ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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A Skyscraper Fit for a King (Kong)?

Immortality is conferred in devious and unexpected ways. If you're an architect, there's always hope. The latest switch in architectural immortality has come with the remake of King Kong. The producers have been running a full-page ad announcing that their first full-page ad was so popular—with 25,000 requests for full-color reprints—that they are working around the clock to fill orders. The ad shows King Kong breaking up airplanes with his right hand and clutching whoever plays Fay Wray in his left hand, standing astride—and this is the point—not the Empire State Building, as in the original film, but the World Trade Center towers.

While this may provide less of a nostalgic kick, it is vastly elevated high camp. And it also gives King Kong an infinitely superior footing. Instead of perilously grabbing the famous Art Deco spire, he has each leg planted firmly on one of the two new flattop towers.

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The Empire State Building, of course, is a star in its own right, with an enduring romantic charisma. Somehow it implies every cherished legend of New York glamour, from the glittering speakeasy era to the suave luxe of the seventies. It is genuinely immortal. By contrast, and as a symbol of the city, the World Trade Center towers are consummately uninspiring. (They still sell more Empire State Buildings in the five and ten.) And whether the producers of the film are aware of it or not, the change they have made is fraught with cultural and esthetic implications.

Today's tall buildings are not stars. They are impersonally impressive, at best, giant nonentities, at worst. Another movie, "The Towering Inferno," for example, was not about a building you could recognize or cherish. This was simply a large object to which catastrophe happened.

I could offer an intellectually seductive explanation of the change, with dithyrambs about the anti-hero and the anti-symbol and how our vision of men and monuments has been altered. This is a populist age in the arts, led, of course, by the elite, and we are tearing down symbols (symbolically) and elevating the ordinary with determined reversals of good and bad and beautiful and ugly. It is a vision that can be hopelessly counterproductive, or it can provide some rich dividends in much more complex and sophisticated ways of seeing life and the world. Anti-art is true to our times.

But the real reason for the change in the tall building is far more down to earth. It is just as rooted in culture and history, but it is less an act of philosophy than an expression of profitable pragmatism. It is a truism that today's tall building is strictly the product of economic calculations, tempered by codes and the law. Those boxy flattops that have replaced slender spires to jar the skyline and the viewer (architects and city fathers would be surprised at the amount of public concern over a city's skyline) represent the best buy in structural space.

Corporate growth and computerizing are also prime contributing factors. Today's huge corporations require huge floor areas in stacks; no builder is going to offer them a tapered tower. And no one could care less about a skyscraper version of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus—a favorite conceit of the 1920's. Status is conferred by sheer size and the comparative quality and solidity of materials and fittings. The business of America may be business, as Coolidge said, but it has also become its art.

This phenomenon has been reinforced uncannily by the modernist architectural esthetic. The 20th-century architectural revolution claimed the higher beauty of utility over ornament; it endorsed the look of the machine product as an artistic end. It enshrined the functional esthetic. But it is an awfully short and dangerous step from the kind of expert and delicate adjustments that turn utility into art, and from the recognition of those adjustments, to the most ordinary solution, or the least design for the money.

This deterioration is sanctioned, in a sense, by the modernist "less is more" philosophy. At its finest, less is more, and the finest is limited to a few men, such as Mies van der Rohe. Mies's work is magnificent, with a stripped, subtle, hard-edged and demanding beauty that is going to symbolize the 20th century for the rest of time. It is also poorly understood and badly knocked off. Even so, the glass box vernacular that grew out of his style is some of the best "background" architecture in history.

But this is an arcane and specialized esthetic—it was undoubtedly easier for the Popes to buy the overt grandeur of Borromini. Business clients rarely understand or want it. They are pursuing sleek space-profit formulas and effective technological solutions that no longer aspire to the kind of moving artistic greatness in the timeless and spiritual sense that architecture, and particularly the big building, has always held a primary concern. (Try standing in front of a Hawksmoor building in London without this visceral hit.) Objectively, the skyscraper's immense, efficient and impersonal blandness is a perfectly accurate picture of much of the architectural art of our age.

So dull, so prosaic, in fact, are most of today's ambitious big buildings that New Yorkers now value, for their quite accidental esthetics, the staggered shapes of the setback buildings required by law until the early 1960's. The zoning code was changed then to encourage straight-sided towers, something architects had pushed for in the name of both architectural and civic art. Now the "wedding cakes" add the interest of eccentric form, at least, to the speculative norm. Their outlines also define a style and a time and a place, a combination of which art and culture are made.

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This ambivalent view of today's construction art is not written in rage or resignation; it is not a cry for impossible change. The needs and responses of big building design today, if not immutable, are certainly justifiable in realistic terms. History is not a process to be short-circuited by dissenters. And there will never be any more great buildings than there are great architects.

Art, however, remains a life instinct from Lascaux to Ronchamps, and it is always going to produce civilization's touchstones. The skyscraper is the miracle and monument of the 20th century. Its progress, curiously, has linked development and decline. Watching the emergence of the tall building in New York in 1913, the critic Montgomery Schuyler could still write that "hardly any American owner is quite so Boeotian as not to show 'a decent respect for the opinion of mankind' in the appearance of his skyscrapers . . . It is a public malefaction to protrude a shapeless bulk 'above the purple crowd of humbler roofs.'"

Montgomery Schuyler, where are you now?