

BUSINESS HISTORY REVIEW

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BOOK REVIEW

The Skyscraper and the City: The Woolworth Building and the Making of Modern New York. By Gail Fenske. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, xii + 399 pp. Illustrations, photographs, notes, index. Cloth, \$65.00. ISBN: 978-0-226-24141-8.

Reviewed by Peter Eisenstadt

There doesn't seem to be a particular name for books about specific buildings or structures—"edificeographies," perhaps—with insights drawn from the fields of architecture, business, and general political and cultural history, but it is a flourishing genre. Harvard University Press, for example, has published a delightful series of short books, under the series title "Wonders of the World," each devoted to a different world wonder, ranging from the Parthenon to Westminster Abbey. New York City's many notable structures have not been lacking in books of this sort, including both bright celebrations (the Brooklyn Bridge, the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building) and dark elegies and obituaries (Pennsylvania Station, the World Trade Center). But perhaps the best book ever devoted to a particular New York City building is Gail Fenske's meticulously researched and exquisitely illustrated history of the Woolworth Building, the stately fifty-nine-story neo-Gothic tower that has stood on lower Broadway since 1913. Like all worthy books of this sort, it is a tale of both the Woolworth Building's "bricks and mortar" (and its lustrous terra-cotta exteriors) and its broader economic and cultural superstructures.

The book opens, appropriately enough, with an overview that should be of great interest to business historians: the biography of Frank Winfield Woolworth and the history of F. W. Woolworth's, describing how a small chain of five-and-dime stores expanded from their upstate New York roots to become, by the early decades of the twentieth century, one of the great international retailing success stories. Fenske's demonstration that Woolworth's concern and interest in commercial design was a key component of his company's growth is particularly interesting. The Woolworth Building had its origins in the decision by the parvenu Woolworth that he wanted a New York City headquarters reflecting his financial worth, if not his social status. (The city's old money tended to sniff at Woolworth, viewing him as a somewhat *déclassé*

glorified grocer.) The Woolworth Building's architect, Cass Gilbert, developed the plans along the lines of his tempered neo-medievalism, and Fenske instructively shows how Gilbert's admiration for English cathedrals, such as Ely and Salisbury, contributed to the design of the Woolworth Building. The book is illustrated with Gilbert's William Morris-like sketches of English cathedral towers and his early designs for the Woolworth Building. But there was nothing backward looking in either the business model or the engineering employed in the building's construction, and Fenske details the innovations in business practice and steel construction that made the Woolworth Building possible.

When the building opened in 1913, it was the tallest one in the world, the talk of the town, the envy of Gilbert's rivals, and it fully achieved the splash that F. W. Woolworth intended. Shortly after it opened, the popular Congregationalist minister dubbed it the "Cathedral of Commerce," a sobriquet soon adopted by the Woolworth Building in its own promotional literature. (Although, as Fenske points out, both Woolworth and Gilbert objected to providing their skyscraper with a religious gloss, and Gilbert resolutely defended the building as secular and civic.) Fenske describes its early decades of history as a tourist attraction, both for its ornate lobby, and for its observation deck, which remained open until World War II, and as a cultural icon that has been photographed, sketched, and painted. If I have any complaint, it is that she doesn't offer, at least as a postscript, a summary of its subsequent history. The building has survived the demise of F. W. Woolworth's as a corporate entity—one can only hope that no future owner will try to change its name—various revolutions in architectural style, and, poignantly (though with great restrictions on its public accessibility), the demise of its near neighbor, the World Trade Center. Fenske's magnificent study is fully worthy of its subject. May both long endure.

Peter Eisenstadt is an expert on the history of New York City and New York State, and was the editor-in-chief of the Encyclopedia of New York State (2005) and managing editor of the Encyclopedia of New York City (1995).

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