

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Inventing Perspectives: New York's Skyscrapers in the French Illustrated Press (1898–1912)

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In the first decade of the 20th century, French illustrated news journals — and especially *L'illustration* — published articles on the skyscrapers of New York. Through the diachronic analysis of word-image relations at work in these journals, this article reveals how the publishing of this new building type — within an equally new cityscape — moved within a single decade towards new forms that were the product of inverted hierarchies between the written and the graphic. The spectacular double-page photographs taken with an unusual viewing axis gave the clearest expression of it. These photographs, preceding those famously taken by Alvin Coburn, were a means developed by the journal editors to convey strong sensations to its readership. With this evolution towards architecture as sensational news in which the reader became the protagonist, the general-interest journals offered a completely different approach visually compared to the conventional way architecture journals published the same skyscrapers. This episode in publishing New York buildings represented the beginning of an important rift between the general public's and the architectural expert's ways of perceiving and experiencing architecture and the city.

Introduction

Towards the end of the 19th century, *La construction moderne* and *L'Architecture*, two major architecture journals in France, began to publish articles on the skyscrapers emerging in the United States.¹ After a break from 1898 to 1902 without any news on the subject, all the published new skyscrapers were located in New York, which by then had become the main skyscraper city on which to report.² From the very beginning, these architecture journals published an explanatory text based on building facts and often also discussed the usefulness of this new type of building.³ Also, right from the start, one or more of the following elements accompanied the texts (sometimes placed on separate plates): plan, section, elevation, sketched perspective view, or photograph (Fig. 1).⁴ Since the sketched views often altered or idealized the context to give the reader an unimpeded view, the building itself would usually be pictured as an isolated object set in an unreal urban context. The much less selective photographs could only be used whenever an unobstructed view of the object was possible. All in all, when publishing about the skyscrapers the architectural journals followed the same procedure as they did when publishing the more conventional types of buildings, such as houses or libraries; the graphic elements primarily served as mere illustrations of the written information.

While in the architecture journals this relation between word and image remained largely unchanged until the 1920s, the juxtaposition of a page from *L'Architecture* in 1906 with a page published only a year later in the news journal *L'illustration* (Fig. 2) shows that the general-interest press had already adopted a very different approach. Indeed, a detailed look into the French general-interest weekly illustrated news journals from around 1900 to 1912, mainly *L'illustration*, *Le monde illustré*, *La vie illustrée*, and *Dimanche illustré*, reveals a body of articles that offered distinctly new perspectives on skyscrapers.⁵ This body of articles allows us today to comprehend the shaping of a public perspective different from the professional one. Furthermore, these articles also contained elements that identify them as international precursors of what would later be defined as the distinctly modern and spectacular perspective of architecture and the city, which makes it rather surprising that this type of source has not yet been used for the writing of the history of architecture.

The move away from conventional ways of publishing skyscrapers and toward new perspectives took place, firstly, through the broadening of aspects considered of interest beyond just the facts of construction. While all those aspects, such as the danger of tall buildings, satisfied the need for spectacular news, the objective descriptions through numbers — which were also those of engineering journals — slowly gave way to more subjective depictions through images. This move provoked distinct evolutions in word-image relationships: a shift away from written facts and toward spectacular double-paged photographs accompanied only by a caption. Secondly, the pre-eminence

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L'heureux élu est M. Hornbostel : nul autre que lui n'eût été mieux qualifié. Les ponts de M. Hornbostel, qui vont prochainement être jetés sur la « East River », montreront aux Américains, mieux que tout autre argument, ce qui peut résulter d'une collaboration entre des ingénieurs habiles et un architecte, ou pour mieux dire, un artiste.

En somme, charmante soirée que celle du 15 février. Pendant le banquet, l'orchestre, composé des musiciens de la So-



Office-Building, Broadway. — Architecte : M. F. A. Kimball.

ciété, a joué le répertoire... de l'École! Un invité non prévenu a cru se trouver dans une réunion d'anciens élèves — non lauréats — du Conservatoire.

Centralisons, centralisons : ce sont les centres qui manquent le moins. Chacun des grands arts est représenté par une vingtaine de sociétés rivales, sans aucun lien entre elles. Signalons avec empressement la fusion qui vient de se produire entre les deux plus importants groupes de peintres américains : la Société des artistes américains et l'Académie nationale ; cette fusion semble déjà de bon augure puisque la nouvelle Académie a résolu :

- 1° D'organiser un Salon annuel ;
 - 2° De devenir une grande association où la peinture, l'architecture, la sculpture et la gravure seraient représentées par les artistes les plus renommés des États-Unis.
- Heureux geste, dont acte.

GALERIE DE PEINTURE ROULANTE

M. C. L. Hind, dans un article paru dans la *Revue des beaux-arts* de Londres, avait décrit une galerie de peinture « roulante », qu'il avait créée de toute pièce dans son imagination ; un journal de New-York a « marché » comme un seul homme et demande l'organisation de galeries de peintures « circulantes » à la manière des bibliothèques. Nul doute que si

jamais cette demande tombe sous les yeux de M. Carnegie, l'Amérique ne soit inondée de peintures roulantes!

Autres conceptions bien américaines :

OFFICE-BUILDING. — LE SKYSCRAPER DU « TIMES »
LE BROADWAY TABERNACLE

1° UN OFFICE-BUILDING, bâtiment d'une trentaine d'étages, pour location de bureaux, qui va être construit sur Broadway dans le quartier des affaires; la partie la plus haute atteindra 418 pieds du sol au faitage; les fondations descendent à 80 pieds sous sol; espace à louer : 500 000 pieds carrés. Il y aura 21 larges ascenseurs à piston (on y revient). Un grand passage intérieur bordé de boutiques reliera l'entrée de Broadway à celles des façades latérale et postérieure.

Architecte : M. F. A. Kimball.

2° LE SKYSCRAPER DU JOURNAL LE *Times*, DE NEW-YORK. Ce bâtiment, achevé l'an dernier, comprend une trentaine d'étages et trois hauts soubassements. Il contient, outre tous les services du journal, une douzaine d'étages de bureaux destinés à la location.

La hauteur du sol au lanterneau est de 340 pieds environ. La superficie totale des étages est de 416 350 pieds carrés.

Pour le chauffage, deux chaudières de 200 chevaux; 250 radiateurs, 20 000 pieds carrés de surface rayonnante.

Électricité : 75 milles de fils, 2440 ampoules, 257 appareils de téléphone.

1^{er} soubassement. Station du Métropolitain; grand escalier public reliant la station au rez-de-chaussée; service de la poste du journal.

2^e soubassement. Les presses, stéréotypie, les chaudières.

3^e soubassement. Pompes et moteurs.

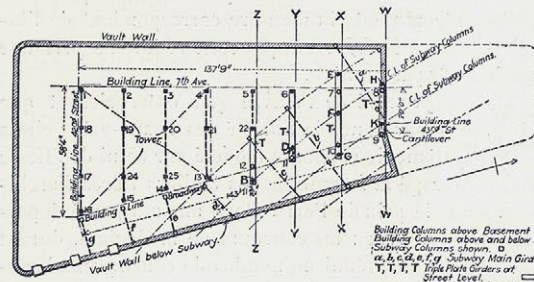
Rez-de-chaussée. Bureau d'information, service de distribution du journal. Boutiques à louer. Accès au Métropolitain.

1^{er} étage. La rédaction.

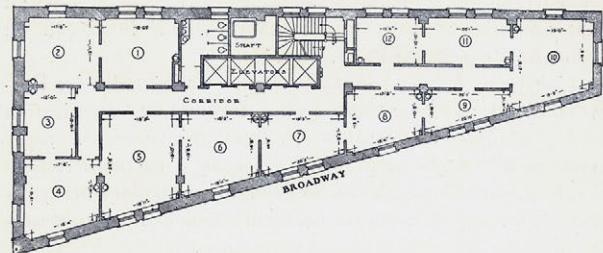
2^e étage au 12^e inclus. Bureaux à louer.

13^e étage. Service de distribution, bureau de renseignement; annonces.

14^e étage. Bureaux; annonces.



Office-Building du journal le *Times*. Plan de la construction et passage du chemin de fer métropolitain.



Office-Building du journal le *Times*. Plan d'un des étages de bureaux à louer.

Figure 1: Article on New York skyscrapers from the professional journal *L'Architecture* in 1906, with a view of the City Investing Building and floor plans of the Times Building (Nelson 1906: 166).

21 SEPTEMBRE 1907

L'ILLUSTRATION

N° 3369 — 191



LA VILLE DES "GRATTE-CIEL"

A New-York: le quartier des maisons à vingt étages photographié du « trente-troisième » d'une maison de quarante étages, en construction.
Voir l'article, page 199.

