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 distinctively 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 that 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 Delirious 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
built is best served by Tauranac. Kingwell writes for another audience, approaching the building as “a kind of visual lightning rod, a central node in a web of imagined visual connections—a conduit or medium, not of radio signals, but of imagination” (20). For him, the building does not have a single logic, and “it cannot be understood in one way.” Rather, the Empire State Building is a “living icon . . . precisely because, like the idea of America itself, it constantly demands renegotiation and revision of its meanings” (21).

Kingwell divides his book into seven chapters. The first briefly traces the building’s construction and how it began to enter the popular imagination. The second concisely considers ways to think about icons (including the ideas of Aldo Rossi, Roland Barthes, C. S. Pierce, and Robert Venturi) and then offers a largely personal reading of the building, somewhat undercut by an incomplete account of a class trip to the top of the Empire State Building by students who lived in New York and had little interest in going. Chapter three explores the idea of the skyscraper as a tower, as “longing made concrete,” as a “stairway to heaven” (56), and as the “human ambition to transcend the mundane, dirty, or slow” (62). If it is Rem Koolhaas’s “utopian device for the production of unlimited numbers of virgin sites on a single metropolitan location” (61), it also embodies Paul Virilio’s “organized violence of speed” (59). Kingwell notes that the skyscraper’s transcendence has appealed to futurists, fascists, and readers of Ayn Rand, and that as a building rises ever higher it no longer represents economic logic but arrogance.

This leads to a chapter on the building’s form, presented not as a matter of modernism or as an illustration of “form follows function” but as a “gesture about the materials themselves” (94). It is “the quintessential skyscraper” and “a limestone and steel hymn to industrialization and the logic of materials” (97). Kingwell takes the Heideggerian position that “a sense of technology as instrumentality is the inevitable outcome of a Western philosophical tradition driven by desire, exerting will, and pursuing a metaphysics of presence” (100). The skyscraper is “a perfect gesture of the standing reserve” (104) with affinities to Italian futurism and to the American modernism of Philip Johnson, who, Kingwell reminds us, flirted with fascism throughout the 1930s. It achieves “a totalitarian ideal of command and control, the inexorable logic of assembly line and social engineering” (114). Yet surprisingly, after twenty-five pages in this vein, Kingwell concludes that “the Empire State Building’s relation to technology is a mixture of faith and doubt” and it “offers a useful antidote to metaphorical conundra” (115). Suddenly, we are told, the “building argues that technology is redeemed through itself” and perhaps offers “a kind of salvation” (117).

Chapter five examines tourism, playing on the notion that a popular icon becomes invisible, obscured by a surfeit of photographs, models, and representations, including numerous statistical comparisons. The discussion of authenticity references Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Andy Warhol’s film Empire, and, inevitably, Jacques Derrida. The point is not to deny the reality of the building, but to deny the possibility of its representation and “the transcendental-representational model of truth” (161). A chapter on cinema follows. More than one hundred moving pictures deal with the building, but most are at best briefly mentioned. Only a few pages concern the King Kong movies, while the author lavishes attention on the intertextual relations between Love Affair (1939), An Affair to Remember (1957), and Sleepless in Seattle (1993), and meditates on the role of nostalgia in popular culture. A final, short chapter, “Empire,” emphasizes the “reappearance” of the Empire State Building in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, when the word “empire” acquired new connotations. Kingwell argues that U.S. oil dependency “means that it cannot avoid a foreign policy de facto organized around Middle East aggression” (196). The nation sees itself as liberal. “If the nation itself is seen as a machine that runs beneath the rhetorical superstructure, however, then it becomes clear that the energy needed to run the machine must be continually secured” (196). Yet, “the Empire State Building does not stand so clearly for the empire of postmodern political realism as did the World Trade Center,” as the Empire State Building holds a position “more layered, and more romantic” (198). Built in 1930–31, it expresses “a formidable nation between more violent engagements,” even if it remains “an instrument of visual dominance” (199). Ultimately, Kingwell finds it to be an icon of a “pervasive nostalgic futurism” (199) and also of liberation.

