

LAND VALUES AND THE GREAT URBAN METROPOLIS

NEW YORK CITY – On a sunny day in Manhattan I am standing beside a small fruit stand looking up at yet another high-arching, beautiful building across the road. Without a doubt my father would eagerly try to use an opportunity like this to point out just how unnatural the very existence of such a tall building is. Unnatural and odd – like an inner-city fruit and vegetable stand. I look at the same pretty skyscraper and see something slightly different. I see ambition. I see a decent amount of audacity and coarse fearlessness. Essentially, what I really see is a whole lot of America.

Later that day, I meet up with Russ who is eager to give me a tour of his city and talk about its history and development. He wants to meet in front of the Trump International Hotel and Tower. That one is not so pretty.

Russ walks with me to Central Park and immediately starts talking about New York's urban aesthetic, the Park and city planning in general:

"In 1811 the New York City Commissioner released a report basically planning out the future of the city. In this report the grid plan was laid out. If you go down to the older parts of the city, Lower Manhattan or Greenwich Village, you see one side of New York. It's like the older parts of London. It's all low buildings and organically evolved space. It's really after 14th Street that it gets grand. Now, the basic concept of what later became Central Park was laid out in this 1811 report as well. Originally, the main park was supposed to be at 23rd Street, more or less where Madison Square Park is today. The basic reason why this didn't happen was that when the time the city officials were ready to commit to something like this, too many people were living [in the area]. There were too many businesses, too many people to displace, too many buildings to buy out. So, by the time the city decided to create the park in the mid-nineteenth century they had to push the project further north. Essentially, the people living further north were marginal enough [to become subjects to relocation]".

This is the story of New York City. The story of near uncontrollable economic growth and expansion, of almost explosive population growth, of human beings getting pushed *outwards* (if they were unlucky) or being pushed *upwards* (if they were luckier); in the end culminating with that most shiny, most splendid piece of glass and steel *Americana*: the New York skyscraper.

But why here? Why did this particular place on the American West Coast become the beating heart of the global economy as well as the birthplace of the modern hyper-structure? Why not, for instance, Philadelphia? Did nature somehow play its part here? Russ believes he has a good guess as to why, and it relates to exactly that – the fruits of nature:

"New York was first and foremost a sea port. Really, the whole reason [why] New York became New York is because we have one of the world's best natural harbours. That made New York a main port for shipping. And because it became a main port for shipping it also became a main port for insurance and financial speculation, which New York still dominates around the world today". Russ continues: *"Especially later in American history when we started building larger ships that needed a bigger draft this had an effect. Baltimore and Boston at the time of the [American] revolution were essentially more populous than New York. The reason why New York ended up becoming dominant was, again, because of that natural harbour. When the largest ships sailed into Boston they were forced to offload their cargo at sea and row it in. In Manhattan it was easier to bring the ships right into the dock. So, slowly, New York became a manufacturing capital of the United States, which people tend to forget today. It was simply easier to ship your materials in and later ship your products out from this city".*

Manufacturing and factories meant jobs. And jobs meant people arriving in New York from just about every nation on Earth. Soon New York would find itself becoming a microcosm of the global economic trends characterizing the second half of the nineteenth century. Industrialization meant urbanization and a profound shift in economic focus away from farming (which also characterized Manhattan immediately after the island was colonized) to a clearer focus on specialized industry and trade.

The very appearance of New York changed rapidly for the same reasons. In the wake of this profound change critical housing problems became the reality for many working-class New Yorkers. The city simply became more and more dense. This density combined with the before mentioned overall shift towards industry and trade pushed the price of land upwards and laid the foundation for the remarkable urban skyline I can admire as Russ and I stroll through the city today.

In its essence, the mighty skyscraper was the rational and logical reaction to the economic and social factors I mention here. It was thought to be the most reasonable answer to a booming city's accumulative growing pains. Growing pains underlined further and further by the increasing scarcity of land on the island of Manhattan would eventually lead to more and more zoning in an honest attempt by city officials to somehow control the city's rapid expansion. But the zoning (restrictions on land use) – in effect – only created even more land scarcity. Add to this several significant advances in technology; from escalators to basic strengthening of building materials such as steel and concrete and the effects on the city became irrevocable. The price of construction gradually went down which, of course, drove the price of land further up. Yes, the shape and height of the New York City was here to stay; and to evolve even further.



