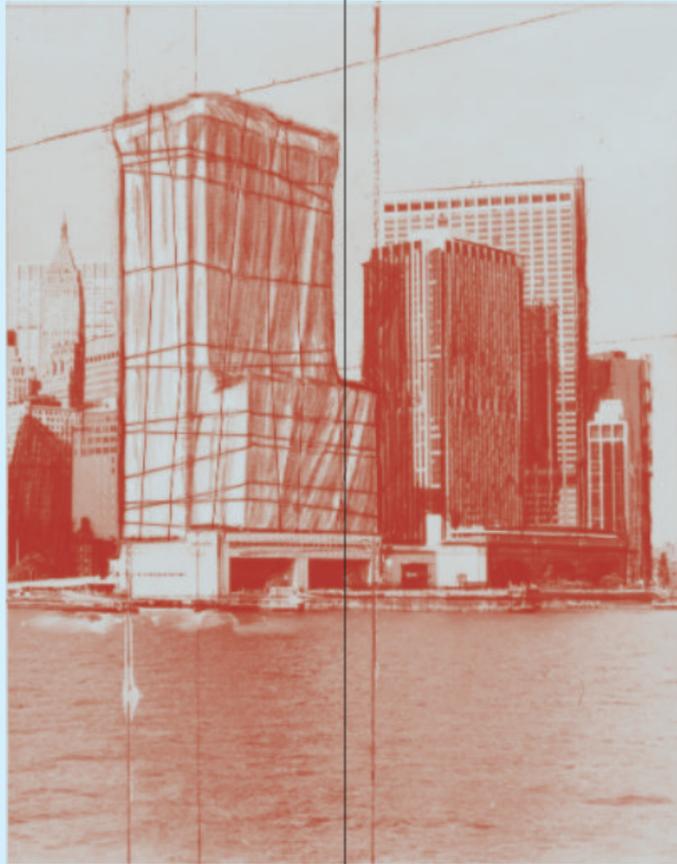




The Office and the City

Nikil Saval



It's for me, but can you giftwrap it?

The wealth of capitalist societies, Marx wrote, presents itself as “an accumulation of commodities.” One could just as easily say today that wealth appears as an accumulation of offices. If an emerging economy wishes to show off, it must immure it-

self in towers. In Chinese advertisements, lurid spaceship skyscrapers hover on the Pearl delta; in the United Arab Emirates, spindly, sinuous glass needles tower over the desert. The Indian state of Gujarat will soon finish a glassy showroom of office



*Kill, f*ck, or marry?*

space in the wastes of its hinterland called Gujarat International Finance Tec-City, or—less clumsily, and more revealingly—GIFT. Not that the West is now free from the temptation of the office. Historically low-slung London has, in the last twenty or so years, succumbed—to

towers that look like pickles and towers from which reflected sunlight melts cars below. The rosy granite hallucinations of postmodernism have come to a close, and a neo-modernism, exemplified by the dazzling glass skins of Sir Norman Foster, currently enjoys untrammelled triumph.



Is this Gluten-Free?

service workers staffing the establishments where the white-collar workers do hatha yoga, and drink coconut water. It was not always so. Cities used to be centered on manufacturing, and the change to other industries has been

Cities once again cloak their workers in curtain walls, striate them with mullions, cinch them shut in spandrels. American cities, and the cities of the developed capitalist world more generally, are cities where white-collar workers are hegemonic, dominating the retail and



Should we Uber or subway?

dramatic, nowhere more palpably than in New York. In the 1950s, New York had two workers in manufacturing for every worker in the finance, insurance, and real estate industries; by the early 1990s, the ratio had reversed. The shift made itself felt in the everyday street life of the city.

On a sweltering summer day in 1998, construction workers picketed the Metropolitan Transportation Authority for using nonunion labor, shutting down Madison Avenue. Blue-collar strikes had by then become so uncommon that the New York Post ran a full-page article titled "Hunk



Heaven,” extolling the erotic fascination that the scene aroused.

New York has led the way in modeling how a city based on production can be transformed into one based on services and how a skyline of church spires and smokestacks can be elevated into a jagged, Tetris-like collection of tall glass boxes. At the same time, this process has been decidedly uneven. For every Chicago or San Francisco that survived the process of deindustrialization to maintain



a salubrious connection to the global economy — evidenced by the continued resilience of their office skyscrapers — there are those like Detroit, whose central business districts are bywords for the windswept vacancy that has seized so many American downtowns. In some

ways, the story of the office and the American city is here, in the development of the downtown central business district itself (for a time, a uniquely American phenomenon), its crisis in the postwar era, and its calculated resurgence in a few major cities and a handful of minor ones, with the rest



of the cities expelled from a system that no longer needs them or their residents. Accompanying the resurgence of the city has been the gentrification of neglected areas, where white-collar workers from the glassy high-rise core “rediscovered” the pastoral pleasures (and low prices) of

the brown-sandstone or brick row house in the low-rise periphery.

Central to this story is the question of class. The development of the original Gilded Age downtowns, as well as the re-fortified business districts of the American city, required planning, and planning very



often meant encouraging the construction of office towers. To use the terminology of the political scientist James C. Scott: cities over time became “legible” to urban elites as essentially, perhaps even fundamentally, white-collar. The pollution, lower-classness, and urban unrest associated with manufacturing and other kinds of blue-collar employment were amenable neither to businesses, which professedly feared strikes and the contamination of their employees by unionization, nor to

What's the wait time for a cronut?



real estate developers, who saw higher returns on investment coming from office towers, nor city planners and politicians, who saw the tax base of white-collar professionals as preferable to that of laborers. This amalgam of interests and ideologies would help the American city become a white-collar phenomenon.

