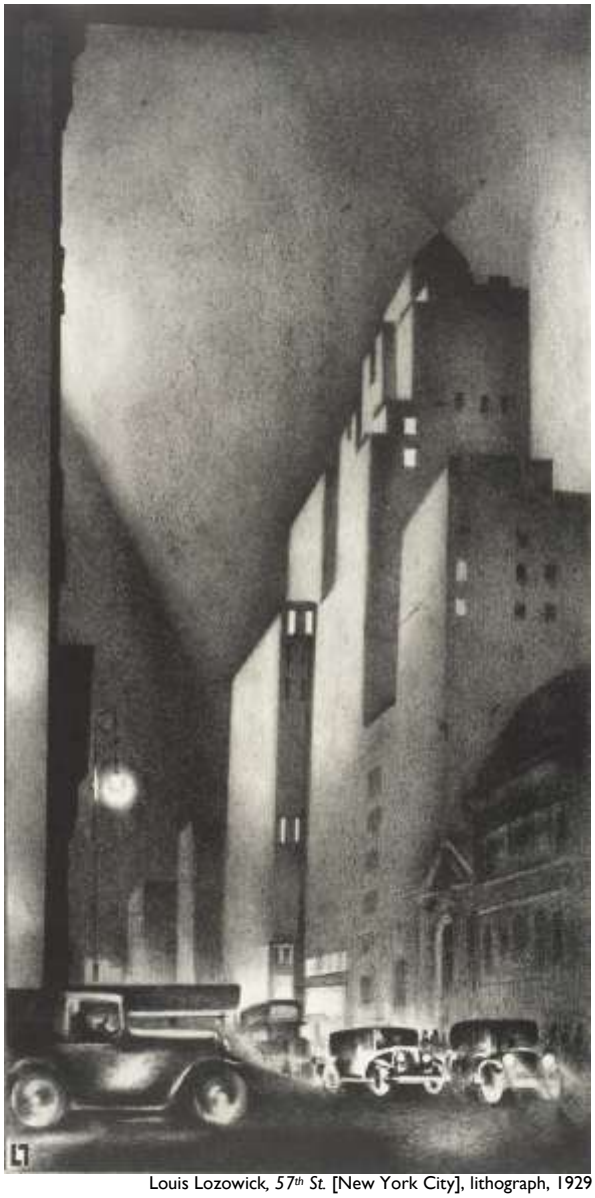
THE TWENTIES IN CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY

THE SKYSCRAPER

In the American self-image of the 1920s, the icon of *modern* was the *modern city,* the icon of the *modern city* was New York City, and the icon of New York City was the *skyscraper*. Love it or hate it, the skyscraper symbolized the go-go and up-up drive that "America" meant to itself and much of the world. A sampling of twenties illustration and commentary on the architectural phenomenon that still captures the American imagination is presented here.

Berenice Abbott, *Cliff and Ferry Street, Manhattan*, photograph, 1935
Museum of the City of New York



Louis Lozowick, *57th St.* [New York City], lithograph, 1929
Renwick Gallery/Smithsonian Institution

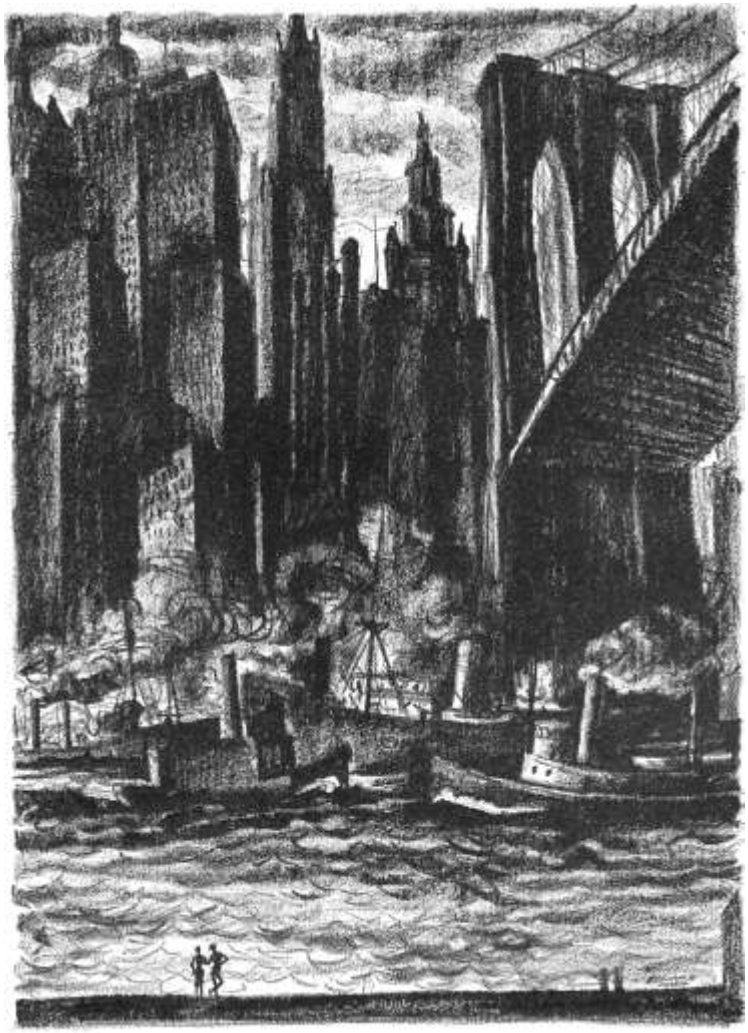
R. L. Duffus
"The Vertical City"
The New Republic
July 3, 1929

