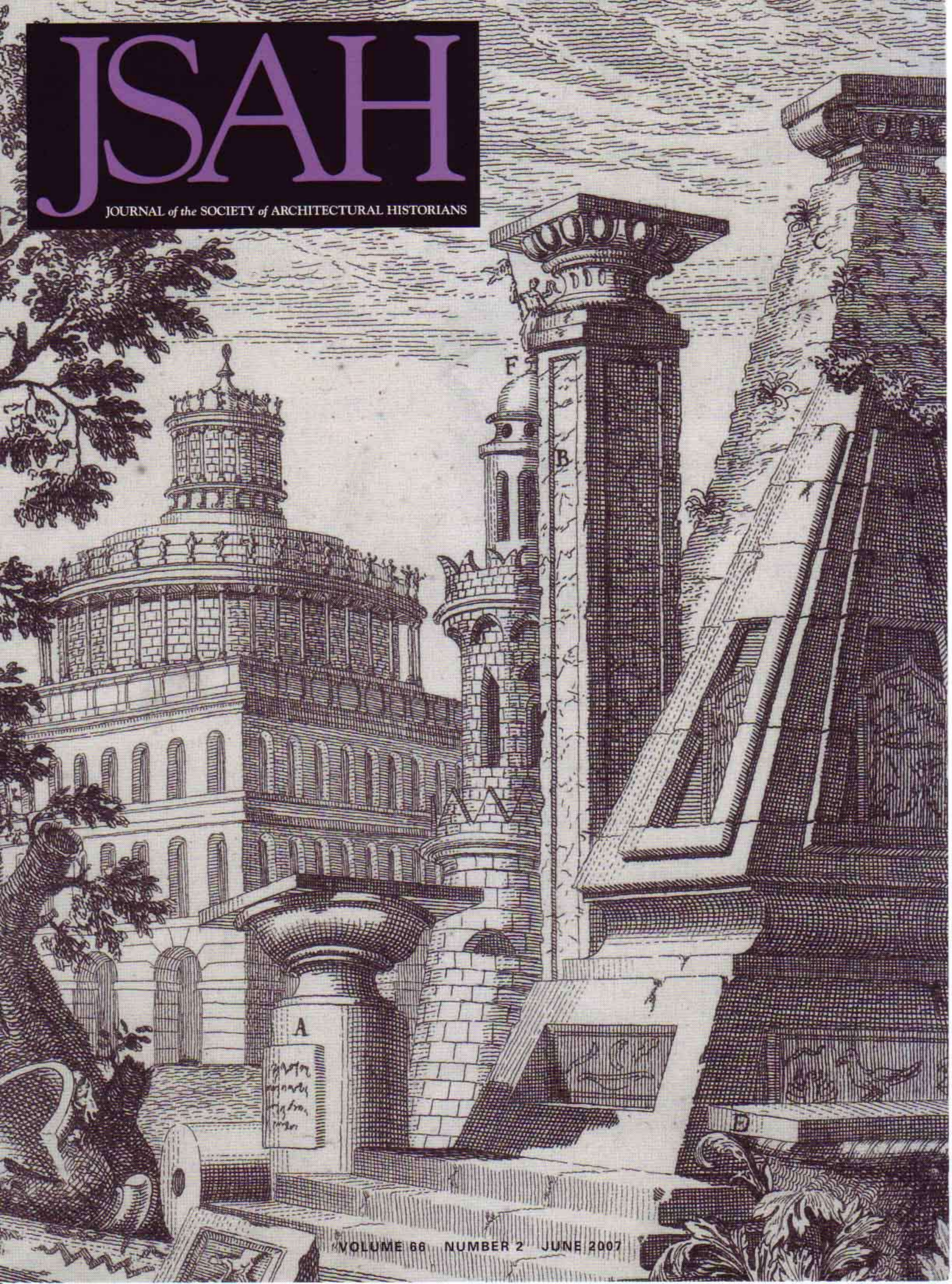


# JSAH

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## FIELD NOTES

# Scenography and Structural Theatrics: Urban, Foster, and the Hearst Tower

STEPHEN RUSTOW  
Cooper Union

One of the greatest pleasures our cities afford to historians and architects is the seduction of an imaginary archaeology, the invitation to mentally reconstitute the slow arc of construction and collapse to which the physical juxtapositions of the present attest. Long before the city's streets are choked with silt and its tall buildings are reduced to the trace of their foundations, the curious eye can find ample evidence with which to weave a multiplicity of narratives, reveries on the future's possible pasts.

