

The Frontier in the Sky

The Manhattan Skyscraper is born in installments between 1900 and 1910. It represents the fortuitous meeting of three distinct urbanistic breakthroughs that, after relatively independent lives, converge to form a single mechanism:

1. the reproduction of the World;
2. the annexation of the Tower;
3. the block alone.

To understand the promise and potential of the New York Skyscraper (as distinct from the reality of its now common performance), it is necessary to define these three architectural mutations separately, before they were integrated into a "glorious whole" by the builders of Manhattan.

1. THE REPRODUCTION OF THE WORLD

In the era of the staircase all floors above the second were considered unfit for commercial purposes, and all those above the fifth, uninhabitable.

Since the 1870s in Manhattan, the elevator has been the great emancipator of all horizontal surfaces above the ground floor.

Otis' apparatus recovers the uncounted planes that have been floating in the thin air of speculation and reveals their superiority in a metropolitan paradox: the greater the distance from the earth, the closer the communication with what remains of nature (i.e., light and air).

The elevator is the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy: the further it goes up, the more undesirable the circumstances it leaves behind.

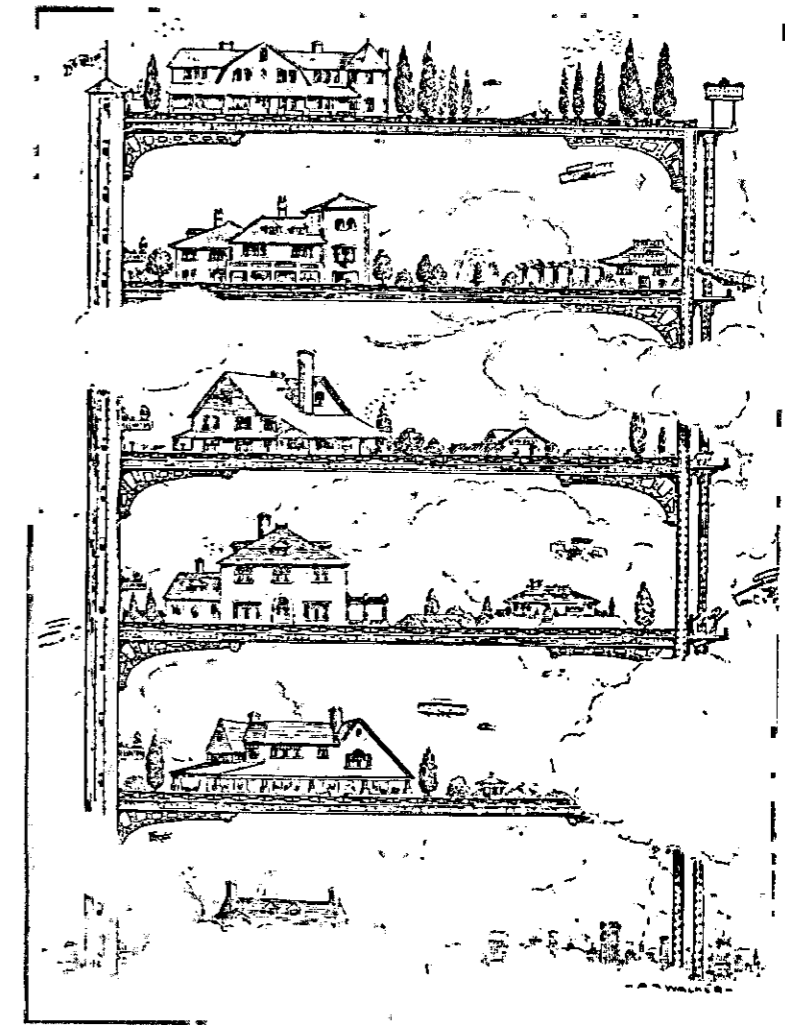
It also establishes a direct relationship between repetition and architectural quality: the greater the number of floors stacked around the shaft, the more spontaneously they congeal into a single form. The elevator generates the first aesthetic based on the *absence* of articulation.

In the early 1880s the elevator meets the steel frame, able to support the newly discovered territories without itself taking up space.

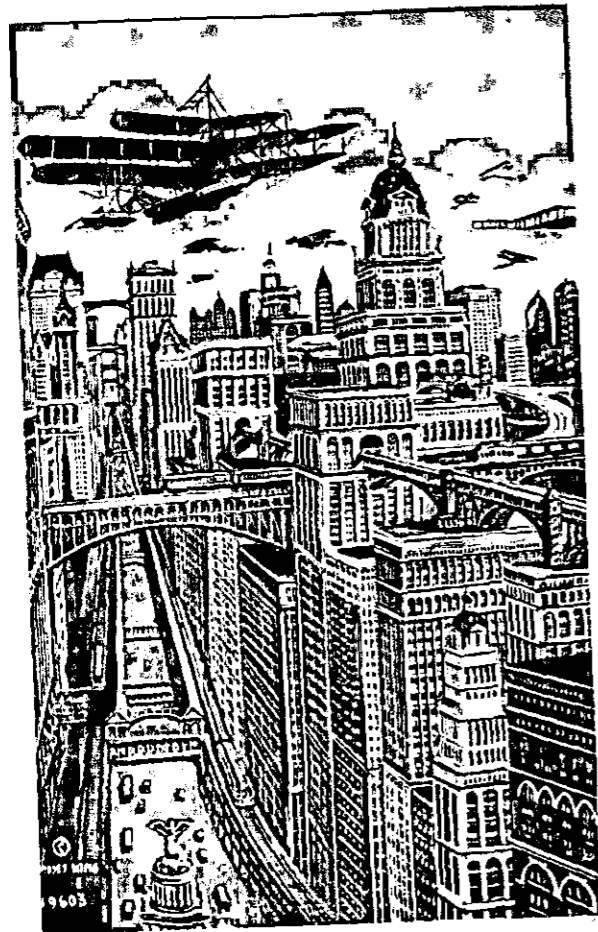
Through the mutual reinforcement of these two breakthroughs, any given site can now be multiplied ad-infinitum to produce the proliferation of floor space called Skyscraper.

THEOREM

By 1909 the promised rebirth of the world, as announced by the Globe Tower, reaches Manhattan in the form of a cartoon that is actually a *theorem* that describes the ideal performance of the Skyscraper: a slender steel structure supports 84 horizontal planes, all the size



1909 theorem: the Skyscraper as utopian device for the production of unlimited numbers of virgin sites on a single metropolitan location.



"THE COSMOPOLIS OF THE FUTURE. A weird thought of the frenzied heart of the world in later times, incessantly crowding the possibilities of aerial and inter-terrestrial construction, when the wonders of 1908... will be far outdone, and the 1,000 foot structure realized; now nearly a million people do business here each day; by 1930 it is estimated the number will be doubled, necessitating tiers of sidewalks, with elevated lines and new creations to supplement subway and surface cars, with bridges between the structural heights. Airships, too, may connect us with all the world. What will posterity develop?" (Published by Moses King, rendered by Harry M. Petit.)

of the original plot.