Robert L. Duffus was a novelist, literary critic, and essayist with New York newspapers.

One of the intangible satisfactions which a New Yorker receives as a reward for living in a most uncomfortable city arises from the monumental character of his artificial scenery. Skyscrapers are undoubtedly popular with the man of the street. He watches them with tender, if somewhat fearsome, interest from the moment the hole is dug until the last Gothic waterspout is put in place. Perhaps the nearest a New Yorker ever comes to civic pride is when he contemplates the skyline and realizes that there is and has been nothing to match it in the world. This feeling the present writer believes is real, though it would be hard to produce documentary evidence of it. We do have a love for bigness. We are thrilled by a sixty-three-story building, and would be even more thrilled by one that ran up to one hundred stories. We derive a vicarious sense of power from our cubes and prisms.

If we were to propose that no more skyscrapers should be built, this combined opposition of self-interest and grandiosity would probably be too strong to resist. We should be trying to sweep back the ocean with a broom. But no one is suggesting that skyscrapers be abolished. No one even suggests that their numbers, their height, or their cubic contents be diminished beyond the limits set by the laws of physics. . . .

We cannot, without spending more than it is worth, send our city more than a certain average distance into the air, either in New York or in Chicago, or in any other metropolis. Manhattan is an object lesson, not because it is a part of the greatest city, but because there the tendency of concentration has been carried very nearly to the point of absurdity. It has been carried indeed, to a point where decivilization may be said to have set in.



"Pretty,—isn't it?"

Reginald Mars, *The New Yorker*, September 19, 1925
Reproduced by permission of the *New Yorker*.

Edward Marshall
"The Scientific City of the Future: An Authorized Interview with Thomas A. Edison"
The Forum, December 1926

I have no doubt that before long it will be necessary to prohibit the building of new skyscrapers in those sections of our cities which already are overcrowded, at least in New York, if something is not devised. If, for instance, New York keeps on permitting the building of skyscrapers, each one housing as many people every day as we used to have in a small city, disaster must overtake us. . . . One of the things that surprises me in this consideration of skyscrapers is that so little utilization is made of roofs. This, I think, will change: aerial navigation may be the thing which directly will call all our attention to the roofs.

William F. Lockhardt Conference Address August 1929

Lockhardt delivered his prediction that "taller buildings are inevitable in the near future" at a meeting of the National Terra Cotta Society, as reported in the *New York Times*, August 11, 1929.

It is rather hard for the public, and even persons directly connected with the building industry, to realize that all this construction is not just a temporary wave. Something of the same situation prevailed in the automobile industry, and it is only recently that the nation awakened to the fact that the great production of motor cars is here to stay, due to fundamentally changed economic conditions. It is the same in the building field. We are living in a changed world, with new requirements, and new resources with which to fill them. We can afford better things, and modern science has developed ways to get them, often at less expense than formerly.

H. I. Brock "Lesser Cities Also Lift Their Towers" *The New York Times,* May 26, 1929

Brock, a *Times* reporter and editorialist, subtitled this piece "The Skyscraper of Manhattan Becomes the American Expression of Urban Greatness."

