Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman

New York: The Monacelli Press, 1995, 1,374 pp., 1500 illus. $125.00 (cloth).

For anyone who has an interest in the built landscape of New York, opening this massive tome, like arriving in the city for the first time, will almost certainly set the mind racing. Page after page of beautifully reproduced photographs document an immense legacy of buildings and projects, some of them very well known, some of them all but forgotten. Leafing at random to page 824 one finds the severe, stripped classical Parke-Bernet Building, designed by Walker and Poor in 1949 for a site on Madison Avenue at 76th Street. Flip to page 256 and there is the Electric Circus, perhaps the most important monument from the East Village’s psychedelic era, designed by Chermayeff and Geismar in 1967. On page 1137 a bizarre proposal for Frank Lloyd Wright for Ellis Island catches the eye. And so it goes with office buildings, hotels, loft interiors, restaurants, superhighways, convention centers. As big as it is, moreover, this volume is only one part in a much larger work that is now projected as a five-volume set on the architecture and urbanism of the city since the late nineteenth century. Like New York City itself, this project is enormous, both in its ambitions and its scale. Also like New York, it can at times seem excessive and the order difficult to grasp. Would anyone have wanted it otherwise?

The size and scope of this book mark a substantial advance on its predecessors. New York 1900 by Stern with Gregory Gilmartin and John Montague Massengale inaugurated the series in 1983. In that book, after a modest introduction outlining three stages in what the authors call “metropolitanism,” the nearly 500-page text acts almost as an extended catalogue raisonné, arranged by building type, of what might be called the Manhattan Collection of Architecture. In a typical entry, the authors start with a description, primarily of the exterior, followed by critical comments either by a writer of that era or by the authors themselves. New York 1930 by Stern and Gilmartin, this time joined by Thomas Mellins and assisted by David Fishman and Raymond W. Gastul, repeated the formula but on a larger scale, reaching nearly 850 pages. Although started before New York 1900, this volume, not published until 1987, is a richer and more complex work. It contains, in addition to the earlier focus on the style of building exteriors, a considerable amount of material on urban planning and infrastructure. The book also acknowledges more directly the fact that the city of New York from a very early date was only a part of an extended metropolitan area.

With New York 1960 the authors have made another major leap in scope and complexity of argument. Given its enormous size and its organization, this time primarily by geographical area of the city, leading to numerous chronological leaps, it does not lend itself to extended reading. It is likely that, like its predecessors, it will serve most readers primarily as a book for browsing or as a reference work. For the scholar, flipping from index to text to endnotes can achieve in minutes what would take hours in a major library, although the very size of the volume makes this process, particularly finding the full original citation for a later note, even more laborious than in the earlier volumes.

Perhaps because many of the events they describe fall within the lives of the authors or perhaps because of the experience gained on previous volumes, this book, much more than its predecessors, attempts to connect building style with economic, social, and political history. In an attempt to go beyond the focus on the exteriors of single buildings, the authors have included extended discussions on architectural criticism, on the image of New York in the movies, on building interiors, on city and regional planning. Most important, there is a continuing thread of discussion about the way in which New York, which started as a small, self-contained settlement and then became the center of a large metropolitan area, has finally emerged as just a sub-center, albeit the largest one, of what Jean Gottmann has called megalopolis, a vast urbanized landscape stretching from Washington to Boston along the East Coast of the United States.

This leap in scale is at once a great virtue and a problem, since it raises expectations that no mere mortals could ever satisfy and suggests some of the limitations of the assumptions made in the series as a whole. While the idea of megalopolis is broached, for example, there is almost no evidence of megalopolis in this book. Any kind of real discussion about how New York merges with Philadelphia or New Haven is largely missing. While the book does discuss Westchester County and Long Island, and there is a good short section on the rebirth of Stamford, Connecticut, as an office center, there is conspicuously little on the New York metropolitan area’s largest component, suburban New Jersey. Newark, which in a megalopolis perspective might be thought of as almost part of downtown New York City, barely rates a mention. In this nothing has changed since the first volume in the series. The authors like dense urban living, and Manhattan is what really interest them. In this book “suburban” is apparently the worst epithet in the dictionary.

The act of expanding the scope of this book dramatically highlights the limitations of a high-art approach to urban architectural history. While this approach works well for some building types, for public buildings, for example, which are meant to be seen by the public and judged as aesthetic objects, it works less well for semi-
public buildings like office towers and luxury apartment buildings. It does not seem to work at all for other kinds of buildings. The criticism of public housing projects, absent any consideration of cost per square foot, tenant income, or alternative housing choices in the private market, seems more than a little superficial. It appears that when it came time to discuss the small apartment buildings and single-family houses that constitute the bulk of building in the city and the metropolitan area, the authors hardly knew where to begin since these buildings were built for individuals well outside the taste cultures with which they were familiar. After a short section on Levittown the task is largely abandoned.