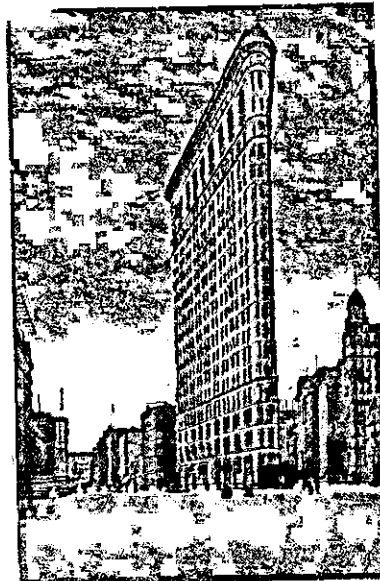
Each of these artificial levels is treated as a virgin site, as if the others did not exist, to establish a strictly private realm around a single country house and its attendant facilities, stable, servants' cottages, etc. Villas on the 84 platforms display a range of social aspiration from the rustic to the palatial; emphatic permutations of their architectural styles, variations in gardens, gazebos, and so on, create at each elevator stop a different lifestyle and thus an implied ideology, all supported with complete neutrality by the rack.

The "life" inside the building is correspondingly fractured: on level 82 a donkey shrinks back from the void, on 81 a cosmopolitan couple hails an airplane. Incidents on the floors are so brutally disjointed that they cannot conceivably be part of a single scenario. The disconnectedness of the aerial plots seemingly conflicts with the fact that, together, they add up to a single building. The diagram strongly suggests even that the structure is a whole exactly to the extent that the individuality of the platforms is preserved and exploited, that its success should be measured by the degree to which the structure frames their coexistence without interfering with their destinies. The building becomes a stack of individual privacies. Only five of the 84 platforms are visible; lower in the clouds other activities occupy remaining plots; the use of each platform can never be known in advance of its construction. Villas may go up and collapse, other facilities may replace them, but that will not affect the framework.

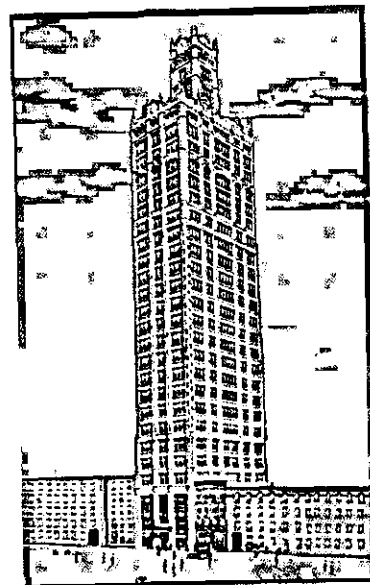
In terms of urbanism, this indeterminacy means that a particular site can no longer be matched with any single predetermined purpose. From now on each metropolitan lot accommodates — in theory at least — an unforeseeable and unstable combination of simultaneous activities, which makes architecture less an act of foresight than before and planning an act of only limited prediction.

It has become impossible to "plot" culture.

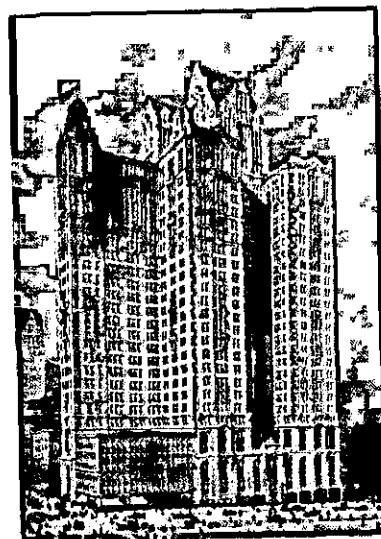
The fact that the 1909 "project" is published in the old *Life*,¹ a popular magazine, and drawn by a cartoonist — while the architectural magazines of the time are still devoted to *Beaux-Arts* — suggests that early in the century "the people" intuit the promise of the Skyscraper more profoundly than Manhattan's architects, that there exists a subterranean collective dialogue about the new form from which the official architect is excluded.



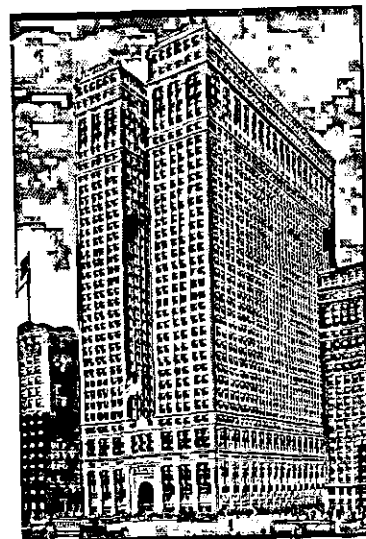
Flatiron (Fuller) Building, 1902, 22 stories (Daniel Burnham, architect).



World Tower Building, 1915, 30 stories (Edward West, "builder and owner").



Benenson (City Investing) Building, 1908 (Francis H. Kimball, architect). Irregular plot extruded to a height of 480 feet, "13 acres of floor space, and room for 6,000 tenants...."



Equitable Building, 1915, 39 stories "straight up.... The most valuable Office Building in the World — up until 1931...." (E. R. Graham, architect.)

ALIBIS

The skeleton of the 1909 theorem postulates the Manhattan Skyscraper as a utopian formula for the unlimited creation of virgin sites on a single urban location.

Since each of these sites is to meet its own particular programmatic destiny — beyond the architect's control — the Skyscraper is the instrument of a new form of *unknowable* urbanism. In spite of its physical solidity, the Skyscraper is the great metropolitan destabilizer: it promises perpetual programmatic instability.

The subversiveness of the Skyscraper's true nature — the ultimate unpredictability of its performance — is inadmissible to its own makers; their campaign to implant the new giants within the Grid therefore proceeds in a climate of dissimulation, if not self-imposed unconsciousness. From the supposedly insatiable demands of "business" and from the fact that Manhattan is an island, the builders construct the twin alibis that lend the Skyscraper the legitimacy of being *inevitable*.

"The situation of [Manhattan's] financial district with rivers on either side forbidding lateral expansion has encouraged architectural and engineering skill to find room aloft for the vast interests that demand office space in the heart of the New World."² In other words: Manhattan has no choice but the skyward extrusion of the Grid itself; only the Skyscraper offers business the wide-open spaces of a man-made Wild West, a *frontier in the sky*.

CAMOUFLAGE

To support the alibi of "business," the incipient tradition of Fantastic Technology is disguised as pragmatic technology. The paraphernalia of illusion that have just subverted Coney Island's nature into an artificial paradise — electricity, air-conditioning, tubes, telegraphs, tracks and elevators — reappear in Manhattan as paraphernalia of efficiency to convert raw space into office suites. Suppressing their irrational potential, they now become merely the agents of banal changes such as improving illumination levels, temperature, humidity, communications, etc., all to facilitate the processes of business. But as a spectral alternative, the diversity of the 84 platforms of the 1909 Skyscraper holds out the promise that all this business is only a phase, a provisional occupation that anticipates the Skyscraper's conquest by other forms of culture, floor by floor if necessary. Then the man-made territories of the frontier in the sky could be settled by the Irresistible Synthetic to establish alternative realities on any level.

"I am business.

"I am Profit and Loss.

"I am Beauty come into the Hell of the Practical."³

Such is the lament of the Skyscraper in its pragmatic camouflage.

TRIUMPH

In this branch of utopian real estate, architecture is no longer the art of designing buildings so much as the brutal skyward extrusion of whatever site the developer has managed to assemble.