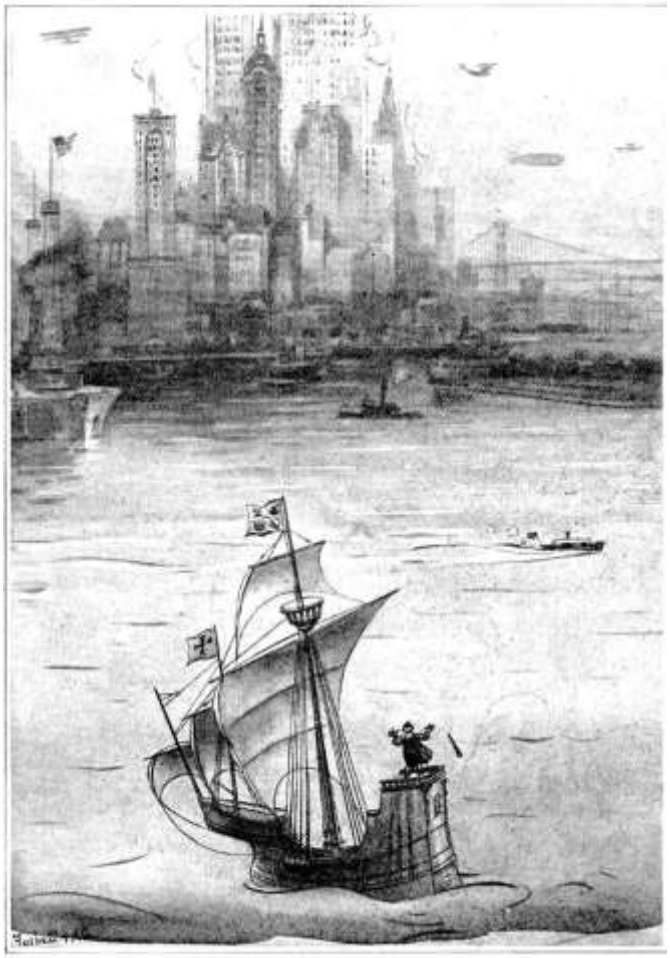
Skyscrapers, to which New York was urged by an economic pressure created by the confined and fixed limits of Manhattan Island, have become to the whole of these United States a symbol, a fashion, and a heaven-climbing contest. With our square footage of land the single one of our physical assets which was practically constant, and with our business and our population inevitably and rapidly expanding, we here on our narrow neck of earth were forced to pile ourselves up layer on layer and still layer on layer or shortly to stop growing. . . . In the smaller cities, where land values do not seem to justify setting half a dozen blocks upright in the space of half a one, in the midst of a not overcrowded horizontal layout, the advertising value—translated into the prestige of doing business in the one and only skyscraper in town—is perhaps the most important factor toward getting such buildings financed, though mere civic pride doubtless gives the initial impetus.

Alistair MacDonald CBS radio address February 15, 1930

British architect Alistair MacDonald broadcast his impressions of skyscrapers after a lengthy tour of the United States. His comments were reported in the *New York Times*, February 16, 1930, with the headline "Calls Skyscraper an 'Ingenious Toy' . . . City 'The New Babylon.'"

I shall never forget my first sight of the skyline. I involuntarily remarked, "the new Babylon" when I saw those proud buildings rearing their heads above the clouds. But I have now come to the conclusion, after traveling across the country and back, that a skyscraper may be a very ingenious toy and very amusing to work on and something to talk about when erected, but really what else is there in the building?

It seems to me that it is just a delightful and fascinating monument of folly. These buildings collect great masses of people together in one spot and literally pile them one on top of each other in order to give somebody else the job of trying to regulate the traffic.



WOULD COLUMBUS HAVE TURNED BACK IF ——?

Charles Forbell, "Would Columbus Have Turned Back If——?" *Life*, late 1920

Walter Lionel George
Hail Columbia!: Random Impressions of a Conservative English Radical, 1921

W. L. George was an English writer, a lover of America, and a social liberal, despite the tongue-in-cheek subtitle of *Hail Columbia!*, a memoir of his 1920 travels throughout the U.S.

The colossal scale of New York naturally makes upon the stranger his first important impression. The American does not realize what a shock New York can be to a European who has never before seen a building higher than ten floors; the effect is bewildering. The monster hotel where the stranger makes his first acquaintance with America is itself a shock. I began in a hotel which seems to have two thousand bedrooms and to carry a rent roll of $20,000 a day. In other words, this is Brobdingnag, the land of the giants.[1] Gigantic chaos, that is the first feeling I had in New York. Differences forced themselves upon me. . . . Fifth Avenue, people so many, traffic so thick that one has to take one's turn at a crossing, that police control has become mechanical, beyond the power of man. Then one goes into a store; one wanders through endless departments, on endless floors, one goes through tunnels and never comes out by the same block as one went in. There is so much in the streets; everything hurries—motor cars, street cars, railway cars.

Museum of the City of New York — Lower Manhattan, ca. 1921 (U.S. Army photograph, detail)

The Woolworth Building—the tallest structure in this photograph, deemed a "cathedral of commerce" by Felix Graf von Luckner—is one of Manhattan's earliest skyscrapers, completed in 1913. Throughout the 1920s it was the tallest building in the world, until the completion of 40 Wall Street (the Bank of Manhattan Company Building, now the Trump Building), in 1930.