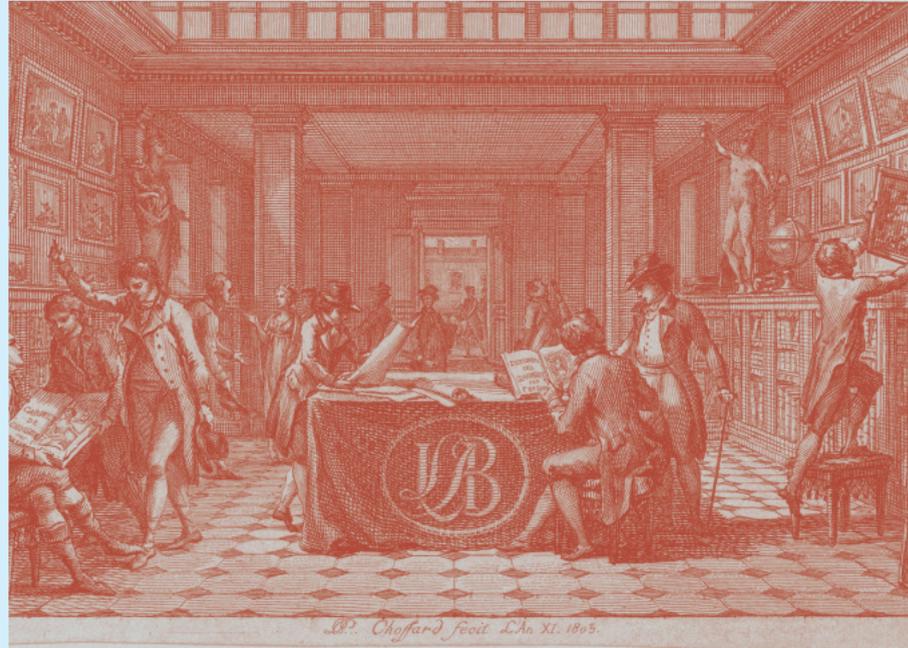
Office workers emerged as a distinct group in the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1850s, clerical workers were the fastest-growing segment of the largest American cities, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Until then, compared with the vast sweep of farms and the growing ranks of factory workers, white-collar

labor was negligible in the eyes of commentators and went unnoticed by them. A new visibility, a sticking out, coincided with their burgeoning city presence, a fact as peculiar to themselves as to others. Clerks began to be... not conscious of



How much is too much cold brew?

themselves, exactly—that is, not in the Marxist sense of considering themselves antagonistic to other groupings and capable of action—but more vaguely aware of themselves as a distinct middle stratum, below the wielders of capital, whom they

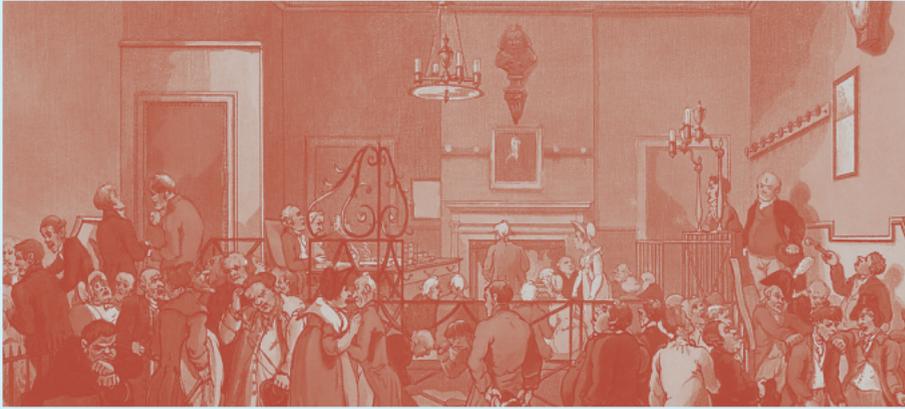


What's the team Soul Cycle?

admired, but above those who worked with their hands, whom the office workers often seemed to despise. Clerks knew themselves to be part of a group, but it was a group marked by pervasive individualism, by a shared expectation that each

individual would rise above his station by virtue of his own merit. This was class not as a restriction but as a viewpoint; the collective condition of clerks was just a temporary stopping place—a ladder rung that would soon be surmounted.

Office buildings took longer to emerge. For generations, the locations where clerks performed recognizable office work were known as “countinghouses,” a term in use in mercantile England as well as in antebellum America. In their organizational form—a few partners employing a handful of clerks and bookkeepers—or their methods, such as double-entry bookkeeping, they weren’t appreciably different from Italian banking offices several centuries older. Their imprint on cities was initially invisible by any exterior modeling; there were no office buildings to speak of. In antebellum New



York, the countinghouses of merchants' clerks clustered around and below Canal Street, close to the busy docks, where the regular arrival of packet ships determined the broad outlines of the workday. Many mercantile concerns also operated dry-goods stores where they displayed their wares, such as textiles; the clerks divided their duties between manning the stores and keeping track of the stores' accounts.

The diaries of a merchants' clerk, Edward N. Tailer, give us some flavor of the geography of the white-collar

workday, the sheer range of the city that it encompassed—achieving a level of mobility that even the more “nomadic” office workers today might envy. In one entry from 1848, Tailer records going to the Bank of Commerce on Nassau Street in the morning, going to two companies on Pearl Street to collect bills, making a deposit in the Merchants' Clerks bank on Beekman Street, meeting up with his friend on Broadway and Walker, and going to the gym in Greenwich Village by 9:00 p.m. Other days he stops at



the Mercantile Library, an educational association specifically geared toward clerks seeking “self-improvement.” Tailer's personal working and leisure geography overlaid that of the city's manual workers but was in various ways distinct from it. By demarcating institutions and spaces as specifically clerical, with accents, interests,



and membership that distinguished one stratum of workers from the others, the office, and office workers, came palpably to structure the metropolis along the lines of class.