The shape of the individual mega-buildings is fascinating in and of itself. Endless literature describing the essentials of every single New York architectural style or building-ornamentation trend throughout its history can effortlessly be found at any well-curated library. But one of the more interesting ideas about the physical appearance of skyscrapers can be attributed to Carol Willis, who in her 1995 book *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* pointed out that these gravity-defying constructions are essentially designed from the “inside out”.

You start with a fundamental understanding of the skyscraper’s main occupant, the office worker inside, and contemplate the basic requirements of office space needed to ensure this individual’s optimal productivity. And so you lay out the basic floorplan complete with elevators, washrooms and so on. At this point you want the office worker to have access to natural sunlight, and so you start emphasizing large windows as part of your basic design. You will also want the office worker who is placed a little further away from these large windows to enjoy natural sunlight, and because of this you make sure that you maximize the height of every floor ceiling whilst trying to limit the space between the tall windows and the innermost walls of the building. You can then start building your architectural LEGO tower of floors upon floors maximising the return on your investment in the land below this structure.

Back in New York, I say goodbye to Russ and step underground to take the subway downtown from Columbus Circle. The train cars are completely packed this afternoon, and the scene resembles any clichéd New York movie scene you might imagine. The New York City Subway – much like the skyscrapers sitting right above – is an impressive, virtually mind-boggling, engineering achievement.

Evident on this day, it is also an entity that draws human beings very close together. This, of course, is not some original thought. But it can clearly be applied to many things in this city. The interconnected well-organized infrastructure, the powerful institutions, the ever-present cultural options to choose from, the buildings. It all creates a demand and a dependency. I can easily feel these forces even as a humble visitor. The city and everything it offers will draw you inwards and lock you there.

Before I leave the United States, I spend some time in a small bookstore in Brooklyn. Here I stumble upon a thick hardcover with a striking image of the Seagram Building – an architectural

jewel on Park Avenue conceived by German-born architect Mies van der Rohe in his distinctive international style. I consider buying the book simply for the intrinsic aesthetic of the cover, but spend a couple of minutes skimming through the considerable number of pages. Perhaps I can locate some interesting thoughts about skyscrapers and land values that I can use for writing my little article upon my return? I discover that the book has a short index in the back. I look under the letter *L* and quickly realize that this book has precisely zero index-worthy mentions of the word *land*. I am holding a book about skyscrapers. A thick book.

So what I am essentially about to purchase here is the same-old story about the tall New York City skyscrapers: a whole lot about the characteristic iconography, the famous architects, the technological advances that made it all possible, the impressive engineering and the forward-thinking property developers that made them a reality. If I am truly lucky I might even find a chapter describing the hard yet oh-so-poetic life of the construction worker, possibly accompanied by a famous photograph of him eating lunch on a steel beam with his *not-at-all-afraid-of-heights* colleagues.

Evidently, what I won’t be purchasing is a story about the following truth: that the cause of the New York skyline is not to be found in the world of architecture, engineering, property development, technology or in the, possibly, poetic life of that construction worker high above ground. The *root* cause of the very existence of the skyscraper you ironically won’t be finding by looking up, but... by looking down.

The rising land values underneath the skyscrapers became the very catalyst for their birth. And whilst the economy grew this effect only manifested itself – nowhere more evident than on the majestic, but expensive, streets of Manhattan – initially gifted by nature with its exceptional natural harbour.

As the demand for the prime locations in the city rose and rose developers had but one choice: To try to “create” more land above the street level to somehow accommodate an increasing number of people and businesses. To try to create useful, productive *land in the air*: the skyscraper. And thus, with these prideful structures the value of the actual land underneath rose even more.

But this story is not one I will find in the graphically-pleasing skyscraper book in my little Brooklyn bookstore. Eventually I put the pretty volume back on its shelf and fly back home to Europe the following day. 📖

