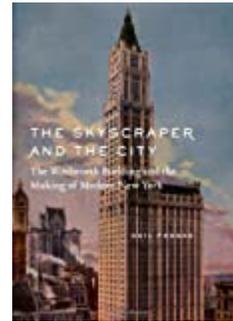




**Gail Fenske.** *The Skyscraper and the City: The Woolworth Building and the Making of Modern New York.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. Illustrations. xii + 400 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-24141-8.



**Reviewed by** Roberta Moudry (Cornell University)

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**Commissioned by** Sharon L. Irish (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign)

## The Woolworth Building Made Visible

Urban and architectural historians looking for New York City or skyscraper history can find a shelf of books proclaiming the significance of the Empire State Building (1931). For scholar and tourist, the Empire State Building, located in midtown Manhattan, commands center stage. It is the monument we see as we travel east through the last miles of New Jersey before the Lincoln Tunnel, and it is the monument at which thousands snake through lines and security checks to rise to its aluminum-clad top for a tourist's eye view of the city. Other skyscrapers and ensembles have also had their share of press. Rockefeller Center, the bridges that link the island of Manhattan to New Jersey and its neighboring boroughs, and the city's train and subway stations have been documented by historians, engineers, and designers.

Curiously absent on these shelves are the volumes, even the single volume, dedicated to the Woolworth Building. Perhaps because of its downtown location, its neo-Gothic aesthetic (neither an early solution to the skyscraper design problem, nor a modern one), or its now-unremarkable height, this skyscraper has not held

public attention quite so well. Situated at the southwestern edge of City Hall Park, the building's intensely vertical Gothic tower is not particularly visible on today's skyline, save from certain vantage points on Broadway and the Brooklyn Bridge. And those who today seek out the tower are stopped by a sign at the Broadway entrance suggesting that they find some other monument in this great city of monuments to admire. Despite a grand opening in 1913 that was a civic, even a national, event, the Woolworth Building turns away its architectural admirers. It stands as an icon of the world's once-largest chain of retail stores that today's young adults cannot remember. Yet the Woolworth Building is a remarkable structure, significant as a refined aesthetic expression of verticality, and as a monument to an ingenious retailer (and his empire) who understood the built environment as a strategic field for consumer activity and corporate image making.

As a remedy to this omission in architecture and urban history scholarship, Gail Fenske's encyclopedic work provides a comprehensive text that situates an

architectural monograph of the Woolworth Building within a broader consideration of major issues in early twentieth-century urban America. Thus the scholarly contribution here is twofold. This book gathers the remarkable archival riches surrounding this built project—plentiful documents from client, architect, engineer, and contractor—and brings an important architectural and urban story to publication. It also contributes to a growing volume of architecture and landscape history scholarship that works broadly in such areas as cultural and urban history, without abandoning the physical and geographic qualities of the subject. Architectural and engineering history, cultural and urban history, and a genuine consideration of the skyscraper as part of the City Beautiful era are all part of the story that Fenske tells in seven chapters. These detail the project’s corporate and urban context, its makers, its making, its public reception, and finally its own history as a structure in a changing city. Throughout the text, the building is linked to its city, and to the modern era into which it was born. Larger issues are raised and discussed, but the specifics of the Woolworth Building are carefully connected to those issues.

The Woolworth Building’s life (using the anthropomorphic strategy delineated by Neil Harris in *Building Lives* [1999] and alluded to by Fenske in her introduction) is organized by chapters that run chronologically and that are also topically specific. The introduction serves as an extended bibliographic essay to situate the Woolworth Building in existing literature that has turned the scholarly microscope on such topics as the skyscraper, consumer and mass culture, modernity, and New York City in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “The Woolworth Building’s importance,” as Fenske notes in the book’s introduction, “resides not simply in its aesthetic distinction, but rather in its capacity to shine a light on New York’s broader historical context” (p. 10).

Fenske’s text thus covers considerable scholarly ground, from urban history to consumer culture, from the history of the skyscraper as building type to that of the larger urban schemes of the City Beautiful. She also delves into the development of construction processes; the rise of the general contractor; and the relationships between engineers and contractors, as well as architects and clients. All of these issues are explored through the specific case of the Woolworth Building—hence the book’s telling title, *The Skyscraper and the City*. Despite the topical range of the study, the Woolworth Building is ever-present, as a project and as an architectural object. Studies that pivot on a more traditional formal analysis have no difficulty with keeping their subject center stage,

but it is a challenge, often not met, for scholars who seek to integrate varied histories with formal description and analysis.

Chapters 1 and 2 are devoted to Frank W. Woolworth, the rise of his network of general merchandise stores, and the strategies that shaped the physical layout of his businesses and their relationships to urban space and shoppers. Chapter 1, confusingly entitled “Woolworth’s Skyscraper,” is in fact about Woolworth’s commercial empire. It tells the story of Woolworth, his personal world, and the world of his stores that charged five or ten cents for goods (thus “five-and-dime” stores). Here, Fenske makes clear that Woolworth admired the great monuments of Europe, and was thus not without aesthetic appreciation. However, he *also* developed his chain of five-and-dime stores with an understanding of architecture and geography as tools to attract and facilitate the selling of cheap goods. The background for the skyscraper’s evolution as an idea is further fleshed out in a second chapter, “Woolworth, Modernity and the City.” Here, attention shifts to the urban context for the Woolworth Building; the development of lower Manhattan and the commercially significant Broadway are detailed. Woolworth’s relationship with the Irving National Exchange Bank is discussed, as well as his decision to hire architect Cass Gilbert as the building’s designer.

