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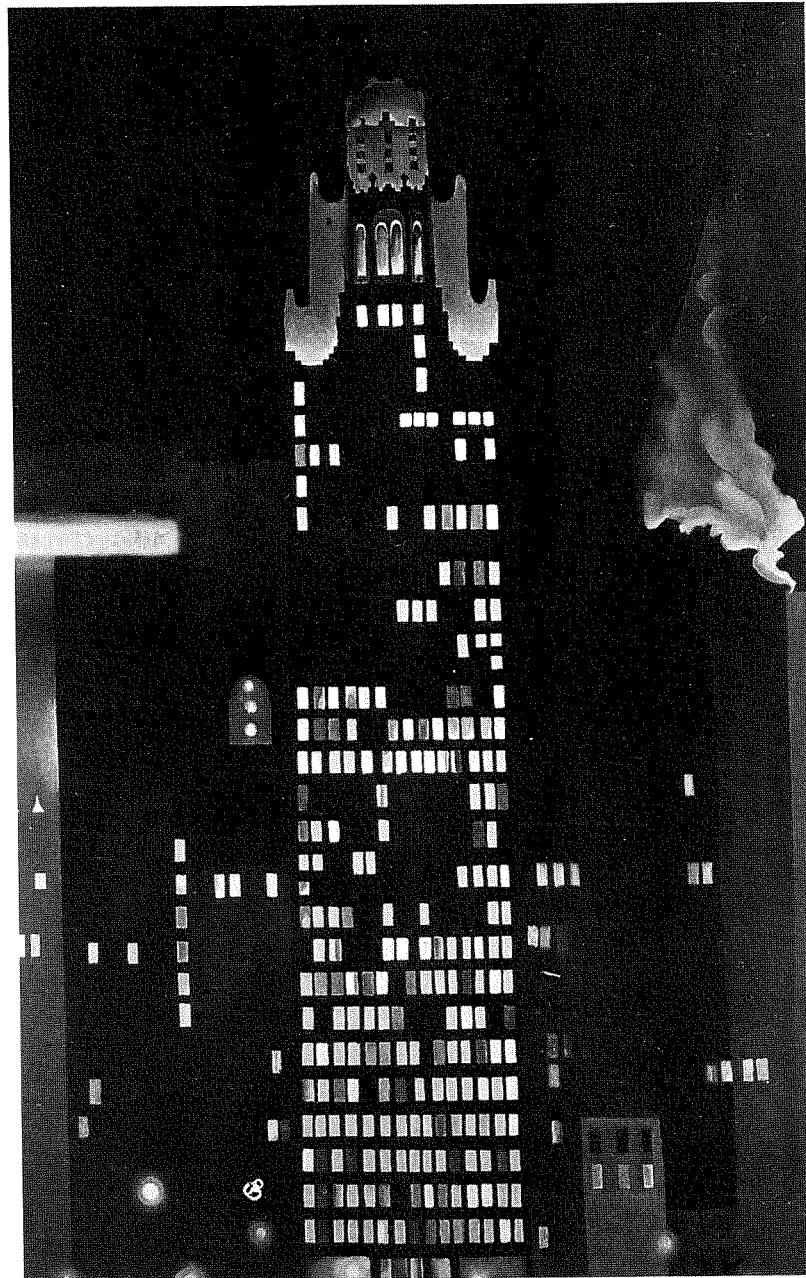
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Georgia O'Keeffe's *Radiator Building:* Icon of Glamorous Gotham

Elizabeth Duvert

Georgia O'Keeffe's *Radiator Building—Night, New York* presents us with an image of the American city on its twentieth-century rise, an image so powerful it still lures us from an alleged heritage of pastoral values and almost a century's experience of urban blight. During the period between the two world wars, New York City was transformed into a wonder-filled and delusively alluring stage set for the enactment of Americans' dreams of success. The city's skyscrapers provide both the setting and the stars for this urban drama, and O'Keeffe's painting of one of New York's key buildings captures the theatricality of the city's new image as well as the commercial spirit which promoted it. Completed in 1927, O'Keeffe's work depicts the metropolis Americans have desired and continue to desire as suggested by our most recent designs whose roots go back to the twenties and thirties when the Radiator Building was erected.¹ Although the Radiator Building is no longer illuminated at night, its tower dwarfed by the super-skyscrapers of the past two decades, O'Keeffe's portrait of this building as a central player in the city's dramatic transformation during the twenties and thirties remains today an icon of Americans' ongoing worship of glamorous Gotham.

The image of the city that O'Keeffe portrays is present not only in Ramond M. Hood's design for the Radiator Building but also in the comments of city planners and newspaper editorials of the day, in the art deco style of other



1 Radiator Building—Night, New York,
1927, Georgia O'Keeffe. The Alfred Stieglitz
Collection, Fisk University, Nashville,
Tennessee.

skyscrapers built during this period, in the visionary drawings of the artist and architectural renderer Hugh Ferriss, and in the interpretation of the city's skyline by early filmmakers. Each of these, in turn, contributes to an understanding of O'Keeffe's *Radiator Building*, a painting in which the artist simultaneously celebrates the city's image and parodies it with wit.

O'Keeffe moved to New York in 1918. Of her early experience of the city, she writes: "At that time Park Avenue, lined with brownstone houses, seemed to stretch way beyond 59th street and on to infinity. It was a quiet sunny street—a pleasant place to walk even though the underground trains were visible in some places."² In 1925, she and Alfred Stieglitz, whom she had married in 1924, moved into an apartment on the thirtieth floor of the Shelton Hotel, built in 1922 and one of several new skyscraper hotels rising in Manhattan. O'Keeffe's city paintings date from this period—the earliest, 1925, and the latest, 1929, the year she spent her first summer in New Mexico and turned her attention to the Southwestern landscape which would ultimately become her home and the major subject of her art.

Acutely attuned to the character of place, O'Keeffe spoke of New York as looking just the way a city should look. Yet initially she was discouraged from taking on its image in her art. Both Stieglitz and the other men in the group of artists surrounding O'Keeffe

objected to her attempting to paint the man-made city. Male painters had found the city a frustrating subject, and O'Keeffe was advised to turn to nature, the "feminine" sphere, not to the city's architecture which required techniques of draftsmanship supposedly alien to a woman. Stieglitz refused to hang O'Keeffe's first New York painting in his 1925 "Seven Americans" show. Though furious at this omission, O'Keeffe was undeterred. In the following year in a show of her own, when the same painting was the first sold on opening day, the men's objections ceased. "From then on," the artist recalls, "they let me paint New York."³