Cities proffer this pleasure at their own temporal scale; indeed, the sense of archaeological time is a hallmark of their characters. Thus Rome and Jerusalem measure their amalgamations in millennia whereas Paris and Beijing parse their palimpsests in centuries. But even here, in the youthful cities of America—where, as a wag once put it, history matters so much because there is so little of it—the pleasures of such an anticipatory archaeology can be found. Most of the material of such reveries is accidental, the result of multiple random ambitions and the accretions of time. But occasionally the evidence is deliberately fabricated, when patrons and architects decide to include the urban detritus of the past as the foundation for a consciously composed juxtaposition, appropriating and repackaging its latent potential as part of something new. Adaptive reuse is the term of art, and the growing ranks of its practitioners are all around us.

Consider Lord Norman Foster: having built one of the largest and most commercially successful practices in the world on his unflinching embrace of technological novelty, he and his colleagues have, in the last two decades, begun to include significant fragments of the past directly in their work. Even more remarkable is the fact that Foster's engagement with history has not in the least softened his fundamentally technological approach to design but, on the contrary, has arguably refined and strengthened it. In several significant European projects the marriage of past and futuristic present has been the order of the day. Now this problematic and Foster's deft approach to it have been imported to our side of the Atlantic in one of his largest North American commissions: the Hearst Tower in New York.

Few local projects have had a longer gestation, as

Hearst's new building has been eight decades in the making. Thus, Foster's design can be seen not simply as a brilliant addition to the skyline, but as the completion of an ambition first articulated in 1928 when Joseph Urban built the block-wide base from which the new tower springs. The Depression forced Hearst to abandon the tower, and the six-story cast-stone confection gradually became a familiar (if slightly awkward) presence in Midtown, a grander version of the one- and two-story "taxpayer" buildings that desperate developers had traditionally built on lots forsaken by one of New York's notoriously fickle boom and bust cycles. To anyone with an historical eye, Foster's design came freighted with the symbolism of renewal, an old promise at long last fulfilled.

Indeed, Foster's project promised a great many things, and no commercial tower of recent vintage has had quite so many claims made for it. The new tower was to be the synthesis of old and new, achieving Hearst and Urban's ambition not with some piece of polite historicist mimicry but with a truly contemporary aesthetic. It was to be a "green" building, achieving lofty environmental goals while managing remarkable economies of materials and energy. It was to be a model of the new corporate work place, intended to redefine in truly urban terms how the office could treat its employees well and improve the bottom line. Finally, here in the city where the tower typology was invented, Foster's project was intended to provide a contemporary paradigm for the design of tall buildings, a kind of new *Neue Sachlichkeit* wherein the terms of formal reference were derived rigorously, seemingly axiomatically, from the simple geometry of the structure itself.

Lord Foster was widely seen as the perfect choice for such an endeavor. His proven brand of late modernism represented a comfortable blend of formal invention and programmatic accommodation intended to make any enlightened corporate executive feel at home. He and his colleagues had already confronted the weight of history with the dialectics of modernism in several complex and delicate settings: the Sackler addition to the Royal Society of Art (1991) and the Great Court of the British Library (2000), both in

London, and most significantly, the transformation of the Reichstag in Berlin (1999). All three projects combined elegant formal innovation with a careful respect for existing buildings and a sensitivity to the layers of symbolism carried by monuments of the past. All three used glass and steel—a resolutely modern materiality—to compliment the restored nineteenth-century masonry compositions. Indeed, it was this insistence on modernism as the appropriate lens for viewing history that seemed particularly intriguing and felicitous for the challenge at Hearst.<sup>1</sup> Foster's office had also pioneered a corporate version of green design in office towers throughout Europe, and in more purely formal terms, Foster had almost single-handedly resuscitated an interest in structural expression, deriving the architectonics of his best projects from an exploration of the formal potential of structural geometries and building systems. That such breadth of ambition and depth of experience had come to land in the heart of Midtown, where the most recent office towers of any architectural merit were fifty years old, seemed almost too good to be true.