Felix Graf von Luckner
Seeteufel erobert Amerika [*Sea Devil Conquers America*] 1928

A former German naval officer who earned the nickname "Sea Devil" during World War I, von Luckner was received warmly during a 1926 speaking tour of the U.S. due to his reputation as a commander who minimized war casualties.

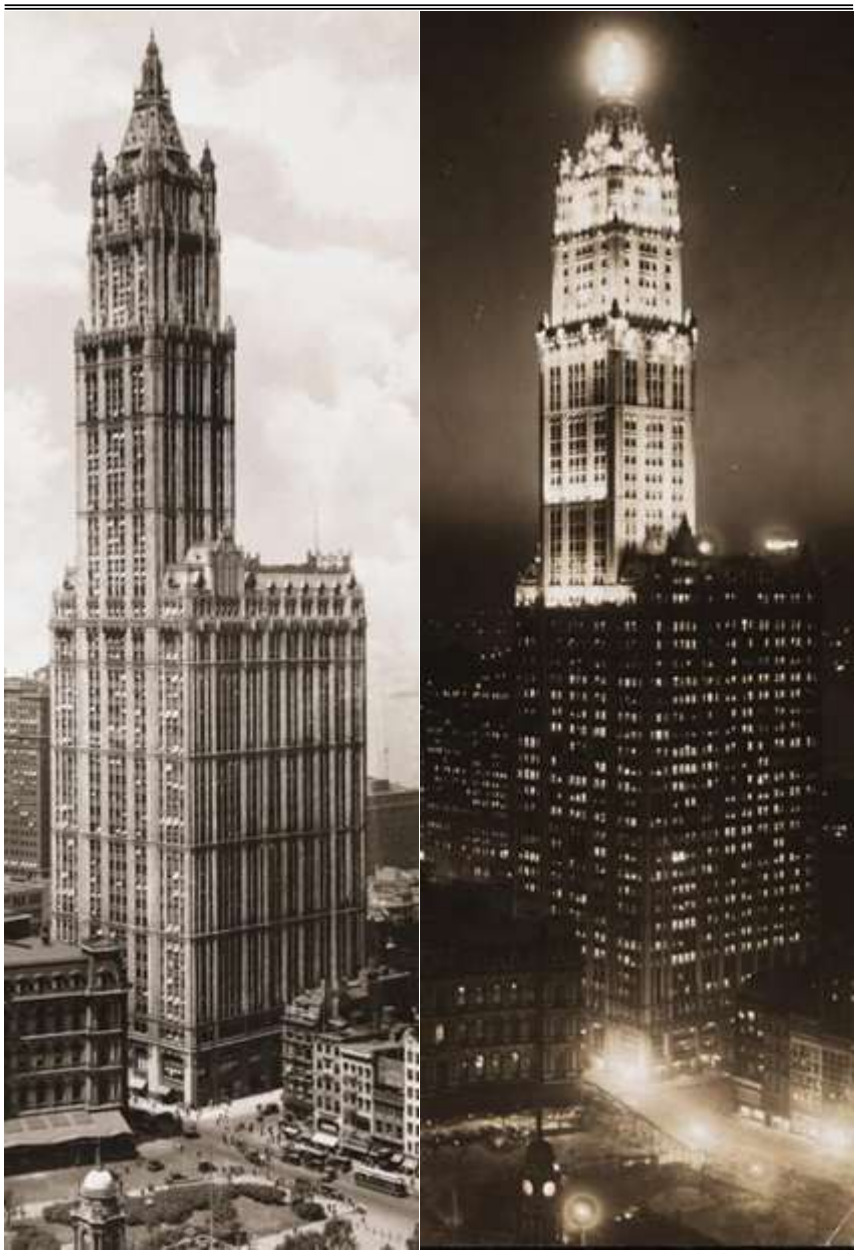
When I first visited New York, years ago, the skyscrapers were few in number and were considered quite exceptional; today they determine the character of the city's physical appearance. Whether they are beautiful or not, I don't know. But they are stupendous and it makes a deep impression to look down from the thirtieth or fortieth story, to see little pointed buildings and then realize that these are churches. Above all, the skyscrapers are necessities in a city like New York in which so much business is concentrated and which lies on a small rocky island. Unable to expand in space, it must grow into the air.

To get a single overall view, we visited the Woolworth Building. This immense structure of steel and stone, the highest in New York, was executed in pure Gothic style and dedicated as a cathedral of commerce. It is 792 feet high, and has fifty-six stories, with three more in the tower. It has become a sort

[1] The land of giants in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726.

of trademark for New York. In the evening, lit up, it seems fairy-like. The view from the tower is overwhelming. All around are the suburbs; in the distance, the Statue of Liberty and the great bridges across the East River to Brooklyn. Far below is the tiny City Hall, and before it at midday is the bustle of the anthouse. Toward Wall Street, downtown, is a little cemetery in which the tombstones seem like tiny pebbles.