Eventually this took place in visible ways. Before long, the countinghouse began to separate itself from manual work-

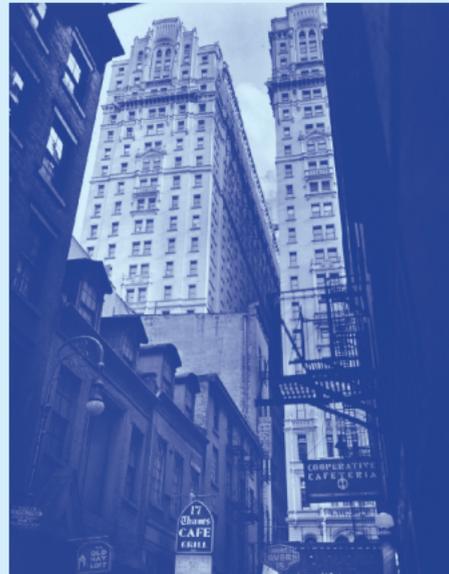


places through distinctive architectural gestures. The specialization of labor within manufacturing enterprises prompted the need for more administration—for more clerks to keep track of bills and accounts and more bookkeepers to handle statements of profit and loss. Countinghouses and their stores participated in the Greek Revival movement of the period, framing their entrances with stiff lintels and fluted Ionic columns. City directories from the time began to note separate locations for company factories and company

“offices”—the latter usually agglomerated in what also came to be called (around this time) downtown, though only in New York City was this business district actually located in the city's southern region.

The subtle demarcation of certain districts as white-collar, especially the downtown, lay the groundwork for the economic era to come. In the late nineteenth century, as a wave of mergers and forms of vertical integration swept through the American economy, cities began to swell with ever

larger businesses, which began to devote more and more resources to specialized accounting and other forms of administrative bureaucracy—which in turn meant needing more office space. It does not necessarily follow that office buildings should therefore huddle together in a set of delimited square miles. But the swelling gigantism of the American economy led precisely here, and the reasons are complex. On the one hand, there were the simple communicational benefits of concentration. Specialization meant transactions that once took one meeting might now take several. It helped to have suppliers,



Can we have a photoshoot on your rooftop?

customers, consultants, advertisers, and distributors all within walking distance or even under the same roof. W.L.B. Jenney, a Chicago architect who helped bring the steel-frame skyscraper into being, would note the benefits of Chicago's especially dense business district. "Business is so concentrated that strangers claim they

can do more business in a given length of time here than in any other city," he wrote in the 1890s.

Ideology also justified the intense levels of concentration that American cities came to enjoy, or endure. Planning logic at the time operated according to a pseudo-anatomical ideology of what the urban historian Robert Fogelson has called "spatial harmony," according to which cities needed to have a strong central "heart" of workplaces and shops and

restaurants and places of entertainment, connected to the periphery by various "arteries" of transportation: first streetcars and later subways and automobiles. For generations, and in European cities still through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the separation of residence and business was not taken as a given. In the United States, however, downtown was for commerce; the periphery was for living. This was a formula that could encourage concentration in boom times,



Excuse me, do you have a light?

when the downtown looked good and people wanted to get to it, but could also encourage decentralization in bad times, when the outskirts and suburbs of a city looked better and people only came to the city to cruise in and out. (Over time, the ways into the city—first streetcars and elevated railways, followed by express-

ways—would become ways out of it, as masses of the residential population decamped to the newly accessible suburbs.)

The discourse of "spatial harmony" arose not coincidentally around the same time that the polarization between bourgeoisie and proletariat began to be remarked upon and lamented. Conflict within cities between capital and labor induced anxiety in city elites. One way to solve, or at least forestall, the conflict was to separate the administrative bureaucracy from the manual labor. The central business district in this sense became the image of a city that concentrated



white-collar work and separated it from blue-collar work.

Chicago was an especially pure example of this enforced separation. In Chicago, the area that eventually became the Loop was originally a working-class district. Mahlon D. Ogden, a real estate developer, read this differently—an early example of the changing “legibility” of American cities. He saw it as “covered with countless old rookeries and miserable shanties, occupied, for the past twenty years, as dens of infamy and low gambling dives, the resort and rendezvous of

thieves, burglars, robbers, and murderers of all grades and colors, to the exclusion of all decency, or business purposes.” Mercifully for developers, the fire of 1871 tore through the area, leaving it pleasingly open for the planning imagination. Planners went to work, helping to move factories and warehouses out of the area, to the outskirts of the city, thereby allowing building owners to charge higher rents. The area became a singular white-collar concentrate, filled with towers whose beauty and innovative engineering feats belied their essentially speculative nature. It was here that the greatest skyscrapers of the Chicago school of architecture appeared, their entrances decorated in multiple kinds of variegated marble, their environs decked out in restaurants, libraries, and sitting rooms, all designed to point to the literally elevated nature of



the work being done within. The city’s factories, warehouses, and stockyards, stinking of smoke and cow dung, unions and anarchism, were moved far from the city center. They could be seen from the tops of the skyscrapers that occupied the areas where some of them once stood.

But why are the buildings so tall? The answer lies in the peculiar trajectory of American city development and above all in the misty realms of real estate finance. Like the central business district itself, the skyscraper was in its origins an American concept. It sprang up in cities that, unlike, say, Paris or Ghent, Rome or Warsaw, had only limited histories of development, and rarely along the lines of the tangled, insinuating medieval streets that characterized many European cities. These thickly populated, historic, communitarian



ian cities would not permit the soaring individualism of a skyscraper breaking the low-slung skyline for decades to come. The rational planning of the American cityscape permitted greater freedom of upward movement. Following William Penn’s plan for Philadelphia, American cities soon began to adopt grid-like forms for development; these allowed for the massive blocks that skyscrapers came to occupy—though the oddly shaped blocks of lower Manhattan also furnished opportunities for tall, albeit strangely shaped, buildings. It was comparatively

easy, too, for developers to tear down existing buildings in order to build upward, because these—and the neighborhoods they were part of—were rarely old enough to justify any kind of preservation.

