Gothic Catholic cathedral (Adolph Druiding, 1893), a confection “send[ing] heavenward enough militantly spiky towers to satisfy an ecclesiastical regiment” (40). British architectural historian John Gloag has observed that “buildings cannot lie; they tell the truth directly or by implication about those who made and used them.” Gloag sees built landscapes—whether grandiose, sublime, or dreary—as “candid statements” about the true character of the individuals and collective cultures that produce them. Reading Fazio’s superb account of Birmingham, it is hard to disagree.

Within the rigidly defined ethnic boundaries of early twentieth-century Birmingham, a small black business and professional class turned to one of its own for architectural expertise. Wallace A. Rayfield (1873–1941), the subject of Allen Dorough’s recent book, is best remembered as the designer of the iconic Sixteenth Street Baptist Church (1909)—scene of a 1964 bombing that became one of the turning points of the Civil Rights Movement. Beyond this, the architect had slipped into obscurity until Dorough’s chance discovery, in 1993, of a cache of 411 printer’s plates related to Rayfield’s professional career. A retired businessman and Baptist preacher, Dorough found the plates while razing an old barn in the satellite steel town of Bessemer, fifteen miles southwest of Birmingham. He became curious about Rayfield—curious enough to teach himself to make images from the plates and to devote several years researching Rayfield’s life and practice. This book is the result.

A short biographical sketch introduces the reader to Rayfield, but the book is essentially a pictorial compendium of Rayfield’s buildings—some illustrated with images reproduced from the plates Dorough found, others through contemporary photographs. The author classifies the structures by type: houses, churches, schools, and “miscellaneous.” Thereafter he simply lists them in alphabetical order, with captions that do little more than indicate location and date. A twenty-page appendix offers a state-by-state roster of “known Rayfield structures”—over four hundred in all.

Trained at Howard University and Pratt Institute, Rayfield came to Birmingham in 1908 after serving briefly as an instructor at Tuskegee Institute. With entrepreneurial skills to match his architectural ambitions he secured commissions in no less than nineteen U.S. states, plus two in Liberia. Ecclesiastical design was his chief focus, and he promoted his work through illustrated advertisements and plan books that targeted denominational audiences.

Dorough provides fresh and useful information. What is missing from his account is the kind of broad contextualization and scholarly analysis needed to fully understand buildings and the milieu in which they were made—the very things that give Fazio’s study such resonance. Their absence in Dorough’s book may cause readers to turn away with as many questions as answers. How exactly (and how differently), one wonders, did Rayfield interact with Birmingham’s black and white communities, or with African American architects of his era working in other cities? How was he able to cross the racial divide and procure commissions from a handful of white southern congregations? What would an informed critique of Rayfield’s work—particularly his churches—tell us about his evolution and his limitations as a designer? Even the printer’s plates that sparked Dorough’s interest go largely unexplained. What would a thoughtful analysis of these artifacts reveal? Dorough’s admirable dedication to preserving them has resulted in an invaluable contribution to African American architectural scholarship. It remains for further research to answer many of the questions this material and Dorough’s book raise.

In their own way, each of these books broadens our perspectives on urban and African-American architectural history. Fazio’s adroit sifting of landscape and architectural evidence provides a model for similar studies. If Dorough’s book leaves more to be said about Wallace Rayfield and the experience of African American architects in a segregated society, it also suggests the potential inherent in this still-new field of inquiry.

ROBERT GAMBLE
Alabama Historical Commission

Notes

Benjamin Flowers

**Skyscraper: The Politics and Power of Building New York City in the Twentieth Century**


In this both sweeping and specific book, Benjamin Flowers describes the Empire State Building, the Seagram Building, and the World Trade Center towers, explaining why developers undertook them and how personal ambitions influenced their designs. The son of an American State Department official, the author grew up in Bulgaria and Romania, countries where “everything was political” and new buildings symbolized allegiance to the Soviet Union (2). He sees architecture as the product of social forces and emphasizes these, instead of the stylistic and structural qualities that dominate many architectural studies.