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In its own day, William Randolph Hearst's International Magazine Building was an equally unprecedented project, from the grandiose scale of its urban ambition to the wildly idiosyncratic vocabulary of its façades. Even the modest building that remains reflects the megalomania of its patron and the polyglot genius of its designer. Joseph Urban, (1872–1933) was a Viennese architect, urbanist, book illustrator, and interior and theatrical designer whose work encompassed residences, stores, exhibitions, and, most importantly, stage sets. Urban had first come to America for the design of the Austrian pavilions at the St. Louis Exposition of 1901. He returned ten years later to assume the position of art director with the ill-fated Boston Opera House, and for the next three years, he designed the opera's entire repertory. Upon the demise of the company, Urban moved to New York and took over the creation of sets for the Ziegfeld Follies, of which Hearst was a major financial backer. It is through Urban's work at the Follies that the two men seem to have met. Two years later Urban was engaged to design productions for the Metropolitan Opera, a position he retained until the end of his life while nevertheless continuing with Ziegfeld, successfully working "both sides of the aisle." In 1925 he became art director of Hearst's Cosmopolitan Studios, triangulating this fusion of traditional high and low stage culture with the thoroughly contemporary and ephemeral demands of film.

All this work was but a prelude to Urban obtaining, in

1926, a local license to practice architecture, whereafter he immediately began to design theaters, hotels, ballrooms, and extravagant mansions in New York and Florida for wealthy patrons in Hearst's circle, culminating in his design for Hearst's Mar-Lago. The architectural plans for the International Magazine Building, combining strands from all of Urban's creative endeavors, were begun that same year, and the project was intended as the capstone of a complete transformation of the area around Columbus Circle. Hearst's office headquarters was to stand at the center of a new media and cultural district, anchored on the east by Carnegie Hall (completed in 1891) and extending to the west with a series of new theaters and art venues, including a design for the Metropolitan Opera for which Urban prepared several plans, all on property Hearst began acquiring in 1895. Equal parts real estate speculation, enlightened corporate urbanism, and shameless self-promotion, Hearst's urban vision was unrivaled until the conception of Rockefeller Center three years later. (Paradoxically, the original plans for that self-aggrandizing piece of enlightened corporate urban real estate speculation also called for a new Metropolitan Opera House).

Hearst had considered several other sites for his company's headquarters, but by 1926, he had settled on the block between 56<sup>th</sup> and 57<sup>th</sup> streets, fronting on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The plans and formal iconography of Urban's design reveal a thoroughly assured understanding of the significance of the site and its place in the new projected cultural district. The connection to Central Park and to the planned transformation of the neighborhood is clear in Urban's unusual decision to create no fewer than four entrances to the building, one each in the middle of the north and east street façades and two on chamfered corners at the cross streets. These entrances were given full allegorical treatment with sculpted figures embodying "Music and Art," "Comedy and Tragedy," "Sport and Industry," and "Printing and Science," all surmounted by oversized, fluted columns crowned with urns intended to project the axial geometries of the site well beyond its own boundaries. In the words of Hearst's public relations apparatus, the building was designed to convey the fact that "it houses industries whose purpose is to exert influence on the thought and education of the reading public."<sup>2</sup>

Urban concentrated this propagandistic charge in the building's façades, which were conceived as urban stage sets, stepping forward from the low bulk of the building and tied together below the sixth-floor attic with a continuous, prominent cornice. The building's structure was reinforced to carry a planned tower, but no contemporary designs exist for it; a postwar proposal by Urban's associate architects was never realized. It is this highly charged and thoroughly idio-



Joseph Urban, International Magazine Building, New York City, 1929, view from the northeast. Courtesy of the Hearst Corporation

syncratic base that awaited the arrival of Foster's team seventy years later. Although Foster has acknowledged that he saw no particular architectural merit to Urban's design, its elevation to landmark status in 1988 made it an aesthetic and urban reality that the new tower had to incorporate with virtually no alteration.