It must not be supposed that the skyscrapers are limited to commercial uses. That may have been true to begin with, but they are now being put up for residential purposes as well, especially in the vicinity of Central Park. And why not? As far as comfort is concerned, it matters not whether one lives on the second story of an old house or on the twentieth or thirtieth of a new one; the elevators ceaselessly run up and down. And such quarters have the advantages of height, which Americans like; they shut out the street noises, are accessible to sunlight and to good fresh air. Rents are, however, not cheap in New York. A six-room apartment in a desirable neighborhood and good house will not be found for less than $3,000 a year.



Woolworth Building, Manhattan, photographs, ca. 1920 (left), ca. 1923 (right)
Museum of the City of New York

Lewis Mumford "Magnified Impotence" *The New Republic* December 22, 1926

A lifelong opponent of modern cities and their compressed verticality, architecture critic Lewis Mumford spared few words in deriding America's love affair with the skyscraper, condemning the innovation of the "setback skyscraper" as the "great booby prize in American architecture."

When a comic history of American architecture comes to be written, many of our new skyscrapers will have a prominent place. Their windy grandeur will be put alongside the solemn rococo of our Gilded Age mansions, the artful ruralism of country cottages thatched with bent shingles, and the awkward splendor of French chateaux in the midst of the Berkshires. The new Paramount Building in New York is an excellent specimen for these pages: the posters describe it as the greatest palace that shadows have built: but it is in fact the greatest shadow that shadows have built.

Paramount Building (Paramount Theater), 1928
Museum of the City of New York

Its exterior is a façade that no one can see: its interior is the reminiscence of a grandiose nightmare that might follow a rather arduous day of sightseeing in Paris.

The setback skyscraper is rapidly turning out to be the great booby price in American architecture;[2] and by now it has become pretty plain that building ordinances and ideal schemes by Mr. Hugh Ferriss[3] cannot take the place of a genuine aesthetic command over the materials, structures, and site. New York possesses a handful of remarkable skyscrapers; and a few of these, like the Radiator Building and the American Telephone Building,[4] can be seen; beyond this handful, the less said about the aesthetic triumphs of the skyscraper the better: for one even soundly designed office building I am prepared to show a dozen more competent and interesting schools, factories, and other low buildings. The people who see our architectural salvation in the skyscraper know very little, I suspect, about either architecture or salvation.[5]

American Radiator Company Building, completed 1923, ca. 1933
Museum of the City of New York

Parke Cummings
"Fragment from a Skyscraper Roof"
The New Yorker
October 1, 1927[5]

" . . . There's Wall Street and the Battery.
The *Cedric*'s putting out to sea.
That pyramided roof? You *must*
Know what it is: the Bankers Trust.
I'm pointing at the Tel. and Tel.
(I like that modern style so well)
The Woolworth, dear? For once you're right!
(Those spires make a stunning sight.)
Of *course* that's Brooklyn Bridge, and that
Is—d-- it all, there goes my hat!"

[2] The innovation of "setback skyscrapers," like the Paramount Building, resulted from a 1916 New York City zoning ordinance intended to maximize skylight reaching city streets. Height limits were established, but buildings were allowed to exceed the limit by incorporating setback stories. Ziggurat-like designs replaced the unbroken verticals of skyscrapers like the 1915 Equitable Life Insurance Building, the structure that spurred the skyscraper ordinance.

[3] Hugh Ferriss, architectural rendering artist who initiated the design of setback skyscrapers in the early 1920s and whose futuristic drawings of the "Metropolis of Tomorrow" set the standard for the visionary city.

[4] American Radiator Co. Building, completed in 1924. American Telephone and Telegraph Co. Building, completed in three sections, 1912-1923.

[5] Entirety of poem; ellipsis in original.

?ARE SKYSCRAPERS AN ASSET?

***The Forum*, April 1927**

Dwellers in our great American cities are as unimpressed by towering skyscrapers as were the cliff-dwellers by their mountains. Are they as natural, as permanent, as beautiful? Mr. [Thomas] Edison, in an interview published in the December FORUM, sounded a warning lest too many skyscrapers swamp our cities. The following discussion of America's tendency to build till her structures scrape the sky is noteworthy. The authors are leading authorities in architectural design—Mr. Hastings in America, Mr. Roosval in Sweden. [Introduction from *The Forum*]

"The City of Dreadful Height"

THOMAS HASTINGS

It is difficult to imagine what the appearance of New York would be today, where and how we should be living, and where commercial and shopping interests would be centered, if fifty years ago laws had been enacted limiting the height of buildings, similar to those of London and Paris. It is equally difficult to imagine today what is to become of us and what it will all be like fifty years from now if no action is taken or nothing further done to establish reasonable limitations. It has been calculated that out of 97,000 buildings in Manhattan there are only 1,686 over ten stories high, less than two percent of the total number. Therefore, unless even at this late hour something is done further to limit the height of buildings, we shall experience the greatest calamity that has ever befallen a municipality —we are now only beginning to feel the effects while only two percent of our buildings are over ten stories high. Imagine the situation when the remaining ninety percent are equally high or higher!