The authors have also tried in this volume to put New York into the perspective of American history and American cities generally. This attempt is not always convincing. According to the authors' narrative, New York declined from a position as one of the most buoyant of American cities in the immediate postwar period to rank as one of the most severely depressed within thirty years. In fact both sides of this proposition are a little dubious. In the first era, certain parts of the city, notably the corporate office centers of Manhattan, like the centers of many American cities, benefited by the enormous growth in the service industry, but the growth of the American economy had already tipped strongly toward cities in the South and West. The crisis of the 1970s, likewise, was not different in kind from that in many American cities except for the particularly acute imbalance between government revenues and expenditures in New York City and the state. A longer view would yield a much more gradual economic profile and a less dramatic contrast with other American cities. These apparent defects, however, like many things in the book, can be seen as virtues from a different perspective. Certainly the book brilliantly mirrors the commonly held and often hyperbolically expressed attitudes about the city of its own citizens during the period the book describes.

In fact the most important role of what could be called, from some perspectives, the limitations of New York 1960 might be simply to throw its achievement into higher relief. The accuracy of research, the elegance of description, and the high level of most of the commentary are remarkable, considering the size of the book. The treatment of many topics, particularly some of the more peripheral ones that particularly engaged the authors—for example, the rise of the sidewalk café, the role of the Architectural League, early small-scale gentrification efforts in Manhattan, the Son-of-Shaft movies phenomenon, the arguments for and against graffiti as art, and the iconography of Windows on the World Restaurant atop the World Trade Center—is often brilliant. Each would merit a full chapter in a less densely packed book.

Another remarkable thing about this book is its catholicity. Again like the city itself, the book allows the most incongruous of topics or buildings to stand next to one another without doing violence to any of them. One might have expected that this book would be an extended argument for polite, anti-Modernist urbanism. Indeed New York 1900 often seemed to favor suave expression and civility over every other virtue. New York 1960 could easily have been a catalogue of buildings acceptable to a fairly conservative, upper-middle-class taste today, a list of works suitable for traditional landmark designation. Ironically, it appears that any temptation to follow this route may have been countered by an equally important force from within the field of preservation itself. While many preservationists in the 1960s and 1970s were among the least tolerant of architectural observers, starting with the assumption that postwar modern architecture and modern planning were the Enemy, these same individuals increasingly started to espouse the preservation of the typical as well as the exceptional. By the late 1990s a growing number of preservationists, Robert Stern conspicuous among them, had come to see these very postwar Modernist buildings as potential historic landmarks to be catalogued, analyzed, and perhaps even protected in the same way as mid-nineteenth-century Gothic villas. Nowhere is this book better than in its attempt to do justice to the office buildings by Emery Roth and other major commercial firms of the late 1940s and early 1950s. While these are clearly not the authors' favorite designs, they did command a loyal following in the real estate community, and in this book they get a respectful look, perhaps the first they have ever received. In fact, after the steady diet of Lever House and Seagram Building served up by standard architectural histories, they actually look pretty good.

The authors have likewise made a major effort to let many voices speak. They are, for example, obviously nostalgic for the days when Mayor John V. Lindsay gathered around him the best and brightest graduates of the nation's top architecture and planning schools, but there is at least a hint of the downside of the Lindsay technocracy. Jane Jacobs is here, as might be expected, but so, too, are her critics. The standard condemnations of Robert Moses are here but also the efforts to rehabilitate at least parts of his career.

In the end it is hard to imagine a book better suited to its subject. Too large to be easily digested but never quite large enough to meet the task set out, it captures the feel of the city itself. Not exactly an inventory, not quite a coherent history, nor yet a guide, it still manages to function as all of these things. Perhaps too idiosyncratic, finally, to serve as a template for other efforts, it will, nevertheless, undoubtedly serve as a benchmark against which all future attempts to record the history of urban architecture in an American city will be judged.

—Robert Bruegmann
University of Illinois at Chicago

John Tauranac
THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING: THE MAKING OF A LANDMARK

The Empire State Building, as John Tauranac successfully argues, is the quintessential American skyscraper. Some skyscrapers are taller, but few are quite as memorable, and none have so deeply inscribed themselves in the public imagination. At the book's outset Tauranac explains the enduring popular fascination with the building; he then organizes the narrative which follows to accord logically with the sequence of its conception, design, and construction. Throughout, Tauranac elucidates the Empire State Building's fabulous singularity with the colorful stories that have accrued about it over time. As a consequence, his narrative reads more as the biography of a building than as its scholarly account. Still,