- In 1902 the Flatiron Building is a model of such sheer multiplication — 300 feet of upward extrusion — nothing more than 22 times its triangular site, made accessible by six elevators. Only its photogenic razor-blade elevation reveals it as the mutation it is: the earth reproducing itself. For seven years "the most famous building in the world," it is the first icon of the *double life of utopia*.

- At 40 West 40th Street the World Tower Building repeats its site 30 times, "one of the highest buildings on so small a plot."⁴ As an image, it is evidence of the revolutionary quality of the architecture of sheer territorial multiplication: it looks impossible, but it exists.

- The builders of the Benenson (City Investing) Building multiply their lot 34 times. The site they extrude is irregular in plan; the building they generate therefore even more arbitrary. This flawed shape is compensated for by the perfection of the interior: "The lobby ... is finished in solid marble, 30 to 50 feet wide and 40 feet high [and] extends [the] entire length of the Building, a full block..."⁵

Through volume alone, life inside the Skyscraper is involved in a hostile relationship with life outside: the lobby competes with the street, presenting a linear display of the building's pretensions and seductions, marked by those frequent points of ascent — the elevators — that will transport the visitor even further into the building's subjectivity.

- In 1915 the Equitable Building repeats its block 39 times, "straight up," as it boasts. Its lobby is a sybaritic arcade lined with social facilities such as shops, bars, etc. The surrounding streets are deserted.

The higher the Skyscraper goes, the harder it becomes to suppress its latent revolutionary ambition; when the Equitable is completed its true nature stuns even its builders. "For a while our 1,200,000 square feet of rentable area seemed almost like a new continent, so vast and vacant were its many floors..."⁶

More than the sum of its floors, the Equitable is promoted as a "City in Itself, housing 16,000 souls."⁷

That is a prophetic claim that unleashes one of Manhattanism's most insistent themes: from now on each new *building of the mutant kind* strives to be "a City within a City." This truculent ambition makes the Metropolis a collection of architectural city-states, all potentially at war with each other.

MODEL

By 1910 the process of territorial multiplication has become inexorable. The entire Wall Street area is on its way to a grotesque saturation point of total extrusion where "eventually, the only space not occupied by enormous buildings in Lower Manhattan would be the streets..." There is no manifesto, no architectural debate, no doctrine, no law, no planning, no ideology, no theory; there is only — Skyscraper.

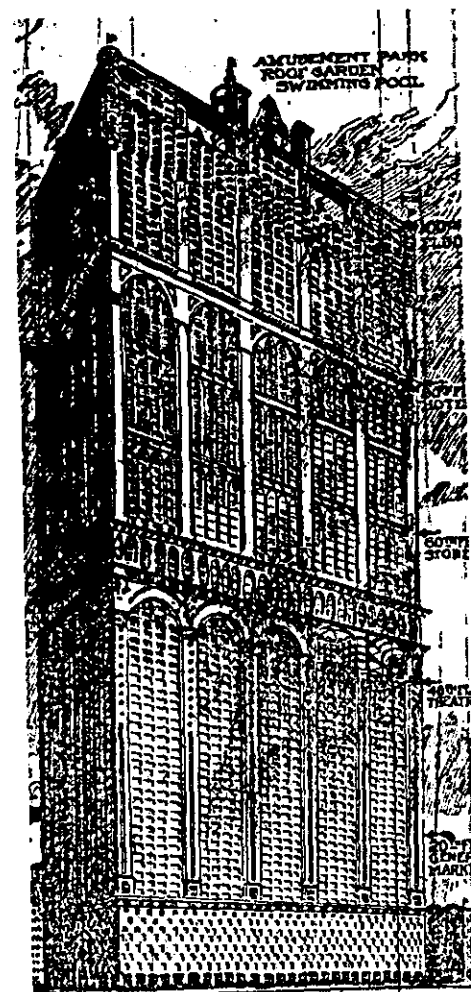
By 1911 the Skyscraper reaches the conceptual barrier of the 100th floor; "when Real Estate brokers shall have found a suitable City Block ... the men and the millions will be ready..."⁸

A coalition of draftsmen, led by Theodore Starrett — member of the construction dynasty already responsible for half Manhattan's Skyscrapers (and which intends to remain in the advance guard of territorial reproduction) — "is working out the plans for the 100-story building..." *Work out* is the right verb; there is no "design," only the extrapolation of Manhattan's irrepressible tendencies and themes; it is no accident that the team lacks architects.

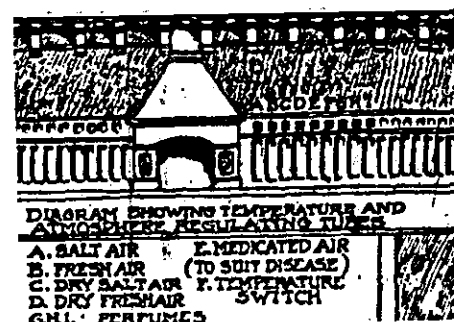
Starrett too believes in metropolitan Manifest Destiny: "Our civilization is progressing wonderfully. In New York — by that I mean Manhattan Island — we must keep building and we must build upward. Step by step we have advanced from the wooden hut to the thirty story Skyscraper... Now we must develop something different, something larger..."

As the conceptual stratosphere of the 100th floor is approached, the programmatic settlement of the platforms according to the 1909 theorem imposes itself: filling the interior with business alone is inconceivable. If the 39 floors of the Equitable constitute a "City in Itself," the 100-story building is a Metropolis on its own, "a mammoth structure, towering into the clouds and containing within its walls the cultural, commercial and industrial activities of a great city..." Its size alone will explode the texture of normal life. "In New York we travel heavenward as well as on the surface," explains Starrett the futurist. "In the 100 story Building we shall be shot upward with the rapidity that letters are sent across the Brooklyn Bridge."

This ascent is interrupted every 20th floor by public plazas that



"In New York we must keep building and we must build upward"; Theodore Starrett's proposal for 100-story building, 1906. "Our civilization is progressing wonderfully..."



The 100-story building, detail of nine revolutionary "temperature and atmosphere regulating tubes" emerging in otherwise conventional office suite with fireplace. "A. salt air, B. fresh air, C. dry salt air, D. dry fresh air, E. medicated air (to suit disease), F. temperature switch, G.H.I. perfumes."

articulate the demarcations between the different functional sectors: industry at the bottom, business in the second quarter, living in the third and a hotel in the fourth.

The 20th floor is a general market, the 40th a cluster of theaters, the 60th a "shopping district," the entire 80th floor a hotel and the 100th an "amusement park, roof garden and swimming pool."

To make these programmatic enrichments possible, the implements of efficiency reassume their original identity as paraphernalia of illusion: "Another interesting feature is the made to order climate we shall have. When we shall have at last reached the ideal construction, we shall have perfect control of the atmosphere, so that there will be no need of going to Florida in the winter or to Canada in the summer. We shall have all varieties to order in our big buildings of Manhattan..."

"Total Architecture!" That is Starrett's antihumanistic proposal as he reveals the essence of his Manhattan project: a diagram of "temperature and atmosphere regulating tubes" that are supposed to emerge from the oak-paneled partitions — complete with fireplaces — of his structure.