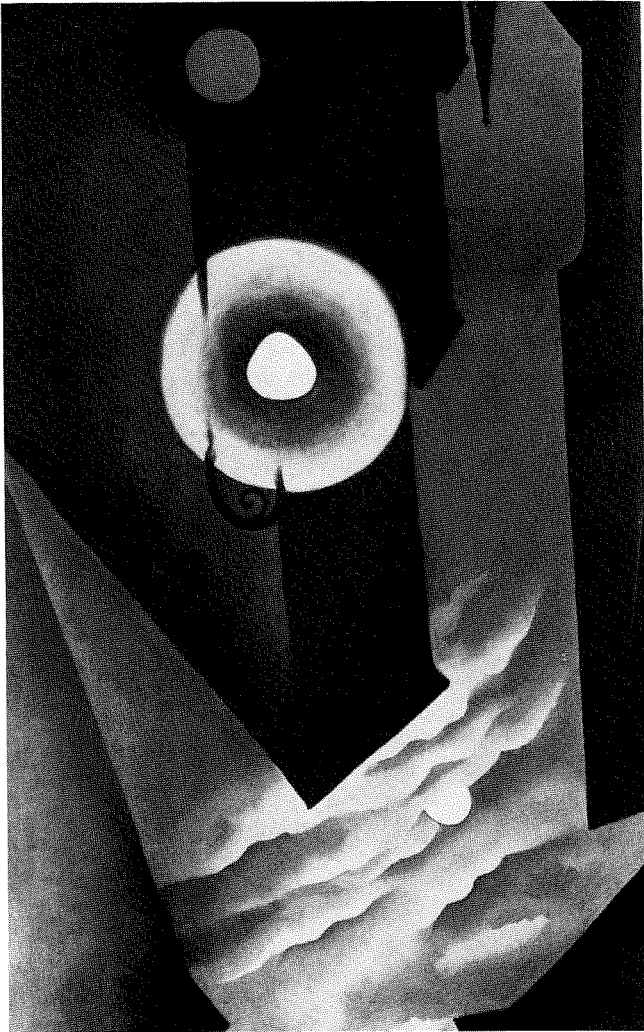
O'Keeffe's New York paintings—almost a score of which were completed in the short period between 1925 and 1929—reveal the city's transformation between the two world wars and incorporate several experiences of its rapidly changing architecture: the experience of the city's tall buildings seen from the streets, the panorama of the industrial city visible from its new architectural heights, and the city's nocturnal projection of a second self, the duplication of its architectural shapes by glittering lights.

In her first city painting, *New York with Moon* (1925), O'Keeffe juxtaposes the scene at street level to the moonlit sky of clouds, which is visible beyond the surrounding buildings. The streetlight's halo of light offers an artificial corollary to the natural illumination of a distant moon. Though the painting incorporates the natural world

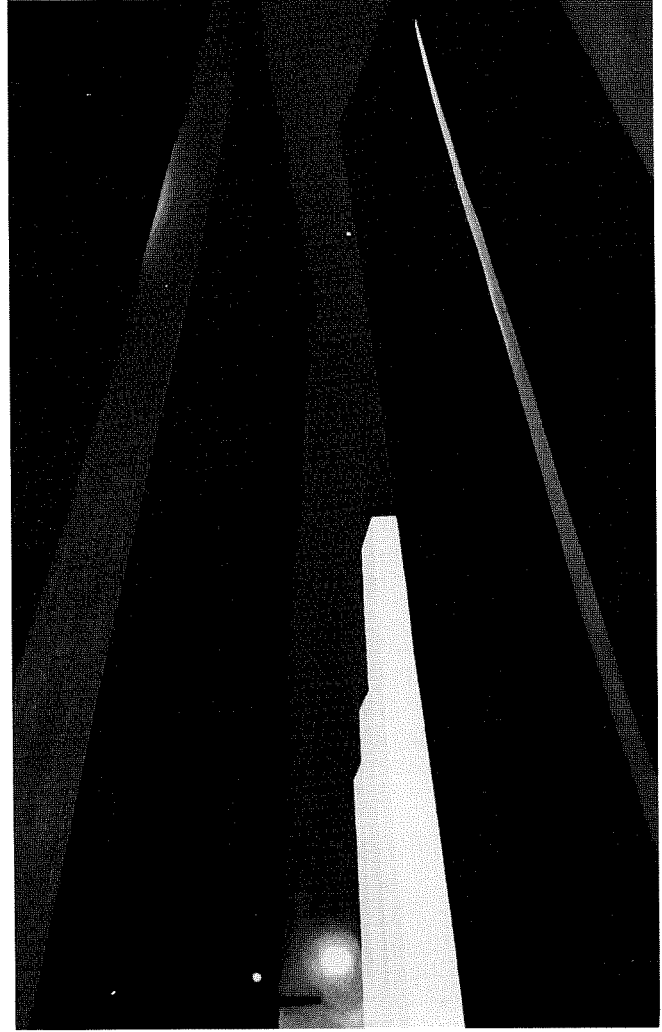
beyond the city's shape, the walls of its buildings glow from the red of the traffic light, which suggests that one stops here, enclosed by the buildings' overwhelming presence. The buildings' cornices, an architectural feature soon to be eliminated from New York skyscrapers, curve over the street, emphasizing the viewer's sense of enclosure. However, O'Keeffe also includes the familiar forms of a human landscape as it would be seen from the street below—the streetlamp, the traffic light, and the distant church spire, all reduced to miniature proportions by the skyscrapers' heights.

In several works, O'Keeffe depicts the skyscrapers' towering walls as anonymous shapes, emphasizing the viewer's sense of diminished stature below the sheerness of their vertical rise. In her two works, *A Street in New York* and *City Night*, both painted in 1926, architectural shapes dominate the canvas surface. In one painting O'Keeffe has used oblique lines drawn from the painting's right side toward its center, suggesting the horizontal sweep of canyon-like walls. In the other, her lines rise from the lower edges of the canvas to its top, accenting the vertical sweep of the black walls whose height seems to supersede even the moon's. Nevertheless, the central area of these paintings contains the image of a slender opening between the skyscrapers' walls through which sky, moon, clouds, or stars are still visible.