Flowers explains that the Empire State Building, the tallest in the world when it opened in 1931, occupies an unusually large midtown plot on Fifth Avenue that had been the site of a family farm, Mrs. William Astor’s mansion, and then the first Waldorf-Astor Hotel. Its primary developers—John Raskob, “an Irish-Catholic self-made millionaire” and Al Smith, a former “governor of New York, Democratic presidential candidate, and the best known Irish-American politician of his time”—were “outsider clients” (16). Building the skyscraper with Pierre and Coleman Dupont was a way to prove they had arrived. Flowers says little of the architects, Shreve Lamb & Harmon, except to note that the 102-story building was completed in just twenty months from the time they were contracted. Meanwhile, the muckraking photographer Lewis Hine was hired to document the construction process, while the Starrett Brothers’ construction company built the building on “a vertical
assembly line” (55). Curiously, profit was not the primary motive for building this or any of the other towers Flowers discusses. In the case of the Empire State Building, this was just as well since it broke ground five months after the stock market crash of October 1929, when Al Smith had finally managed to wrangle changes in the building code to cut costs. He kept pressuring public agencies, tax assessors, and lenders to keep the project afloat until he died in 1944. Still, the building—constructed mainly to house small businesses—did not become profitable until after World War II.

The Seagram Building, though more successful financially, was not primarily an investment. The Canadian owner of the Seagram Company Ltd., Samuel Bronfman, built it because, like other distillers, he had been pilloried during the Kefauver Hearings of 1950–51 for illegal activity during Prohibition and wanted to create a respectable name for himself and his company in the U.S. The Museum of Modern Art’s 1932 Exhibition 15, which promoted the International Style, had made setback skyscrapers like the Empire State Building old-fashioned, especially in the circles Bronfman hoped to enter. Also, his daughter, Phyllis Lambert, insisted that he hire a major architect—a figure of the sort Ayn Rand had celebrated in The Fountainhead (1943), one of the most popular novels of the day. With a generous budget and artistic freedom, Mies van der Rohe created a masterpiece on Park Avenue, establishing Bronfman as a patron of architecture. Flowers quotes reviews of the time (1958) praising the Seagram Building’s elegant proportions, fine materials, dignity, and sense of permanence. “Architectural Forum” claimed that at $45 per square foot, it was the most expensive office tower ever built ‘in Manhattan or anywhere else’” (97). The critics did not question the cost or that the social ideals of the International Style had been put in the service of a whiskey company.

The story of the World Trade Center (WTC) is very different. It was panned when completed in 1971 and disparaged until September 11, 2001, when it was nostalgically reappraised. Built by the Downtown Lower Manhattan Association (DMLA) and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, it aimed to revive the Wall Street area which, as Flowers notes, had been involved in world trade (including the slave trade) since the Dutch West India Company settled there in 1625. By the 1950s, downtown had been replaced as the city’s primary business district by midtown and its skyscrapers, including the Empire State and Seagram. The WTC was central to the effort to bring primacy back to this end of the island.

The author lavishes attention on the architect, Minoru Yamasaki, explaining that as a Seattle-born Japanese-American based in Detroit he was a long shot for the job. Although Yamasaki was not part of the New York architectural establishment, he was a significant figure at the time. The key players at the World Trade Center, however, were the Port Authority director, August Tobin, and David Rockefeller, who had built a new skyscraper nearby for his Chase Manhattan Bank with Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill. Rockefeller led the DMLA while his brother Nelson was governor of New York State. The Port Authority, founded “to manage ports and transportation infrastructure within 25 miles of the Statue of Liberty” (161), was “entirely removed from public oversight” (158). Together these groups were powerful enough to remove hundreds of thriving small businesses from the area (though not without vociferous protests) in order to build a pair of 110-story towers—the tallest in the world when they opened—for which there were no tenants. In doing so, they destroyed the fine-grained street grid of Lower Manhattan, a fact Flowers does not emphasize quite enough. Although the project’s underground shopping mall eventually thrived, the towers were never a commercial success. They mostly housed government agencies, as the Empire State Building did during the Depression. The new oversized office towers and the small memorial museum going up now will occupy the same gigantic 16-acre plot that destroyed street life and actually made the area less—rather than more—viable.

Benjamin Flowers sheds intriguing light on three important skyscrapers here. In the process, he humanizes these endeavors, while situating them in a historical context, raising issues for further discussion, and providing a useful model for studies of other buildings.

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Notes
1. The Starrets’ efficiency was rarely equaled in this country, a fact that merits but does not receive further discussion here. They also built the block-long, mixed-use, 49-story Carew Tower complex in Cincinnati in an almost unbelievable nine months in 1929–30.
2. Among many other projects, he designed two airports and the Monetary Agency in Saudi Arabia where the Bin Laden family owned a construction company, a potentially relevant fact the author omits.
3. The World Trade Center site is about seven or eight times the size of the Empire State Building site, which is twice as large as the one the Seagram Building occupies uptown.