HOW NEW YORK HAS REDEEMED HERSELF FROM UGLINESS—AN ARTIST’S REVELATION OF THE BEAUTY OF THE SKYSCRAPER: BY GILES EDGERTON

ALF way across the Bay the mist thinned out a little, changing from deep gray to pale rose and pearl. The water grew luminous as the edge of the mist trailed through it, and a city of enchantment rose through the scattered vapors—a city of uneven lines, of eerie towers that gleamed high with many orange lights and of low dwellings that rested in shade at the foot of high walls. As the mists gathered and fell apart from time to time, the city took on fresh wonder. It seemed piled up into the heavens, row upon row of lights lost up in the farthest clouds, with low, black canyons reaching from the water back far into the twilight.

There seemed to be no purpose in the building. It was as though a great harbor were filled with ships from every port, each with rigging suited to its own purpose and course, and with no regard to its neighbor ships. No building needed the other for completed symmetry or proportion, yet the whole was full of that related beauty which is expressed as picturesque—a condition in architecture which can not easily be brought about intentionally, but invariably follows in the wake of a real need expressed with intelligence and skill.

Those marvelous old Bavarian villages of gray and deep red that snuggle at the edges of rivers and hills, down near the earth, so deeply a part of the landscape that they seem like hills of moss or flowering lichen, were never built to be picturesque. They grew up for convenience and comfort out of the materials at hand and met the needs of the people, and so in time they developed picturesqueness because they were simple and harmonious and useful.

The strange city in the harbor has in the same way, by the same mysterious law of nature, grown in wonder and bewitchment as it has set out honestly to meet its own needs. The skyscraper is the first absolutely genuine expression of an original American architecture. In this tall, eccentric tower we have begun to feel our way toward national buildings—buildings that suit our needs, our comfort, our landscape, without regard to any other nation or civilization. Up to the present time in our domestic architecture, and in all others for
A METROPOLITAN CANYON, SHOWING THE CATHEDRALS OF MAMMON
CANYON NUMBER THREE.
A NEW YORK CROSS STREET
LOOKING DOWN PARK ROW WITH TRINITY SPIRE IN THE DISTANCE
THE SKYSCRAPER WITH ENVIRONMENT THAT MAKES FOR PICTURESQUENESS

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THE CLIFFS BACK OF "L" ROAD CURVE AT BATTERY PARK
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that matter, we have imitated any old style on earth from Karnak to Versailles. We have been to the last degree absurd, not only in the homes we have built, but in our churches, our theaters, and, save in the case of the skyscraper, in our shops, and we have been proud in proportion to our absurdity. The more our buildings might have suited the needs of people in Greece or Paris and the less real use and comfort we secured from them ourselves, the more towering our pride.

WE HAVE never said—until the skyscraper—"We want such and such a building because it is suited to our lives, the way we work, the way we play, the way we live—simple, strong, and fairly intelligent lives." At least, if it has been said before the last few years, it was in a whisper, and the idea was never realized. When a man of wealth among us has desired a home, he has not asked his architect to study the land upon which he was to build, and the stone he could quarry from the land, and the wood he could find in the forest, and the lay of the landscape, and the manner of life of the man who wanted the home. A check was written and the architect started for Europe, or the Orient, or in any futile direction, and then he returned and imitated in wrong materials the most inappropriate place he had seen, and the man lived in the place and was proud and uncomfortable. Thus, our homes in general average about as national and personal an expression of our wants as a log cabin on the Boulevard des Italiens or an Indian tepee on the Nile.

But when difficulties arose with our housing problem in one long, narrow tape-measure of a city, and we found ourselves with twice as much business as space, it became impossible to sit around and wonder what Ptolemy would have done in the building line under the circumstances, or even to rely upon the architectural impulses of Italian nobles or the needs of monkish communities in the Middle Ages.

Circumstances put an iron hand upon counterfeit architecture for commercial purposes in New York, and forced us to build something that we, as a nation, needed, that was adapted to our own way of living and working, that in fact possessed national characteristics. The manifestation of this first honest building impulse in America was the skyscraper, maligned, wronged, insulted from the start, and yet up to the present time the finest architectural expression in this
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country because of the completeness of its adaptation to need. And it is the skyscraper that has changed the outline of New York City, that has revolutionized the quality of it, and that has created the first suggestion of beauty that the city has ever laid claim to.

When Ruskin, some years ago, was invited to come to America, he refused because he felt that he could not live in a land where there were no castles. If to-day he could sail across South Ferry at dawn or twilight, or walk up Broadway through a mist, or cross Forty-second Street near the Times Building in a snowstorm, he would forget that we have no castles and find interest enough in the individuality that the skyscraper has wrought in what justly has been considered the ugliest and most commonplace city in the world.

This light, towering building was not designed in the first place for beauty nor to satisfy any esthetic craving of citizens of the metropolis. It was built to meet the demands of a rapidly increasing population in a restricted area. The one thought that ruled the erection of the tall, steel-framed building was strength, simplicity, and the maximum of light and space. It was the first purely commercial structure put up for the sole purpose of holding a mass of humanity needing to be grouped together that its units might better worship Mammon. It towered up to the clouds—not to express lofty flights of imagination or inspiration, but that it might afford more and more office room. Men can not worship the modern American deity in solitude, and so our Twentieth Century cathedrals line Broadway up and down and criss-cross out to the river’s edge, with gleaming towers and the shadowy canyons between, and the congregations number millions, all bowing to a god that is never satisfied with a tribute other than of gold.