For her view of the city from above, O'Keeffe frequently reverses her



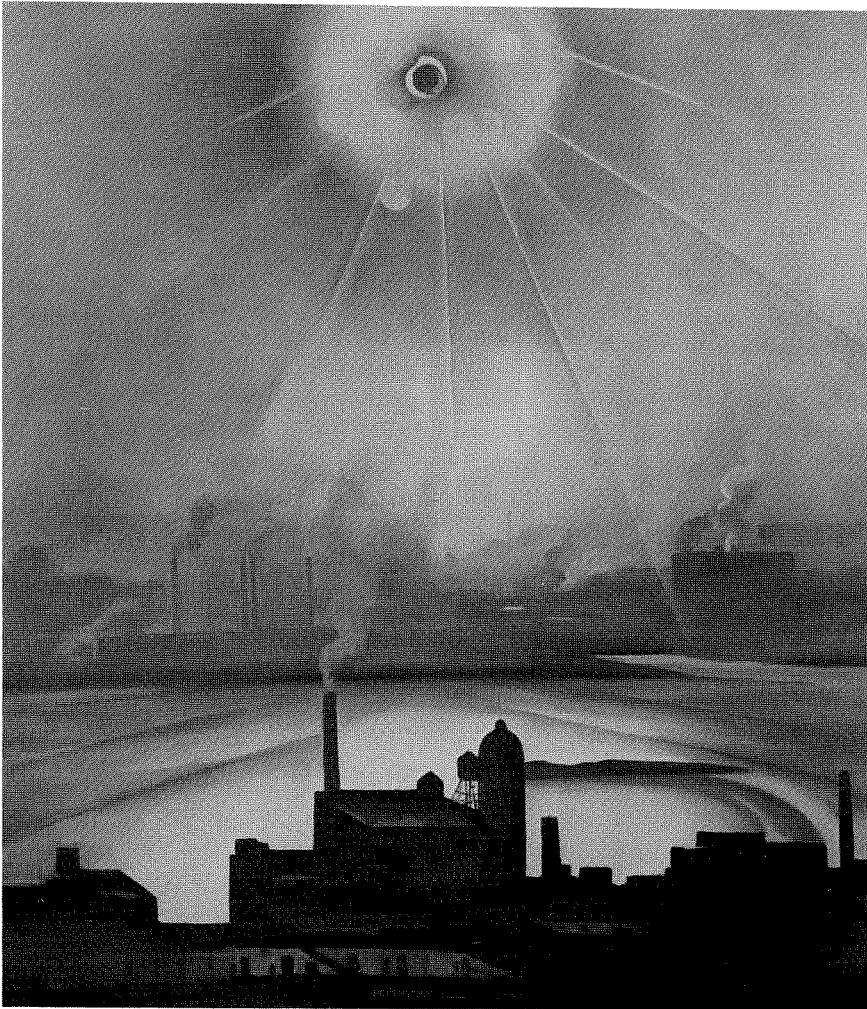
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2 *New York with Moon*, 1925, Georgia O'Keeffe. Private Collection. (From Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, Viking Press, 1976.)

3 *City Night*, 1926, Georgia O'Keeffe. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.



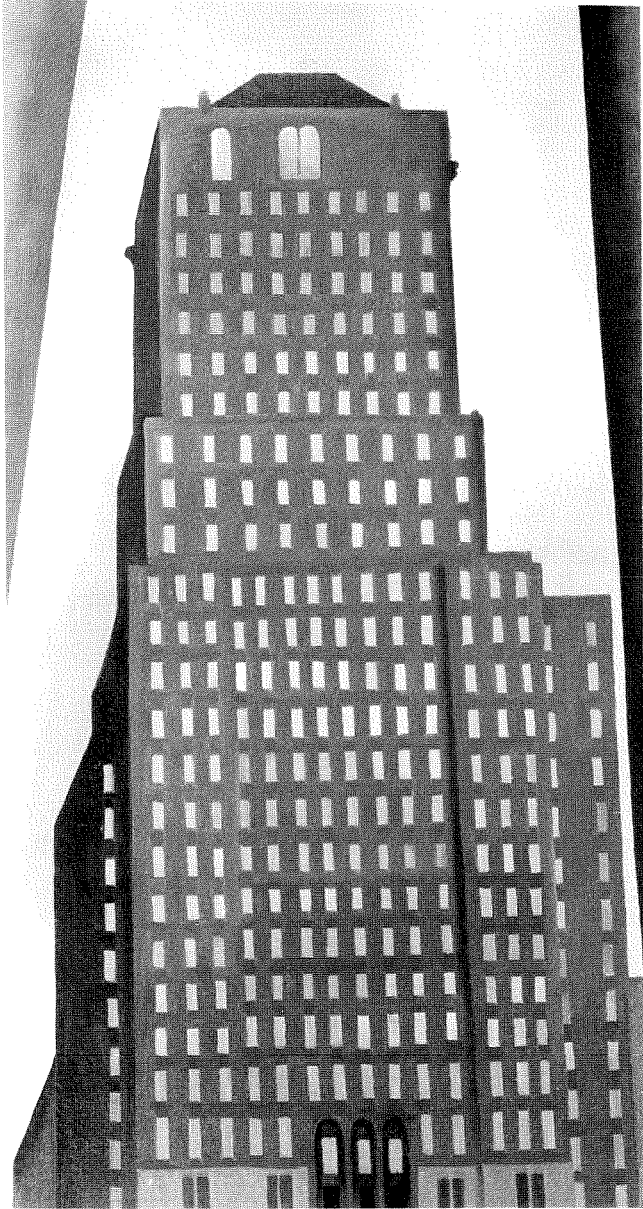
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4 East River from the Shelton, 1927–28,
Georgia O'Keeffe. New Jersey State Museum
Collection, Trenton. Purchased by the
Association for the Arts of the N.J. State
Museum with a Gift from Mary Lee Johnson,
1972.

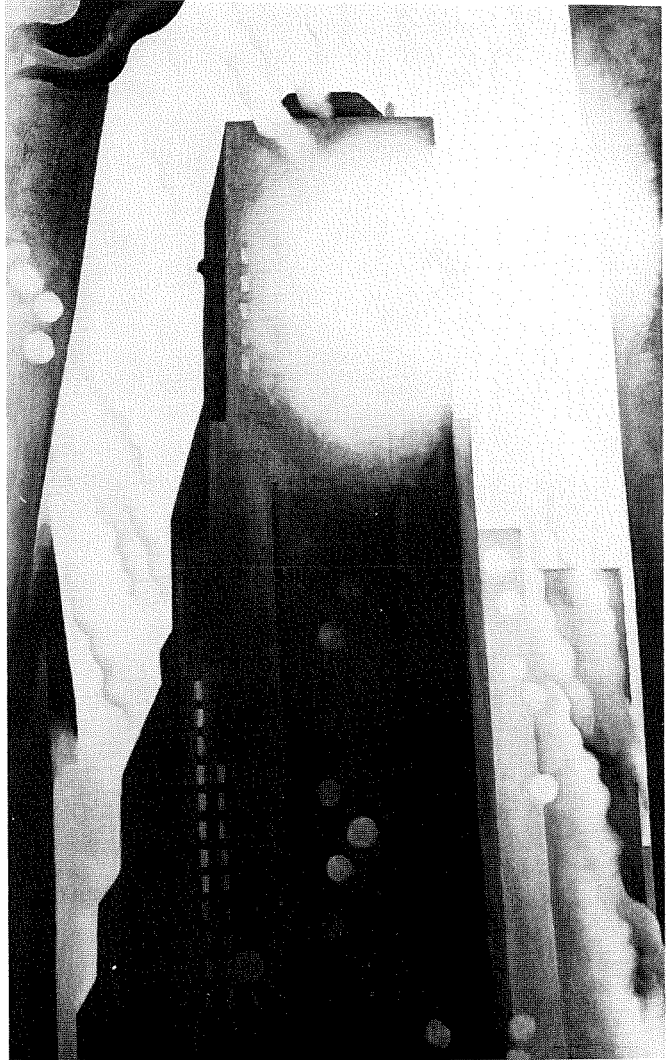
format, using a long, narrow canvas to portray the panorama of the East River which is visible from the windows of the Shelton. In *East River, Number 1* (1926), the natural world is the central motif, with its image of the river's light-reflecting expanse counterpointed only occasionally by the vertical forms of smokestacks along the river's edge. In *East River from the Shelton* (1927–1928), O'Keeffe uses a squarer format in which the dark forms of the industrial city seen from above share the canvas with a powerful image of the sun, its corona encircled by sunspots, its refracted rays radiating downward over the smoke-filled landscape below. In *River, New York* (1928), O'Keeffe again uses a long, narrow canvas; yet, in this painting the river itself is almost eclipsed by the artist's attention to the geometry of man-made structures on the river's two sides.