The outlets of this psychosomatic battery are keys to a scale of experiences that range from the hedonistic to the medical.

The Irresistible Synthetic pervades every corner; each compartment is equipped to pursue its private existential journey: the building has become a laboratory, the ultimate vehicle of emotional and intellectual adventure.

Its occupants are at once the researchers and the researched.

Such structures as Starrett's 100-story building would be definitive; they would mark the point where the index of Manhattan's vitality — "the sound of New York tossing its traditions in the air and devouring its own landmarks" — would be silenced. In the absence of that roar, the 100-story building needs a new index to measure its achievement. "What would become of the present skyscrapers?" asks the reporter apprehensively. "Some of them would doubtless have to be torn down, but no doubt many of them, on the corners of blocks, could be used in the new structures," reassures Starrett.

This is not generosity; the 100-story building needs an archaeology of dwarfs to tie it down to earth, to remain convinced of its own scale.

2. THE ANNEXATION OF THE TOWER

• In 1853 the Latting Observatory offers Manhattanites the first comprehensive inspection of their domain; it confronts them with the

limitation of Manhattan's islandness, the excuse for all subsequent developments.

- In 1876 the Centennial Tower in Philadelphia is the second needlelike celebrant of Progress, hauled to Coney Island in 1878 to trigger its stampede toward the controlled irrationality of Fantastic Technology.
- From 1904 Luna Park is a breeding ground for Towers, discovering in the clash of Towers the source of architectural drama.
- In 1905 Dreamland's Beacon Tower tries to lure innocent ships aground to flaunt Reynolds' contempt for so-called Reality.
- In 1906 the Globe Tower reveals the potential of the Tower to be — literally — a world on its own.

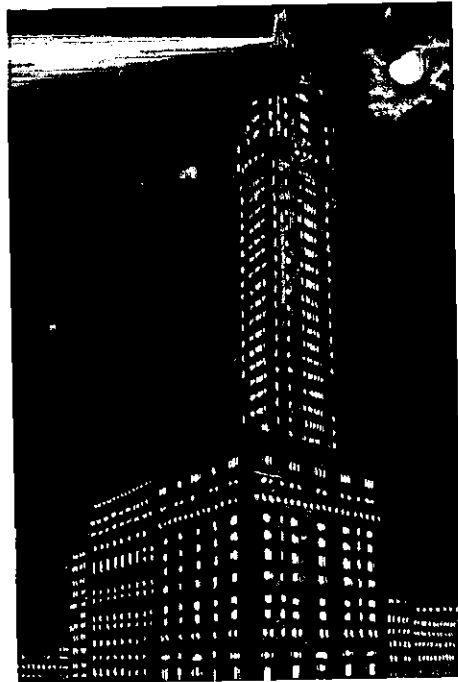
In 50 years the Tower has accumulated the meanings of: catalyst of consciousness, symbol of technological progress, marker of pleasure zones, subversive short-circuiter of convention and finally *self-contained universe*. Towers now indicate acute breaks in the homogeneous pattern of everyday life, marking the scattered outposts of a new culture.

BUILDINGS

Manhattan's early tall buildings are often taller than many of these Towers, but there is nothing in their cubic outlines to remind anyone of a Tower. They are consistently called *buildings*, not Skyscrapers. But in 1908 Ernest Flagg designs a Tower and places it on top of his existing Singer Building, a 14-story block built in 1899. This architectural afterthought alone makes it "from 1908 to 1913 America's most famous building."

"Thousands of travelers come to New York especially to see this Modern Tower of Babel, gladly paying fifty cents to ride to the 'observation balcony.'" In acknowledgment of the darker side of Metropolis it is also the first "Suicide Pinnacle" — "it seems to have a strong appeal to those who were soured on life..."¹⁰

The Metropolitan Life Building (1893) is an early "tall block" — ten times its site — on Madison Square. After 1902 it is outflanked by the 22-story wedge of the Flatiron. The management decides to expand, upward; in 1909 they multiply a small adjoining plot 39 times. Because of the small site, their structure copies Venice's campanile on San Marco, its shaft activated for business, holes punctured all over to admit daylight. At the top they perform a more modern annexation by installing a searchlight and other apparatus lifted directly from the lighthouse archetype. A ruby red nipple that caps the structure is supposed, through prearranged signals, to communicate time and weather



Singer Building, constructed in two stages: lower 14 floors in 1899, Tower superimposed on block in 1908 (Ernest Flagg, architect).



Metropolitan Life Building, conceived in two separate operations: main ten-story block in 1893, Metropolitan Tower in 1909 (Napoleon LeBrun & Sons, architect).

conditions to imaginary mariners on the Atlantic.

In these steps, the process of sheer multiplication steals the meanings the Tower has accumulated over the previous 50 years.

Building becomes Tower, landlocked lighthouse, ostensibly flashing its beams out to sea, but in fact luring the metropolitan audience to itself.

3. THE BLOCK ALONE

The Horse Show Association — “whose roster was the nucleus for the first social register” — owns Madison Square Garden, on a block east of Madison Avenue between 26th and 27th streets.

In 1890 it commissions a new building — a rectangular box 70 feet high that occupies the entire block. The interior of the box is hollow; its auditorium, the largest in existence, seats 8,000 and is sandwiched between a 1,200-seat theater and a 1,500-seat concert hall, so that the entire surface of the block is a single, articulated field of performance. The arena is designed for the Association's hippodrome events, but is also rented out for circuses, sports and other spectacles; an open-air theater and restaurant are planned for the roof.

Firmly in the tradition of World's Fairs, Stanford White, its architect, marks the box as a site of special interest by constructing a copy of a Spanish Tower on the roof of the hall.

As one of the Garden's promoters he is also responsible for programming the entertainment inside, even after the building is finished, in a form of never-ending architectural design.

But it is difficult to ensure the financial viability of the colossal arena with tasteful performances alone; its size is incompatible with the social strata whose domain it is intended to be. “The Building was a financial lemon from the day it opened.”

To avert disaster White is *forced* to experiment, to invent and establish “situations” with a wide popular appeal within the interior acreage.

“In 1893 he sets up a gigantic panorama of the Chicago Exposition, to save New Yorkers the long trip West...” Later he turns the arena into replicas of “the Globe Theatre, old Nuremberg, Dickens' London and the city of Venice, the visitors floating ... from exhibit to exhibit in gondolas.”¹¹

White is caught in the crossfire of the battle between high and low culture that has already flared up at Coney: his spectacles are so “tasteless” that they keep the Social Register away, but they are still not intense enough to attract the masses.

In the difference between a real gondola and Dreamland's mechanical gondola propelled along its mechanical track lies White's dilemma: he

is a man of taste who ought to have less. He has no time to resolve it: in 1906 a madman shoots him on the roof of his own project.

TONGUE

In 1905 Thompson, bored with Luna, buys a block east of Sixth Avenue between 43rd and 44th streets. For the first time Coney's Technology of the Fantastic will be grafted onto the Grid.

In one year, Thompson builds his Hippodrome, another box, seating 5,200, topped by “the largest dome in the world after the Pantheon.” Two electric Towers, transplants from Luna's forest, identify the Sixth Avenue entrance and mark this block as another miniature state where an alternative reality is established.