Figure 2: New York skyscrapers in 1907, showing the view downward from the top of the Singer Building, a photograph from the French general-interest journal *L'Illustration* ("La ville des "gratte-ciel'", 1907: 191).

of the image and the subjective was augmented at times by a shift in the images themselves that prioritised a new perspectival viewing axis of looking upwards and, most often, downwards. It is critical to note that this photographic perception of New York in the general-interest journals would not be published in French architecture journals until the 1920s (Gournay 1991). But this perception was also ahead of the famous American pictorialist photographs of Alvin Langdon Coburn (*The House of a Thousand Windows*, *The Octopus*, and other works of 1912), to whom scholarship commonly attributes its first expressions (Hales 2005; Tallack 2005; Wigoder 2002; Woods 2009).⁶ Also, the photographs in the general-interest journals were raw, unlike the work of the pictorialists, which employed an impressionistic 'effects' approach, erasing the rough edges and focusing on aesthetics. To the general public, the images of the general-interest news journals were also much more accessible – materially, economically and intellectually – and must therefore have had a far bigger impact on the collective imagery of that time than the chronologically later artistic photographs. This article will unveil another important aspect of the coverage by French general-interest journals of New York's skyscrapers and other modern urban objects: the European – or at least the French – 'discovery' of New York and its modern cityscape began at least 10 years prior to the arrival of the famous cubist artists whose comments on the city, such as the one by Marcel Duchamp (Corn 1999: 43), are commonly mentioned as the earliest examples of European fascination for the American metropolis.

Reporting on the fast changing nature of New York's urban landscape seems to provide an easy explanation for the quick and important change in the way general-interest journals published the city's skyscrapers. That could also be said of synchronic technological evolutions in image production and publishing techniques: that is, from drawings made from photographs by artists, and subsequently transformed into woodcuts by engravers for publication, to photographs taken by photojournalists and published as half-tone engravings (Ambroise-Rendu 1992; Gervais 2007; Gretton 2007; Watelet 1998). Indeed, the obvious effect of the shift to the photograph was that buildings formerly published as isolated objects were now shown as buildings in a concrete and realistic physical context. However, in spite of these evolutions, and in spite of a general shift towards photography, the professional architectural journals in France (and also in the US) continued with their conventional way of publishing New York skyscrapers. This clearly indicates that the groundbreaking perspectives of French general-interest journals were not the automatic by-product of urban and technical evolutions but the result of specific editorial decisions.

These shifts may have taken place within the general-interest press because its editors acknowledged the possible evolution in the use of words and images as a conscious tool to produce, in the case of New York skyscrapers, a specific perception of buildings as spectacle. If spectacle is understood in the sense of a 'visually striking performance or display',⁷ this perception relied more and more on strong visual and emotional experiences to

stimulate the reader's mind. To do so, the editors focused on the reader's experience of architecture rather than on composition and construction techniques, as was being done in the architecture journals whose images would remain technical and objective. The attention of general-interest news journals towards the experience of the reader was in itself a key contribution to a new way of perceiving architecture or, at least, of transmitting an *in situ* experience.

The developments towards new approaches of publishing buildings emerged from neither the new building type and urban landscape nor the increasing number of published photographs. However, when combined, both the new urban landscape and the increasing number of photographs, in the context of a highly competitive commercial environment, satisfied the inclination of the readers of general-interest news journals towards miscellaneous news items (*faits divers*), towards the increasingly popular investigative journalism produced by reporters on the spot, and towards photojournalism in general. In the specific case of *L'Illustration* (Gervais 2007; Marchandiau 1987), the newly appointed director, René Baschet, led this approach. Upon his arrival in 1904, he decided to reduce the literary news in favour of international political news. He also aimed to modernize the content to respond to the readers' taste for an increasingly spectacular urban environment (Schwartz 1998), and to turn the photographs into the massively dominant form for the published image.

In this 'new economy of visual information in France' (Gervais 2007: 213), also labelled an 'iconographic revolution' (Ambroise-Rendu 1992: 28), the Manhattan of the turn of the 20th century was the perfect match for journals continuously searching for the latest visual news. More than any other place, the city kept on producing objects that appealed to the public's thirst for entertainment. The visually striking spectacles of big-scale engineering works, new architecture, and catastrophes of all kinds were perpetual news events. Albeit of no generally acclaimed artistic value – at least by the academic architectural standards of 1900 – the news from New York provoked new, strong, and thrilling emotions, as demonstrated by postcards sent by visiting tourists back to France as well as by interviews visiting French personalities gave to New York newspapers. The French general-interest journals not only recognized this but also tried to benefit from this growing fascination. Since the message differed strongly from the one associated with the then academically accepted architecture based on composition and beauty, it had to resort to new means: to make the readers live, as close as possible, the experience the city provided. By doing so, the raw and expressive images produced by the photojournalist, bereft of any particular sensibility or outspoken artistic agenda, constituted a matter-of-fact approach to the skyscraper and the strong emotions it produced. In the first decade of the 20th century, these impressions, occasionally complemented by words, were unlike any other graphic representations of this New York building type.

As stated earlier, the principal sources used for this analysis are the three leading French general-interest

weekly illustrated news journals published throughout the period 1898 to 1912: *L'illustration*, *Le monde illustré*, and *La vie illustrée*. Some lesser-known weekly journals like *Le soleil du Dimanche illustré* and *L'illustré national* provide occasional insights, as do others that did not appear throughout the whole period, such as *Nouvelles illustrées*, and other weekly journals whose aim was mostly to spread scientific knowledge among the general public. Those include *La nature*, *La science illustrée*, and *La revue scientifique*. The evolutions mentioned before will become clear through the analysis of word-image relationships. I aim to illustrate how periodical publications – and even more so, weekly journals – built a view over time and offer therefore a unique opportunity to construct a diachronic approach. This approach, mostly used to study evolutions over time – and initially evolutions in language as theorized around 1910 by Ferdinand de Saussure – is in this case the study of the word-image relation, which in itself can be considered a language. Journals thus give insight not only into the evolution of words but also into the evolution of ideas, images, and objects. This approach is useful since it not only places the ‘moment in time’ in a context but it also enables the use of the diachronic capacity of the journals to analyse the evolution of a concrete subject.⁸

While all these journals published New York’s skyscrapers, the evolution in the word-image relationship occurred most clearly in *L'illustration*. Also, while most journals published on similar topics and referred to the skyscrapers in various contexts and for various purposes, in the first decade of the 20th century only *L'illustration* showed this very clear development from objective fact to personal experience. *L'illustration* is therefore the principal source of this study. More significantly, what makes it very compelling for the writing of the history of public imagery and perception of architecture and the city is the fact that, by the first decade of the 20th century, the journal was also considered as the best international periodical publication in terms of editorial, iconographic, and technical quality.⁹ *L'illustration* published a wide variety of news on national and international politics, the military and social movements, religion, science and technology, arts and letters, fashion, society life, and other miscellaneous topics. It circulated 30,000 copies in 1880 and 280,000 in 1914 (Marchandiau 1987: 325). With these huge numbers, the journal was not only the first in quality but also in reach.

The analysis in this article is structured in five thematic parts, organized in the general chronological order in which they appear in *L'illustration* and other journals. The word-image relationship, and particularly the hierarchy between words and images, changes from one theme to the next. As will become clear, the image eventually overtakes the words, whose role evolves from explaining the spectacle, to offering only additional information about the visual spectacle or images unfolding in front of the reader’s eyes.¹⁰

Numbers and Records

The early examples of the general-interest journals’ articles on New York’s skyscrapers came quite close to what was also published in architecture or engineering journals.

They presented numbers of either technical or economic aspects, expressing mainly the floor numbers, the overall height and weight of the building, the speed of construction, and its costs. In the mid-1890s, *L'illustration*’s interest in New York’s architecture was first aroused by the number of floors that were being piled up in one sole building: first 10, then 12, 15 and, by 1900, over 20. This unprecedented number of floors in particular helped to emphasize the efficiency of the new building type for creating more office surface in central areas of the city.

This quantitative method was a way of approaching a building phenomenon that, while being newsworthy, was at the time difficult to comprehend with conventional tools. Indeed, and contrary to when aesthetic considerations came into account, the quantitative features could easily be written in a text, certainly more precisely than they could be shown in an image.¹¹ Another reason for this early absence of images was the fact that the journal was not yet focused on disseminating specific buildings but general data. The very first of *L'illustration*’s texts on skyscrapers in New York included various quantitative features of a building (overall height, number of floors, depth of foundations, weight of steel, overall weight) without ever mentioning its name or location (‘Les constructions géantes’, 1896). But while the buildings remained thus not only faceless but also anonymous, the spectacular factual information was, of course, supposed to impress the reader.

Even when other journals like *L'illustré national* did publish images of New York buildings drawn as isolated objects, as in an 1898 article titled ‘Les gratte-ciel des États-Unis’ (La Fère 1898),¹² nothing except their names was presented. The text focused only on the reasons for erecting skyscrapers and the numbers of rooms and people. This was the same general approach *L'illustration* had adopted up until that year but would abandon thereafter. And yet the purely quantitative approach continued to be relevant for other journals for a few more years. In 1902, for instance, *Les nouvelles illustrées* published an article based on numbers to present and explain skyscrapers and their construction methods (‘Les maisons “gratte-ciel”’, 1902). Just as in *L'illustré national*, only images of a particular building were published, with no mention of even its name (in this case the Fuller, or later Flatiron, Building), nor the location and the architect’s name. Quite ironically, the unique and almost instantly iconic Flatiron Building was thus used as a representative and anonymous illustration of a new building type.