In two 1926 paintings, *Shelton Hotel, New York* and *The Shelton with Sunspots*, both views of the skyscraper hotel from the street below, O'Keeffe again frames her view with the partially visible walls of surrounding buildings; but in these works, the center of her canvas is neither a slender open space between buildings nor some unifying element of the natural world. Rather, the central portion of her composition is filled with an image of the skyscraper itself.

In *Shelton Hotel, New York*, the skyscraper's image is painted in earth-tones and covered with windows that are meticulously depicted on virtually every plane



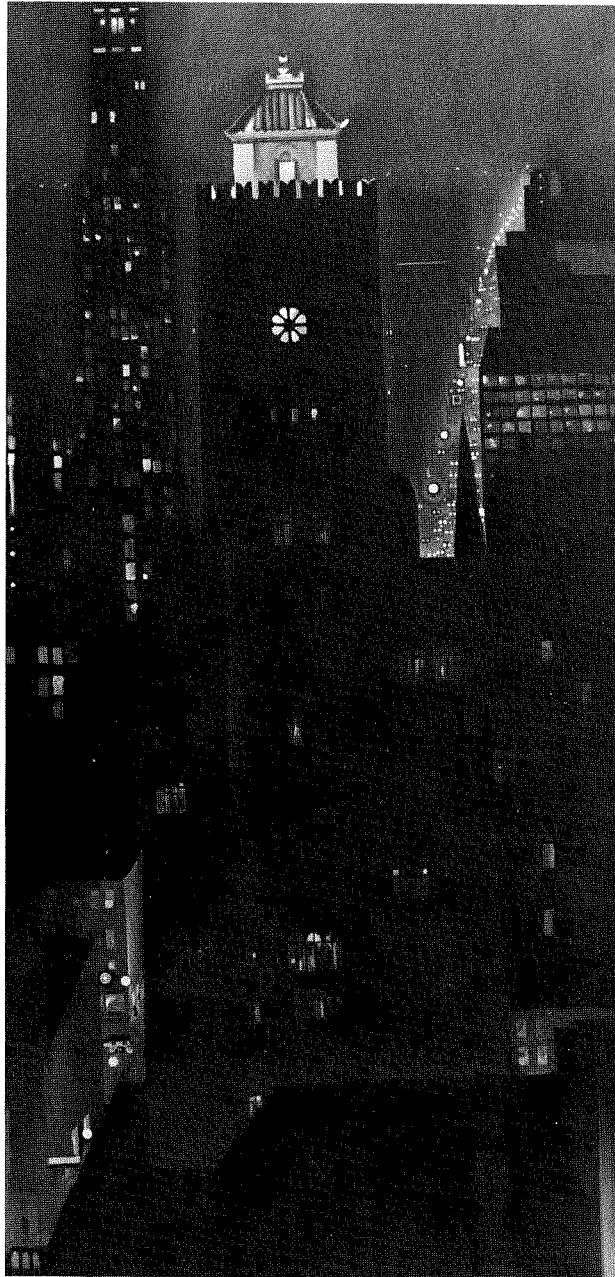
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5 Shelton Hotel, New York, No. 1, 1926,
Georgia O'Keeffe. The Regis Collection.
Photograph courtesy of Kennedy Galleries.

6 The Shelton with Sunspots, 1926,
Georgia O'Keeffe. Collection of Inland Steel
Company.



7 **New York Night**, 1929, Georgia O'Keeffe. Nebraska Art Association. Thomas C. Wood Memorial Collection. Courtesy of Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

of its massive form. However, any notion of the hotel as human habitat, from whose windows its inhabitants could look out at the city whose life they share, is completely eclipsed in *The Shelton with Sunspots*. In this painting the building is the leading actor in the city's drama. Its myriad windows are barely suggested, for O'Keeffe focuses instead on the skyscraper's massive form whose image she has painted in unbroken planes of black and outlined against the white tones of the smoke-filled atmosphere in which it stands. O'Keeffe describes the origin of this painting: "I went out one morning to look at it before I started to work and there was the optical illusion of a bite out of one side of the tower made by the sun, with sunspots against the building and against the sky." Between the soaring image of the Shelton's black mass and the bite of the sun, O'Keeffe's vision of the city's drama has reached titanic proportions.

In two of her last paintings of New York, *Radiator Building—Night, New York* (1927) and *New York Night* (1929), O'Keeffe turns to the city in its nocturnal glitter. The natural world has virtually disappeared from these paintings, reduced to the faint image of a single pale star in the upper left corner of *Radiator Building*, hardly a competitor with the artificial galaxy presented in both canvases. Of *New York Night*, O'Keeffe remarks: "Lexington Avenue looked, in the night, like a very tall thin bottle with colored things going up and down inside it." Of the *Radiator Building*, she writes: "I walked across 42nd Street many

times at night when the black Radiator Building was new—so that had to be painted too.”

These last two paintings are markedly different from O’Keeffe’s first view of a city street lit by a single lamp post above which skyscrapers bound a moonlit sky. Their central image is a skyscraper tower artificially illuminating itself amid a carnival of city lights. Possessing an acute sensitivity to place, O’Keeffe artistically recreates in this series of paintings of New York the changing character of the city’s image in the decade of the 1920s. The earlier juxtaposition of the natural world with the city’s darkened interior gives way to a vision that is centered on the skyscraper itself, a vision from which the natural world has been permanently excluded and the battle between light and dark resolved by the city’s artificial creation of its own reflection.

Except for her paintings of the Shelton in which she lived, O’Keeffe’s *Radiator Building* is the only work that the artist names after a particular skyscraper. Its location⁴ in an area of the city familiar to O’Keeffe, its striking nocturnal image, and the controversy aroused by its color drew her attention as well as that of the rest of the city. That was, in fact, its goal. Completed and occupied in 1924, the Radiator Building was a forerunner of New York’s art deco skyscrapers whose style suited large cities, a commercial style created mostly for big business as good advertisement, entertaining to the public which it sought to attract.⁵

A look at the character of the city’s rapidly changing image and its expression in the Radiator Building’s design demonstrates how keenly O’Keeffe understood that image and portrayed it in *Radiator Building—Night, New York*.

