

Carol Willis, *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995) reviewed in *BUSINESS HISTORY REVIEW* 71 (1997): 327-28.

The history of the skyscraper has become a lot more interesting of late, and this book shows why. Not so long ago historians viewed skyscrapers solely from the outside, as if they were only architectural objects. The historiographical issues were style and ornament, architectural solutions, and corporate symbolism. In the last few years work by such social, cultural and architectural historians as Olivier Zunz, Lisa Fine, Sarah Landau and Carl Condit have literally opened up the skyscraper for historical investigation, approaching the skyscraper as it were from the inside out. In her splendid book Carol Willis writes about skyscrapers as if business practices and economic logic mattered. She argues compellingly that “skyscrapers should best be understood both as the locus of business and as businesses themselves” (p. 10). Her essay is thoughtful and provocative (including 170 well-chosen illustrations for 182 pages of text).

While her book develops an innovative thesis on the “vernaculars of capitalism” that encompasses differences in municipal regulations and land-use patterns in Chicago and New York, and similarities in spatial and financial considerations found in both cities, Willis begins simply enough with two axiomatic points. First, skyscrapers themselves were designed from the inside out. Once the office plan was set, floors were laid out with offices, elevators and services, then stories were piled up, and so the external form of the building took shape. For offices, the principal design concern was lighting. In the era before fluorescent lighting the point was to use natural lighting to the fullest possible extent and thus to minimize reliance on expensive, heat-producing incandescent bulbs. Besides large windows, useful for light and ventilation, architects aimed to have tall ceilings and no more than about 25 feet distance from the light-gathering windows to the innermost wall or public hallway. The results, found universally in the two cities, were a classic T-shaped office module (two private offices with external windows, sharing a reception area, which opened onto the hallway). Executives, secretaries, and callers all took their places.

Willis’s second axiom is that skyscrapers, whether corporate or speculative buildings, were income-generating ventures shaped by the constraints of municipal regulation and economic logic. “While office plans and interiors were virtually identical in all cities,” she writes, “skyscrapers in New York and Chicago presented very different formal types when viewed from the outside” (p. 33). These formal types were less the result of city-specific “schools” of architecture; instead, they were creative if bounded responses to shifting constraints. Indeed, the central achievement of her book is relating the evolution of these building types in the two cities (persuasively illustrated by specific buildings) to changes in these skyscraper-shaping constraints, including city-specific building codes, the dynamics of speculative financing, and historical land-use patterns. New York was a laissez-faire building environment from the 1890s to 1916, when the city’s building code in effect mandated the “set-back” form of skyscraper (think of a pyramid stretched skyward) but permitted towers of unlimited height on an area equal to one-quarter of the building’s property. In New York the building code and the “economic

height” of a building, a function of land values and rents, worked together to shape the tower-dominated skyline through the 1930s.

Chicago unlike New York permitted steel-skeleton buildings in the 1880s and thus took an early lead in skyscraper construction. But in 1893 Chicago placed absolute limits on skyscraper height, which for the next 60 years oscillated up and down depending on the city’s building cycle and (under- or over-) supply of office space. Chicago’s building code, then, coupled with the large size of city blocks, produced a skyscraper vernacular of big boxy buildings penetrated by light courts at their center or rear. In 1923 Chicago not only raised its height limit to 264 feet, straight up from the sidewalk, but also permitted towers so long as they were of no greater volume than one-sixth of the main building. The result, so unlike the classic “modern” New York skyline that went up in the 1920s, was again boxy buildings topped by stunted towers. Willis gives compelling interpretations of both conservative and innovative architectural responses to these constraints. Her examples include the Empire State, Daily News, and RCA/Rockefeller Center buildings in New York; and the Jewelers, Civic Opera, Board of Trade, and Palmolive buildings in Chicago.

Even given the standardizing effects of International Style modernism on postwar skyscrapers, her findings will force us to re-think any facile association of skyscrapers with corporate America. Notions of “the corporate skyline,” she argues, obscure the non-corporate nature of most skyscrapers. Beginning in the 1890s and accelerating in the boom years of the 1920s, skyscrapers were mostly financed by special real-estate bonds; bearing between 6 and 10 percent interest, these bonds were issued in denominations as small as \$100 to attract small investors. Skyscrapers in the 1920s were erected, as one critic of the practice put it, “entirely through the efforts of bond houses to sell bonds, whether the buildings were needed or not” (p. 164). Up to three-fourths of all skyscrapers, Willis shows, were built not as corporate headquarters but as speculative, income-producing ventures. Even the prestige buildings for Woolworth or Metropolitan Life were mostly filled with rental offices. “Of the fifty-five stories of the Woolworth Building, that company’s operations filled less than two floors, while the remaining space was leased, generally as small offices,” she writes (p. 148). Understanding this profusion of smaller enterprises in the midst of erstwhile symbols of corporate power should engage business historians who are looking for fresh approaches to the American business system between the 1880s and 1930s.

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