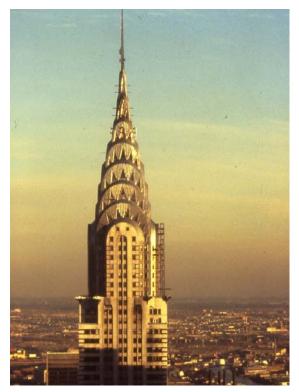
## Can We Be Both Lighthearted And Serious? The Chrysler Building Shows How!

## By Anthony C. Romeo, A.I.A.

Few buildings have had the impact on the New York City skyline and the hearts of New Yorkers that the Chrysler Building has had. I remember seeing it from the back seat of our car as my family drove to Yonkers when I was about 5 or 6 and having a sense of awe. I had no idea then that this beautiful building does something I wanted to do in my life: it puts together opposites. In his 15 Questions, "Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?," Eli Siegel asks about GRACE AND SERIOUSNESS:

> Is there what is playful, valuably mischievous, unreined and sportive in a work of art?— and is there also what is serious, sincere, thoroughly meaningful, solidly valuable?— and do grace and sportiveness, seriousness and meaningfulness, interplay and meet everywhere in the lines, shapes, figures, relations, and final import of a painting?



These questions were written in 1955 about painting and the visual arts, but they apply to all the arts, including architecture—and the Chrysler Building answers the question about Grace and Seriousness with a resounding *Yes*!

People don't know how to be serious and lively at the same time. I didn't. Even as a child I was very serious, often glum, and quite humorless about myself. "Here comes Mr. Misery," my mother would say, "with the weight of the world on his shoulders." The Chrysler Building shows the serious can also be graceful, even humorous. It was designed by architect William Van Alen, who had studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and was influenced by the birth of Art Deco. Upon returning to America, he announced, "No old stuff for me! I'm new! Avanti!"

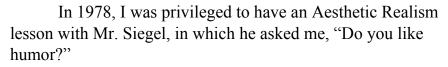
The Chrysler Building was indeed "unreined and sportive" compared to the more formal, heavy buildings of the time. Many architects and critics disliked it at first, and Van Alen was called the "Ziegfeld" of his profession. *The New Yorker* proclaimed, "it has no significance as a serious design." Even Lewis Mumford described it as "meaningless voluptuousness." Yet, as *The New York Times* said recently, it is now "for some people the most striking and graceful skyscraper in New York."



Most often we don't think of a skyscraper as having humor, but the Chrysler Building brought something new to architecture, and it is serious; it has enormous meaning. Where else could you find brickwork designed to look like automobiles, and the employment of actual hubcaps from 1929 Chrysler cars bolted into the brickwork, right in the center of the tire where it belongs? At mid-height, where the base of the building becomes the tower, giant winged radiator caps, modeled after those used in 1929 Chryslers, accentuate the graceful outward curve of the building. This brings exuberance to what might

otherwise have been a heavy base, and from this level the graceful tower rises. It is crucial to the beauty of this building that none of these elements seem "stuck on." Amazingly, they seem to belong together. This is because William Van Alen saw an authentic, integral relation between two ever so different entities— the fixed, structural solidity of a building, and the dynamic, gleaming attributes of a motor car.

Above the radiator caps and hub caps at the base of the tower, eagles, fashioned after Chrysler hood ornaments, thrust outward— like the gargoyles of Notre Dame Cathedral. And then there is that majestic spire, constructed in gleaming stainless steel, which crowns the New York skyline with exuberant, noble grace. What is serious, "solidly valuable," is made one with the playful and mischievous. Isn't this is what *we* want to do?





"Yes," I answered, "but it's interesting that I don't have much. When it comes to telling a joke or having a sense of humor I can be very heavy."