The early approach by numbers offered by the general-interest news journals was the closest to what was synchronically published in the architecture periodicals. The latter explained the skyscraper typology while citing numbers and, more rarely, general construction techniques. Unsurprisingly, the approach by numbers was also visible in general-interest journals that concentrated on the popularisation of science, such as *La science illustrée*, *Revue scientifique*, and *La nature* (see e.g., ‘Un hôtel de 49 étages’, 1905; Baudouin 1898; Teymon 1895). These were closer to the specialized architectural journals as they focused on precise construction elements and techniques, while also

citing the buildings' and architects' names. But as we will see later, they also eventually included other topics.

In 1902, *Le monde illustré*, *Le soleil du Dimanche illustré* (later renamed *Dimanche illustré*), and *La vie illustrée* all published articles on New York's skyscrapers in a way that offered quantitative explanations while also introducing the idea of height records and, to a lesser extent, of records of costs and value of buildings (Fig. 3). *Le monde illustré* showed a full-page image of what was probably the very first view published in France of Lower Manhattan's urban landscape from an upper floor ('New-York', 1902). However, the title and short caption focused solely on the high concentration of insurance companies in this area and the value of their buildings. In stark contrast to what happened some years later in other journals, not only was the image a simple illustration of the factual text, but its visually spectacular qualities were completely ignored.

As for *Le soleil du Dimanche illustré*, in 1902 the journal published two articles written as an introduction to the skyscrapers of New York. While the first one, erroneously titled 'La plus haute maison du monde' ('La plus haute maison', 1902), presented a drawing of the (again unnamed) Fuller Building, the second article ('Tours de Babel américaines', 1902), which used a photograph as if it was irrefutable proof, convincing readers of the existence of buildings, showed the Park Row Building, which was indeed at the time the 'plus haut "attrape-nuages" de New-York'. In both cases, the news was about height records. The role played by the accompanying text was to provide the necessary explanation for this new phenomenon.

It is interesting to note that *Le soleil du Dimanche illustré's* factual error about the Fuller Building was not unique. Two days earlier, *La vie illustrée* had published the caption title, 'La plus haute et la plus mince maison du monde', below a full-page photograph of the same building ('Une maison monstre', 1902). This is relevant for the study of word-image relations since in both cases the caption with height records was significantly more striking than it would have been without. The distinct shape of the Fuller Building and its exposed position within the urban fabric made it a visually convincing recipient for the title of the 'tallest building in the world', so the journals added to this spectacular image the (false) height record to suggest the most striking perspective on this new building type. The use of this particular building in *Le soleil du Dimanche* and in *La vie illustrée* was the complete opposite to its use in *Les nouvelles illustrées* where, as seen earlier, this uniquely shaped building was simply an illustration of tall buildings in general. In common among all these ways of presenting the Fuller Building was the lack of the building's name.

By that time, *L'illustration* had already taken a step ahead. Once an innovative and recognizable skyscraper stood out from the others, the journal showed a specific interest and then abandoned the non-specific news of sheer numbers. That was the case of the Park Row Building, which, just before 1900, was the first tall building of New York to be clearly identified by *L'illustration*. The journal surveyed its weight, cost, and number of floors. But

special interest was aroused by the fact that this building was now clearly the tallest. As the information of this particular building in New York became thus more concrete, the need for images also became more pressing. In 1899 *L'illustration* published a small drawing of the Park Row Building and juxtaposed it with monuments of Paris and the cathedral of Rouen (Fig. 4). The text explained that, 'in order to give an idea of its height, we cannot think of a better way than to compare it' (N 1899). The image also delivered the irrefutable graphic evidence of New York buildings dominating the height of Paris buildings. This method of comparison, where tall structures were juxtaposed with the Parisian context, resurfaced in the text of an article in *L'illustration* from 1904 on the new Times Building, whose 'basements [. . .] go 18 meters underground, [. . .] the height of our ordinary buildings [in Paris]', and whose 'steel frame, 115 meters high, is, after the Eiffel Tower, the tallest in the world' ('Un nouveau gratte-ciel', 1904). However, in 1909, the text on the Metropolitan Life Tower, New York's latest tallest building, moved further away from these comparisons and instead provided a wealth of numbers and records, including that of the speed of the elevator; the image was simply proof of the building's existence ('Le roi', 1909).

Showing skyscrapers as isolated objects, aside from their potential for visual comparisons, clearly corresponded to the logic of the height record. The visual attention of the reader had to be concentrated or even limited to that one specific building. For that reason, the Park Row Building had to be shown in a drawing rather than in a photograph. In that way it could be shown at an angle and in a context that was not plausible in the actual situation of the building's vicinity. The same could be said of other New York buildings, also situated in the very dense district of lower Broadway, which continued to be seen in drawings, such as on postcards.¹³ The Times Building, and the later Metropolitan Life Tower, however, both faced large public spaces and therefore each could easily be photographed as a whole and isolated in the centre of the image – exactly the way the Fuller Building was depicted in the previously mentioned journals.

The idea of using a comparison to graphically illustrate great building height was also present in *La nature* whose 1907 article on the record-breaking Singer Building and the Metropolitan Life Tower was used by the journal 'as an occasion to sketch the tallest monuments of the world' (Mériel 1907). This frieze arranged 15 monuments from left to right according to their height. It was led by the Eiffel Tower, and then followed by the two New York buildings, European cathedrals, and other monuments, the last being New York's Park Row Building. While the text of the article clearly focused on numbers and construction techniques, the theoretical contextualisation of isolated objects within a single image transmitted altogether different messages, i.e., New York's record-height buildings are monuments, and they are taller than any other inhabited building on earth. The comparative approach, which *L'illustration* also used, clearly distinguished this scientific popularization journal from the architecture periodicals.



Figure 3: Record-breaking buildings in New York. Left to right: The most expensive group of buildings in the world, from *Le monde illustré* ('New-York', 1902: 199); the tallest and thinnest building in the world, from *La vie illustrée* ('Une maison monstre', 1902: 236).

The Spectacle of Disasters

Reporting on numbers and building records was the earliest way general-interest journals could deal with the skyscraper while transmitting spectacular news and unusual factual perspectives on a new subject. Since the words and the images used for this approach kept the reader outside of the buildings and in the position of a distant observer, the news provoked no particular emotional response. This fact-based reporting would change with the reports on New York skyscraper disasters – potential and real – that appeared in both *L'illustration* and *La vie illustrée* in the same period.

In the case of *L'illustration*, the journal transmitted the threat posed by skyscrapers to public health and safety at the same time as catering to readers' interest in these buildings. The article 'Les "gratte-ciel" de New-York' (N 1899) demonstrates the deliberate character of this 'yes, but' approach, since it featured not only the comparative image previously discussed but also the image of the 17-story Home Life Insurance Company Building going up in flames at night (Fig. 4). Putting these two images on the same page was undoubtedly meant to show that, while Paris may have been surpassed in height, it was also safe from the new perils. To further convey the readers' sense

of being witnesses to the vulnerability of New Yorkers, the text articulated the relationship between height record and disaster by pointing out that the building's daily population of up to 8,000 people would have been unable to escape a disaster. It also pointed out that while the building was supposed to be fireproof, it actually did burn. But it also admitted that the main structure of the Home Life Building had resisted well and that new safety measures in this kind of building could soon allow a lunchtime meal proceed on the 27th-floor restaurant of the Park Row Building without being overly disturbed by a fire breaking out 10 floors below. However, as this article and the later ones showed, the potential threat that buildings might come down did enhance the thrill associated with the new heights and increased the very spectacle of it. This applied not only to the awestruck New York crowd attracted by the sublime event but surely also to the French readers.

Subsequently, *L'illustration* reported – without images, however – on new solutions to make skyscrapers safe and at the same time reported on new threats like corrosion, an issue that, according to an American expert, 'made the tall buildings very dangerous as they might collapse all of a sudden' ('Le danger', 1902). The information prepared the readers for the worst. And when an accident finally

LES « GRATTE-CIEL » DE NEW-YORK

Pour désigner les énormes immeubles, bâtisses élevées de dix-huit ou vingt étages, qui se construisent depuis une dizaine d'années dans les grandes villes des Etats-Unis, principalement à New-York et à Chicago, au centre des quartiers d'affaires, les Américains ont forgé un pittoresque néologisme. Ils les appellent des *sky-scrapers*, littéralement « gratte-ciel ».

Les gratte-ciel ont, le mois dernier, beaucoup fait parler d'eux dans la presse américaine, et cela pour deux raisons : 1° on venait d'en achever un qui, par sa hauteur, laissait loin derrière lui tous les autres; 2° un violent incendie, en s'attaquant au bâtiment monstre de la *Home life company*, avait fourni des indications précieuses sur la valeur du mot « incombustible » appliqué à ce genre d'édifice.

