In the famous photograph taken at the Society of Beaux-Arts Architects Ball in 1931, a group of architects enact the idea of “The Skyline of New York” wearing costumes of their recently designed buildings. William Van Alen looks resplendent beneath the finials of the Chrysler Building. But who is that short, stocky figure with an abbreviated mustache, his head and shoulders struggling to keep aloft what is unmistakably the most modernist design of them all? No one in the assembled company would have asked this question. The bold, blocky setback headdress was the Squibb Building, to be found at Park Avenue and 58th Street. Its bearer was Ely Jacques Kahn, soon to become president of the Architectural Department of the society.

During the preceding decade Kahn had established himself as one of the city’s premier architects, erecting over forty significant structures, initially in the Garment District and then in Midtown. He followed the money from the production of clothing to its consumption, and to the housing of those who consumed conspicuously. He went on to design many more of the large-scale, high-rise structures that defined the length and breadth of Manhattan during the twentieth century. They still do; over fifty of them remain in use.

Jewel Stern, artist and art historian, and John A. Stuart, associate professor of architecture at Florida International University, make a strong case for Kahn’s centrality, acclaiming him as the “preeminent twentieth-century architect of commercial buildings in the United States” (14). In careful detail, they track his upbringing in a comfortable French and Austro-German Jewish New York family, emphasizing his strong, lifelong ties to European culture, and follow the details of his architectural education at Columbia University and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, in the studio of Gaston Fernand Redon (brother of the painter Odilon). Although some of this reconstruction must remain guesswork, these early years are vividly evoked.

The precision of the authors emerges early, in their engaging account of his 1911 prizewinning qualification project for a national immigration station. “Kahn correctly analyzed the essence of the problem: orientation and circulation, the movement of masses of people smoothly and systematically through the procedure” (43). Careful and sensible planning was to be the hallmark of his architecture, a quality much appreciated by New York developers and clients alike.

In 1917 Kahn took over as lead partner at what became Buchman & Kahn, turning a firm specializing in solid commercial building in a broad Beaux-Arts style into one that introduced elements of European modern design into its projects, first in efficiency of construction and then in ornament. Kahn himself moved from a love of Islamic imagery in ornamental detailing to the recognition that similarly dazzling effects could be achieved through variegation in the use of bricks and the vigorous deployment of bands of colored tiles. Stern and Stuart argue that Kahn had moved in this direction before the 1925 Paris exposition. There is no doubt that his major achievement of this phase, and perhaps of his career, was the Park Avenue Building, on Park Avenue between 32nd and 33rd streets. Quite properly, it adorns the cover of the book, its polychromatic terra-cotta resplendent, while in the background the Empire State Building appears, by contrast, somewhat plain.

Stern and Stuart devote nearly ten pages to their exposition of the Park Avenue Building, taking the reader (as they do for project after project) from its conception in Kahn’s office, through every interesting detail (frequently including the design of the lobby letterboxes), to the reception by architects, critics, and developers. An interesting subtext is the oft-cited commentaries of Lewis Mumford, issuing observations in The New Republic and other journals on each new building as it appears. Almost always he is a big fan of Kahn, praising No. 2 Park Avenue as “perhaps the most satisfactory essay in color to be seen so far in New York, the Squibb Building, shows equally what can be done in pure white, when it is intelligently used” (157).

This kind of assessment brings us to the subtitle of Stern and Stuart’s book: Beaux-Arts to Modernism in New York. The authors remain ambivalent about whether Kahn actually got to modernism. A constant refrain in Kahn’s own writings is a careful distinction between “modern”—as that which “starting from the problem and working towards a solution with little artificial aid from either European novelties or traditional recollection . . . may approach fresh results”—and “modernistic” architecture that, to Kahn, too slavishly followed the precepts of the European masters: Le Corbusier, Gropius, and other proponents of “flat stucco surfaces” (177). This last comment was deliberately provoked by the young Philip Johnson, hell bent on clearing the American architectural ground for what he and Henry-Russell Hitchcock would dub “the International Style.”

What counted as “modern” depended above all on the available options at the precise moment the question was posed. As always, it is less a matter of what is modern, modernist, or modernistic than when. Alert to this, Stern and Stuart carefully set out the situations in which the issue arises; they name the players, chart the forces, refer back to precedents and forward to later solutions, showing us again and again that Kahn’s buildings are smooth solutions to a conjunction of unlike elements. Always they return to a profile of the architect that underscores, on every level from his personal life to his urban planning, both his openness to innovation and his profound conservatism.

