

ARCHITECTURE AND YOU: EMPIRE STATE BUILDING  
By Dale Laurin, RA



Of all the thousands of skyscrapers that have been built around the globe in the last 100 years, is there any more famous than the Empire State Building? Yet like many people, I once thought of this New York



icon more as the site of King Kong's last stand or as an engineering feat—for over 40 years the tallest building in the world—than an important instance of architecture having beauty. Through my study of Aesthetic Realism, I've come to see this building as a work of art because of the way it puts opposites together: grace and strength, lightness and heaviness, and these are opposites every person is trying to put together in his or her life. And so, as I speak about this famous structure, I'll be illustrating what is in this Aesthetic Realism principle: "All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves."

In an Aesthetic Realism lesson I was fortunate to have with Eli Siegel in 1978, he asked me, “Do you think the reason that you were taken by architecture is because architecture is at once graceful and massive, or can be?” Though I had liked drawing and designing buildings since I was a boy, I had never thought about this before, but when he asked me that question, I knew the answer was Yes. As a teenager, I had felt anything but graceful. I had a lumbering, shuffling walk and a slouching posture that my parents often called to my attention. I was also awkward and self-conscious around people, feeling rather sure that everyone was looking at me, making fun of me. Meanwhile I never thought there might be a relation between my feeling so ill-at-ease and the way I made fun of people in my mind. I was to learn later from Aesthetic Realism that when we elevate ourselves by lessening others—which is contempt—we’ll punish ourselves in various ways. I came to see I felt heavy and stuck within myself because of the way I secretly got importance by making light of other people, denying them the full weight I gave myself.

The beauty of the Empire State Building is in how it asserts its tremendous mass in a way that is graceful, not overpowering. It

seems to blend with the buildings around it in a friendly way. The mass itself has grace because of the form it is given.

Empire State, designed by the architectural firm of Shreve, Lamb, and Harmon, and built by the Starrett Brothers and Eken contractors, is a 102-story, 1250-foot high structure which, on its completion in 1930, contained two million square feet of office space, 60,000 tons of steel, 6500 windows, and more than 3,500 miles of telephone wire.







One of the surprising things is that while this great building commands the midtown skyline, towering high above every other structure, walking down Fifth Avenue, you can easily pass it by

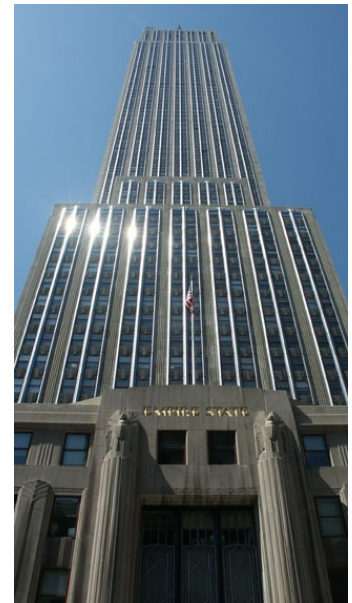
unnoticed. Some years ago when I worked in the vicinity, tourists sometimes asked me for directions to the world famous skyscraper, and on more than one occasion, I simply pointed straight up, to the exclamation of the astonished visitor, for we were standing right next to it.



The structure rises from a simple five-story base, which is quite neighborly in its scale, similar to nearby buildings and

actually smaller than many of them. And like them, its front façade abuts the sidewalk.

But at the 6th floor level, the tower is pulled back generously from the streets—on three



of its sides, and climbs gracefully in a series of well-proportioned setbacks that at the same time seem to visually buttress its soaring mass. Does this tell us that *we* can assert ourselves in a way that's graceful and proud when we want to respect what's around us?

The Empire State Building appears slimmer, less bulky than it actually is, because of the elegant way its north and south faces have central recesses that extend vertically over 50 stories. These recesses give sculptural relief to what would otherwise be a large expanse of wall, and the equally lofty shadows they create add definition, depth, and drama to the tower.



Toward the top there are additional horizontal setbacks, and as the floors diminish in size, there's a sense of a gradual transition — that we're slowing down and finally nearing the summit. But at the

top is a final triumphant flourish as four powerful yet gracefully curving steel buttresses fortify a central cylindrical communications tower which rises another 222 feet. Looking more closely, we see that each buttress is beautifully sculpted to resemble a bird's wing, so something visually graceful helps support something that's much



more massive—the communication tower. And like the building below, this tower also has setbacks, becoming slimmer as it rises, giving it lightness and speed that draws our eye higher and higher until at the pinnacle, all this matter becomes sheer space.

We've come to another, related pair of opposites in the Empire State Building: Heaviness and Lightness. We can get a vivid idea about just how important a building's form or shape is in determining how heavy or light it appears if we compare photographs of the Empire State Building and a considerably smaller structure—the former Waldorf Astoria Hotel—that was demolished to make way for the mighty skyscraper. Doesn't this 13-story structure appear as heavy or even heavier than the 80-story office building?