One thing I do believe, without a shadow of a doubt—that if even at this late day we were to do less talking and theorizing about city planning, and an effort were made to enact proper laws, we should soon see in the heart of Manhattan Island dead and deserted houses and unimproved properties—such as are to be found in the lower East Side and other sections of the city—brought to life and so improved that they would soon be favored in preference to the present ill-lighted and ill-ventilated buildings towering beyond reason. We should also, I believe, find the congestion of both vehicular traffic and rapid transit no worse than today and perhaps greatly relieved, even with an increased population; and, finally, we should have a city made architecturally beautiful, because it would be the artistic expression of what is both reasonable and practical in its growth.

"The City Beautiful"

JOHN ROOSVAL

American skyscraper architecture, even though it has faults that may be criticized when we discuss individual examples, constitutes one of art's most remarkable and noble manifestations. In the best skyscrapers, we still find adherence to traditions, but to traditions of another sort; for a complete break with tradition is impossible, since we are men and descended from men. These traditions may be classified as *Medieval* —in this spirit the facades' vertical divisions are fashioned; *Oriental*—in the Mesopotamian spirit is the modern terraced skyscraper, conceived as a combination of blocks; and perhaps also *American*—for in pre-Columbian America we find kinsmen of these terraces. . . .

There are two evident deficiencies in skyscrapers. In the first place, there is a lack of good judgment in their location. The latticelike, schematic plan of the great American cities, which in itself has its merits, is not at all designed for skyscrapers. The older skyscrapers, those in New York, in lower Manhattan, stand like wild elephants let loose among downtrodden sheep. . . . Until streets and squares are developed to the same degree of perfection as means of communication as are corridors and elevators in the buildings themselves, the architectural perfection of the individual skyscraper is sabotaged. . . .

The other fault is in the beautifying details, slavish in their tradition, the antithesis of the free form in building, which distinguishes the skyscraper as a whole. . . .

In spite of all this, I believe in a happy future for America's new, giant architecture. I believe that the power of American initiative will be able to create an artistic city plan, the execution of which will be regarded as a necessity for the happiness of the inhabitants.

James H. Collins
"Panic!"
Scientific American
September 1925

As skyscrapers came to dominate the downtowns of American cities, the pages of *Scientific American* filled with articles on their engineering triumphs, their future possibilities—and their unprecedented and unnerving challenges.

Given a disaster that would suddenly start the skyscraper population of downtown New York hurrying into the streets in a blind rush like a theater panic—what would happen? What steps could be taken to safeguard life and property?

The nearest answer thus far found to that question came on the afternoon of November 7, 1918. It was the day of the "false armistice." During the lunch hour a premature report that peace terms had been signed sent New York into the wildest carnival it has ever known. People rushed into the streets, abandoning work. The shops were quickly stripped of every whistle, horn, bell, rattle, tin pan or anything else that would make noise. By some common impulse, thousands already in the city started for the downtown skyscraper section, and many more thousands outside hurried in the same direction, in anticipation that there would be found the vortex of excitement.

That day, Chief John Kenlon, of the New York Fire Department, landed at the Battery [at the southern tip of Manhattan] an hour after the excitement began, coming from an inspection trip to Staten Island. Responsible for the safety of the city, he immediately viewed the merrymaking from that standpoint.

"And had New Yorkers been determined to destroy their city that day, he says, "they were taking the most effective means of doing so." . . .

But suppose the signal that set this pandemonium loose had been, not a false newspaper report, but a catastrophe like an earthquake, violent enough to cause panic—what then? It need not be a destructive earthquake. One severe enough to sway the skyscrapers, and rattle down a very little of the brick, stone, terra cotta, and other building material suspended over the heads of people in the business district, might easily have that effect. . . .