He explained that humor is one of the deepest subjects, and encouraged me to have a better sense of humor, including about myself. For example, he said in this lesson: "Space and Romeo have this in common: they both have room for improvement." And hinting at why I didn't have a sense of humor about myself, he asked: "Do you believe your questions are distinguished and pretty much alone?" I did, but I learned, as my study continued, that I was related to every object and every other person through the opposites, and when we see that the depths of ourselves are related to everything else, we feel honestly lighter. The Chrysler Building is *truly* distinctive—I think the most distinctive building on the New York skyline. At the same time, its slender proportions and gracefully tapering crown and spire seem friendly to its surroundings. It is bold but not a bully. It doesn't go after distinction through the contemptuous lessening of its neighbors. You don't feel it's trying to compete with or detract from the buildings around it.



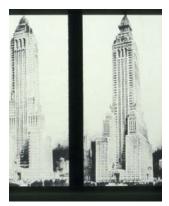
Up through the center, three vertical columns of windows rise, culminating in the gentle arch echoed in the curves of the crown. By its very nature, an arch accents upward motion, while at the same time curving gracefully downward. It soars upwards and has modesty, is grounded—reaching towards earth.

Can we learn from this building about ourselves? Can we have stature without giving up friskiness and grace? Did the architect who designed this have respect for both aspects of reality? To take a hubcap and place it on top of a skyscraper is saying: "I'm going to elevate this seemingly lowly object, so that you will see its meaning and respect it."

Along with the up and down motion of the Chrysler Building, there are dark windows with white bands of brick at the edge of each story, accenting the horizontal so we go simultaneously up, down and out. And all these motions, Mr. Siegel explained, represent something deep in our minds. He wrote:

The vertical line is a symbol to the unconscious of the self alone; the horizontal, of the self going out....The down and up motion of a line is like the ego given to nothing but itself. The horizontal line...represents the ego going out, as an *off-set* to verticality.

The interplay of vertical and horizontal motion in the Chrysler Building has to do with its unique quality of being at once soaring and earthbound. But the most outstanding aspect of the building is its crown and spire. There is nothing like it, in New York or anywhere else. The significance of the crown can



be seen if we look at some early studies of the building.

While both earlier designs accent the vertical and horizontal in a way similar to the final building, they culminate in a stodgy and bulky top. Even with the liveliness of hubcaps and



hood ornaments, the building would not be a beautiful relation of grace and seriousness without the crown Van Alen finally chose.

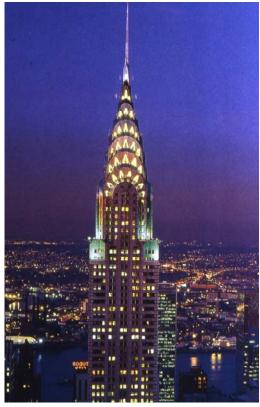
The spire has a history. Secretly assembled within the crown, it was raised into place one night to the astonishment of all New York— and to the chagrin of those constructing what was to have been the tallest building in the world—the Bank of Manhattan at 40 Wall Street, designed by Van Alen's former partner and now rival, H. Craig Severance. The Chrysler Building's final height: 1,048 feet, making *it* the tallest building in the world— at least for a year, until the Empire State Building came along.



The spire does seem to rise organically from the building's tower. The gentle curves on the crown accent thoughtfulness: they are graceful and reposeful. The triangular windows follow the curves, but accent playfulness and surprising, critical energy. These triangular windows mischievously contradict but also seem to complete the quiet repose of those curves. They come to sharp points that shoot out in every direction. The windows would be too jarring without those curves, just as the curves would be too placid without the pointed windows. Together, their relation of liveliness and depth, energy and repose is what people are looking for.

Fluorescent lighting was new in 1930 and Van

Alen's plans to light the building were ahead of their time and could not be implemented. When the original plans were found some years ago, these triangular windows were lit up as Van Alen intended, in a way that surprised people and got their attention, giving the crown the energy and spirit at night that it has during the day. When you see the Chrysler Building, you can have a big emotion about the whole world. You can feel earth and sky, matter and space are joined in a new way. From a base so solid and strong rises a spire that soars into space with dignity and playfulness. Many people, looking at the Chrysler Building, have felt something almost religious—a greater sense of wonder and respect for the world. And Aesthetic Realism, in describing what beauty is, has given me a chance to learn how opposites can be closer in



myself through studying a building I have loved all my life.

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