The stage itself is the core of Thompson's realm: it breaks out of the traditional proscenium to reach 60 feet into the audience like a gigantic mechanical tongue. This “apron” is capable of instantaneous metamorphosis: among other transformations, “it is possible to turn this portion of the stage into a creek, a lake or a running mountain stream...”

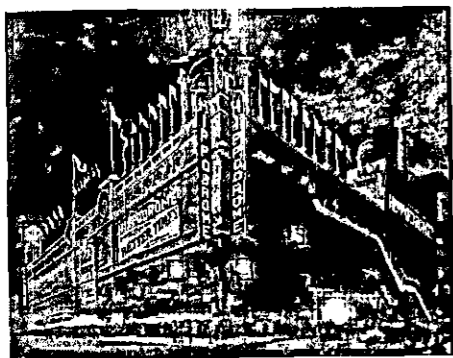
Where Luna's ploy of displacement was the trip to the Moon, Thompson's first Manhattan performance is called “a Yankee Circus on Mars,” in an ambitious attempt to turn the surface of his entire block into a spacecraft. “A stranded circus was to be sold at auction by the sheriff, but was saved by a messenger from Mars who bought it for his king...” Once on Mars, “the Martians ask [the performers] to remain permanently and to become inhabitants of that far-away planet...” Such is Thompson's plot, which leaves the visitors to his theater similarly marooned on another planet. The climax of the circus' Martian performance is an eloquent abstract choreography: 64 “diving girls” descend a staircase in squads of eight, “as if they are one.” The tongue becomes a lake, 17 feet deep. The girls “walk down into the water until their heads are out of sight,” never to return to the surface. (An inverted underwater receptacle that contains air is connected by corridors to the backstage area.)

It is a spectacle of such ineffable emotion that “men sit in the front row, night after night, weeping silently...”¹²

CONTROL

In the tradition of economic free enterprise, control is exercised only at the scale of the individual plot. With Madison Square Garden and Thompson's Hippodrome, the area of such control coincides more and more with the area of an entire block.

The block itself is equipped with technological paraphernalia that



From Coney Island to Manhattan: Frederic Thompson's Hippodrome on Sixth Avenue (1905).



Scene from "A Yankee Circus on Mars" — entire city block displaced to another planet.

manipulate and distort existing conditions beyond recognition, establishing private laws and even ideology in competition with all the other blocks. The block becomes a "park" in the tradition of Coney Island: it offers an aggressive alternative reality, intent on discrediting and replacing all "natural" reality.

The area of these interior parks can never exceed the size of a block: that is the maximum increment of conquest by a single "planner" or a single "vision."

Since all Manhattan's blocks are identical and emphatically equivalent in the unstated philosophy of the Grid, a mutation in a single one affects all others as a latent possibility: theoretically, each block can now turn into a self-contained enclave of the Irresistible Synthetic.

That potential also implies an essential isolation: no longer does the city consist of a more or less homogeneous texture — a mosaic of complementary urban fragments — but each block is now *alone* like an island, fundamentally on its own.

Manhattan turns into a dry archipelago of blocks.

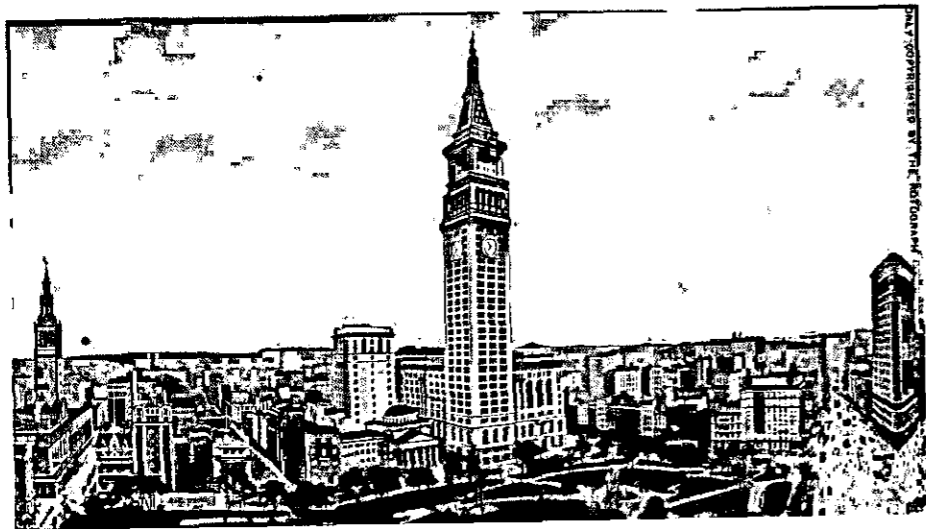
FREEZE-FRAME

A 1909 postcard presents a freeze-frame of architectural evolution — three major breakthroughs coexisting on Madison Square: the *multiplication* of the Flatiron, the *lighthouse* of the Metropolitan and the *island* of Madison Square Garden.

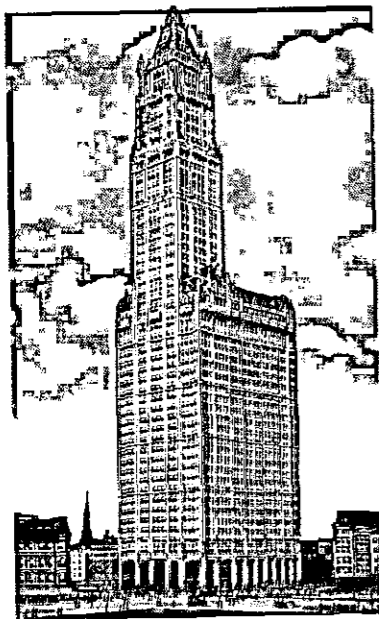
At the time the postcard is produced — with its multiple vanishing points it is no simple photograph — the Square "was the center of Metropolitan Life such as New York has never seen reproduced... Fashion, Clubdom, Finance, Sport, Politics and Retail Trade all met here at high tide... It was said that someone standing long enough on Fifth Avenue and 23 Street might meet everybody in the world... Viewing Madison Square from the 'old' Flatiron junction, the scene was Parisian in its kaleidoscopic aspect..."¹³

As Manhattan's social center, this tangle of intersections is the theater where business is being repulsed and replaced by richer forms of activity. That the Square is a front line accounts for its urbanistic fertility in provoking new tendencies. But apart from documenting a multiple breakthrough, the postcard is also a picture of a triple impasse: on its own, each of the three tendencies has no future.

The Flatiron's mere multiplication lacks meaning; the Metropolitan Life Building has meaning, but it is compromised by the contradiction between its pretense of isolation and the reality of its location on just one of many plots on the same block, each poised to steal its thunder; and Madison



Multiple breakthrough but also triple impasse: Madison Square in 1909, doctored photograph. From right: Flatiron Building, Metropolitan Life Building, Madison Square Garden — three distinct architectural mutations before their fusion to form the true Skyscraper.



"The Cathedral of Commerce": Woolworth Building, 1913, 60 floors (Cass Gilbert, architect) — first *built* amalgamation of the three mutations.

Square Garden cannot make enough money to justify the extravagance of its metaphors.

But when the three are put together, their weaknesses become strengths: the Tower lends meaning to the multiplication, the multiplication pays for the metaphors on the ground floor, and the conquest of the block assures the Tower isolation as sole occupant of its island.

