction and repeatedly failed. The critic Montgomery Schuyler described the new skyline as "bewildering and stupefying in the mass, with no ensemble but strife and struggle," while the writer Henry James decried the new social order for which it stood: a "vast, crude democracy of trade."

In 1906, Ernest Flagg designed the Singer Tower as the world's tallest skyscraper, and in doing so, proposed his vision for the future of New York as a "city of towers." Using the Singer Tower as the city's model he suggested that "isolated pinnacles" occupying just one-quarter of a site's buildable area, rise above a low, classical cornice line to previously unconquerable heights. As a leading advocate in New York for height restrictions, Flagg made it his mission as an architect to reform the skyscraper, and in particular, to ameliorate its impact on the public streets of the city — now

maligned by chaos and visual disorder, and thrown into shadow without light and air — but just as important, to shape its impact on skyline views.

Flagg’s ideas found a counterpart in Cass Gilbert’s original design for the West Street Building (1905–07) and the Woolworth Building (1910–13), both of which featured proud, central towers. Not unlike Flagg, Gilbert aspired to create a distinctive identity for New York as a “towered city.” For inspiration, he looked to the free-trading cities of Flanders during the late Middle Ages, notably Bruges, at the time the preeminent port of northern Europe, with a profile view distinguished by an array of distinctive secular towers. Gilbert viewed the New York of his day as a comparable center of world trade. Both Flagg and Gilbert acknowledged the skyscraper as fundamentally commercial — its steel-framed construction provided the most valuable of commodities, office space for rent, and advertising with the “world’s tallest” served the financial ends of not only the Singer and Woolworth companies but also the products they sold around the world.



Woolworth Building on City Hall Park at Park Row, New York. Photographer unknown, ca. 1915. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



“Some High Buildings of Lower New York.” A. Loeffler, photographer, 1908. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



Seattle, view with Mount Ranier, showing L.C. Smith Tower, 1912-14. Photographer unknown, ca. 1920. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

New York’s “city of towers” inspired artists and illustrators, ranging from the avant-garde photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn to guidebook publisher Moses King, but also attracted tourists, who flocked to the towers’ observation decks. Most important, the city’s planners recognized that New York, now a “city majestic” had taken the place of the “city beautiful,” and as such, had crystallized a wholly new and distinctively modern identity for the city.

New York’s creation of such a modern, cosmopolitan “city of towers,” took on a special allure in major cities across the United States — as shown by the construction of spectacular towers as skyline features in Cincinnati, Seattle, and San Francisco, with the Union Central Life Building, L. C. Smith Tower, and the Call Building, respectively, standing as isolated towers, providing each city with a noted and memorable landmark, calling attention to the importance of each in the nation’s economy.

The 1920s in New York, Chicago, and the Nation’s Major Cities

Chicago in the 1920s followed the pattern recently established by cities across the nation, showing the influence of New York’s “city of towers.” As the economic engine of the Midwest and the nation’s “second city,” it had by 1923 revised its varied earlier flat height restrictions, implementing a new ordinance that allowed the addition of tall, slender spires to the city’s earlier block-like pattern of office structures.

Chicago’s 1923 law specified a flat height limit of 264 feet while also permitting towers over 25 percent of a city lot, albeit limiting their cubic volume to one-sixth of the building itself. Still, the towers could rise as high as 20 stories, and in their contrasting designs, created a new and remarkable skyline silhouette, a dynamic interplay among the individually-designed spires, now appearing daringly thin and tall, poised on top of lower blocky structures. According to one contemporary, Chicago’s “city of towers” now “stood for the city as a whole,” presenting the “real picture of Chicago today.”

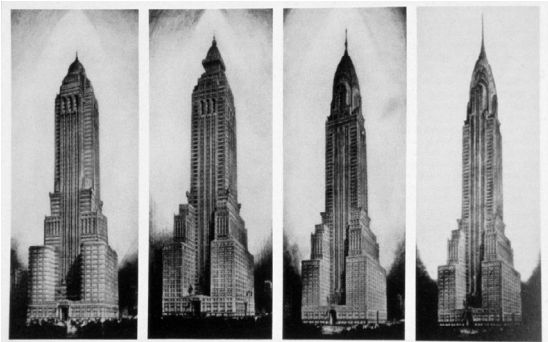
New York during the 1920s, already world-renowned for its skyscrapers, achieved still further distinction as the quintessential modern metropolis. Its skyline comprised two sets of towers, those of the Financial District and the new Midtown, with the latter the city’s most energetic site of construction and, from the standpoint of public entertainment and the arts, its newest center of gravity. By the end of the decade, the skyscrapers of Midtown echoed those of the Financial District, albeit not as tightly clustered together, with many sharing the same features: stepped back massing, slender towers, and distinctive crowns.