Le nouveau gratte-ciel dont s'enorgueillit New-York se dresse en bordure du Park Row, dont il a pris le nom : c'est le *Park Row building*. Sa façade n'a qu'un développement de 31 m. 50; mais sa hauteur, prise au sommet des deux tours qui le couronnent, est de 117 mètres. Pour donner une idée de ce que représente une pareille élévation, nous ne pouvons mieux faire que de la mettre en comparaison avec celle de l'Arc-de-Triomphe, celle de Notre-Dame, celle de la coupole des Invalides, le plus haut monument de Paris si on met à part la tour Eiffel, et enfin avec la flèche de la cathédrale de Rouen. Sur notre dessin comparatif figure également à l'échelle la plus récemment construite à Paris, rue Réaumur. Ce rapprochement ne manquera pas de réjouir les New-Yorkais, si fiers de leur architecture babylonienne.

De la base des fondations de l'immeuble du Park Row à la pointe de la hampe des drapeaux qui flottent sur ses coupes, la distance verticale est exactement de 153 mètres.

Le nombre des étages est de vingt-sept. Tout en haut, entre les deux tours, est même installée sur le toit la cuisine du restaurant qui occupe le dernier étage. Ce bâtiment démesuré, qui n'a pas été construit, comme plusieurs de ses devanciers, pour une grande administration particulière, est divisé en neuf cent cinquante offices séparés, de dimensions variées. A raison de quatre personnes en moyenne pour occuper chaque office, la maison est donc susceptible de posséder une population (population diurne, il est vrai, et qui se réduit la nuit à quelques gardiens) de près de quatre mille personnes, hommes d'affaires et employés.

De plus, ces neuf cent cinquante offices, ces quatre mille personnes reçoivent tout le jour de nombreuses visites. Combien? Quel chiffre hasarder? New-York est réputé la ville la plus active des Etats-Unis, et le Park Row building n'est si haut que parce que l'espace est trop resserré pour le mouvement des affaires dans le cœur de la cité. Est-il exagéré de supposer qu'à une heure quelconque quatre mille visiteurs peuvent se trouver dans l'immeuble, qu'à la fin du jour vingt-cinq mille personnes y ont passé? Quel grouillement dans les corridors et la cage des ascenseurs!

Rien que cette évocation en fait surgir une autre dans notre esprit de Parisiens qui ne recherchons plus dans les théâtres que l'amplitude des dégagements : Qu'arriverait-il en cas d'incendie? Comment les occupants des étages supérieurs s'enfuieraient-ils? Quels jets de pompe iraient lutter si haut contre les flammes? Jusqu'au 5 décembre dernier, les architectes américains se contentaient de répondre : « Nos gratte-ciel sont bâtis en matériaux incombustibles : acier revêtu de terre-cuite réfractaire et marbre. »

Cependant, le 5 décembre, dans Broadway, l'incendie d'un immeuble voisin, de taille modeste, s'est communiqué au bâtiment de la *Home life*, lequel compte dix-sept étages. C'était la meilleure expérience qui pût être faite. Hélas-nous d'ajouter qu'elle n'a été que partielle. Le sinistre s'étant produit la nuit, la haute maison était vide et il n'y a pas eu à résoudre la question de son évacuation.

Quant au bâtiment lui-même, comment s'est-il comporté au feu? — « Il n'a pas brûlé », disent les architectes. En effet, il est encore debout; son ossature n'a pas bronché; sa façade est à peine lézardée. En revanche, à partir du neuvième étage, le feu, hors de la portée des pompes les plus puissantes, a accompli dans l'intérieur des locaux l'œuvre de destruction la plus complète qu'on ait jamais vue : meubles, tentures, parquets ont été réduits mieux qu'en cendres, — en fumée.

La conclusion du service des secours en cas d'incendie fut digne d'une administration de la vieille Europe : « Nos pompes les plus perfectionnées et nos échelles de sauvetage ne peuvent attendre qu'au huitième étage. Il faut interdire la construction d'immeubles de plus de huit étages. » Le public se récria : renoncer aux gratte-ciel, ce serait abdiquer une des gloires du Nouveau Monde.

Le public américain a raison, semble-t-il, contre le service des incendies. S'il est incontestable que l'immeuble de la *Home life*, malgré son incombustibilité, a été bel et bien incendié, il n'est pas moins certain que sa résistance au feu a été des plus méritoires. Il avait un point vulnérable : ses fenêtres. Leurs châssis étaient en bois et elles n'étaient malheureusement pas préservées contre les flammes



Incendie d'un immeuble de 17 étages à New-York.

venant du dehors. Le feu ayant pu, par ces ouvertures, pénétrer dans la place, c'est également par le dehors, de fenêtre en fenêtre, qu'il s'est propagé d'étage en étage. Enfin les réservoirs, placés dans les combles, n'ont été inutilisables que parce qu'il ne s'y trouvait personne pour en manœuvrer les robinets.

Tels étaient les points faibles du *Home life building*. Rien de plus facile que d'y remédier. Pour protéger plus efficacement encore qu'auparavant contre les dangers d'incendie les énormes édifices de ce genre, il suffirait, d'après l'expérience du 5 janvier : 1° de munir de volets métalliques toutes les ouvertures qui se trouvent situées au-dessus et du côté de la toiture d'une maison ordinaire adjacente; 2° d'isoler plus que par le passé les étages les uns des autres, au moyen de planchers de fer et de briques ainsi que par des rideaux horizontaux qui se déploieraient en cas de sinistre dans la cage des ascenseurs.

Quant à la lutte par l'eau contre les flammes, elle devrait être assurée, dans chaque immeuble de quinze, vingt ou vingt-cinq étages, par quelques pompiers, toujours en faction dans les combles, près de vastes réservoirs toujours remplis. Une petite ville de 6 à 8.000 habitants a ses pompiers et ses pompes : pourquoi des villes qui ne se composent que d'une maison, mais ne sont pas moins peuplées, feraient-elles exception?

Ces mesures prises, on pourra aller sans crainte déjeuner au restaurant du vingt-septième étage de l'immeuble du Park Row. Si un incendie éclate au quatorzième, on en sera quitte pour attendre qu'il soit éteint avant de redescendre : ce sera l'affaire d'un petit quart d'heure.

M. N.

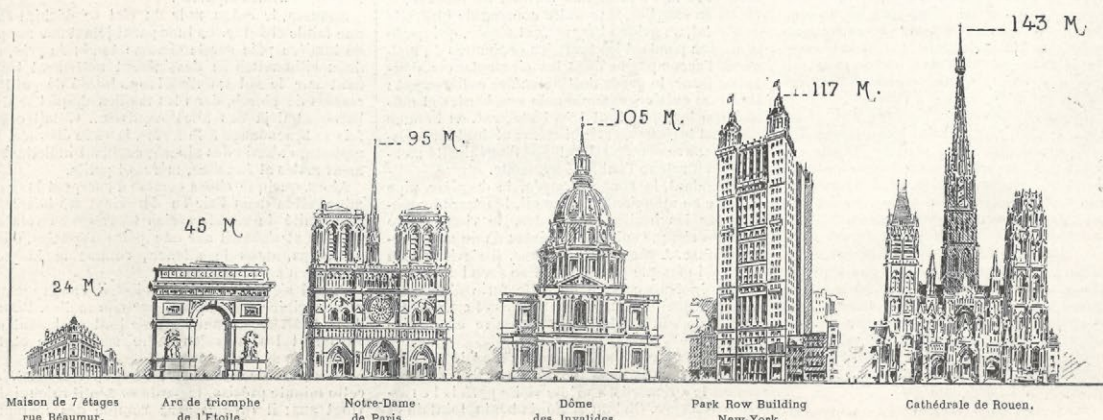


Figure 4: An article on the skyscrapers of New York, from *L'illustration* (N., 1899: 25).

occurred in 1904, the journal did indeed publish a photograph showing the pile of what had been the Darlington Hotel's steel frame under construction (Fig. 5). The article mentioned the 'appalling roar' with which the building went down and the 'seismic tremor' the fall provoked ('L'effondrement d'un skyscraper', 1904). And while it also reported the human tragedy of '50 workers brought down of which 17 had died and 20 were seriously injured', the article surely sent shivers down the bourgeois reader's spine when explaining in detail how a millionaire's daughter and her friend having tea in the adjacent building were 'hit by a piece of the steel frame that had ripped open their roof'. If collapsing tall buildings could kill a millionaire's daughter, could this not happen to anyone? Certain aspects of the drama that could not be shown graphically were therefore conveyed in the text of the article, completing the image. With this reporting, *L'illustration* had changed perspectives for the reader who had turned from a distant observer of skyscrapers to being potentially involved in the consequences of their failings.

Background Skyscrapers

While the numbers and records approach as well as the reporting on risks and disasters of skyscrapers differed in the perspective they offered readers, these were all

relatively straightforward ways of reporting on New York skyscrapers. The following approaches that some of the French journals used, however, dramatically changed the relation of word and image insofar as buildings were either pictured in images without being the subject of the text or, inversely, written about but not actually shown in the accompanying images. These approaches exemplify the increasingly diverse ways of using, perceiving, and representing skyscrapers, and illustrate the aim of journals to exploit the potential of skyscraper reportage to provide the reader with a thrill.