Urban's composition is frankly scenographic and its aesthetic terms principally address surface and a kind of illusion—the city as stage. One almost senses that the necessity of enclosing usable square footage behind his façades was an afterthought compared to the joyful exuberance of the cast-stone wrapper. Foster's use of the base respects this aspect of Urban's design and gives it new life by demolishing all of the floor space in the podium and creating a six-story-tall volume behind the wall, emptying the base of all

depth and reducing it to a shell. The scenographic thus becomes a part of Foster's composition as well. The new proportions and exaggerated thinness of the wall confound conventional notions of interior and exterior, and we can as easily imagine the "audience" outside on the sidewalk as inside Foster's enclosed atrium, now a combined lobby, lounge, and cafeteria. Indeed, this impression is reinforced upon arrival at the main floor of the atrium, two levels above grade, where Urban himself had placed an elevated courtyard in the original design: one is now surrounded by a four-story silhouette of rhythmic, empty fenestration, the *revers* of Urban's stage set. Foster has, wittingly or otherwise, liberated Urban's wall from any functional role it once played and left it as pure theatrical whimsy. This whimsy retains the façades' very specific compositional character,

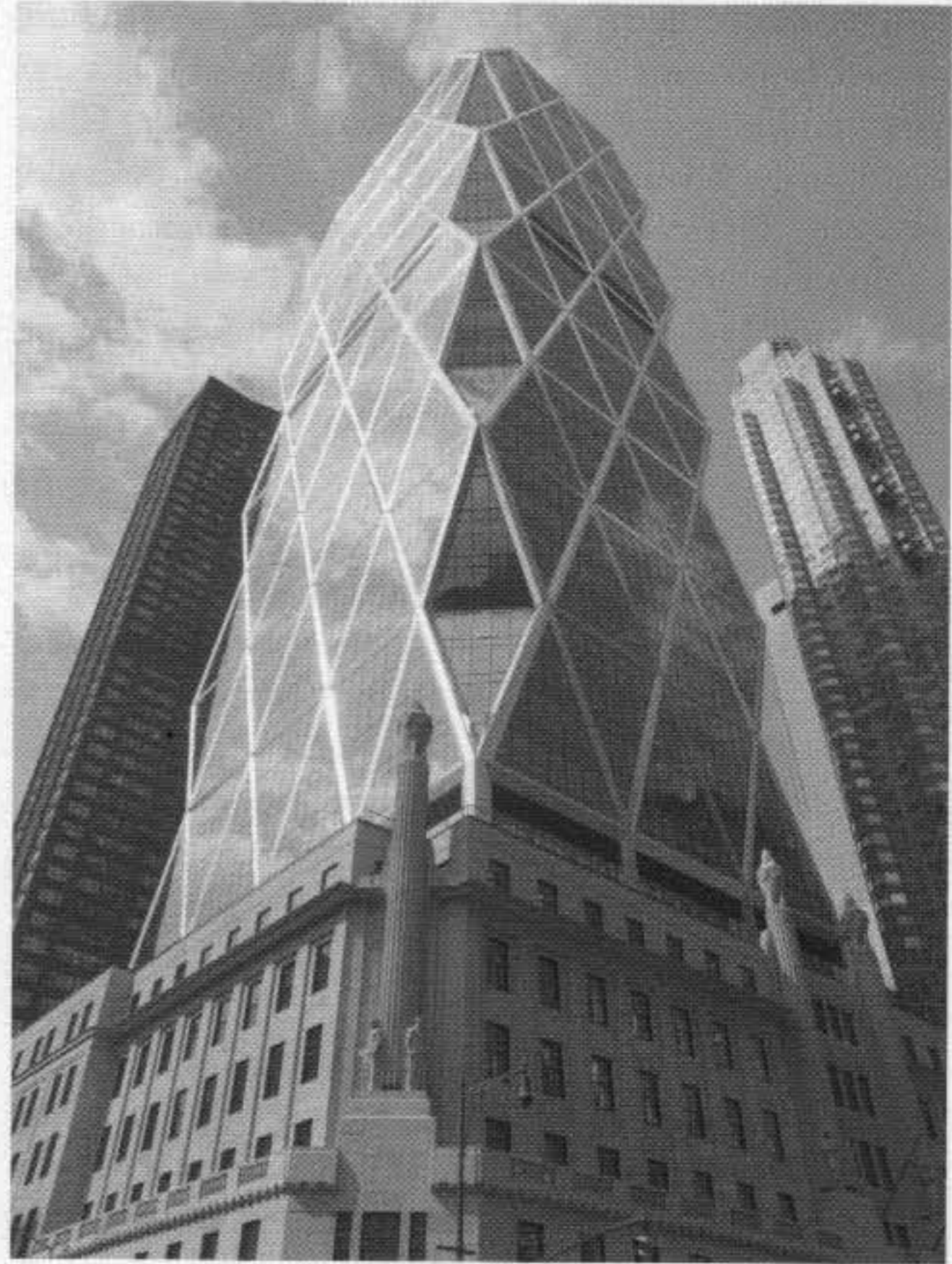
one originally addressed to the same sophisticated opera-going audience that could readily discern the classical references in the well-proportioned surfaces, the idiosyncratic touches in its corner entries, and the strange columnar markers. It was pastiche but very savant pastiche.