Writing about the opposites of heaviness and lightness in his historic 15 Questions of 1955, “[Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?](#)”, Mr. Siegel asks a question that I believe describes what has stirred people about the Empire State Building for over 75 years:

Is there in all art, and quite clearly in sculpture, the presence of what makes for lightness, release, gaiety?—and is there the presence, too, of what makes for stability, solidity, seriousness?—is the state of mind making for art both heavier and lighter than that which is customary?

The state of mind making for a beautiful building may be guided by the architect, but his or her design would never leave the drawing board or computer screen and become a three-dimensional reality without the minds—and bodies, the hard work—of many people.





There are the structural, plumbing, mechanical, and electrical engineers who work directly with the architect, the contractors who plan and orchestrate all the complexities of construction, the workers who blast and excavate the rock for the foundation, who build the formwork and pour the concrete, the steelworkers who forge the beams and who erect them on site, the bricklayers, stone-carvers, window installers, plumbers, roofers, carpenters, plasterers, painters, and many, many more, from the foreman to the clean-up crew.

This is true about every building, but it's of particular note in any discussion of the Empire State Building, which owes its existence to the efforts of the largest construction crew assembled since the building of the pyramids—at one point numbering over 3,000 men.

The entire project—from excavating to polishing door knobs—took

13 months—a record time that has never been equaled for a building of this size.



Speed is on the side of lightness, and it must have been a stirring experience to witness the steady rise of the building's heavy steel skeleton, which fortunately has been documented in photographs, at a pace that averaged four and a half floors a week.

Later, when the exterior masonry was being laid, trucks lined up continuously all day waiting for crews to unload thousands of bricks directly into carts that were immediately hoisted to that day's floor where they were then guided along temporary mini- railroad tracks that wrapped around the perimeter of the floor, finally stopping to be unloaded right next to the bricklayer who cemented the bricks into place. Meeting this schedule would not have been impossible without the tremendous planning, coordination, and discipline of serious work in behalf of a structure so solid, stable, yet one that makes for such a feeling of lightness, release when you see it.

I think it's the oneness of these opposites that have to do with the beauty of Louis Hine's awe-inspiring photographs of the Empire State construction workers. They look so



lightsome, casual, and at ease doing some of the most serious, challenging, dangerous work imaginable. These men were working on one of the very few active construction projects during the crippling Depression that began with the stock market crash of October 1929 just as the foundations were being poured. Fourteen of these men died during the course of construction, despite the extraordinary—for the time—safety precautions that were taken.

As an architect and man, I've come to have a new, different way of seeing construction workers and what they deserve. I'm ashamed to say I once regarded persons who did this tremendously difficult and skilled work so lightly, contemptuously, as inferior to what I regarded as the serious, superior work of the architect—without whose design and drawings they wouldn't have a clue what to do. The criticism of this unjust way of seeing that I heard opened my eyes to the knowledge, expertise, and honest pride these workers bring to

their jobs, without which the architect's design would never see the light of day; we have a beautiful need for each other. Seeing this was the beginning of big changes in me: a greater seriousness about working with other people as a team, and greater pleasure as I did.

And now in my work as an Aesthetic Realism consultant, I'm able to ask other men questions that encourage a way of seeing people, including people they work with, that enables them to be kinder and to like themselves more. We have asked, for instance: "Do you think you have a preference to see other people as more different from you than like you? The question is—is it true? Do you think the next step is to see that very different person —your co-worker John, for example—as also against you or inferior to you? This may set your ego up for awhile, but do you think it has anything to do with the feeling you described of not wanting to get out of bed in the morning? Can you write down everyday one way John Lee is honesty like you, beginning with, say: "John and I both like to begin the work day with a cup of coffee." Do you think Mr. Lee has ever felt—like that cup of coffee—that he can change too quickly from being warm to being cold? —from feeling as lightsome and free as steam rising from the top of that cup to feeling as bogged down as the coffee grounds



at the bottom? Can you feel that way too?” And in consultations people also learn how the opposites they’re trying to make sense of are made one in art.

For instance, one of the most beautiful ways the Empire State Building puts together the opposites of coolness and warmth, heaviness and lightness, is the way



its somber and massive gray stone walls are contrasted and complemented by the lively tomato-red color of the window mullions and the highly reflective stainless steel moldings that frame the rhythmic rows of windows. Rising nearly the full height of the tower, these moldings glow and glisten as they welcome and reflect the ever-changing sunlight throughout the day and at dusk are often magnificently ablaze with the reds and golds of the setting sun. The way the opposites complete each other here has a person feel a greater oneness of “lightness, release” and “solidity, seriousness.”

And this is what people everywhere are hoping to feel.