IN A CITY of tape-measure proportions every foot of ground must furnish a resting-place for many human feet. New York could have acquired endless territory in her suburbs, but no business man wanted to locate in the suburbs. The telephone and the Subway make it possible to live there, but work must cluster about the heart of things. Then the Yankee mind moved about a little and as usual something was achieved. The skyscraper developed and made glad the heart of the real estate man, the manufacturer, the commercial giant, and then, at last, the artist. Thus, out of a need
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which was met honestly, skilfully, and simply, has grown a strange, individual beauty, and New York has gained charm through her first real expression of her own quality.

Not standing alone, cut away from the earth, as a lonely slice of architecture, is the skyscraper beautiful; its charm must always depend upon its environment. Rather than actually contributing beauty it makes beauty possible. It needs the old Gothic church with its tall, slender spire, the hoary churchyard, the Colonial City Hall, the green park, the wide harbor, Battery Park and Madison Square to fold about it, to rest near it and connect it with the earth. Given these for environment, it has power to change the face of the greatest American city from crude ugliness to irregular loveliness, and with the varying setting of sunrise or sunset, storm or fog, New York grows into a city of enchantment with a wondrous fleeting, mysterious beauty.

Sail across to South Ferry on an early spring morning, as Mr. Pennell undoubtedly did before etching Battery Park, and you will find Lower New York with its rush and hurry and squalid detail lost in a pink and pearl fairyland, full of romance and poetry. Or walk down Fifth Avenue late in the twilight with an October mist drifting through Madison Square, and just as you reach the upper edge of the open space stop and peer through the mists to where Broadway and Fifth Avenue join, and you will see a gigantic galleon sailing majestically into a shadowy harbor; the masts lost in the clouds and the orange lights through many portholes softly glimmering out as the night deepens—a ghostly ship that never reaches port and never changes its course. In the daytime the strange ship is known as the Flatiron Building—the most famous skyscraper in the world.

Mr. Pennell has etched with rare skill and imagination this ship of mist and clouds. He has neither added to nor taken from the tall triangular tower; but in his etchings he has with light and shade, with sharp lines and soft masses, revealed all the witchery and fine wonder that the skyscraper can gather and envelop herself in with every varying mood of Nature. It is somehow most natural to use the feminine pronoun for the skyscraper, which seems to have the sometimes magnetic quality of the interestingly ugly woman—the woman who develops her own charm by right surroundings and the expression of individuality.
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IT IS wonderful how Mr. Pennell has caught all the variation and the whimsical charm of the skyscraper; winter, summer, rain, sunlight, wind, and mist all held with an entirely original use of medium. The artist does not limit the scope of his power; he does not value elimination above richness. He is American, not Japanese, and he enjoys fullness of beauty more than a miracle in lines. Shadows as seen in the long black canyons, known in New York as cross streets, he obtains by adding dry-point; the richness of tone he gains by etching on black surfaces, and the delicate vagueness of rain, mist, and snow—that subtlety which in an etching is atmosphere—is accomplished by vague surfaces in the manner of aqua-tint. Surfaces which Whistler would have left untouched, or at best only suggested, are here not only etched, but intensified with “foul” biting. Through this variety in medium Mr. Pennell obtains the crispness of execution—the lightness and gaiety of effect, that no other etcher has achieved, at least in relation to New York. Mr. Pennell’s methods of work account for some of that intimacy that is so immediately felt in his etchings. You walk through his gardens and sail down his rivers; you live high up in the skyscraper’s towers and rest under the trees. His etchings are not so much pictures as places to enjoy and remember, and all this sense of personal intercourse with his work can not be brought about by remote methods of handling his subjects. His etchings are invariably made in the heart of the scenes he wishes to represent. Out in the crowded street or at the edge of the river he chooses his place and rapidly draws his lines with an etching needle on a copper plate which he contrives to hold in one hand. Each line is a “learned stroke,” to quote Sir Seymour Haden, and yet all is done so close to the subject that the very atmosphere of the place saturates the man’s personality and works through brain to point of needle out to the picture.

First of all, Joseph Pennell is a great artist, trained and skilful to the highest point; second, he is a man who loves life and all its various expressions, and sees beauty wherever color, light, or shadow produces it, without regard to tradition or conventionality. He was the first to discover the beauty of the skyscraper, or at least the first courageously to express it, and he is to the last degree convincing in every etching he has made of this important development in American architecture. Whether he is presenting the Times Build-
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ing, with the "L" station forming an effective break in its height, or the tremendous stretch of white marble reaching up into the blue which he calls the "White Tower of Cortlandt Street," or Park Row with Trinity Church in the shadow and the Post Office in the foreground, or Battery Park with the marvelous curve of the elevated road sweeping past an unfinished skyscraper growing into beauty, you are compelled to believe that he has seen truly. The beauty is all there, though we may have missed it in our hurry along the pavement, or our worry within the skyscraper walls. Mr. Pennell has not created the wonder of the skyscraper, he has only registered it, and the significance of his etchings is not limited to their fresh beauty as pictures or their charm as a revelation of hitherto undiscovered enchantment; he has gone beyond this and proved, without striking one false note, that New York has, in her first architectural honesty, redeemed herself from ugliness. More than this, he has made a few thinkers wonder if perchance we may not achieve further perfection by further truth, and if America may not in the end secure a dignified national architecture by fearlessly building to suit her own needs—not merely public buildings, but homes—the homes needed by busy people who must seek art through simplicity and who should have a right to comfort without riches.