At the heart of New York’s image in the 1920s and 1930s lay a self-conscious ambiguity. On the one hand, city planners sought material expression of human aspirations in its rising skyscrapers. The report of the Regional Planning Commission of New York City, published in 1931, noted:

There are two aspects in which the bold magnificence of New York skyscrapers cannot be questioned. The great isolated tower that thrusts itself into the clouds and is surrounded by open spaces or very low buildings, so that its shadow does no injury to neighboring buildings, may in the hands of the artist be an ennobling feature in the city. Secondly, the mass effect of a mountain of building, such as is obtained by looking at lower Manhattan from the wide expanse of the Upper Bay, is recognized as one of the wonders of the world, as an artificial creation.⁶

Against the image of the ennobling skyscraper or the wonder of New York’s skyline, a New York newspaper pitted the city’s reality:

. . . the spirit of New York . . . does not aspire; New York is content with this world, plenty content; New York has no wish to climb up out of the human scene and lose itself in the sun;

New York hates the sun and shuts it out with towering buildings that make dark canyons of the streets at midday, and visitors do not come to see the sunshine on Broadway.⁷

As the language of both the report and the newspaper suggests, the city seemed to have a life of its own, to be a living entity animated by its own spirit, directed by its own will, both perhaps resistant to the ennobling hand of the visionary artist. Yet to speak of the city as a personified being was merely to reveal the human desires determining its shape and to see in its material form their realization and their perpetuation.

Between skyward aspirations and mundane contentment, the city takes on the mediating role of glamorous stage set, a role simultaneously acknowledging its own artificiality and raising the pursuit of illusion to a way of life. What one comes to see in the city is its spectacle, its unabashed advertising of itself as an artificial wonder wrought by man alone. For in the early decades of the twentieth century, New York is transformed into a city conscious of being seen, and its skyscrapers generate that self-consciousness. From their towers, the city can for the first time look down upon itself and behold the scene in which the skyscraper is itself a part. Like the self-consciousness Roland Barthes perceives being generated in Paris by the presence of the Eiffel Tower, the skyscraper’s effect is to transform New York into a city looking at itself. Between being “an object which sees” and “a glance



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8 The American Radiator Building, from *The American Architect*.

which is seen,"⁸ the city's self-conscious dilemma is resolved by the projection of an illusion of itself as a stage set on which its citizens may enact their individual dramas, all the while maintaining the principal role for the buildings themselves, for they are the show before which a willing audience applauds the supposed reflection of its own imagined success.

The architect of the American Radiator Building, Raymond M. Hood, chose a tower for its form, black for its color, and floodlights to make it glow in the dark, making the building the perfect expression of the city's new image—self-consciously theatrical, pointedly commercial. In a period when the city's architecture displayed what Manfredo Tafuri has called "a proliferation of formal themes and linguistic references, which were generally divorced from structural problems," Hood's design announced what would come to be seen as "the self-proclaiming, publicity function of the architecture of the commercial metropolis. . . ."⁹

The Radiator Building was constructed at the start of a building boom in New York that has never been equaled (fifteen new office buildings were erected in 1925, a number unmatched in any year after World War II until 1957; thirty buildings were built in 1926, a number which has never been matched¹⁰). Like these buildings, Hood's Radiator Building is generally believed to have been influenced by Eliel Saarinen's second place entry in the 1922 competition for the Chicago Tribune Building.

Its narrow setbacks on all four sides also suggest a response to the 1916 New York zoning law which sought to alleviate the problem of the city's interior becoming increasingly darkened by the construction of towering buildings.¹¹ However, Hood's preference for the tower ultimately determined the Radiator Building's shape. The architect's predilection for the tower form is evident in both his winning entry in the 1922 Chicago competition (designed with John Mead Howells) and in his design for the Radiator Building. The consistent element in the drawings that Hood undertook for the Chicago Tribune Building is the building's mass; its tower shape remained unchanged while Hood worked on its decoration. Hood's love of the tower is even clearer in the Radiator Building where, instead of using the full frontage on West 40th Street for the lower levels of a building which would taper off at the upper levels in setbacks, Hood discards 16 feet on either side, making the whole structure an isolated tower, visually distinct and individualized amid the city's architectural mass. Perhaps more than other buildings of its day (and comparable, one might add, to the new skyscraper towers being constructed in American cities today), the Radiator Building exemplified what Hugh Ferriss called "a species of tower-buildings" and what Hood himself envisioned as a future "city of towers."¹²

Even so, Hood, writing for *The American Architect* in the year in which his building was completed, subordinates all aspects of the building's development to its color:

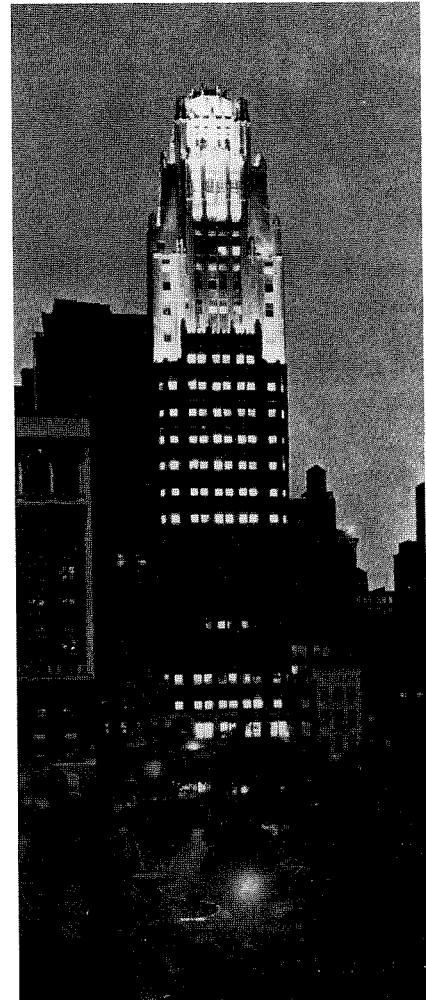
“Whatever value and interest, however, there may be in the study of the building itself must naturally be secondary to the study of the color of the exterior.” Hood believed that the need for so many windows in the building would make its towering shape look like anything but the solid, massive form he desired. Windows punched black holes into wall surfaces; but, if the building itself were black, the windows would blend into the wall, creating “a more unified design.” Hood’s commentary seems to be a response to the controversy that the building’s color aroused in a city already feeling the overwhelming effects of skyscrapers’ darkening its daylight existence. Hood cites historical precedent for the use of black in architectural design and the building’s location as justification for this departure from convention. To increase its visual appeal, the building’s upper levels would be ornamented in gold.¹³

Along with the controversy concerning its color, the Radiator Building’s striking nighttime illumination transformed the structure into an around-the-clock event in the life of the city. Its lighting installation enabled the owner “to vary the night appearance of the building from time to time, and to introduce spectacular displays on special occasions.”¹⁴ Night photographs of the building corroborate this variation in lighting pattern; at times only the upper tower was lit; at others, the illumination began at the first setback.