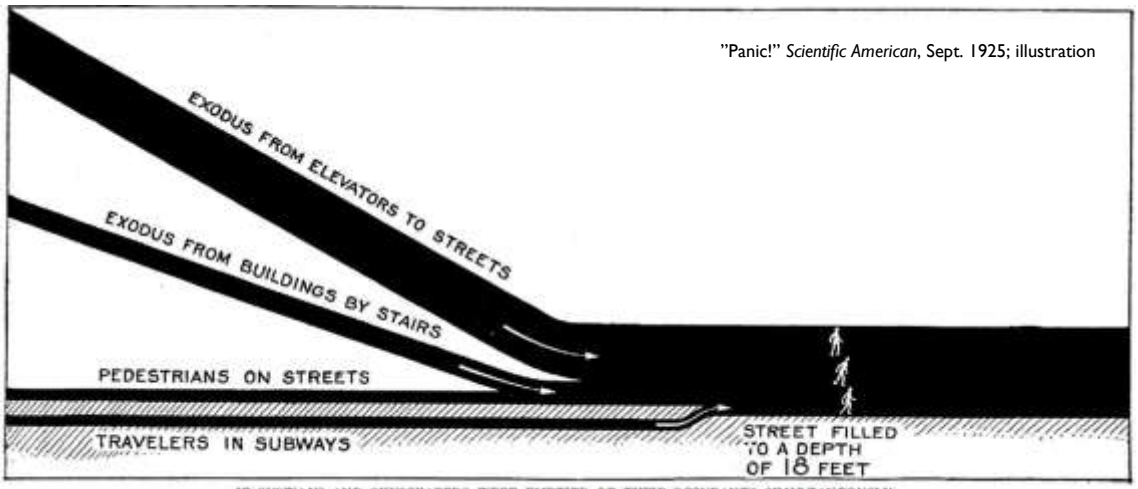
The tallest building, the Woolworth, houses nearly 12,000 persons, and 35,000 visitors additional enter the building daily. The building has twenty-nine elevators, and could probably be emptied in an orderly way in twenty to thirty minutes—the management makes no statement on this point, but that is a fair estimate measured by other buildings.

The largest building in the area, the Equitable, has 11,000 tenants and, in addition, 115,000 persons visit the building daily. It is estimated that it could be emptied in twenty minutes, the elevators and fire escape capacity being such that the people could be brought to the ground floor faster than they could pass through twelve revolving doors to the street. (Naturally, in an emergency, these doors would be thrown wide open.)

. . . The four streets around the [Equitable] building have hardly 50,000 square feet of space, about standing room for the tenant population of the building. And it must be remembered that adjoining it on all four sides are other skyscrapers with dense populations. In the event of a panic, their tenants and visitors would start for the street too.

It has been found by H. F. J. Porter, an engineer who has made many investigations, that people crowding into the interior stairway type of fire escape, even though calm and orderly, will pack so tightly that movement is impossible. Human beings are like bricks in an arch under such circumstances, and the number of persons on the various floors of a large building, in ratio to the airway

"Panic!" *Scientific American*, Sept. 1925; illustration detail



"Panic!" *Scientific American*, Sept. 1925; illustration

IF SUBWAYS AND SKYSCRAPERS WERE EMPTIED OF THEIR OCCUPANTS SIMULTANEOUSLY

If, in an emergency, there were a general exodus to the streets of travelers in the subways and workers in the skyscrapers of New York City, pedestrians would be literally "three-deep"

space, is so great that if all try to use the stairway simultaneously, they wedge each other tightly. In panics, they wedge tightly enough to burst way the stair railings. . . .

. . . A dozen skyscrapers around City Hall Park house more people than the city's entire population a century ago. Nineteen buildings facing on or located near Broadway, exclusive of the Equitable, have a business population, not counting visitors, of nearly 90,000 people. As there are at least five visitors daily for each person in a skyscraper, these nineteen buildings alone have a daily "traffic" greater than the population of San Francisco. They are all handled in the elevators, almost without exception. Wherefore, elevators and their capacity become highly important in considering panic possibilities. . . .

"But let us assume [posits Fire Chief Kenlon] that an earthquake severe enough to rock the skyscrapers and bring down tons of their wall and cornice material did occur. That would be terrifying beyond doubt, and tend to create panic. New York's skyscraper population might conceivably start in alarm to reach the street, using the elevators and interior towers.