It is difficult, however, to ground something as ponderous as a forty-six-story office tower in whimsy. In so directly appropriating Urban's block as the tower's pedestal, Foster inevitably adopts some of the aesthetic syntax and relationships that governed Urban's set piece: the implicit tripartite development (base, shaft, and crown), the axial symmetries, and the layering of a representational program in a tightly compressed street wall. While there is no reason to hold Foster's design to the dictates of a bygone stylistic mannerism, his refusal to play Urban's game raises the stakes on any move that consciously elides these contextual expectations.

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The formal strategy that Foster develops in the tower is ostensibly derived from its structure, a lattice of large, sloped ribs that span diagonally from one side of the tower to the other. This is the latest in a series of "diagrid" buildings from Foster's office, based on systems that eliminate all vertical columns by combining load-bearing elements with diagonal bracing that resists shear. The resulting diamond-shaped net acts as an enormous truss and accommodates in its triangular ribs all the forces acting on the tower: gravity, lateral and wind loads, and seismic movement. As a pattern on the surface of the tower it reads most clearly as a series of lozenge figures, each divided by a horizontal member into a pair of inverted triangles, each triangle spanning four floors from apex to base. (The structure does shift to conventional perimeter columns on the lowest eight stories as it slides through the Urban building.)

There are many advantages to such a structural approach, and much has been made of the total reduction in the amount of steel used in comparison to conventional tower framing. The strength and stiffness of the tubular structure also allows for the elimination of interior columns so that the 20,000-square-foot floor plates of the building have, in principle, an uncommon flexibility. The diagrid is also highly redundant, providing multiple paths for any eccentric loads, a key safety (and public relations) consideration for one of the first towers to be designed in New York in the aftermath of the World Trade Center collapse. And there is that unmistakable visual pattern, immediately recognizable from any angle. The diagrid seems the pure product of the engineer's credo to do more with less and has the



Foster and Partners, Hearst Tower, New York City, 2006, view from the northeast corner. Photograph by Nigel Young, courtesy of Foster and Partners

grand seductiveness of an apparent "inevitability" that seems to capture the zeitgeist perfectly.

Foster has used this strategy before, not coincidentally in his "Kissing Towers" proposal for the Ground Zero reconstruction competition, a project developed with Cantor Seinuk, the same engineering firm used for the Hearst Tower. Other examples include the "Gherkin" (formerly the Swiss Re Headquarters, 1997–2004), the bulbous, circular shaft in the heart of London; a speculative office building south of Amsterdam; and the gargantuan Palace of Peace and Reconciliation now being completed in Astana, Kazakhstan. All of these buildings—a surprising range of forms and sizes—incorporate some version of the diagrid as the primary structural support. Nor is the diagrid a Foster exclusive: I. M. Pei used a version of the system in his Bank of China Headquarters (Hong Kong, 1989) and has returned to the concept in a number projects, including his own "Kissing Towers" proposal for a site in Bilbao, a stone's throw from where Gehry's Guggenheim later landed.