The architectural community readily praised the building as

event. A 1924 editorial in *The American Architect* touted the Radiator Building’s educational value: “It has attracted and held the attention of thousands who ordinarily give little heed to street architecture. The appearance of the building at night is one of the sights of the city. . . . The vast throngs that crowd this district at night are blocking traffic. . . .”¹⁵ The Radiator Building suggested to the architects of its day “bewildering possibilities as to the future use of surfaces with colors, glows, and lights in order to convert the high places of New York, as seen from distant streets, into a wonderland of elaborate, fanciful, and vivid masses and patterns.”¹⁶

A wonderland, and why not? For, as Rem Koolhaas has pointed out in *Delirious New York*, the origins of Gotham’s image lay in the fabricated fairylands constructed on Coney Island around the turn of the century. One of these, Luna Park, which opened in 1904, was New York’s first city of towers, “functionless, except to overstimulate the imagination and keep any recognizable earthly realities at a distance.” Its promoter used “electricity—the essential ingredient of the new paraphernalia of illusion—as an architectural duplicator,” making for the inhabitants of Gotham “a separate *city of night*.”¹⁷ A second park, Dreamland, the brainchild of William H. Reynolds (who was later to insist as the developer of the Chrysler Building that its tower be sheathed in aluminum against the architect’s wishes), included in its dreamscape a beacon tower, “an

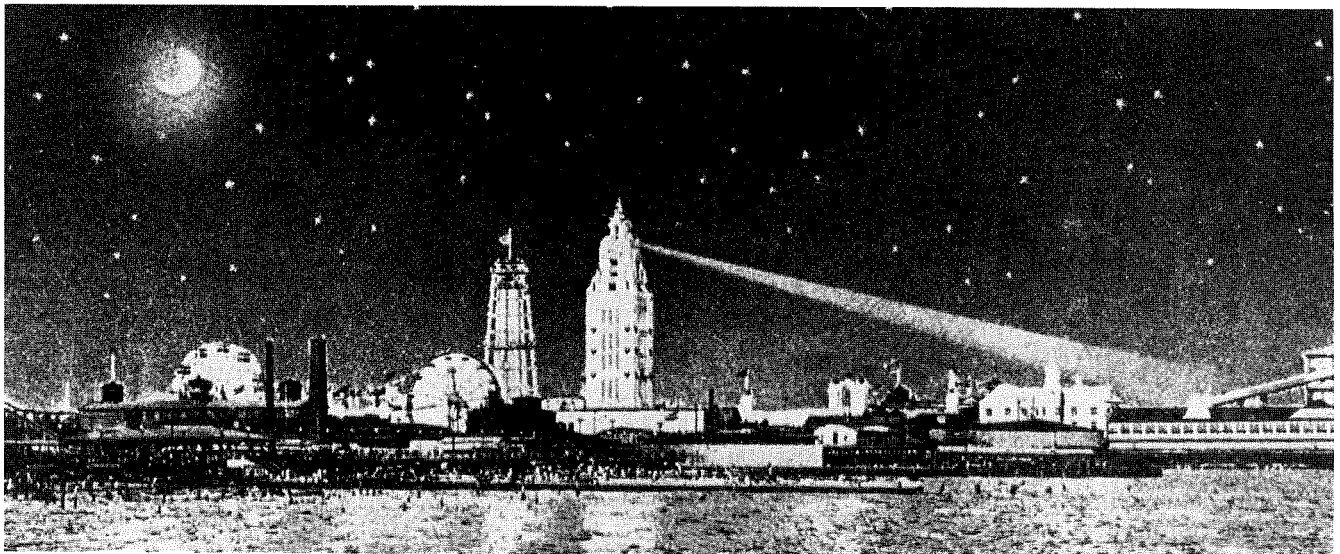


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9 The American Radiator Building, from *The American Architect*.



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10 **Luna Park, Coney Island**, from Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, Oxford University Press.

11 **Dreamland's Beacon Tower**, from Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, Oxford University Press.

architectural device that promotes self-consciousness.”¹⁸ The beacon tower, visible from the distance, lured city dwellers to the shores of dreamland while offering them an ascent to its heights for the momentary thrill of mastering all they surveyed. The tower was so popular that in 1908 Ernest Flagg designed such a tower to be added on top of New York’s Singer Building whose lower portion had been constructed in 1899. Other New York buildings quickly followed suit.

The device of a beacon light, sweeping the city with an electric glance, was quickly eclipsed by the lighted tower, now illuminating only itself, drawing eyes to its own continuous self-reverie. The skyscraper thus became an “automonument,” an empty symbol “available for meaning as a billboard is for advertisement, . . . a solipsism, celebrating only the fact of its disproportionate existence, the shamlessness of its own process of creation.”¹⁹

And this self-advertisement is the motive for the Radiator Building’s nighttime illumination, a motive confirmed by the architect himself who recalled:

The use of floodlights on billboards for advertising at night was already established: Why not gild the top of the black building for effect by day and then floodlight it by night, utilizing the building as a billboard for itself? The owner agreed. For a company selling furnaces and heaters, a building that glowed in

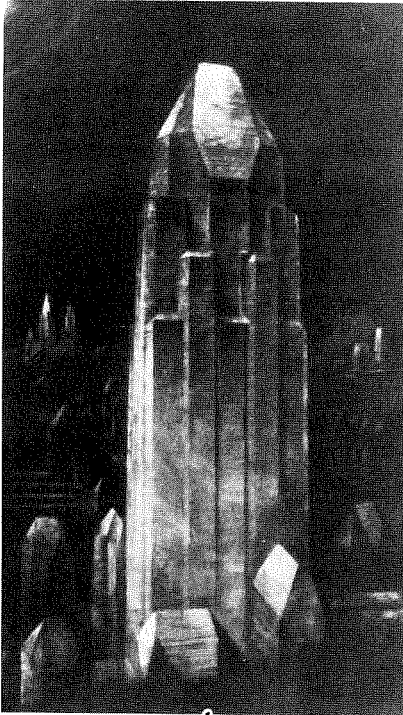
the dark like a torch was not such a wild idea.²⁰

As Hood’s fellow architect Harvey Wiley Corbett noted, since “commercialism is the guiding spirit of the age, the building which advertises itself is in harmony with that spirit.” The building becomes the company’s and its own best advertisement: “‘What is that black building?’ one asks at once when one sees it. ‘The American Radiator Building’ is the answer. And by that answer the first principle of commercialism, advertising, has been served.”²¹ Even the building’s interior is turned to this purpose. Its boiler room is transformed into a showroom at street level though, as Hood’s engineers note, the architect took “the greatest care . . . in designing the equipment within this room to make it as sightly as possible.”²²

The idea of the skyscraper as billboard, advertising both its owners’ products and itself, became a major design component in the art-deco architecture which flourished briefly in New York in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Competing for attention amid Manhattan’s architectural density, these buildings emphasized such features on their towers, façades, and entrances. The Chrysler Building, which was begun in 1928, displays an iconographic panoply of the automobile industry. Exterior walls are covered by a brick frieze of car wheels with aluminum hubcaps. The corbels are radiator caps borrowed from Mercury’s winged helmet, an emblem used on early Chrysler cars. The Empire