The true Skyscraper is the product of this triple fusion.

CATHEDRAL

The first *built* amalgamation is the Woolworth Building — completed in 1913, four years after the freeze-frame. Its lower 27 floors are a straightforward extrusion supporting a 30-story tower; the graft occupies an entire block. But this "Glorious Whole, quite beyond the control of human imagination," is only a partial realization of the potential of the Skyscraper. It is a masterpiece merely of materialism: none of the programmatic promises of the new type are exploited. The Woolworth is filled, from top to bottom, by business. The Tower is subdivided into office suites with discrete decorative themes — an Empire-style room next to a boardroom that mixes Flemish and Italian Renaissance — while the lower floors accommodate modern administrative operations — files, telexes, tickers, pneumatic tubes, typing pools.

If its interior is business only, its exterior is pure spirituality.

"When seen at nightfall bathed in electric light as with a garment, or in the lucid air of a summer morning piercing space like a battlement of the paradise which St. John beheld, it inspires feelings too deep even for tears.... The writer looked upon it and at once cried out 'The Cathedral of Commerce.'"

The Woolworth does not actually contribute any radical modifications or breaks to the life of the city, but it is supposed to work miracles through the emanation of its physical presence; a larger *mass* than ever constructed before, it is at the same time seen as disembodied, anti-gravitational: "Brute material has been robbed of its density and flung into the sky to challenge its loveliness..."

The building is activated electronically in April 1913, "when President Wilson pressed a tiny button in the White House and 80,000 brilliant lights instantly flashed throughout the Woolworth..."

Through its sheer feat of existing, the Woolworth has a double occupancy, one concrete — "14,000 people — the Population of a City" — the second intangible — "that spirit of man which, through means of change and barter, binds alien people into unity and space, and reduces the hazards of war and bloodshed..."¹⁴

AUTOMONUMENT

Beyond a certain critical mass each structure becomes a monument, or at least raises that expectation through its size alone, even if the sum or the nature of the individual activities it accommodates does not deserve a monumental expression.

This category of monument presents a radical, morally traumatic break with the conventions of symbolism: its physical manifestation does not represent an abstract ideal, an institution of exceptional importance, a three-dimensional, readable articulation of a social hierarchy, a memorial; it merely *is* itself and through sheer volume cannot avoid being a symbol — an empty one, available for meaning as a billboard is for advertisement. It is a solipsism, celebrating only the fact of its disproportionate existence, the shamelessness of its own process of creation.

This monument of the 20th century is the *Automonument*, and its purest manifestation is the Skyscraper.

To make the Automonument Skyscraper inhabitable, a series of subsidiary tactics is developed to satisfy the two conflicting demands to which it is constantly exposed: that of being a monument — a condition that suggests permanence, solidity and serenity — and at the same time, that of accommodating, with maximum efficiency, the “change which is life,” which is, by definition, antimonumental.

LOBOTOMY

Buildings have both an interior and an exterior.

In Western architecture there has been the humanistic assumption that it is desirable to establish a moral relationship between the two, whereby the exterior makes certain revelations about the interior that the interior corroborates. The “honest” facade speaks about the activities it conceals. But mathematically, the interior volume of three-dimensional objects increases in cubed leaps and the containing envelope only by squared increments: less and less surface has to represent more and more interior activity.

Beyond a certain critical mass the relationship is stressed beyond the breaking point; this “break” is the symptom of Automonumentality.

In the deliberate discrepancy between container and contained New York’s makers discover an area of unprecedented freedom. They exploit and formalize it in the architectural equivalent of a lobotomy — the surgical severance of the connection between the frontal lobes and the rest of the brain to relieve some mental disorders by disconnecting thought processes from emotions.

The architectural equivalent separates exterior and interior architecture. In this way the Monolith spares the outside world the agonies of the continuous changes raging inside it. It hides everyday life.

EXPERIMENT

In 1908 one of the earliest and most clinical explorations of this new artistic territory occurs at 228–32 West 42nd Street, which by now is called “Dreamstreet.”

The site of the experiment is the interior of an existing building. Officially, its architect, Henri Erkins, describes his project, “Murray’s Roman Gardens,” as “the realistic *reproduction*, largely from the originals in the form of direct copies, casts, etc. . . . of the homes of one of the most lavishly luxurious of the world’s ancient peoples — the Romans of the Caesarean period — the *reconstruction* of a Roman residence. . . .”¹⁵

Inside, exact perception of space and objects is made impossible by Erkins’ consistent use of mirrors — “so large and artfully disposed that no joint is apparent and it is indeed impossible to discover where the substantial form ceases and the reflection begins. . . .” The center of Erkins’ “villa” is “an open court with a colonnade on each side” — an artificial open-air garden, realized through the most advanced technical means: “The ceiling is decorated to represent a blue sky in which electric lights twinkle, while by an ingenious arrangement of optical apparatus, the effect of clouds sweeping over the Sky is produced. . . .” An artificial moon puts in an accelerated appearance, crossing the firmament several times each evening. The mirrors not only disorient and dematerialize, they also “duplicate, triplicate and quadruple the interior exotics” to make the resort a model of decorative economy: the electrified “Roman Fountain” in the Atrium is only one-quarter real, the “barge” one-half. Where there are no mirrors, projecting screens, complex illumination effects and the sounds of a concealed orchestra suggest an infinity of forbidden space beyond the accessible parts of the villa.

Murray’s is to be “the storehouse for *all* that was beautiful in the World that the Romans knew, conquered and plundered.”

The collector collected is Erkins’ formula for harvesting the past, for the borrowing and manipulation of memory.

Overlooking the garden is a mezzanine that gives access to two separate apartments where elaborate three-dimensional murals and a hyper-density of converted objects and decorative motifs represent Egypt/Libya and Greece: an obelisk has become a lamp, a sarcophagus an “electric



"Forbidden" space at Murray's: Terrace Room, whose dimensions have been made unknowable through arrangements of screens, walls, lights, mirrors, sounds, decoration. Smoke of Vesuvius hovers ominously over the Greco-Roman idyll as a metaphor for the explosive quality of life in the Metropolis.



Murray's Roman Gardens, first autonomous metropolitan interior generated through architectural lobotomy: view of the "Atrium" with reflected barge, fountain, artificial sky. Further escalation of the Irresistible Synthetic: fabricated history for Manhattan's population. "Take away the scions of the four hundred in their gloomy evening attire, looking like so many scarecrows or undertakers, and the sober-faced attendants, equally sombre as to apparel, and replace them with figures tricked out in the many-hued raiment of ancient days.... Substitute for the begoggled chauffeur, the Roman charioteer, and for the blue-coated guardian of the peace ... the mail clad Roman legionary, and but for such improvements as we owe to our mechanical progress, the visitor to Murray's might readily imagine himself 'turned back' two thousand years to the city of the Caesars at the Zenith of its wealth and splendor...."

car" to transport dishes from one end of a table to the other. This combination blurs the sense of time and space: periods that were once sequential have become simultaneous. In this three-dimensional Piranesi, iconographies that have remained pure invade each other. Figures from an Egyptian bas-relief play music in a Roman perspective, Greeks emerge from Roman baths at the base of the Acropolis and a "semi-nude female figure in a recumbent position [blows] iridescent bubbles from a pipe, castles in the Air": antiquity is invested with modern sexuality.