The first of these approaches began when New York skyscrapers formed an imposing background for images of public urban events in New York. Before the First World War, between 1899 and 1909, this use of skyscrapers first appeared in *La vie illustrée*, and then from 1905 to 1909 in *L'illustration*. The image of a skyscraper (or a group of them) was the 'natural' environment of a particular event. For instance, in 1899, the parade celebrating the return of Admiral George Dewey passed through the homonymous Triumphal Arch and Colonnade built for the occasion at Madison Square ('Arc de triomphe', 1899). The 1903 mayoral election led to an image of the new mayor entering City Hall (Croze 1903). During the election for the state governor in 1906, the principal voting station of the Wall



Effondrement d'une construction de onze étages, à New-York.

Figure 5: A pile of steel from a collapsed 11-story construction in New York, printed in *L'illustration* ('L'effondrement d'un skyscraper', 1904: 206).

Street area was on Broad Street, and people gathered in Times Square to await the results (Fig. 6) ('Les élections', 1906; 'Une élection', 1906). The financial crisis happened in the Wall Street area ('La crise financière', 1907), while the celebratory parade for returning US Olympians in 1908 took place on Fifth Avenue, where parades were usually organized ('Lendemain de victoire', 1908), the same Olympians gathering later in front of City Hall for the official reception by the mayor ('Les Etats-Unis', 1908). And, finally, the Hudson-Fulton Celebration of 1909 unfolded on New York Bay and the Hudson River (Forbin 1909).

The published photographs reveal that tall buildings were considered an important part of the given event, even though these events were not in themselves a reason to give such prominence to buildings. It seems that tall buildings were used as backgrounds even more deliberately when the setting or the viewing angle could be chosen freely; they thus contributed to the very interest of the event. This could be seen in the photographs of the start of the 1908 New York to Paris car race at Times Square (H 1908), and of Wilbur Wright's airplane flight across Manhattan's skyline ('Une belle promenade aérienne', 1909). In photographs of preparations for an end of year celebration on Vesey Street, a nondescript low-rise street on the West Side of lower Manhattan benefited from the rising Park Row and St. Paul Buildings in the background (*La vie illustrée* 1909). In both the 'natural' and the chosen situation, the urban setting

enhanced the events. Such photographs also revealed the city as a place where important things happened, but also that the city was, ultimately, as modern as the automobiles and airplanes that graced its streets and skies.

Only two of the dozen articles on urban events in New York mentioned the background of skyscrapers, though briefly. One article in 1908 stated that the car race departed on Broadway, 'at the foot of one of those skyscrapers that best summarize the big thriving American cities' (H 1908). Another, in 1909, on the Hudson-Fulton Celebration said that 'a truly interesting spectacle could be seen from the top of the skyscrapers located at the end of the island' ('Le roi', 1909).

With this particular new aspect of publishing buildings, word and image began to be more independent of each other. While the words concentrated entirely on the actual event, despite its built context, the image suggested that the real news could be found in the urban context. As event and building foregrounded and complemented each other, the role of the city's space shaped by its buildings became of increasing interest. The spectacular quality of the background must surely have been a decisive criterion for covering such an amount of political, social, and festive news from New York. Indeed, in the French general-interest journals discussed here, this kind of news was quantitatively only surpassed by similar news from France.

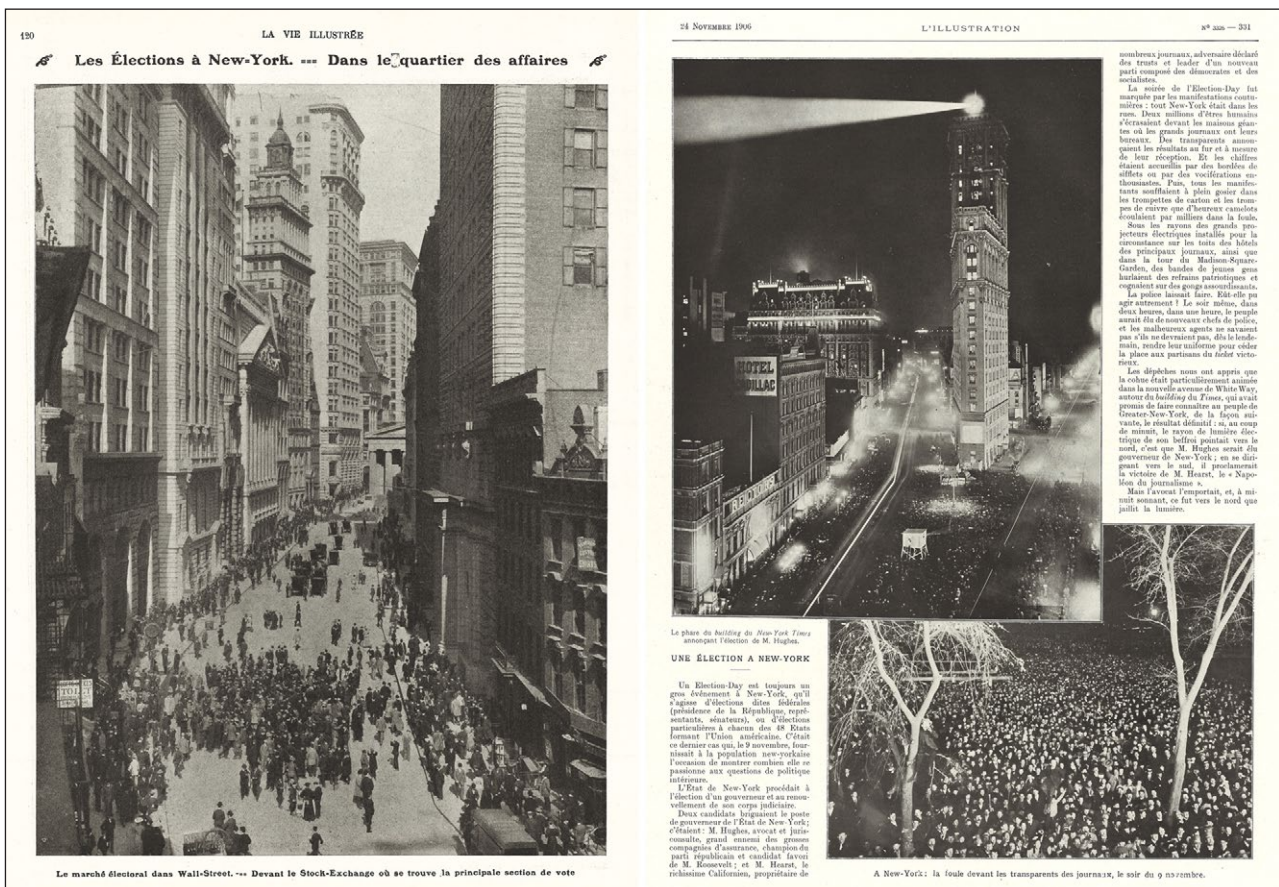


Figure 6: Skyscrapers as background for urban events. Left to right: Election day at the Broad Street voting station, from *La vie illustrée* ('Les élections', 1906: 120); election night at Times Square, from *L'Illustration* ('Une élection', 1906: 311).

A Stage High in the Air

After featuring as prominently as news background, skyscrapers came again to the fore as a stage high in the air. Readers could come across such scenes in articles published from 1905 to 1912, especially in *L'illustration*. On this 'stage' construction workers, with their acrobatic and perilous acts, created a hitherto unknown kind of heroic man, the photographs of them able to provide a thrill that surpassed even the dangers of climbing high mountains. While this kind of photograph is well known today, its fame is based almost exclusively on the work of Lewis W. Hine from the early 1930s, of the construction site of the Empire State Building (Hine 1932). The articles presented here, however, show that the narrative of the unfazed skyscraper worker, viewed close up, had actually begun more than two decades earlier.

Over the years important evolutions took place in the way this story was told through words and images. While in 1905 a photograph ('Un faîte vertigineux', 1905) showed in a conventional way one of the Park Row Building's domes and lanterns with a busy but unshakeable worker (with a caption that, laconically, read, 'How to repaint the pole at the top of a skyscraper'), later images changed not only in point of view but also in the amount of risk undertaken by the workers who were sometimes the photographers themselves. The photo reporter of this period was, to use Anne-Claude Ambroise-Rendu's description, 'a hero of modernity [whose] recklessness and self-sacrifice were praised' (1992: 26).

For instance, an article from 1910 showed an image of an electrician, sent to work on a wire, hanging upside down on the mast of the Singer Building with a camera. The article includes two of his plunging views downward, of the building's own roof and beyond (Fig. 7). The captions were just as factual, but the main text had to explain what the viewing angle, still very unusual at that time, offered to the untrained eye:

To the left and to the right, the eye plunges into the streets that have been transformed by the gigantic buildings into gorges and canyons. To the left, one makes out a grey strip: it's Broadway, New York's main street. ('Un photographe', 1910)

In the latest phase of this development the buildings that functioned as stages had not only ceased to be visible – except for their steel girders – but were in a more general way bereft of any kind of importance, other than their height that guaranteed the seriousness of the risk taken. And the more the staging building disappeared, the more the workers themselves, as the key performers, became prominent.