State building, which was begun in 1930, exemplifies in its lobby the use of the skyscraper’s image in the building’s decoration. Similarly, the entrance to the skyscraper at 60 Wall Tower, which was begun in 1930, displays a miniature model of the building itself. Hood’s own design for the McGraw-Hill Building of 1930–1931 appropriately incorporates reading into its exterior decoration, spelling out in bold block letters the company’s name on both the building’s entrance and across its heights.²³ Finally, buildings such as Central Park West at 66th Street, which was built in 1930, had walls shaded from a deep tone at the base to a lighter color at the building’s top to make the building appear taller than it was and to create the added illusion of sunlight, even on an overcast day.²⁴

When these buildings were not overtly attracting city dwellers to inhabit their seemingly sunlit space or to buy their company’s products, they were nonetheless subtly reminding New Yorkers of their own role in the drama of commercialism. As Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Bletter note in *Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York*: “Forms taken directly from the theater appear in lobbies and at building entrances, or the lower floors of high buildings are given forms like painted sets facing onto the street.” These authors suggest for example, that the horizontal striping on the lobby walls of the Film Center Building mirrored the flow of Gotham’s citizens on their way to and from work.²⁵ A further example occurs



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12 "Night in the Science Zone," Hugh Ferriss, from *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, 1929.

in the Chrysler Building where a design for coved lighting over the elevator lobbies looked like rising curtains on a stage set announcing to the waiting public that the curtain was going up on its own performance.

It is not surprising that in Hugh Ferriss' 1929 volume of architectural drawings, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, the dominant metaphor is the theater, the world of illusion. Ferriss opens his volume with an imaginary spectator poised at dawn in a skyscraper above the city, "perched in some elevated stage box" awaiting the performance of a "gigantic spectacle, some cyclopean drama of forms" on which the curtain is about to rise. Ferriss calls Manhattan's mass of architectural forms "only a stage set." Though he tries to emphasize that the drama of metropolis is a human one and the city's citizens "the principals of the play," he questions their role and the stage's effect upon their performance:

But what influences have these actors and this stage reciprocally upon one another? How perfectly or imperfectly have the actors expressed themselves in their constructions—how well have the architects designed the set? And how great is the influence which the architectural background exercises over the actors—and is it a beneficial one?²⁶

Behind his interrogation of the city's architecture stands Ferriss' ambivalent contribution to the drama. For though Ferriss decries the

unplanned character of the city's architectural setting, "the more convincing his work, the more he promotes the realization of proposals he dislikes."²⁷ His images of epic monuments suggesting their construction by superhuman forces has prompted Tafuri to note in Ferriss' drawings an "anguish in the face of a potential revealed as uncontrollable by the individual. . . ."²⁸

In Ferriss' own "Imaginary Metropolis," the title of the last section of his book, he presents, among others, a strangely ambiguous image of a monolith from his imaginary city's zone of science. Accompanying his rendering is a short verbal sketch of this nocturnal stele commemorating man's triumph over organic nature. His building's shape recalls Hood's Radiator Building, itself an image of the human power of artifice.

In 1924 a New York newspaper, editorializing on the Radiator Building, praised that power. Its writer goes straight to the point: "Radiator wants none of Nature."

Radiator could fittingly rise only from a place where men are huddled together or have crowded dead matter together, anywhere where Nature is not: . . . it is sprung out of the city's very heart! . . . it is New York . . . New York has a meaning, and Radiator gathers it up and distills it.

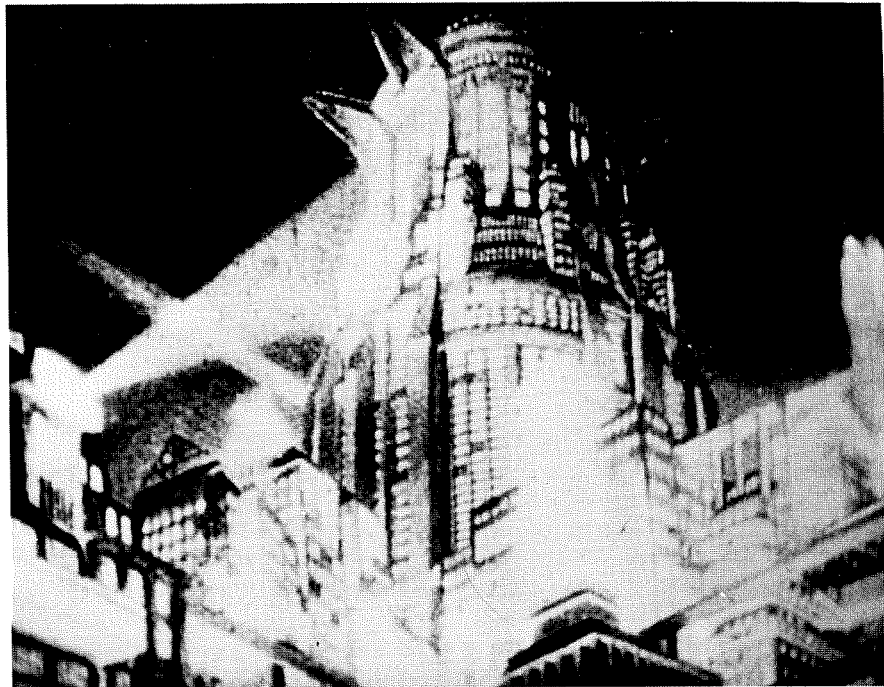
There is cynicism here. There is a sneer at the buildings which would clothe themselves in vestal white or homely brick-red, and

yet be the big business buildings of the twentieth century world. Radiator deliberately chooses the color of darkness, not of light, the color of iron, not of life. . . . It is beautiful with the beauty of sin. . . .

Behind the brutality is power, but not the power of Fate or God: it is the power of monster, of relentless machine. . . . With its mocking name, Radiator rears itself into the sky. Dead are its black walls; the light is repulsed by them; dead is the strange, tawny crown the building wears, its own color, not the color of the live sunlight. Whose is this spirit? Not Washington's and Johnny Appleseed's and U. S. Grant's, certainly! . . . Or is it Babylon? The spire of the Gothic was to point men to their Heavenly Master. But the Tower of Babel was to reach the skies, not point men thither; the Tower of Babel was built in the passion to demonstrate that Man, by means of Matter, is Master.²⁹

The editorial so appealed to the architectural community that *The American Architect* reprinted it the same year. The writer's image of a personified Radiator suggests that behind the floodlights stands the realization of man's ultimate fantasy, some architectural Golem mockingly manifesting its master's power.

Manhattan's art-deco skyline indeed looks like the appropriate setting for a futuristic fantasy, and it is not long before American films, image makers par excellence, turn the



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13 Still from Fritz Lang's "Metropolis,"
1926. The Museum of Modern Art/Film
Stills Archives, New York.

city into a colossal movie set. As Robinson and Bletter note: “Images of some of these buildings, like the Waldorf-Astoria, the Chrysler and the RCA Victor building, or the Empire State, helped crystallize our image of Gotham, the city of skyscrapers and urban chic, without which such a film as *King Kong* [and we might add *Superman*] would be difficult to imagine.”³⁰ In 1938 the city becomes the home of the superbeing able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Its towers seem to require such a being, coequal to the Egyptian goddess Seshat, patroness of architects, who stares out from the tower of the RCA Victor Building or airborne like the dirigibles which were to tie up at the Empire State Building’s mooring mast.