But the other, more consistently compelling reason is that tall buildings make money. For the office skyscraper is above all a speculative investment. “A machine that makes the land pay” is how Cass Gilbert, architect of the Woolworth Building, described the skyscraper. Speculation of course only means the forecast that rent income will equal or exceed the investment. But in commercial real estate, even more than housing, the delivery system encourages oversupply, because “demand” is only modestly related to the construction of office space. Offices don’t necessarily come into being

because people need them; after all, an office developer only has to lure tenants from another building. A city skyline is in some ways the reflection of a history of real estate cycles, and in boom times the skyline begins to burgeon and crane upward, seeking as much profit as the air, promise-crammed, will offer. Few of these buildings ever reflected the initiative or pride of the companies that owned them. The tendency to refer to the most spectacular instances by the names of corporations—Woolworth, Seagram, Lever (the soap manufacturer), Pan Am, Sears—

Is the condo at least a prewar?



Can you recycle pizza boxes with grease?

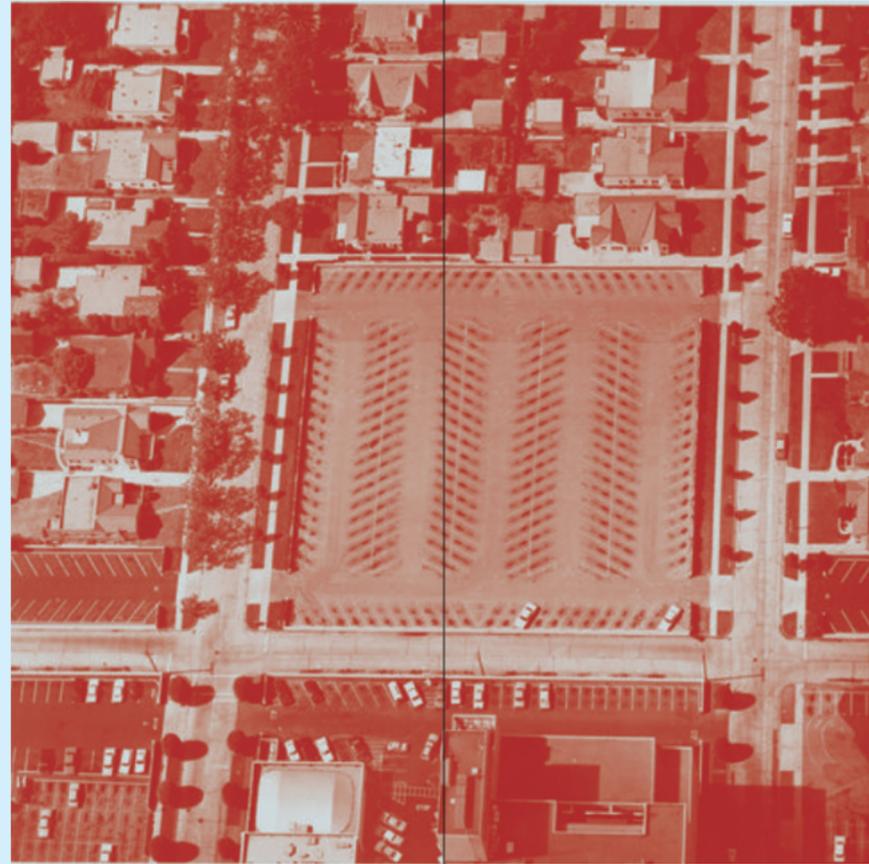
obscures how often the buildings rented out space to other clients, as well as the horde of numberless knockoffs thrown up in haste to provide short-term leases for unknown future clients. In flush times, the number of these dreadful buildings begins to climb, as the value of the land becomes less grounded in predictable costs and more tied to the ballooning number of what someone will pay for it. Architects, developers, planners, and designers therefore collude in rushing to put out a

building; it is in everyone’s interest to throw caution to high-speed winds when the money is good. “Overbuilding of Offices Is Impossible,” ran the chief headline of New York’s Real Estate Record a brazen few months after the stock market crash of 1929.

And the form and height of the skyscraper in the early twentieth century depended to a great extent on the best way to make the land pay the investors and owners of a project. As the architectural historian Carol Willis pointed out in *Form Follows Finance*, the height of the building is achieved by compromising the engineering height—the structurally feasible number of stories that a building can go in the size of the location and geologic conditions of the plot offered to it—with the economic height, in Willis’s words, “the

number of stories that would produce the highest rate on the money invested." After a certain point, building higher begins to diminish returns, with extra stories failing to cover extra costs, chiefly because building higher required bigger elevator and service shafts, which in turn cut into the rentable area. One of the earliest examples of a speculative grand slam was the 1915 Equitable Building (now demolished). When completed, it was only the fifth-tallest building in New York, but thanks to its H shape it permitted four long lines of offices along the sides with shafts in the center and contained the world's largest concentration of office space in one building.