The hanging-in-the-air show on top of an unnamed skyscraper's construction site could at that time be seen elsewhere, for example in the image published on the cover of the 5 December 1908 issue of the *Scientific American*. But while in this coloured drawing the worker provides an idealized and largely symbolic representation of the ever more vertical city and its building hero, French journals pursued other goals. Through photographs of increasingly spectacular performances by the workers, the French

readers were supposed to shudder at the sheer thought of being in the place of those pictured. That was clearly the case with the 11 photographs of the (again) unnamed Singer Building under construction, arranged over a two-page spread (Fig. 8), which *Le soleil du Dimanche illustré* published in late 1907 ('Le roi', 1907). Six photographs pictured workers standing precipitously on the edge of beams or climbing up poles, while other ones showed the city far below. As if the editors of *Le soleil du Dimanche illustré* had not yet grasped the feat unfolding in the photographs, these images are accompanied by only three short captions focusing on the speed of construction and how this could improve Parisian construction delays. As a whole the journal's layout and editorial stand in this case displayed a strong disconnection between image and words. The image began to have its own life and interest. Unlike in *L'illustration*, however, no word was written in *Le soleil du Dimanche illustré* about the workers themselves.

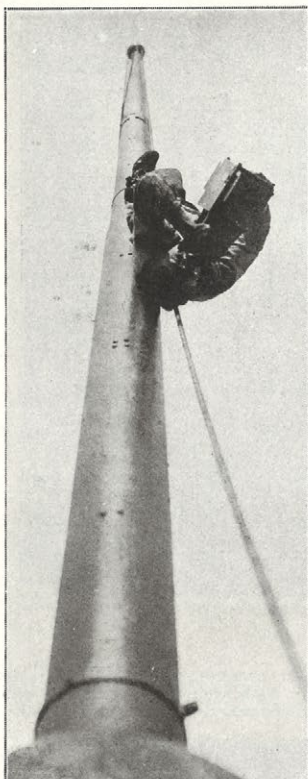
While this primacy of the image drove the general-interest journals further from the methods of professional journals, the journal of popular scientific information *La nature*, while in other aspects closer to the professional journals, did engage in the thrill and risk associated with the pictured construction worker. And yet, as if these breath-taking images and the implied increasing risk of death were not enough, accompanying texts tried to push the reader's imagination beyond the image itself. An article from 1908, entitled 'New-York à vol d'oiseau', focused on the construction of the Metropolitan Life Tower without, however, showing it. It began like this: 'The young worker was suspended at 200 meters above the streets of New York, perched on a narrow plate from which a false movement would precipitate him into the void' (Forbin 1908). In the same vein, for *L'illustration*'s double-page spread of a photograph of a worker hanging on the chains of a big crane (Fig. 9), nothing was said about the building except for its location on West Street:

The wind amplifies the oscillation of the chain. One has constantly to rediscover the jeopardized balance. The suspended man [is] at the mercy of a failure of his nerves or of his muscles which, in both cases, would throw him to the ground, smashed. ('Les chantiers aériens', 1910)

Interestingly, this text was part of the photographic caption while the article's main body of text, five pages later, focused on the new profession of the skyscraper worker. This was the most striking example to date of the increasing shift of the image – enhanced by its caption – away from the article's text and into the centre of attention.

When buildings were published as stage, *L'illustration* explored the danger and thrill in a similar way to when the journal dealt with disasters. Contrary to the articles on disasters, though, the buildings featuring as stage were neither the subject of the text nor shown in the image. Indeed, this was the furthest the non-appearance of a building would reach in the journal, emphasizing the shift in the journals' approach towards the experience of buildings rather than the knowledge of them. It was now all

UN PHOTOGRAPHE
QUI N'A PAS LE VERTIGE



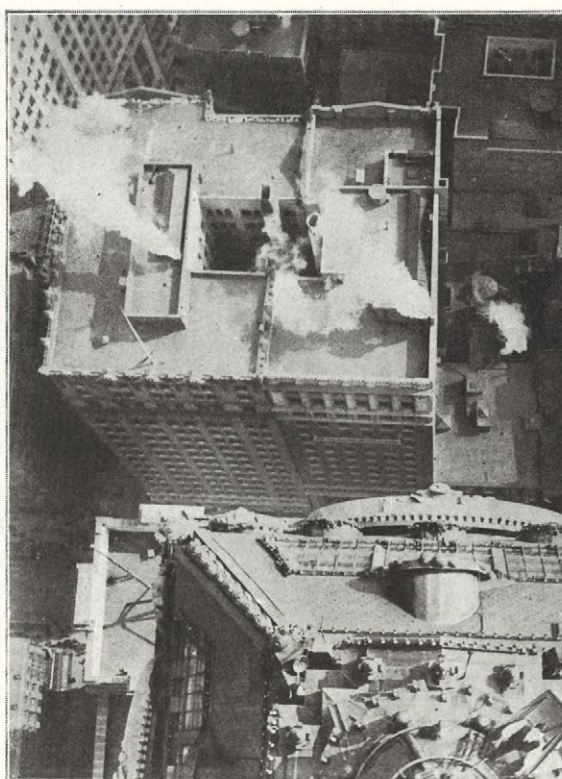
Ces photographies, qui nous montrent les immeubles géants de New-York sous un aspect peu familier, ont été prises dans des circonstances exceptionnelles.

M. George Nealy est un ouvrier électricien qui s'est fait une dangereuse spécialité : quand il s'agit de poser une lampe ou un fil électrique au sommet des mâts qui se dressent sur les « gratte-ciel » de quarante à cinquante étages, c'est à lui qu'on a recours. Il ignore la sensation du vertige, et il se promène, sans hésitation, sur une étroite corniche à 100 ou 150 mètres au-dessus du pavé. Récemment, il fut chargé par les propriétaires du Singer Building, qui était la plus haute maison du monde avant la construction du Metropolitan, de grimper au sommet du mât de l'immeuble pour réparer une poulie. Un de nos confrères new-yorkais, averti de cette circonstance, confia à M. Nealy un appareil, pour qu'il prit des vues de la ville, à la hauteur de 225 mètres.

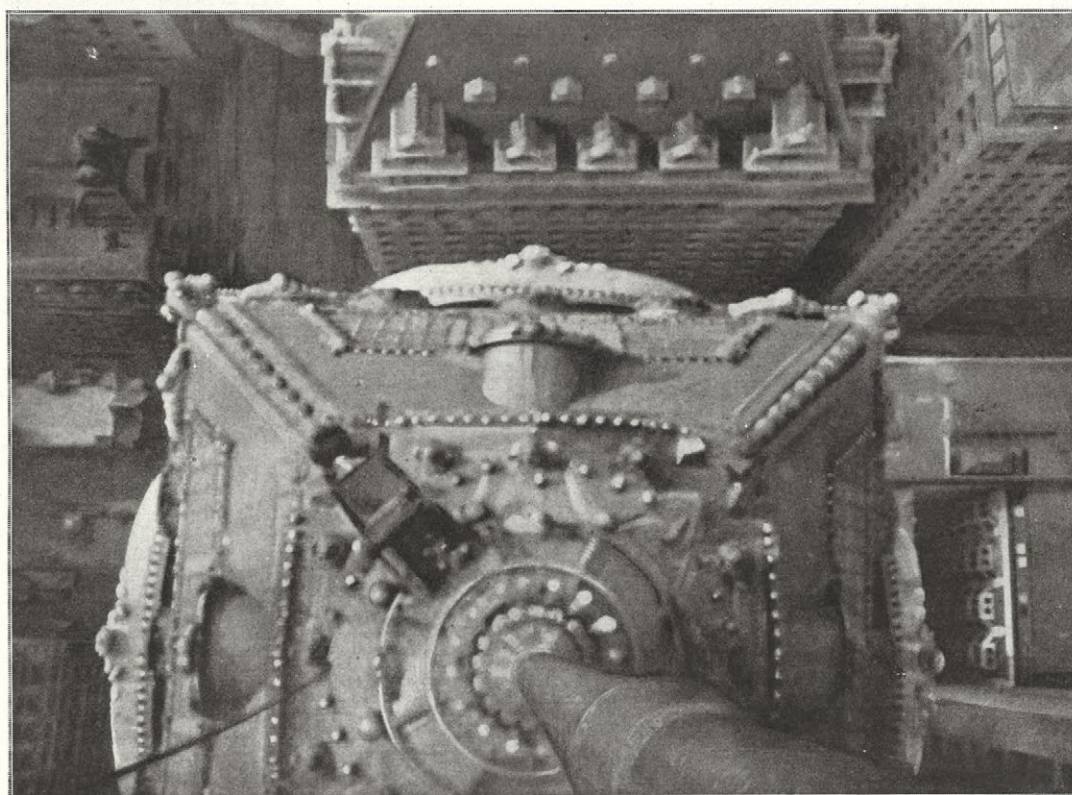
Celui que ses compatriotes ont appelé l'électricien aérien escalada le mât. Et ce fut alors seulement qu'il comprit la difficulté de sa tâche. Pour obtenir ses clichés, il n'avait qu'un seul moyen d'opérer : se suspendre au mât par les pieds, la tête en bas, et braquer son objectif dans le sens de la verticale. Nous publions ici les deux meilleures des photographies qu'il put prendre.