Even in the early 1920s American audiences were attending European films whose architect-designed sets were the subject of a 1921 article in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*. Seated in a dark theater in the heart of New York City, Americans may have been viewing an expressionistic fantasy imported from abroad, but the setting of one of these films, Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, must have seemed strangely familiar. One of Lang’s most striking images is a night view of a gigantic building whose tower, which is seen from below, is illuminated from within and floodlit from without. With this film, “the imagery of the modern city . . . has come full circle, for Lang was influenced in the creation of his sets by a view of the Manhattan skyline seen on a

boat trip to the States in 1924.”³¹ Of that trip, Lang wrote:

I first came to America briefly in 1924 and it made a great impression on me. The first evening, when we arrived, we were still enemy aliens so we couldn’t leave the ship. It was docked somewhere on the west side of New York. I looked into the streets—the glaring lights and the tall buildings—and there I conceived *Metropolis*.³²

When *Metropolis* opened in New York, 10,000 people lined up in front of the Rialto Theatre.³³ The year was 1927, the same year O’Keeffe painted *Radiator Building—Night, New York*.

As if announcing some gala film opening, searchlights flood the sky in O’Keeffe’s own image of metropolis. Not as ominous as Fritz Lang’s filmic version, O’Keeffe’s painting directs attention to the fact that, in a city which applauds its own imagined success, the skyscraper itself dominates the show. Even as she celebrates an architectural event in the city’s life, the artist confronts its image head-on with her characteristically uncompromising frontality. Reducing the Radiator Building’s three-dimensional mass to a vertical silhouette and aligning its façade to the plane of her canvas, O’Keeffe moves the city’s painted backdrop to center stage and, with urbane wit, parodies its commercialism with a joke of her own. With glowing red colors, O’Keeffe places her own advertisement next to an image of the city’s most noticed skyscraper. Across the top of a

neighboring building where a neon sign actually flashed the words “Scientific American,” Alfred Stieglitz’s name goes up in lights. In the same year O’Keeffe painted *Radiator Building—Night, New York*, Stieglitz had written in an announcement for the Intimate Gallery he had opened two years before: “The Intimate Gallery is not a Business. . . . The Intimate Gallery competes with no one nor anything.”³⁴ The artist he had advised not to attempt to master the city’s new image had ideas of her own. On its terms, O’Keeffe had taken New York—its spirit, its glitter, and the glamour of its architecture, transforming them all into her own radiant black beauty.

NOTES

- 1 For a discussion of recent skyscraper designs and their roots in the urban architecture of the 1920s and 1930s, see Paul Goldberger, “The New American Skyscraper,” *The New York Times Magazine* (November 8, 1981), pp. 68–73, 76, 78, 86, 88, 90, 92, 94, 96.
- 2 Georgia O’Keeffe, *Georgia O’Keeffe* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1976, unpagged). Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from O’Keeffe come from this text.
- 3 See Laurie Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O’Keeffe* (New York, NY: Seaview Books, 1980), pp. 149–151.
- 4 The Radiator Building is located at 40 West Fortieth Street between Fifth Avenue and the Avenue of the Americas.
- 5 See Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, *Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 40.
- 6 Thomas Adams, *Regional Plan of New York and its Environs, Volume 2: The Building of the City* (New York, NY, 1931), p. 114.

- 7 "The Radiator Building," unsigned editorial from *The Villager* reprinted in *American Architect*, 126 (November 19, 1924), p. 483.
- 8 The phrases are borrowed from Barthes' description of the Eiffel Tower: "The Tower is an object which sees, a glance which is seen . . .," in *The Eiffel Tower and other Mythologies*, translated by Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1979), p. 4.
- 9 Manfredo Tafuri, "The Disenchanted Mountain: The Skyscraper and the City," in *The American City*, edited by Giorgio Ciucci, et al. (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1979), pp. 451, 457.
- 10 Robinson and Bletter, *op. cit.*, p. 12; see also footnote 22, p. 31.
- 11 The zoning law established "a line representing the minimum desired angle of light, sloping back from the center of the street; the facade of a building could rise vertically until the roof or cornice intersected this line. Additional stories above this height would have to be set back to stay within the line." Walter H. Kilham, Jr., *Raymond Hood, Architect* (New York, NY: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1973), p. 85.
- 12 For a discussion of Hood's preference for the tower form, see Tod A. Marder, "Raymond Hood: City of Towers," *58 Arts Magazine* 8 (April 1984), pp. 100–103. See also Robert A. M. Stern, with Thomas P. Catalano, *Raymond M. Hood* (New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, 1982).
- 13 Raymond M. Hood, "The American Radiator Company Building, New York," *The American Architect*, 126 (November 19, 1924), pp. 467–474.
- 14 Meyer, Strong, and Jones, Inc., consultant engineers, "Heating, Ventilating, Electric and Elevator Equipment for the American Radiator Building," *The American Architect*, 126 (November 19, 1924), p. 482.
- 15 "Editorial Comment," *The American Architect* 126 (November 19, 1924), p. 487.
- 16 Herbert Kroly, "New Dimensions in Architectural Effects," *Architectural Review* 57 (January 1925), p. 94; quoted in Robinson and Bletter, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
- 17 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York; A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 34.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 32. Manfredo Tafuri similarly describes the American super-skyscrapers of the 1960s as "only inflated, empty signs, intent on communicating nothing beside their own surreal presence." *Op. cit.*, p. 500.
- 20 Hood, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
- 21 Harvey Wiley Corbett, "The American Radiator Building, New York City, Raymond M. Hood, Architect," *The Architectural Record* 55 (May 1924), p. 477.
- 22 Meyer, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 481.
- 23 Though not skyscrapers, Hood's 1929–1933 designs for Rex Cole, a distributor of General Electric refrigerators, make even more explicit the analogy between a company's building and its product. The whiteness and box-like shape of the building in Flushing, NY, looked almost like the refrigerators the company sold; the company's Bay Ridge showroom had on its top a replica of a real refrigerator, making the building's role as advertisement of its company's products inescapably clear.
- 24 See Robinson and Bletter for further discussion and numerous photographs of these buildings' features.
- 25 Robinson and Bletter, *op. cit.*, p. 10; also see note for color plate 24.
- 26 Hugh Ferriss, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (New York, NY: Ives Washburn, 1929), pp. 15–16.
- 27 Koolhaas, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
- 28 Tafuri, *op. cit.*, p. 448.
- 29 Hood, *op. cit.*, pp. 483–484.
- 30 Robinson and Bletter, *op. cit.*, p. 4. See also Giusi Rapisarda, "Die Stadt und ihr Doppelgänger: Von 'Metropolis' zu 'King Kong,'" *Archithese* 17, (1976), pp. 29–36, cited in Tafuri.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 32 Quoted in Robinson and Bletter, *op. cit.*, p. 67, from Peter Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1967), p. 15.
- 33 *Ibid.*, footnote 97, p. 80.
- 34 See Lisle, *op. cit.*, pp. 150 and 124.

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