Buildings like the Equitable, with its monotonous, thick walls of limestone casting shade everywhere, prompted attempts to mitigate the scale of buildings. For a time, desperate height restrictions and frantic zoning laws provided the only municipal variation on what were largely similar-looking skyscraper shapes. In Chicago, an initial period of laissez-faire construction led to overbuilding and high vacancy rates following the panic of 1893. The city council moved to cap building heights at 130 feet, which over time gravitated toward 260 feet; during the same period, New York towers, unbounded by law, reached as high as 700 feet. Chicago investors, dissatisfied by the returns on their squat, fat buildings, sought money elsewhere, and they found it by constructing high-ceilinged, ornate light courts on the ground floor, which they let out to retailers, who paid higher rents than office



How does your parking cost more than my rent?

tenants. This eminently commercial strategy had the added benefit of lending an air of aristocratic comfort to "mental laborers" as they entered their lofty environs. New York, too, came to adopt restrictions, following a burst of overbuilding in 1909 and a subsequent real estate recession in 1913. The zoning ordinance of 1916, rather than capping building heights, forced builders to set back their buildings past a certain height. In other words, a building within a certain plot of land could rise, say, 150 feet from the corners of the plot before having to recede into the plot 30 feet for the next 100 feet of space. Though building heights didn't decrease (the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings went up during this period), they acquired a ziggurat-like shape that became characteristic of New York skyscrapers of the time.

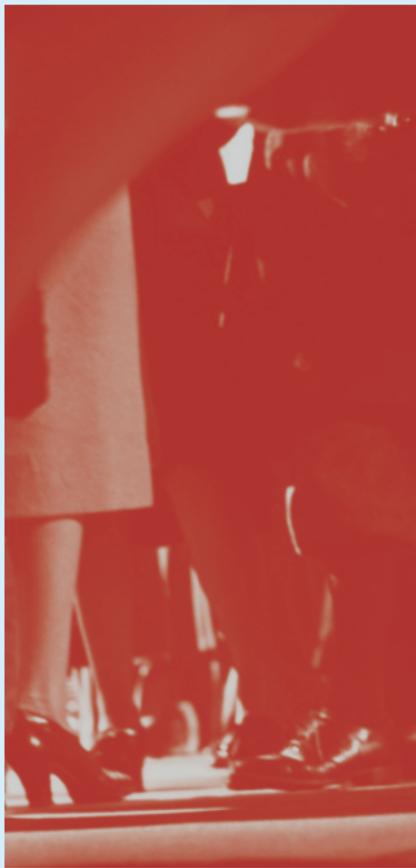
Buildings get taller and more spectacular as booms come to a close. Offices

often survive the initial market crash, and periods of recession are correspondingly marked by the absurdity of empty office buildings going up based on previously spent cash. The Empire State Building in 1941, a decade after its opening, remained 75 percent empty. In New York City more generally, the vacancy rate hovered around 30 percent well after the recovery began. The Depression had followed one of the wildest construction booms in the history of the world; the vacancy rates that followed were, accordingly, crushing. Skyscrapers began to be demolished to make way for parking lots—"taxpayers," they were called, for their ability to generate reliable and quick returns for developers.

Some of the poorest people live in conveniently located slums on high-priced land. On patrician Fifth Avenue, Tiffany and Woolworth, cheek by jowl, offer jewels and jimcracks from substantially identical sites. Childs restaurants thrive and multiply where Delmonico's withered and died. A stone's throw from the stock exchange the air is filled with the aroma of roasting coffee; a few hundred feet from Times Square with the stench of slaughter houses. In the very heart of this "commercial" city, on Manhattan Island south of 59th street, the inspectors in 1922 found nearly 420,000 workers employed in factories. Such a situation outrages one's sense of order. Everything seems misplaced. One yearns to rearrange things to put things where they belong.

Robert Haig, Chief Economist, New York Regional Plan Association (quoted in Robert Fitch, *The Assassination of New York*).

Do I own too many Crocs?



By the 1940s, downtown was suffering. Vacancies still plagued many downtowns well into the war-sponsored recovery. As a result, laissez-faire development, which had produced all the empty buildings, came into serious disrepute, and it became an item of widely held faith that the government—arm in arm with the power elites of municipalities everywhere—would have to step in. The peculiarity of this, the third major phase of skyscraper construction (following the Gilded Age, and the 1920s, and preceding the surge of the 1980s), was its harmonization of two supposedly antagonistic forces: architectural modernism and corporatist bureaucracy. A modernism

that had begun as an avant-garde, and often explicitly socialist, force, concerned with housing and shelter, found its greatest realization and support in corporate America. In a way that few of modernism's original proponents might have foreseen, some of the classic works of international modernism would turn out to be corporate office towers built for the purposes of speculative accumulation.

Before the crash of 1929, a conception of the office as a solution to the problems of the city had become internationally commonplace. Le Corbusier in his "Plan Voisin" (1925) had imagined an ultrarational, orthogonal plan for the solution to Paris's housing problem; he