Detroit skyline, showing Penobscot Building, 1927-28, and Guardian Building, 1927-28, ca. 1935. Detroit Publishing Company. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



Chicago, view of skyline, ca. 1930, showing Straus Building, Roanoke Building, Jewelers Building, Mather Tower, Wrigley Building, and the Chicago Tribune Tower. Kaufmann & Fabry Co., photographer. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



William Van Alen, Chrysler Building, 1928-30. Eddowes Co., Inc., photographer. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress

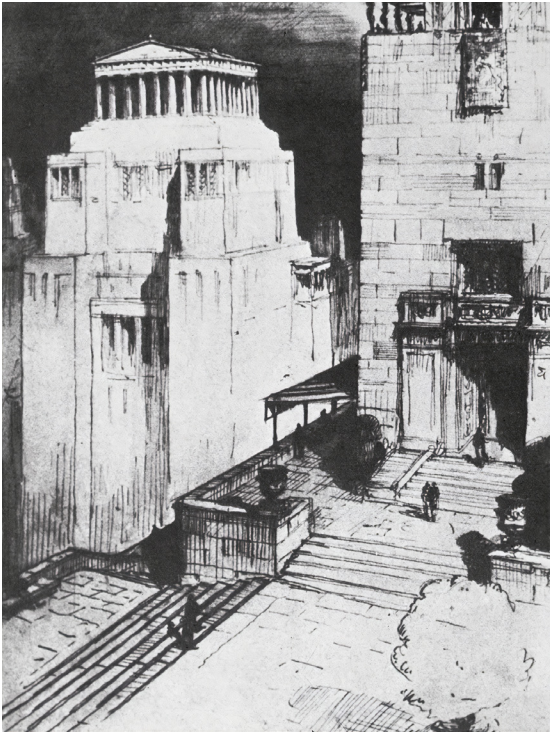
Behind New York's distinctive skyline, there laid a clear set of rules, defined with precision by the Zoning Resolution of 1916. The law comprised use districts and height districts, with the latter governed by exacting dimensions prescribing setbacks and an "angle of light." It aimed, ultimately, to make the city's streets not only habitable, but also dignified experientially as public spaces for the city's sidewalk crowds. Over one-quarter of any site, towers were permitted to rise to an infinite height, the feature that Chicagoans had welcomed (as opposed to the setbacks) in framing their code of 1923. Architects such as Hugh Ferriss and Harvey Wiley Corbett viewed the law poetically as well as pragmatically. It inspired Ferriss in proposing his *Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1922-29). In Ferriss's future city, governed by what he called "humanistic values," pyramidal clusters of towers — each of which took four city blocks, rose like mountains out of the vast urban infrastructure of transportation and machinery below, and stepped back to become more ethereal in reaching 1,000 feet high — the architect organized along axes and cross axes, creating wide avenues accompanied with planted squares and lower perimeter blocks of housing, incorporating associated greenery, light, and air. All spoke to the importance of public space.

Perhaps the most important feature of Ferriss's future metropolis was its illustration of the law's prescribed setbacks for potentially creating terraces and living aloft. He asked how might such terraces be used for a variety of public purposes: "a masked ball atop a fine arts building"?

Midtown's construction during the 1920s reached new and dazzling heights. The spurt of activity on building sites close to Grand Central Station included Sloan & Robertson's Chanin Building (1926-29), which set a new height record for Midtown, followed by William Van Alen's Chrysler Building (1928-30), the world's tallest at 1,048 feet. Both skyscrapers exploited for the sake of urban theater the new ornamental vocabulary later called "Art Deco." While influenced by Paris's 1925 Exposition of Decorative Arts, which featured ornamental patterns from widely diverse places in the world and all times in history, the Art Deco also incorporated sources from film, for instance Robert Wiene's "Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" and Fritz Lang's "Metropolis," as well as sources closer to home, echoing prints by the New York artists Louis Lozowick and Winhold Reiss, the latter of whom documented the exuberant nightlife of the Harlem Renaissance. The Chrysler Building, in particular, was bound up with this imagery, which aimed to capture an audience of sidewalk crowds with a new form of urban theater, as if Broadway's great theatrical spectacles had moved outdoors to merge with the public spaces of the city.



Chrysler Building and other skyscrapers, ca. 1930. Irving Underhill, photographer. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



Hugh Ferriss, "Civic Architecture of the Immediate Future." *Arts and Decoration* 18 (November 1922), also printed in *Metropolis of Tomorrow* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1929).



Associated Architects (Harvey Wiley Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray, Hood & Foulhoux, Reinhard & Hofmeister), Rockefeller Center, variation of scheme "G3," showing roof garden, 1932. *Rockefeller Center* (New York: Rockefeller Center, Inc., 1932). Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

New York's two sets of towers participated in a certain intra-urban rivalry, as shown by the highly-publicized, competitive race for height between Van Alen's Chrysler Building in Midtown and H. Craig Severance's Bank of Manhattan Company Building (1929-30) in the Financial District. The district's "rival towers," the Cities Service, City Bank and Farmer's Trust, and One Wall Street, all completed by 1932, furthermore, brought national attention to New York, which along with Chicago inspired a new intensity of construction across the country. The changing skylines of

Detroit, the nation's "automobile capital," Houston, economically linked to Detroit in supplying materials for the automobiles, and San Francisco, the new "Wall Street of the West" and "Gateway to the Orient," showed that the skyscraper had assumed a powerful role in defining urban prosperity within the nation's broader economy. Interestingly, not a single one of the cities claimed height or zoning restrictions of any kind. Their setback skyscrapers, nonetheless, echoed those of New York City, clearly viewed by all as the world's financial capital and very emblem of modernity.



