

Political Architecture

Business has taken me to New York twice this spring. Once again, I never cease to be both amazed and overwhelmed by Manhattan. To someone who lives in the midst of hundreds of acres of forest and field, the concrete canyons of The City hold a strange fascination. There are people everywhere—considerably more in one urban square mile than the entire population of the county I call home. The sidewalks are crowded, making navigation a game of skill similar to piloting a bumper car on a county fair midway. Stand still for a brief moment and you hear a polyglot of strange languages rolling off the tongues of passersby. To me, it's confining, oppressive, foreign. Were it not for the parks, crowded as they are, I'd feel as if I were a visitor in another universe. Which brings me to the subject of this little rant—the politics of architecture.

I was sitting in Washington Square Park the other afternoon, taking in the scenery and doing a bit of people-watching. In that part of town—Greenwich Village, to be exact—the highrises are not so high, and the pace more laid back. Still, just beyond the leafy confines of its grass and trees, the silhouettes of massive buildings define the skyline, a constant reminder that you are in the heart of one of the world's great cities. It occurred to me as I studied them that often I could peg within a few years the date of their construction. Here you see an Art Deco apartment building from the 1930s, there a nineteenth century brownstone, and in the distance gleaming “modern” skyscrapers from the 1950s and '60s, quintessential emblems of New York.



All this got me to thinking about why things are like they are. Why this style or that? What currents drive choices in design? Perhaps the best book on the influence of politics on American architecture was Tom Wolfe's 1981 *From Bauhaus to Our House*. I'd read it years ago, and passed my copy on. I was inspired enough to order another—it's still in print!—and reread it. It's a quick read, more in the style of a long article in *The New Yorker*, and full of Wolfe's pithy wit and insightful social commentary. His thesis is basically this: The iconic buildings that defined mid to late twentieth century American architecture trace their roots to the socialist labor movements that swept Europe prior to and after World War I.

Let me explain this seemingly torturous connection with a little bit of history. Among the several intellectual currents that competed for European thought in the late nineteenth century was that of socialism/communism as articulated by Marx, Engels and others, perhaps most famously Lenin. They rejected the growing wealth of the middle class, referred to as the *bourgeoisie*, in favor of the common working man, a member of labor class, the *proletariat*. Their ideas had theoretical merit as a way to spread the wealth to those whose labor produced it, and were embraced on both sides of the Atlantic. (A number of Roosevelt’s advisors admired the “progress” being made in the Soviet Union.) The concept of the supremacy of the common man spread beyond the confines of politics to art, literature, music—and, yes—architecture.



In a rejection of the ornate styles that had characterized building design of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a core of German architects—Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer, and Mies van der Rohe—were founders and proponents of the Bauhaus school of architecture. In their vision, building design should be reduced to its essence, free of any and all unnecessary ornamentation, efficiently built or even mass-produced, functional in the extreme. Gone were colors, corbels and comfort. The habitat of the common worker would be raised and that of the oppressive factory owner lowered until all men were equal—in their housing, at least. “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need,” as Marx had so succulently put it in 1875. Gropius and the others, later joined by the Swiss architect, Le Corbusier, became dominant voices in European design, defining what became known as the International Style (perhaps named for the socialist workers’ theme, *L’Internationale?*).

Well, if you remember your history, things didn’t go well in Europe after World War I. Germany suffered a profound economic collapse, leading to Hitler’s rise to power in 1933. With things on their way to hell-in-a-handbasket over there, a number of influential architects ended up in the United States—Gropius at Harvard, van der Rohe at the Illinois Institute of Technology, to name a couple. From their lofty perches, and aided by domestic architects of the same bent, they influenced American design for decades. In a specific rejection of the grace of the Empire State Building and the amazing spire of the Chrysler Building, we got the Seagram Building, a generic box of glass and steel towering over Park Avenue.

But that was not the worst part—it was the trickle-down effect. It was the sense that if the big guys are doing it in New York, we should be doing out here in the provinces. Hence, many if not most of us attended school in plain, blocky, unadorned, flat-roofed classroom buildings, the epitome of the International Style adopted by local school boards. Public housing projects designed to provide shelter for the huddled masses failed as tenants fled the institutionalism of their soulless design.

Fortunately, by the 1960s some architects had begun to recover their senses and design began to loosen up a bit. John Portman spread his Hanging Gardens of Babylon style to hotels around the world. Even Phillip Johnson, an early proponent of the Internationalists, was responsible for putting a Chippendale roof on the AT&T building, an otherwise stereotypical “modern” New York skyscraper.

Of course, you can't try to explain all this to a New Yorker. Their world, physically and intellectually bounded by the East River and the Hudson, is near perfect to hear tell, politics and architecture aside.