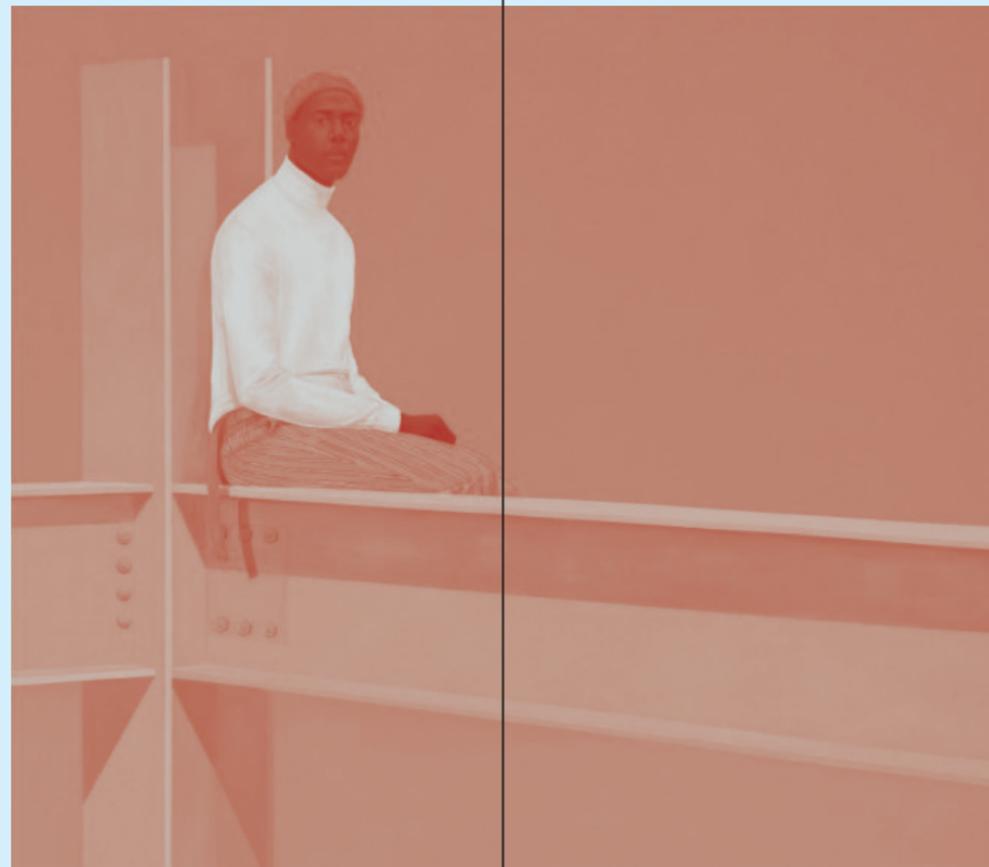
Can I have the Guacamole Greens with salmon?

went out of his way to centralize business operations as well, in evenly spaced, tall office towers. He rhapsodized the glory of his business district in characteristically telegraphic sentences: "From its offices come the commands that put the world in order. In fact, the skyscrapers are the brain of the city, the brain of the whole country. They embody the work of elaboration and command on which all activities depend. Everything is concentrated there: the tools that conquer time and space—telephones, telegraphs, radios, the banks, trading houses, the organs of decision for the factories: finance technology, commerce." In the American context, the Regional Plan Association of New York looked at the heavily blue-collar city of 1928 and produced a rezoned plan that would limit the amount of manufacturing and expel what remained to the city's edge. With the planning and creation of Rockefeller Center in the 1930s, the architect Raymond Hood brought the

notion of a conglomerated, rational business-and-consumer center—against the individual skyscraper, which answered only to the irrational needs of speculation—to reality. In private, he imagined a total reorganization of New York along similar lines.

Though such enormous rational plans did not materialize, a concerted effort to reimagine the city as a pure, ordered, and—this part was usually unspoken—middle-class collection of office towers would broadly describe the postwar project known as urban renewal. Title I of the Housing Act, signed by President Truman in 1949, encouraged the demolition of “blighted” areas and the relocation of former “slum-dwelling” residents to public housing. Though it did not stipulate

that federal authorities grant the newly vacated land to housing developers, that’s what happened. Once the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of poor and working-class residents from the city center to housing projects on the periphery was complete, new office towers appeared on land granted to developers at below-market rates. The towers that sprang up in American cities during this era uniformly took on the cast of the International Style. Thanks to fluorescent lighting and air-conditioning, they had deep, wide, anonymous floor plates that could be partitioned according to the desire of tenants; their curtain walls were of pure, reflective glass, their crosshatched lines reflecting the gridded offices on the interior and the wider grids of the cities they towered over. Intended to be symbols of a progressive, technologically advanced civilization, in due course they came to look like icons of bureaucracy, indifferent to scale and human need.



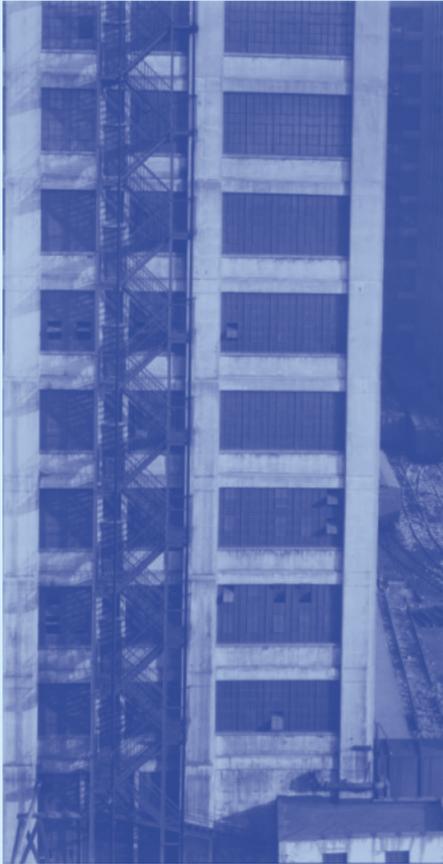
Talented or trust fund?

Meanwhile, the cities they occupied were transforming at their base. Downtown business leaders and their allies in planning circles rarely countenanced any changes that would limit the scale of skyscrapers or the density of the business district. Rather quickly, business districts became unpleasant places to be and certainly joyless places to linger. Streets obscured by inescapable shadow and viscous with heat and sweat in the summer, crammed all the time with suits and construction, the rents climbing higher alongside the proliferating towers: it made sense that workers in these districts would come to seek homes, and other pleasures, outside the city. The highways that planners had constructed in order to encourage in-migration to the city began to facilitate the exodus.