On remarquera que l'échelonnement des plans est fait pour dérouter l'œil. Au premier plan, c'est le mât, dont la base aboutit à la toiture en dôme de l'immeuble. A gauche et à droite, l'œil plonge dans des rues que les gigantesques maisons qui les bordent ont transformées en défilés, en cañons. Enfin, à gauche de la première photographie, on distingue une bande grisâtre : c'est Broadway, la principale rue de New-York.

Comment M. George Nealy prend des clichés du mât du Singer Building, à 225 m. de hauteur.



Un gratte-ciel voisin, vu du Singer Building (à gauche, à 225 mètres au-dessous, un carrefour dans Broadway).



LES CLICHÉS DE « L'ÉLECTRICIEN AÉRIEN ». — Le toit du Singer Building et quelques-uns des autres immeubles géants du voisinage.

Figure 7: Photographs from on high. Top left: An electrician suspended from the mast of the Singer Building holds a camera. Top right and bottom: Two of his shots downward from the Singer Building, from *L'illustration* ('Un photographe qui n'a pas le vertige', 1910: 367).



Figure 8: The construction of the Singer Building, 'king of the skyscrapers', from *Le soleil du Dimanche illustré* ('Le roi', 1907: 8–9).



Figure 9: Construction worker standing on chains, high above the ground, from *L'Illustration* ('Les chantiers aériens', 1910: 506–507).

about making the perspective of the reader coincide with the perspective of the person working on the buildings.

Skyscraper Cityscape

The most innovative perspective on New York skyscrapers occurred when the shift towards the experience of the reader was coupled with the buildings being the main subject of the articles. This fact distinguished the articles on the 'cityscape' from the ones treated here before under skyscrapers as 'background' and 'stage': the skyscrapers and the city itself became the news. The spectacle no longer required an event or human feat, but solely relied on what the cityscape had to offer as visually new and dramatic. Nevertheless, the articles on 'cityscape' drew on one of the two distinct word-image approaches previously encountered – either the anonymity or the invisibility of the skyscraper.

This specific interest in what tall buildings had to offer to the spectator had been expressed for the first time in 1902 in *La vie illustrée's* article on the Fuller Building. While the image was a daylight photograph, the short caption, devoted to evoking numbers and records, had stated that 'when the 20 stories are illuminated, it is as if we stood in front of a giant lamp with multiple lights' ('Une maison monstre', 1902). Two years later, *L'illustration* was the first French journal to publish exactly this effect: two night-time photographs of unnamed tall buildings of which only the illuminated windows were visible. The title below the photographs, 'Les maisons géantes à New-York – Effet de nuit', indicates that the only way these buildings were of interest was in a night photograph, revealing

impressionistic 'effects' (Fig. 10). Still, the accompanying text, written in a tone of justification, explains how these buildings 'that one cannot admire deliberately' produced nevertheless, at night-time, 'new aspects for European eyes', a 'curious, almost fantastic effect' ('Un nouveau gratte-ciel', 1904). The *Revue illustrée*, discussing the 1905 Salon entry *Sur les toits – On the Roof*, writes about the 'thousand glowing windows of the giant buildings' ('Le Salon', 1905) in the painting by the French painter Charles Hoffbauer, who had taken his inspiration from published night views of New York.¹⁴

After these couple of imagined or real night-time views, the year 1907 marked the very beginning of possibly the most spectacular images related to high buildings: plunging views downward from skyscrapers. The first instance is the Singer Building, which reached a new record height of 500 feet, the views from which were published in *L'illustration* (Fig. 2) and in *Le soleil du Dimanche illustré* (Fig. 11). These views were at the time unheard of, even in the United States,¹⁵ and their appearance can directly be linked to the existence of a sufficiently high viewpoint within the city. As previously seen with the images of construction workers in *Le soleil du Dimanche illustré* and with the aforementioned and reprinted images of the electrician turned photographer published in 1910 in *L'illustration* (Fig. 7), the Singer Building did provide this height.

The historical roots of these plunging views were twofold. Taking photographs from a flying device apparently began in 1858, with Félix Nadar's images from a balloon (Gervais 2013). The view downwards from a stable

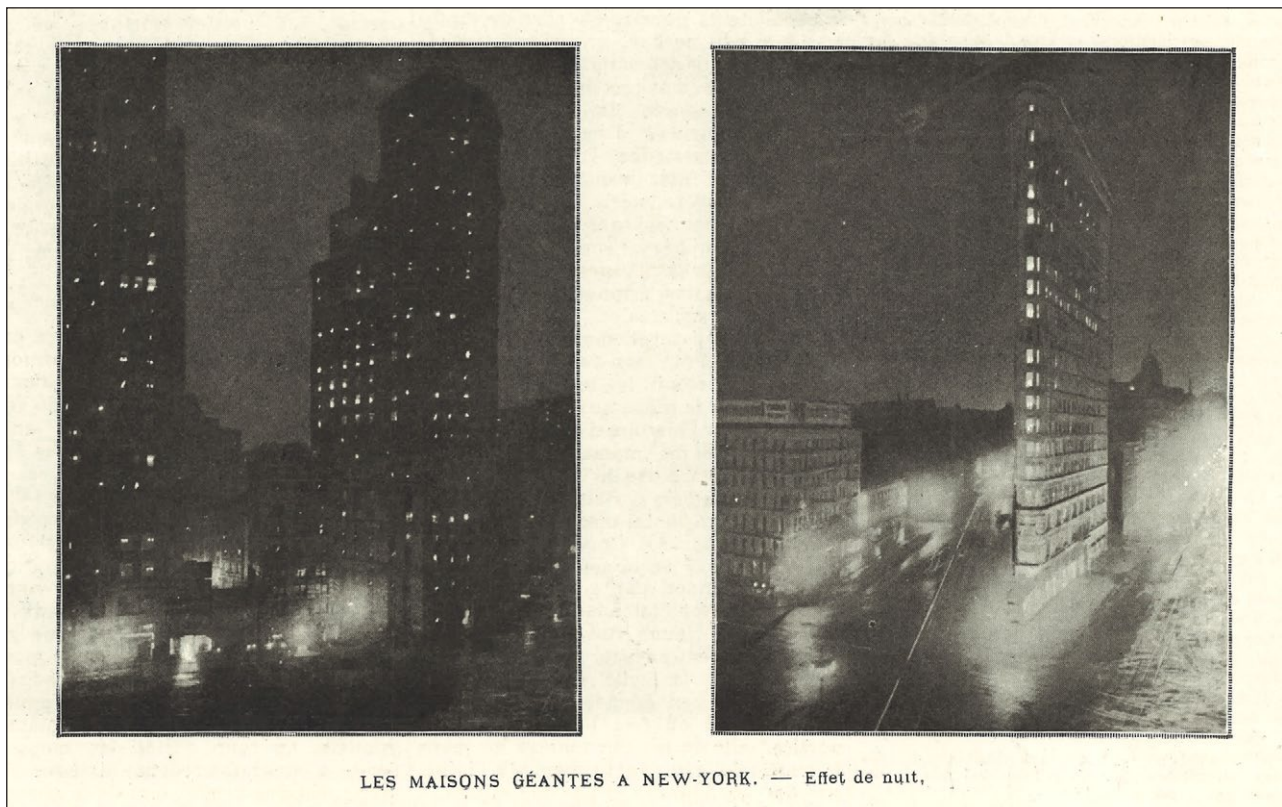


Figure 10: Night views of two New York skyscrapers, from *L'illustration* ('Effet de nuit', 1904: 350).