Many Americans have interpreted the central symbols of the United States—on skyscrapers one thinks of Carl W. Condit, Paul Goldberger, William R. Taylor, Monah Domosh, and Merrill Schleifer (whose The Skyscraper in American Art is not mentioned)—but Kingwell seems unaware of their work. His points of reference are insistently European, ranging from Le Corbusier, Peter Conrad, Michel de Certeau, and Victor Hugo to Plato, G. W. F. Hegel, Franz Kafka, Ferdinand de Saussure, Hannah Arendt, Filippo Marina, Thomas Mann, JeanFrancois Lyotard, Karl Marx, and Jürgen Habermas. Few of them, however, had much directly to say about the Empire State Building. Kingwell also ignores major primary sources. He never mentions Louis Sullivan, the pioneer of the tall building and one of its most interesting theorists. He cites Lewis Mumford only once (a 1931 New Yorker review of the Radio City Music Hall) without coming to grips with his other writings. The following are also missing: Edmund Wilson wrote an article for the New Republic on the Empire State Building when it opened; Claude McKay was ambivalent about skyscrapers in “Song of New York,” both Djuana Barnes and Gertrude Stein had interesting things to say about skyscrapers; Sophie Treadwell wrote an important dystopian play about skyscrapers in 1928; and Sinclair Lewis wrote about them in Arrowsmith. But Kingwell ignores such American commentators, preferring a predictable parade of Euro-
Michelle Murphy
Sick Building Syndrome and the
Problem of Uncertainty: Environ-
mental Politics, Technoscience, and
Women Workers
Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006,
182 pp., 21 b/w illus. $21.95 (paper), $74.95

Molecules, bodies, belief systems, the
built environment, social and material
manifestations of race, class, gender, and
disability: where does one domain end
and the others begin? Similar to complex
systems and living ecologies, interdisci-
plinary scholarship is built on intercon-
nectivity, permeability, and a multiplicity
of perspectives, which together open up
the meanings and configurations of
power during particular historical
moments. Few interdisciplinary scholars,
however, tackle the dense layering of
their subjects with as much breadth,
rigor, and theoretical transparency as
Michelle Murphy does in her analysis of
the recent phenomenon called Sick
Building Syndrome. Even fewer criss-
cross the terrains of the history of sci-
ence, medicine, and technology, the
history of business and labor in society,
critical theory, and the history of archi-
tecture, design, and urbanism (in approxi-
ately this order of emphases).

Sick Building Syndrome and the prob-
lem of Uncertainty will be of significant
interest to interdisciplinary historians of
architecture and design who want to
understand how the twentieth-century
 corporate built environment reflected
and inflected social hierarchies of race,
class, and gender, as tied to perceptions
of disease. The book is also useful to
those who seek a more holistic under-
standing of the relation of contemporary
architecture to sustainability (the chem-
ical toxicity of building materials and
accessories) and to systems complexity
(relevant to the architectural design of
complex, information-based spaces).

Originating in 1984, Sick Building
Syndrome (SBS) quickly became a wide-
spread diagnosis for buildings whose
occupants complained of diverse minor
illnesses—headaches, rashes, dizziness,
difficulty breathing—that they attributed
to their work environment; yet, when
experts tested the building for chemical
toxicity above industry safety standards,
they failed to find unsafe conditions. If
toxicity levels above the threshold limits
were in fact measured, and a direct
cause-effect relationship between the
chemical and occupants' illnesses were
determined, a building would not
be diagnosed with SBS. Rather, SBS by
definition referred to buildings with unde-
tectable toxicity levels in combination
with widespread occupant symptoms.
Hence, as the title of the book stresses,
the diagnosis hinged on uncertainty, a fact
that leads Murphy to label it a “postmod-
ern” condition.

This type of diagnosis and its inher-
ent notions of disease in relation to
architecture are highly unusual and
interesting. It was not the occupants but
rather the buildings that were diagnosed
as sick. Buildings were therefore “organi-
sm,” an idea with a long legacy in archi-
tectural history. The classification of
particular types of design as “diseased” or
“degenerate” has traditionally originated
from architects, designers, and critics as
part of an internal debate over the valid-
ity of certain stylistic traits (ornamenta-
tion, for example). The idea of a “sick
building” in the 1980s, however, was
proposed by toxicologists, scientific
researchers, and “healthy building” spe-
cialists. It was a diagnosis that marked
their difficulties unraveling the complex
knot of chemistry, biology, and individ-
ual and collective experiences, as inter-
twined with the specific spatial domains
of late twentieth-century corporate
architecture.

Because the sources of illness were
undetectable according to standardized
methods and levels of toxicity, interpreta-
tion of the cause of workers’ symptoms
was highly flexible. This made it amenable
to biases of gender, race, and class, since
mostly middle-class women experienced
symptoms and mostly educated white
males conducted the investigations deny-
ing toxicity. The experts often claimed
that women’s illnesses were psychosomatic,
perhaps manifestations of emotional hys-
teria rooted in menstruation, instead of
deriving from an exterior physical cause.

This move delegitimized women’s claims
for workers’ compensation in the eyes of
insurance company officials and judges.
Women workers then protested that
experts were invalidating their testimonies
based on an incomplete understanding
of disease as constructed by Western medi-
cine and science. Some of these women
had participated in consciousness-raising
sessions in the 1970s that affirmed their
collective experiences of discrimination
and validated their experiential knowledge
of their own bodies, a fact that deepened
the rift between these parties.