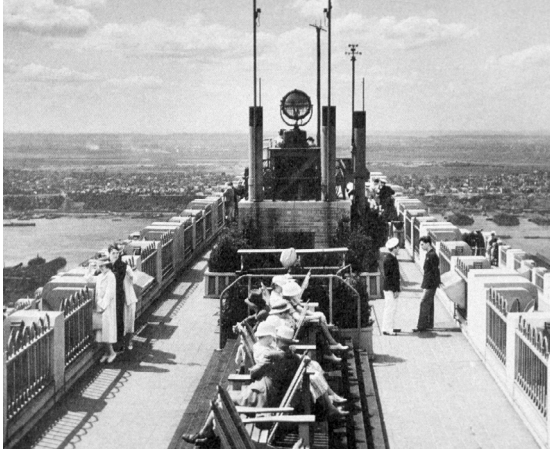
H. Craig Severance, Bank of Manhattan Company Building, 1929-30, and Clinton & Russell, Holton & George, Cities Service Building, 1930-32, in foreground. Courtesy Western History Collections, Special Research Collections, Cities Service Collection.

Rockefeller Center

That New York City had continued to function as the nation's dominant economic center was especially evident in the construction of the day's most grandly scaled composition of skyscrapers, Rockefeller Center (1927-40). Covering several city blocks along Fifth Avenue between 48th and 51st streets, and functioning as an enlightened project from the start, Rockefeller Center highlighted the importance of the city's public life and public domain. The project's protagonist, John D. Rockefeller, working with its architects, Raymond Hood and Harvey Wiley Corbett among them, asked: Can a group of skyscrapers be arranged in such a way to give something back to the city? The drawings illustrating the project's scheme "G3" illustrated the final design's most important concept: the wide spacing of skyscrapers combined with terraced roof gardens, organized around axes and cross axes, emphasizing a generosity of public space. Outdoor theaters, gardens, greenhouses, and a system of bridges suspended in mid-air, suggested an updated "hanging gardens of Babylon" designed to appeal to the city's collective imagination. Serving as the center's dominant vertical marker, the RCA Building culminated the scheme's main axial promenade. Hood's 70-story, 850-foot-high slab, daringly thin with sawn limestone verticals, rose like a sheer cliff, gracefully eroding in setbacks, with a powerful sense of

verticality but an equally powerful sense of mass and weight. It featured a “public forum” at its base, on the interior the Radio City Music Hall and Foyer, and at its crown, the city’s most spectacular of public observation decks, designed to recall the deck of an ocean liner, on which the spectator could feel the narrowness of its dimensions, and experience their own sense of detachment from the city, participating in a modern way of moving through the world.

For architectural critics such as the historian Sigfried Giedion, Rockefeller Center represented a *tour de force*, a timeless reminder that the very structure of the modern city needed to be transformed, not just for the sake of each individual, but also — given its lessons about public space — for the sake of the community as a whole.



RCA Building, observation deck, ca. 1935. Courtesy of Rockefeller Center, Inc.



Associated Architects (Raymond Hood), RCA Building, 1931-33. Gottsho-Schleisner Collection, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

The Empire State Building and the City

The Empire State Building (Shreve, Lamb & Harmon, 1928–31) culminated the day’s competitive quest for height, surpassing the Chrysler to reach a new height of 1,250 feet (including the 200-foot mooring mast), representing the most dramatic design as of yet for the skyscraper as an isolated tower — extraordinary in its siting — standing wholly free in its surroundings at Fifth Avenue and 34th Street, far from the Midtown’s earlier cluster of skyscrapers grouped around Grand Central Station.



View from observation deck, RCA Building, looking towards Empire State Building, ca. 1935. F. Palumbo, photographer. World-Telegram & Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



Looking southeast from McGraw-Hill Building, showing Empire State Building at Center. Samuel H. Gottscho, photographer, 1931. Museum of the City of New York.

It can be asked whether such isolated towers truly make a city. The Empire State indeed stands independent, heroic, and free, but by contrast to 432 Park Avenue, its setbacks engage the views of the city, and the commercial activity at its base engages sidewalk passersby as well. Its observation deck, the most public of places, offers all visitors unparalleled views of the city.

As shown in artists’ countless depictions of the Empire State Building, the skyscraper majestically commands the city from the heart of Manhattan Island — and no skyscraper in history has so powerfully shaped a city skyline. Still, it fostered countless perspectives and angles of view. Few besides the day’s artists and photographers understood so well the full array of complexities comprising modern urban life.