The chief tension in this discussion is that history has been written by the victor. Who remembers that Kahn was the architect of record for Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram Building, perhaps the greatest of all postwar skyscrapers? Stern and Stuart record every instance, and
there were many, when Kahn gave support to one of the brilliant modernist designers he regularly employed, culminating in the 1941 Municipal Asphalt Plant, the Freyssinet-like concrete arches of which sprung from the experience of his then-new partner Robert Allen Jacobs. But prior to the success of International Style architecture in the United States after World War II—not least because of the presence of most of its masters—it was still a live question whether a distinctly American modern architecture would emerge from the economic and social conditions peculiar to this country.

In Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America (1993) I argued that the enormous advances made in mass-production manufacturing during the 1910s, and then in marketing built around mass consumption in the following decade, led to at least two kinds of modern design being more advanced and more deeply rooted in the United States than elsewhere. They are both the reverse of the aesthetic principles adumbrated by Johnson and Alfred Barr in Machine Art, their 1934 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. One was the engineering functionalism (as distinct from the largely symbolic functionalism of Gropius et al.) of daylight factories, grain elevators, and above all in the buildings of Albert Kahn. The second was a kind of industrial design that offered consumers symbolic indications of purpose for the machinery of everyday life: thus the “streamlining” of railway engines and carriages, and bold detailing, such as the two huge prows jutting up at the entrance to the Marine Transportation Building at the New York World’s Fair in 1939, designed by none other than Ely Jacques Kahn. These two tendencies amount to a distinctively American modern architecture and design, an actually existing modernism, achieved before the definitional narrowing advocated by MoMA took hold so extensively that Americans to this day undervalue the achievement of their architects and engineers during the early twentieth century.

The prospect held out by Stern and Stuart’s study is that the circumstances in New York during the 1920s—above all the reorganization of the manufacturing and residential zones in the city, driven by a booming consumer economy—produced a third distinctive modernism as powerful as the two noted above. Is Kahn the avatar of this third way? Stern and Stuart all but say that he was, yet hold back, noting that he preferred to satisfy clients with “simplified exteriors” did not fully embrace the tenets of the International Style, which leads them to this equivocal conclusion: “The trajectory of Kahn’s entire body of work, however, exposes and highlights in the career of one architect the many connections that join the seemingly distant and often critically disconnected points between Beaux-Arts and modernism in New York” (15).

But why should Kahn have embraced principles that, especially in the 1920s, were still in formation in Europe? Does not Kahn’s work represent a distinctive American modernism, as did the indisputable achievement of Wright and other architects inside and outside the Chicago Loop?

To my mind, Stern and Stuart make the case for the American modernism of Kahn’s work during the early decades less by overt statement and more by implication. It appears in the structure of their account: in their measured setting out of Kahn’s programmatic approach, in building after building, project after project, matched to the requirements of his clientele of New York real estate developers and merchants. Local distinctiveness characterizes the making of architectural (and artistic) modernisms all over the world, no matter how “high,” “cosmopolitan,” “gentle,” or “vernacular” they have subsequently been seen to be.

My reservations are few and minor. I would have been interested to know what the authors make of the key argument in Delicious New York, of Rem Koolhaas’s typically love-hate characterization of the architectural ethos of this era as “Manhattanism.” I was puzzled to find Albert Kahn referred to only twice, in passing, and labeled along with Gropius and Richard Neutra as an “International Style modernist” (177–78). He would have been appalled: his views on this issue were almost word for word the same as that of his namesake. Finally, given E. J. Kahn’s organizational deftness, I wonder how much he knew of A. Kahn’s office organization, one that, along with that of the Austin Company, was a model of modern management.

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Mark Kingwell
Nearest Thing to Heaven: The Empire State Building and American Dreams

The cover of Mark Kingwell’s Nearest Thing to Heaven shows the tip of the Empire State Building thrusting above the clouds, a small iconic profile that is unmistakable. Kingwell writes that the building “has always been an anchor in my sense of the city, a study peg holding the world of New York, mythic and real alike, firmly in place” (ix). Yet the floating tip of the skyscraper on the cover also suggests a lack of mooring and multiple mythic foundations, as does the book’s subtitle, The Empire State Building and American Dreams—not one myth, but many, and all in evolution. Kingwell argues, “The building is a symbol of America . . . but it is also far more than that, an embodied cluster of ideas about beauty, technology, politics, and economics” (ix).

Kingwell does not seek to replace John Tauranac’s history of the building’s construction, The Empire State Building: The Making of a Landmark (1995). That excellent 375-page book focuses on the 1920s context, the building’s design, the nuts and bolts, the financing, and the practical side of running it and making a profit. Tauranac only briefly treats the years after 1940 or the symbolism of what for half a century was the world’s tallest building. The architect or historian interested in how the building was