Businesses, too, began to move out of downtowns, fleeing not only prices but restive unions, migrating African-Americans, and—a particular concern of the

postwar era—the threat of nuclear war, which, business leaders assumed, would target centralized business districts. The 1950s and 1960s consequently witnessed a swelling trend toward the construction of suburban office parks. Not just a few of them emphasized the pastoral, contemplative pleasures of working in the “countryside.” Some of them—such as Bell Labs—would enter the pantheon of American business. Most of them—thick, low-slung glass boxes encircled by fake moats that burgeon with reeds and stink of the ceaseless excrement of Canada geese—are among the most dreary and wasteful constructions known to man.

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The subsequent flight of manufacturing from the urban core was not a placid, inevitable process, like water flowing



inexorably downhill. In many cities, and in New York in particular, manufacturing was pushed out through a panoply of strategies—largely grouped under the rubric “urban renewal”—that left the city impoverished of blue-collar jobs but open to redevelopment for white-collar workers, or at least the office towers that were supposed to house them. From 1967 to 1973, sixty-eight million square feet of office space were constructed in New York—twice the amount of the boom of the 1920s. The lofts south of Houston Street, which housed the thousands of small-batch firms that were characteristic of New York manufacturing, were forced out through redevelopment. The landfill created by the monstrous World Trade Center and adjoining Battery Park City crushed the docks jutting out from West Street, helping to destroy the port of Manhattan and the jobs of the thirty thousand workers employed by the city’s shipping industry.

Yet in the years that followed, New York and cities like it managed with relative

success to reconstitute themselves entirely as powerhouses of media, banking, insurance, real estate, and, eventually, the proliferating, innovative instruments of high finance. These firms were networked with similar firms in similar cities (London, Tokyo, Frankfurt, and, more recently, Shanghai and Seoul) around the globe. Meanwhile, mid-level companies or smaller branches of what were increasingly multinational firms found homes (and generous tax credits) in the downtowns of cities like San Diego, Denver, Miami, and other cities of comparable size.

How could a city gut itself, as New York, Boston, and San Francisco did, and emerge to all appearances intact, not to say gleaming? In effect, deindustrialization encouraged the growth and concentration of white-collar work. Cities with diverse manufacturing bases, such as New York and Chicago, already had expe-

rience with concentrating various levels of white-collar management; this turned out to be one of the necessary foundations for what would be a new era of intense agglomeration. (In places like Detroit, where manufacturing was focused on a single commodity, the challenges of restructuring would prove insurmountable.) The push toward dispersing production across the globe that began to take place in the postwar era, accelerating in the 1980s, had the corollary effect of making it essential to centralize management services, for the ease and speed of communication.

Not only that: the increasingly complex network of factories that characterized manufacturing any commodity, as well as the intense competition engendered by firms having to fight for market share across the planet, augmented the tasks of management and the speed with which transactions needed to be

conducted. Corporations required more lawyers, accountants, and advertisers. Universities not only provided future white-collar workers but also received grants from foundations and government bureaucracies to provide research that helped the growing network of firms. Finally, by the 1980s, the deregulation of the financial industry permitted the development of complex financial instruments, whose dubious value seemed to be based on the distance between the security (of, say, a collateralized debt obligation) and the underlying asset (the original housing mortgage). The multiple levels that lay between asset and security in turn inflated the numbers of white-collar workers, and especially rich ones, in American cities. In the classic analysis of the sociologist Saskia Sassen, these transformations in the nature of the economy ended up turning a few cities into the “command-and-control centers” of global capitalism. Many others, such as Detroit, St. Louis, and Cleveland, suffered from their reliance on nondiverse sources of



manufacturing and went into unarrested declines. These developments were not necessarily predictable, and the reasons for the failure of some cities and the success of others are not always clear. Nonetheless, it seems likely that the cities that had an existing knowledge base (universities, hospitals, and associated research facilities), as well as major financial institutions, were best able to survive and prosper in the new era.

In this process, cynical New York again led the way, with cheery San Francisco not far behind, in encouraging the construction of office towers. Ed Koch in the former and Dianne Feinstein in the latter became infamous for luring developers and firms with luxurious offers of tax credits for new development, and for burdening their cities with some of the worst architectural excrescences in the history of the form. The 1980s skyscraper, with its nearly universal penchant for large quantities of granite massing on the exterior and high-ceilinged marble lobbies, became emblematic of the era's

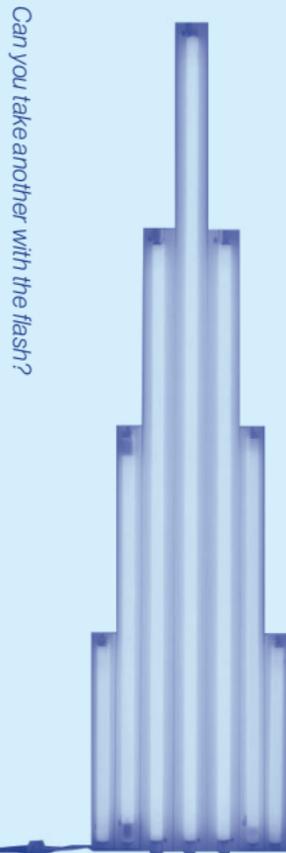


Is that a bookend or a bong?

tasteless excesses. It had its roots in an intellectual movement, postmodernism, born out of an opposition to the inhumane, slick de rigueur gestures of modernism. In its corporate guise, whatever oppositional content postmodernism had enjoyed in the 1970s was buried under the mounds of cocaine and sushi and marble and granite. The signature architect of the era was Philip Johnson, the massing of whose AT&T Building was covered in acres-thick rose granite, its base circumambulated by a Renaissance-style loggia, and its very top capped by a silly Chippendale arch. Goofy, serenely nostalgic, and opulent all at once, the building and its descendants captured the Reagan era's schizophrenic desire to live in a glorious, fabricated past while ensuring the desecration of the past's actual remaining monuments.