Gilbert is the central focus of the third and fourth chapters. “Gilbert’s Beaux-Arts Skyscrapers” details the architect’s work prior to the Woolworth commission, including his civic and commercial work. Admirably, Fenske discusses his Beaux-Arts imagery and urbanism, and his Gothic skyscraper designs without replaying the entire history of the skyscraper as an urban building type. This presentation of Gilbert’s earlier work, well illustrated with photographs, plans, and the architect’s sketches, is followed by “Designing the Woolworth Building,” which documents the many versions of the project that resulted in a final design, both aesthetically refined and much taller than originally planned.

Chapter 5, “A Record-Breaking Feat of Modern Construction,” provides a full accounting of the Woolworth Building’s construction, a complex dance between client and architect, the general contractor, engineers, and actual building crew. The rise of the general contractor as a major player in a rationalized building process is recounted. We also see how Gilbert’s small office, which in many ways still resembled a Beaux-Arts atelier, modified its design production to work with the contractor, the Thompson-Starrett Company. The actual building

effort—from the placement of caissons to the design and placement of structural steel columns and wind bracing and the application of terra cotta cladding—is thoroughly described, as well as contemporary efforts to use these aspects of construction to capture the public’s attention.

The two final chapters tell the story of the building’s completion and grand opening, its occupancy, and its impact on Manhattan and on the broader national and international expanse of the Woolworth empire as a robust corporate icon. “The Skyscraper as a City” walks the reader through the elaborate public spaces of the lobby-arcade, the rathskeller, and the banking hall of the ground level Irving National Bank, but it also discusses the technologies and spaces that supported tenants on the floors not open to the public. High above the city, on the twenty-fourth floor, the Woolworth Company’s corporate headquarters was outfitted in the “Empire style” of Napoleon Bonaparte, a heroic figure with whom Woolworth felt a powerful connection. Like Napoleon, Woolworth had acquired an empire, albeit one built of the loose change of urban immigrants. Looking beyond the walls of the skyscraper-city, “The Woolworth Building and Modern New York” observes the reception of the building in news media, tourist literature, and product and corporate advertising. As a nighttime lighting spectacle, a downtown destination, and a marker on the skyline, the Woolworth Building became part of, and catalyzed change in, the city around it. Certainly, this final chapter makes clear the inseparability of the Woolworth Building, or perhaps any urban monument, from its physical and cultural contexts.

A notable quality of this study is the use of the scholarly tools of images, endnotes, and bibliography. These are not simply adjuncts or supplements, but are significant and well-integrated components of the published study. The visual material—including black-and-white photographs, drawings, maps and plans, and a center section of color images, all clearly identified and captioned—elaborates on facts and issues detailed in the text. Fifty-plus pages of endnotes, formatted like the text in double columns and in an easy-to-read font size, are also essential to the book. These are the kind of endnotes that contain not simply a citation, but provide additional information that might clutter the chapter text, and are gems

for the specialist seeking more detail. A selected bibliography follows the endnotes, providing yet another way to draw material from this study. In other words, Fenske employs all of the traditional scholarly tools of architecture history to tell a story that extends on all sides beyond a traditional formal study. This aspect of *The Skyscraper and the City* will be particularly instructive for graduate students of American studies, urban history, and architectural and planning history, who are embarking on projects that consider physical (architectural or spatial) aspects of the city and their nonphysical historical and cultural contexts.

The breadth and detail of this work are extensive. If the Woolworth Building could boast a set of “biographies” and analyses such as those that cover the Empire State Building, one might wish for a more selective compilation of facts. But as a foundation text, which this book is, we can be grateful that the author was thoughtful in her organizational strategy. Because chapters are largely topical, one can select a single aspect of the building by moving to that chapter. Chapter titles are not entirely informative for a reader wanting to skip to the chapters most interesting to the business historian or the historian of technology, but the index will provide the necessary information. This use of the book may not have been the intention of the author, who has aspired to produce an integrated study. But in a world where commentary and attention spans are limited to the length of a tweet, production of a lengthy study that can also be accessed as a linked series of essays is a scholarly strategy worthy of consideration.

*The Skyscraper and the City* has much to offer a broad readership, including historians of the city, business, architecture, and technology. It is also fully accessible to the many who walk in Manhattan with their eyes open, filled with a wonder for the city and its rich history. However, it may be of greatest significance to architects and historians of architecture, who these days seem adrift in a sea of ambivalence about the role of history in the education of young architects. With her exhaustive study, Fenske (who is both architect and historian) suggests that only through history may we glean the cultural context and aesthetic understanding of our monuments and cities.

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