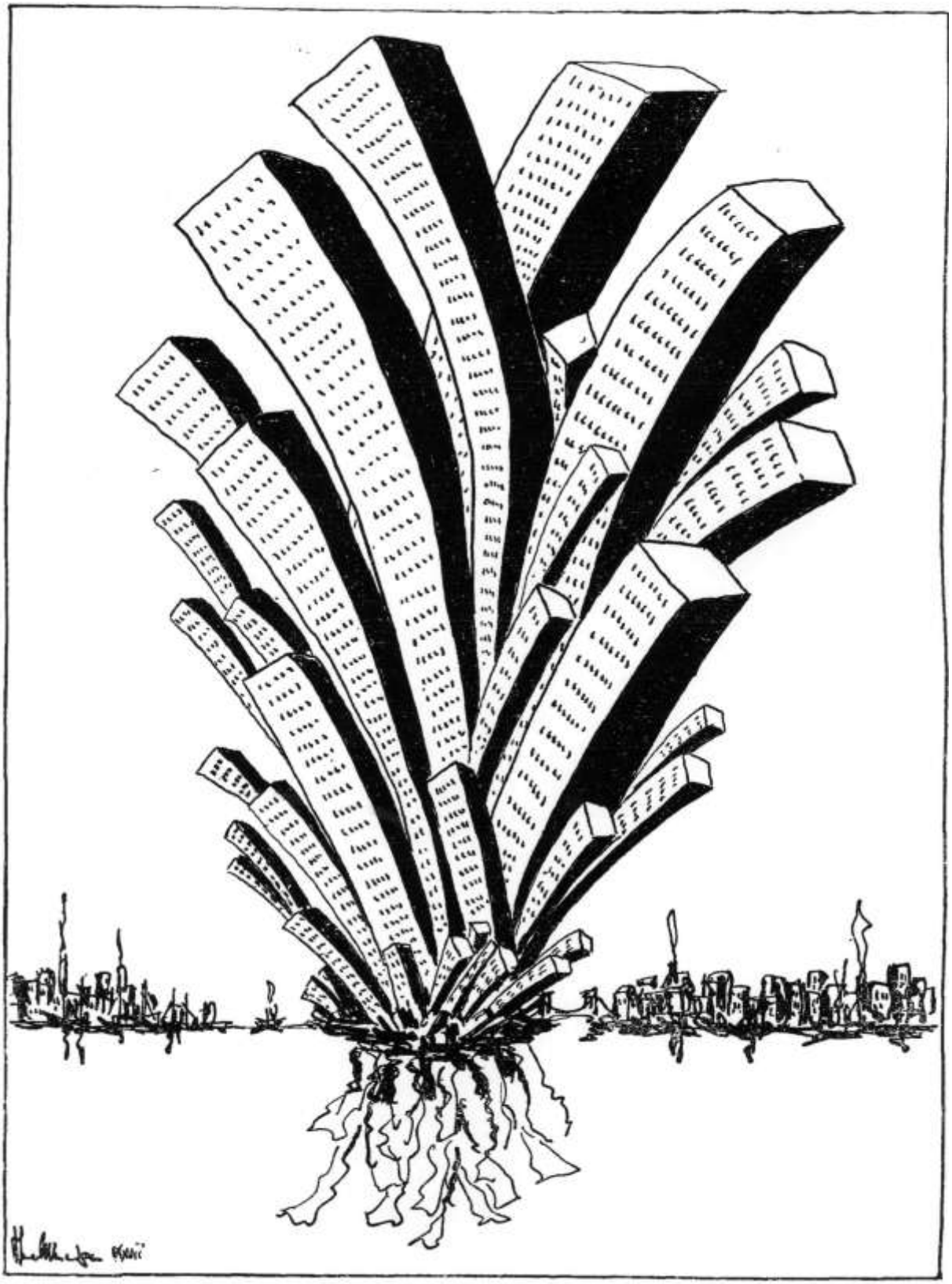
"In that event, the safest place would be the skyscrapers themselves, and the most dangerous place would be the street. People caught in the streets at the moment of shock, or rushing into them for perhaps several minutes later, would be in peril from falling material. People in old buildings of moderate height would likewise be in danger, for if the shock were severe enough, the structures would collapse. But while the skyscraper might sway and shiver, all earthquake experience with modern steel buildings shows that they withstand shock. There is nothing in them to collapse, except the outer walls, and practically nothing to endanger people inside. In an ordinary building with floor beams resting on brick or stone wall, the collapse of the walls means the falling of the floors. But the walls might be stripped from a skyscraper, and its beams would be intact, and its floors being really arches buttressed against the steel beams, could not fall. Whatever danger there might be of this kind would come from movables hung or piled up in offices.

"So, those who were busy at their work in the skyscrapers, and had presence of mind enough to stay where they were, would escape the two chief dangers of such a disaster—the danger of being hurt or killed in the street, and that of panic in the building itself. I believe that New Yorkers, besides being generally a cool-headed lot, know enough of the stability of skyscrapers to rely upon them in any emergency." . . .

Architects' dreams for New York are wrapped up in taller and taller buildings—tower cities a thousand feet high or more, terminating in pinnacles, and set at such distances from each other that there will be ample light and ventilation around them.

It is logical to ask, "What would become of the people in such structures in case of disaster like a major earthquake?"

And the answer seems to be, "The higher the buildings, the more proof they will be against such disaster, and the safer people will be in them.



Top-heavy

The Nation, April 13, 1927