But the increase in high-paying professional jobs and the relatively larger decline in decently paying blue-collar jobs would leave its mark on more than the city's skyline. As with the rise of clerical

workers in the antebellum American city, the new middle classes (or "yuppies") of the post-manufacturing city transformed urban culture. Nowhere was this more a source of continual tension than with the rise of gentrification. The white-collar enchantment with places like SoHo and Park Slope in Brooklyn—more recent examples might be South of Market in San Francisco, Northern Liberties in Philadelphia, and sections of downtown Los Angeles—was in part a class-wide reaction to the stultifying nature of the central business district. Many workers in the suffocating, air-conditioned cubicle warrens of lower or midtown Manhattan had ceased to be content with the modern apartments that largely resembled the offices where they worked, let alone with the anodyne comforts of the suburbia where many of them had grown up. Seeking authenticity, the pleasures of village life, the ordinary pleasures of organic communities, they found solace in the air of craftsmanship that attended



Can you take another with the flash?

the modest ornamentation of sandstone row houses or the wooden beams and exposed pipes of formerly industrial lofts. These same workers opposed the lingering industries, helping to move factories and warehouses away from the neighborhoods they were rehabbing. The city that had supported industry was gone (and good riddance, the yuppies thought). But it still gave some pleasure to live where industry had lived, as in the lofts, or, in the brownstones, to relive the lives of the old Brooklyn bourgeoisie.

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In his 1980 bestseller *The Third Wave*, the professional futurologist Alvin Toffler had imagined that the increase in telecommunication capacity would render office buildings obsolete. Human beings would no longer commute to work. Instead, they would work from home, in a decentralized network of glowing "electronic cottages." Downtowns in turn would depopulate, with office towers looming darkly over abandoned parking garages and streets bereft of any signs of life.

Toffler's forecast for what technology would do to city life has proven to be incontestably wrong. Cities wired beyond his imagination have repopulated; many downtowns have grown, and it has become common among people living in expensive, thoroughly gentrified cities like New York and San Francisco to speak longingly of other, cheaper places that are several stages behind in the process: "People tell me Columbus, Ohio, is really cool, that it's a great beer town" or "You can get a cheap place in Pittsburgh, and there are a lot of great bars in former steel factories," and so forth.

Why has the city center grown, when it no longer seems necessary? It is not only that a generation schooled on Jane Jacobs lite has come to prize the network of eyes and morning-to-evening ballet of street life. It is also that the city has become prized by workers as a supposed repository of knowledge and information, as a potential for random encounters

and serendipity—not to mention as an inexhaustible source of baubles and entertainments for white-collar consumers. The faith of white-collar workers in the redemptive potential of the city has become absolute. In places like Las Vegas, venture capitalists and investors, led by messianic tech entrepreneurs, have seized derelict downtowns, in the hopes of turning them into conglomerations of cafés, bars, and other white-collar hangouts. Cities cater to white-collar workers by turning themselves into giant offices: every flat surface in any location with wireless access threatens to become an office, and service and retail establishments spring up with a kind of abandon to meet the demands of workers after or between their hours of work.

But one part of Toffler's prediction threatens to come true. In the wake of the crash of 2007–8, building office space in the old, enthusiastic way has become increasingly hard to justify. Space in cities is expensive, and office workers—who



Did you just say he has seven roommates?

can work nearly anywhere—appear to need it less. According to a study by the design consulting group DEGW, employees are at their desks on average about 30 percent of the time, implying a tremendous amount of wasted space. What's more, firms employ fewer of these workers on a full-time basis; many more of them (around 20 to 25 percent, according to one estimate, and growing every day) work on a contract basis as "freelancers." These workers have no offices at all; they work at home or in cafés, or they pay for desks in increasingly popular "co-working" facilities. Office furniture manufacturers I have spoken to told me of a general crisis in their industry. Companies want less space to cram more workers into, as they directly employ fewer of them. The trend toward open-plan offices reflects this fundamental real estate concern, masked by depressingly ideological nonsense about "collaboration." The rise of metrics to record actual uses of space will likely put pressure on space to justify itself; it will

undoubtedly mean that companies will use less of it.

The smart, or speculative, money has turned to condo development. Overall, though the United States has recovered the office worker jobs lost in the recession, the vacancy rate has increased. In cities like New York, the office-to-condo conversion rate increased dramatically in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, thanks in part to incentives offered by the city to developers to convert commercial space. For the moment, the incentives are expiring, and the improbable growth of the tech industry in New York and elsewhere has increased the demand for space. But the bubble will burst, and the conversions will continue. In the cities of the West, the skylines are threatening to darken, and where people once worked, amid copy machines and phones, light gray partitions and withering plants, the rich will come to live.

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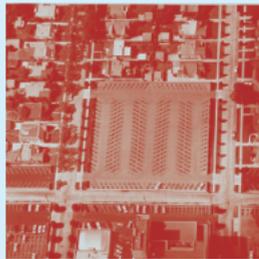
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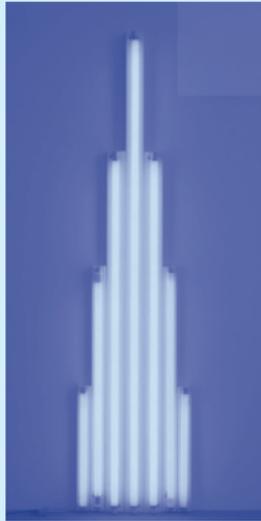
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Taxi, New York

1957, printed 2006

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Nikil Saval

"The Office and the City"

ed. Gessen and Squibb

City by City

New York: n+1/Farrar,

Straus and Giroux, 2015.



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