The accumulated loot is customized to carry contemporary messages to the metropolitan audience: Nero, for instance, is reinterpreted. "Although he is reported to have been an indifferent spectator of the burning of a considerable part of the Town [Rome], it is shrewdly suggested that he was interested rather in the opportunity the conflagration offered for improvement rather than in the loss it entailed...."

For Erkins, this cross-fertilization represents a true modernity — the creation of "situations" that have never existed before but are made to look as if they have. It is as if history has been given an extension in which each episode can be rewritten or redesigned in retrospect, all past mistakes erased, imperfections corrected: "The latest evolution of the art of past ages, applied to the creation of a veritable modern place of recreation [is] modern, or *modernized art*...." Murray's Roman Gardens is a second chance for the past, a *retroactive utopia*.

HOUSE

Perhaps most original about the tumult of frozen lust of Murray's decoration is its consistent quasi-three-dimensionality: a whole population (the original inhabitants of the villa) is arranged along the walls to enliven the social transactions in the rooms and apartments.

They make the "upper ten ... dressed in somewhat sombre colors" intruders in the sanctity of their empire of the senses. The public are only guests. Reinforcing the house metaphor, relationships generated in the oversaturated downstairs can be consummated upstairs: "In the upper part of the building are twenty-four luxurious bachelor apartments of parlor and bedroom provided with every comfort and convenience, including separate bath room accommodations...."

With the Gardens, Erkins and Murray have stretched the private format of the house to absorb the public. Such is the collective realm in Manhattan: its scattered episodes can never be more than a series of bloated private enclaves that admit "houseguests."

PRIDE

After performing his architectural lobotomy Erkins' pride is that of a successful surgeon.

"The fact that all ingenuity of plan, the wealth of artistic elaboration and the profusion of gorgeous ornamentation, revealed in this unique establishment, have really been 'grafted' as it were onto a building of essentially plain and formal character, planned and erected originally for a purpose *absolutely foreign* to that for which it is today utilized, lends additional interest to the results achieved and reflects the greater credit of the author and originator of this superb exemplification of Modern taste and skill.

"Henry Erkins ... was constrained to adopt, as the basis for this beautiful production, a building originally planned for use as a schoolhouse, but which the magic wand of Mr. Erkins' genius has transformed so happily that in its present arrangement, equipment, adornment and ornamentation, it *nowhere betrays the slightest trace of its original purpose in any way...*"

Lobotomy satisfies the two incompatible demands imposed on the Automonument by generating two separate architectures.

One is the architecture of metropolitan exteriors whose responsibility is to the city as sculptural experience.

The other is a mutant branch of interior design that, using the most modern technologies, *recycles, converts and fabricates memories and supportive iconographies* that register and manipulate shifts in metropolitan culture. A *system of Murray's* is planned throughout Manhattan. An Italian Garden on 34th Street and Murray's New Broadway — "3 acres of floor space devoted to Dining Room" — are planned to open in 1909.

From the beginning of the 20th century architectural Lobotomy permits an urbanistic revolution in installments. Through the establishment of enclaves such as the Roman Gardens — emotional shelters for the metropolitan masses that represent ideal worlds removed in time and space, insulated against the corrosion of reality — the fantastic supplants the utilitarian in Manhattan.

These subtopian fragments are all the more seductive for having no territorial ambitions beyond filling their interior allotments with a hyper-density of private meanings. By leaving intact the illusion of a traditional urban landscape outside, this revolution ensures its acceptance through its inconspicuousness.

The Grid is the neutralizing agent that structures these episodes. Within the network of its rectilinearity, movement becomes ideological navigation between the conflicting claims and promises of each block.

CAVE

In 1908 a delegation of American businessmen visits Antonio Gaudí in Barcelona and asks him to design a Grand Hotel in Manhattan. No site is known for the project; the businessmen may merely want an initial sketch, to raise money on and match later with a location. It is unlikely that Gaudí is aware of the quantum leaps and breakthroughs Manhattanism has produced; the businessmen themselves must have recognized the affinity between Gaudí's hysteria and Manhattan's frenzy.

But in his European isolation, Gaudí is like the man in Plato's cave; from the shadows of the businessmen's descriptions and requirements he is forced to reconstruct a reality outside the cave, that of an *ideal Manhattan*. He synthesizes a premonition of the true Skyscraper that applies both the lobotomy and the mutant branch of interior design not only on the ground floor but in layers throughout the interior.

His hotel is a sheaf of stalagmites, combined to form a single conoid that is, unmistakably, a Tower. It inhabits a podium or island, connected by bridges to the other islands. It stands aggressively alone.¹⁶

Gaudí's design is a paradigm of floor-by-floor conquest of the Skyscraper by social activities. On the outer surface of the structure, low floors provide individual accommodation, the hotel rooms; the public life of the hotel is located at the core, on enormous interior planes that admit no daylight.

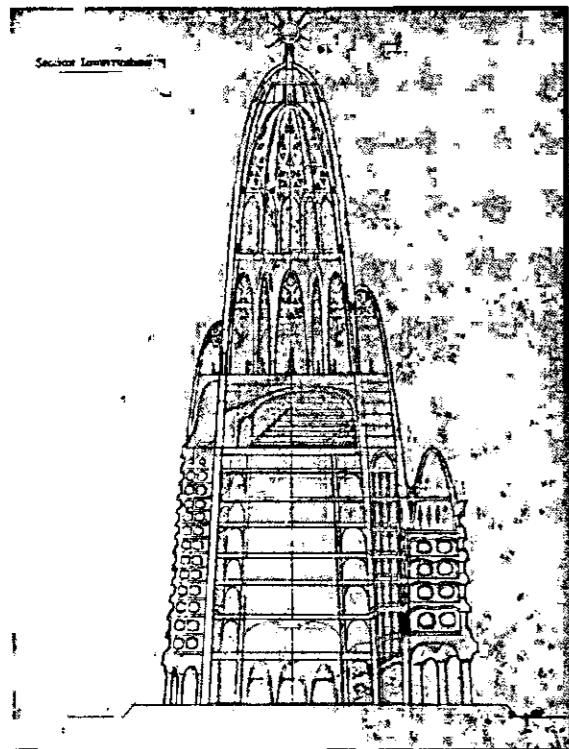
This inner core of the Grand Hotel is a sequence of six superimposed restaurants. The first is decorated with a concentrate of European mythologies that will be reinforced by the choice of menu and European music, played by a large symphony orchestra. Each of the other restaurants, with its own hermetic iconography, represents another continent; the stack together represents the World.

A theater and exhibition hall are superimposed over the world of the restaurants. The whole is topped by a small observation sphere that awaits the moment when the conquest of gravity will be no longer metaphor but fact.

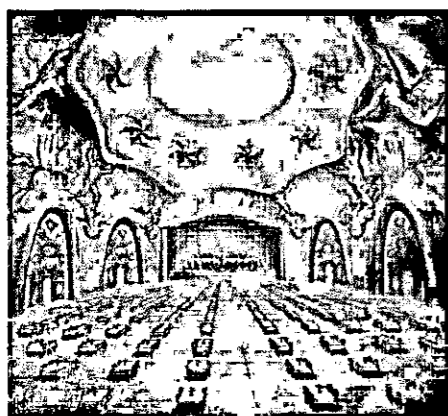
SCHISM

There is to be no seepage of symbolism between floors. In fact, the schizoid arrangement of thematic planes implies an architectural strategy for planning the interior of the Skyscraper, which has become autonomous through the lobotomy: the Vertical Schism, a systematic exploitation of the deliberate disconnection between stories.