For Foster, however, the diagrid is a subset of a more general exploration of a variety of triangular structures often used to span or cover large voids, as at the Great Court of the British Museum and the National Arena of Scotland. The earliest project to garner international acclaim for the firm was the Sainsbury Center of 1974, which, while not a diagrid, relied for its exceptional spans on a triangular space frame. Foster has spoken of triangular geometries as part of a natural order, an approach that can be traced back to Buckminster Fuller's experiments of the 1950s and 1960s, the period when Foster was studying architecture at Yale, and ultimately to D'Arcy Thompson's seminal text of 1917, *On Growth and Form*. Despite the mild novelty of its application to a Midtown office tower, little is truly innovative in the choice of this engineering approach; rather Foster is exploring one more variation on a recurrent theme in his work of the last three decades. The question then is what the diagrid brings to Hearst, Urban, and the corner of 57<sup>th</sup> Street.

While the structural rigor of the diagrid system no doubt saves steel compared to conventional New York high-rise construction, a high-strength concrete structure would save more and essentially could have eliminated the use of steel altogether, if this were really the point. The other green aspects of the design, laudable as they are, obviously do not militate for any particular structural system. The much-vaunted interior flexibility seems a red herring given the entirely conventional layouts that the Hearst space-planners have used to organize the office floors. And while the façades' diagrid pattern clearly proclaims that Foster had no intention of kowtowing to the dictates of historicist commissions, the balance-through-contrast resolution of the site's complex legacy does not argue a priori for triangles (or any other form). Foster is really proposing a compositional strategy, a series of specific formal objectives for shaping a tower on a preexisting masonry base and for making a new object in the skyline. It is ultimately a visual and representational strategy, and it is on that basis that its successes and failures must be judged.

The tower has an unmistakable sculptural presence, and the diagrid, seen in these terms, admits to two possible interpretations. First, there is the notion of structural expression, as if the surface of the tower had been eroded or suppressed to reveal the primary framework beneath. In this reading, the triangular system can be considered as an autonomous form—some great urban Tinkertoy or oversized Snelson tensegrity gadget—subsequently clad to enclose the space of the building. A variant interpretation is to view the tower as a kind of minimalist object, a crystalline form carved from some preexisting block with the diagrid declaiming the reg-

ulating lines of a prismatic abstraction. This reading is reinforced by Foster's decision to cut away the corners of the tower and to create canted, glazed surfaces between the intersecting points of the diagrid, the so-called bird's-mouth corners that give the building its distinctive silhouette against the sky and elegantly echo the chamfered corners of Urban's original plan. There is evidence for each of these readings, and both have promise and a distinguished pedigree as compositional strategies; yet they are antithetical to one another, and Foster never quite seems to make up his mind which he wants. This ambiguity seems finally to weaken rather than enhance the building's formal interest.

True structural expression is illusory, at least in steel construction. Protecting the actual structure from fire, protecting the fire-proofing, and then accommodating the tolerances of the fabrication and assembly of the protecting layer—all this adds nonstructural dimension and finishes to what we actually see. We are far from the single volume enclosures of the nineteenth century, like Paxton's Crystal Palace or the 1889 Hall of Machines of Dutert and Contamin, where one may legitimately speak of an expressed structural presence. Once the space is inhabited (occupied floor plate instead of simple roof span), we enter the realm of Miesian subterfuge where the superfluous decorative I-beam welded to the surface of the skin stands for the real member that holds things up, hidden deep in its sheathing but visible only in the architect's plans.

What we actually see on the Hearst Tower's surface is not the structure but a stainless-steel cladding offered as a representation of the true underlying structure. Ultimately, this seems to be little more than a "supergraphic." It does not help that the surface steel has been detailed as part of the prefabricated curtain wall rather than as an autonomous element, and one reads the mullion lines at each floor obliquely across the diagonals that become a shiny metallic edge trim, like automobile bumpers, undercutting any reading of weight or force. There is a corresponding sense of thinness, an impression underscored by the decision to cut and fold the surface at each of the chamfered bird's-mouth corners to include a floodlight for dramatic nighttime effect.