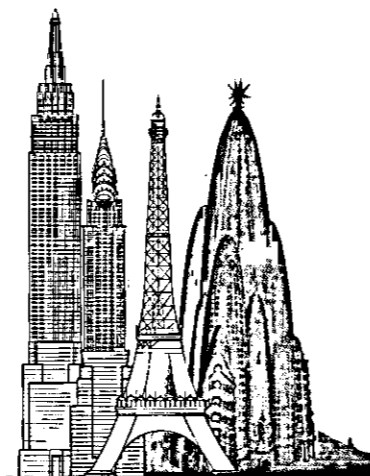
By denying the dependence of one floor on any other, the Vertical Schism



Gaudi's Grand Hotel, section. Through the lobotomy, the interior of the hotel is disconnected from the reality outside by a skin of bedrooms. As in the 1909 theorem, the central floors are stacked on top of each other as self-contained thematic planes in an essentially random sequence. Through this vertical disconnection, local changes in iconography, function, use can be effected without any impact on the structure as a whole.



Gaudi's Grand Hotel, European restaurant on the fifth floor.



Relative size of Gaudi's Grand Hotel compared to Empire State Building, Chrysler Building and Eiffel Tower.

allows their arbitrary distribution within a single building. It is an essential strategy for the development of the cultural potential of the Skyscraper: it accepts the instability of a Skyscraper's definitive composition beyond a single floor, while at the same time counteracting it by housing each *known* designation with maximum specificity, if not overdetermination.

SHADOW

For a time "real" Skyscrapers like the Woolworth and versions of the older type are erected simultaneously; in the latter the simple operation of extrusion takes more and more grotesque proportions. With the Equitable Building (1915) the process of reproduction loses its credibility through the grim deterioration — both financial and environmental — it inflicts on its surroundings. Its shadow alone reduces rents in a vast area of adjoining properties, while the vacuum of its interior is filled at the expense of its neighbors. Its success is measured by the destruction of its context. The time has come to subject this form of architectural aggression to regulation. "It became increasingly evident that the large project was a concern not only of an individual, but of the community, and that some form of restriction must be adopted..."¹⁷

LAW

The 1916 Zoning Law describes on each plot or block of Manhattan's surface an imaginary envelope that defines the outlines of the maximum allowable construction.

The law takes the Woolworth as norm: the process of sheer multiplication is allowed to proceed up to a certain height; then the building must step back from the plot line at a certain angle to admit light to the streets. A Tower may then carry 25 percent of the plot area to unlimited heights. The last clause encourages the tendency of single structures to conquer the vastest possible area, i.e., a whole block, in order to make the 25 percent that can be Tower as large (profitable) as possible.

In fact, the 1916 Zoning Law is a back-dated birth certificate that lends retroactive legitimacy to the Skyscraper.

VILLAGE

The Zoning Law is not only a legal document; it is also a design project. In a climate of commercial exhilaration where the maximum legally allowable is immediately translated into reality, the "limiting" three-dimensional parameters of the law suggest a whole new idea of Metropolis.

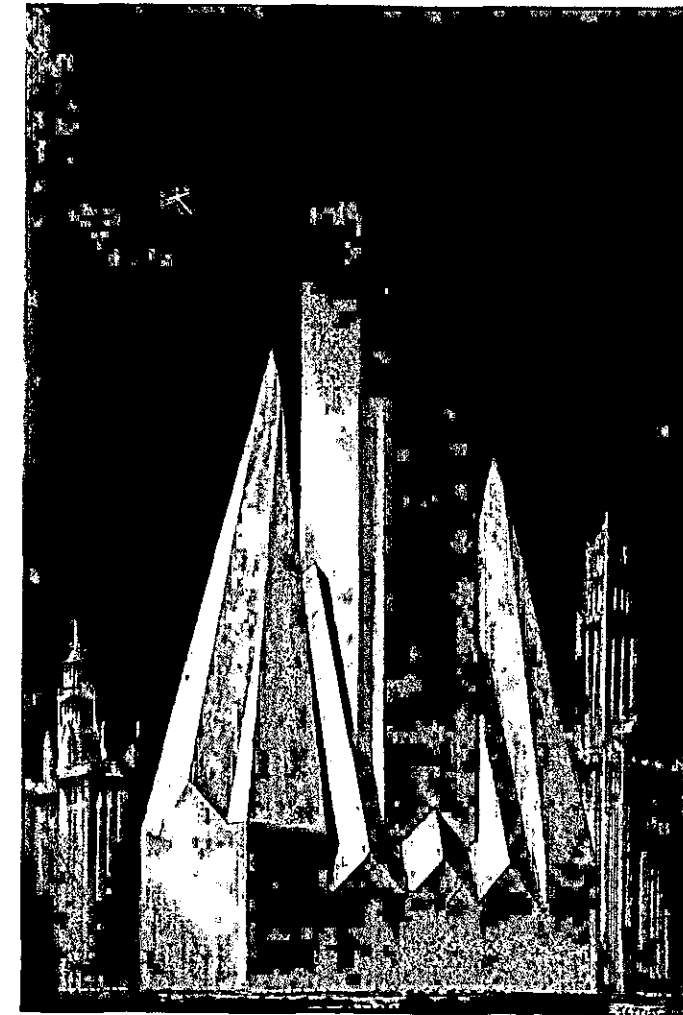
If Manhattan was in the beginning only a collection of 2,028 blocks, it is now an assembly of as many invisible envelopes. Even if it is still a *ghost town of the future*, the outlines of the ultimate Manhattan have been drawn once and for all:

The 1916 Zoning Law defines Manhattan *for all time* as a collection of 2,028 colossal phantom "houses" that together form a *Mega-Village*. Even as each "house" fills up with accommodation, program, facilities, infrastructures, machineries and technologies of unprecedented originality and complexity, the primordial format of "village" is never endangered.

The city's scale explosion is controlled through the drastic assertion of the most primitive model of human cohabitation.

This radical simplification of concept is the secret formula that allows its infinite growth without corresponding loss of legibility, intimacy or coherence.

(As a simple section reveals, each envelope is a gigantic enlargement of the original Dutch gable house with the tower as an endless chimney. The City of the Zoning Law — the Mega-Village — is a fantastic enlargement of the original New Amsterdam.)



Theoretical envelope of 1916 Zoning Law appearing between the Municipal Building and the Woolworth (rendering by Hugh Ferriss).

"The New York Law, formulated by a group of technical experts, was based on purely practical considerations.... By limiting the bulk of a building, the number of occupants was limited; fewer people required access and egress; traffic on adjoining streets was lightened. The limitation in mass had also of course the effect of permitting more light and air into the streets as well as into the buildings themselves.... The Zoning Law was not at all inspired by concern for its possible effect on architecture...." (Ferriss, *Metropolis of Tomorrow*.) After 1916, no structure in Manhattan could exceed the limitations of this spectral shape. To exploit maximum financial return on any given block, Manhattan's architects were forced to approximate it as closely as possible.