Yet, even if the structure could actually be exposed, we are left to wonder: why should an urban tower express its structure any more than, say, its mechanical systems or, more to the point, some conviction about the aesthetics of tall buildings in dense urban settings? Moreover, considered purely as a visual device for articulating the tower's mass, the diagrid brings with it some unintended and unfortunate consequences. The four-story triangles constitute a kind of giant order, a proportional reference that reduces the apparent height of the tower in relation to its neighbors

with conventional wall patterns. The paradoxical outcome is that Foster's building feels too short, as if the diagrid had not been given its due; one wishes that it were half again or even twice as high to give full amplitude to its visual geometry (at the World Trade Center site Foster proposed towers three times the height of the Hearst Tower). By implication, the top seems truncated, arbitrarily cut at the requisite number of floors. It is here that Foster's design seems to be most in conflict with Urban's composition, for the forceful distinction between base and shaft only highlights the absence of a terminating gesture on top. Conversely, we miss the engagement of Foster's diagrid with the ground plane, transitioning as it does to vertical piers and disappearing into the center of the masonry shell. In Foster's hands, Urban's block seems less base than bustle.<sup>3</sup>

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The new Hearst Tower seems to falter on the dilemma of tall urban buildings everywhere: the intelligence or refinement of their construction and closed interiors is reserved to the few who work in them while their exteriors have a public presence—and obligation—proportional to their size in the skyline. It is as a public presence that the Hearst Tower disappoints so thoroughly. While it raises serious questions about the marriage of old and new, the much more important question concerns the fundamental relationship of architectural modernism and the city: can a building with an entirely self-referential formal development make a comprehensible urban gesture? Foster's apparent conviction that triangulation permeates the natural world is not very helpful in determining the formal obligations of built artifacts. Elsewhere, Foster seems to have understood this, and the several other diagrid structures his office has produced almost all use the system in the service of some independent formal or geometrical gesture; one thinks of the round obelisk form of the Swiss Re Tower or the low clamshell-

like double curvature of the London City Hall, where a version of the system is also used. In taking what was a means to an end and making it the end in itself at the Hearst Tower, Foster has left himself very little to hold on to.

What remains is a kind of stage-set architecture, scenographic in its forms, propagandistic in its intentions, a grand assemblage of flat billboards onto which we are invited to project a new urban iconography derived from an allegory of corporate ecological responsibility, the altruism of late capitalism, and the "inevitability" of pure, natural geometries. Perhaps with his design for the Hearst Tower Foster is rendering an indirect homage to Urban in spite of himself by making a pastiche of his own; if only his were a bit more savant.

### Notes

1. There are numerous critical studies of Foster's work and monographs on individual projects. Two that deal explicitly with his attitude towards interventions in historic settings are Bernard Schulz, *The Reichstag: The Parliament Building by Norman Foster* (Munich and London, 1999); and David Jenkins, ed., *On Foster . . . Foster On* (Munich and London, 2000).
2. An extensive analysis of the interplay between scenographic and architectural design in Urban's work can be found in Arnold Aronson et al., *Architect of Dreams: The Theatrical Vision of Joseph Urban*, exhibition catalog (New York, 2000). The Hearst Press Office also publishes interesting historical material on the iconography of the International Magazine Building project; see <http://www.hearst.com/tower/history/>.
3. There is arguably a proportional problem in the proposed marriage of old and new. In Foster's earlier, much more successful attempts to wed steel and glass structures to masonry buildings (e.g., the Reichstag, the British Museum, and the Sackler addition), the sheer size of the originals and their historical "weight" clearly dominated the elegant additions. Furthermore, in all three of the projects cited, the new structures were detailed in ways that disguised their use of the old as physical support—the glass and steel seem to hover almost dematerialized over the nineteenth-century cores. At the Hearst Tower, the proportional relationship has been reversed; there is simply too much new to allow a contemporary expression of the old to be meaningfully asserted, and the glass and steel tower literally eviscerates the masonry core it pretends to take as its pedestal.