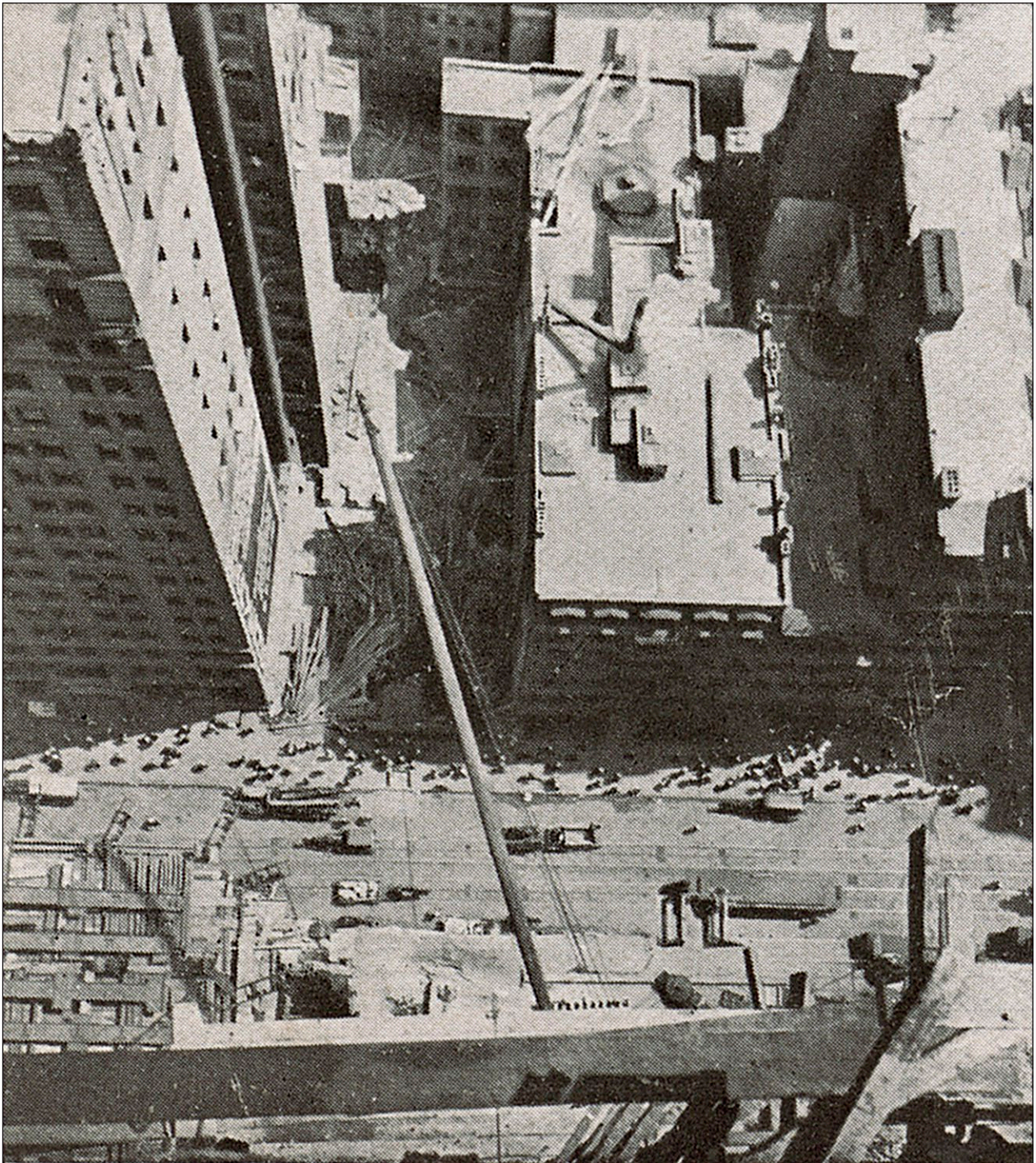


Figure 11: Plunging view from the Singer Building on Broadway. Detail of Fig. 8, from *Le soleil du Dimanche illustré* ('Le roi', 1907: 8–9).

viewpoint high up a building appeared as early as Gustave Caillebotte's painting of 1880, *Boulevard vu d'en haut* (Varnedoe 1989). As we will see, the photographic twin to Caillebotte's work would only appear more than two decades later, at around the same time when the views down from the Singer Building were published.

Both of these methods were used in the first decade of the 20th century. Two overhead views of the Eiffel Tower were taken from a dirigible and from a balloon, and published respectively in the 1907 and 1909 issues of *L'illustration* (H 1907; 'La tour Eiffel', 1909). It is surprising

that, besides these views in which the tower was both the subject and the object of the image, *L'illustration* did not publish other views downward from the top of the Eiffel tower. In French general-interest journals, these kinds of views from high up a building focused on events other than the building itself and were all taken from Parisian monuments other than the Eiffel Tower. The first two views of this kind published in illustrated journals in France, all in *La vie illustrée*, showed the July 14 parade in 1905 ('Le 14 juillet', 1905) and the procession of the Danish royals in 1907 ('Les souverains danois', 1907), both from the top

of the Arc de Triomphe. The next one in *La vie illustrée*, in 1909, showed the Île Saint-Louis as seen from a tower of Notre-Dame (Caizac 1909). However, in *L'illustration*, the first plunging photograph from a building down to the street had not been taken in Paris but in New York. Published in early 1908, it pictured cars participating in the start of the New York–Paris race in Times Square (H 1908). In *L'illustration*, the first images of this type taken in Paris appeared in 1910, first from the towers of Notre-Dame for the mid-lent procession ('La Mi-carême vue', 1910), then from the Arc de Triomphe for the procession of the Belgian sovereign ('L'arrivée des souverains belges', 1910). If we take into account the fact that all these viewpoints from buildings were chosen in order to report on specific events, and not to show the city itself – with the exception of the 1909 view on the Île Saint-Louis – this then means that the 1907 view downward from New York's Singer Building published in *L'illustration* was very special indeed: it was the first ever widely disseminated published photograph taken from a building downward with only the city itself as news, and this among all the cities on the globe.¹⁶

Both this perspective and Parisian views that were related to specific urban events represented an 'experimental approach of photography' that allowed certain photographers like Léon Gimpel to distinguish themselves from his news agency competitors while satisfying the journals' wish to renew the formal content of its images (Gervais 2007: 329, 336). If Thierry Gervais' statement that 'among the selection criteria for the images of *L'illustration*, the formal seduction [counted] at least as much as the interest for the news conveyed by photography' (2007: 344) is true, then this means that the formal and visual qualities of New York were certainly of interest to the journal.

But the plunging views more specifically achieved the production of a new, more dynamic composition of diagonal lines, not present in conventional horizontal views. The reader, losing his own horizon and spatial reference points while looking at the image, was sucked into its depth. While this happened, he or she was transformed not only into a spectator but also into a participant of the scene, placed on top of the building (see Varnedoe 1989: 220–222 for more on this topic). This could only lead to a heightening of the emotional response, which was enhanced even more by the fact that the scene was taken from a building that one could actually climb on (and fall from), and not from a balloon (which represented relative distance and safety). As such, and together with the absence of workers, the reader-spectator-participant became now the protagonist of the scene.

The common understanding of having to be on the spot in New York to feel and grasp this new urban phenomenon was actually quite usual at that time and was expressed by French visitors *The New York Times* interviewed, such as Stéphane Lauzanne, editor of the Paris *Le Matin* newspaper ('See "How A French Editor Looks on New York City"', 1908) and other French tourists (Fig. 12). For instance, one French tourist of 1902 wrote on a postcard depicting the Park Row Building that 'you must see indeed that this building is very high – but very high is not a big enough

word in order to explain what it is like. You have to see it for yourself' ('The Park Row Building, New York', 1902). On another postcard sent in 1913, the sender wrote that 'it is a formidable impression to feel oneself at the foot of these imposing buildings' ('Trinity Church, New York', 1913). In essence, *L'illustration* and *Le soleil de Dimanche* provided some images for the readers who could not easily make it to New York, and these images certainly represented some of the strongest experiences one could imagine at the time.

If we examine more precisely the *L'illustration* article from 1907, entitled 'La ville des "gratte-ciel"', the text reveals the (invisible) Singer Building as its central subject. It also uses hyperbole to add to the spectacle in the full-page photograph (Fig. 2) of the view from the building looking downward at lower buildings and Broadway far below: 'The city seems to have been taken from a balloon, the buildings crushed, the highest domes almost reduced to the size of warts, fumes floating as light clouds at the top of the buildings' ('La ville', 1907: 199). Nevertheless, these words, which appear eight pages after the image, are clearly secondary to the image. Also, while the Singer Building was the reason for this article to be published, it was no longer the building itself that counted but rather what its height could offer the viewer. In the same year, *La vie illustrée* published a photograph of Manhattan taken from New York Bay. While spatially and formally the photograph was not as dramatic as the plunging views, the short accompanying text confirmed that the image was a more precise tool for describing its surroundings: 'Better than words, photography can give an impression of this upright city' ('L'aspect nouveau', 1907).

This method of letting photography impress more than words came to its culmination five years later in *L'illustration*. While the 1907 photograph taken from the Singer Building had been published far ahead of the explanatory text, which, although it emphasized the visual experience, was fundamentally not necessary anymore, the 1912 photograph taken from the (also invisible) Woolworth Building towards the bay, accompanied only by a caption, demonstrated even more effectively that an image could tell its own story (Fig. 13). With the image enlarged as much as possible over a two-page spread and, for the first time, no additional text printed in the following pages, it was clear that the urban spectacle had swallowed up all the other previous approaches to the skyscraper in order to construct one image that was as breathtaking as possible. In an attempt to bring everything together, the caption printed alongside the image included numbers and records, but also an explanation of how these formerly 'monstrous objects, [. . .] now that we have become used to them, possess beauty and, with their countless windows [. . .] through which the light passes as if it was lace, [. . .] have their own elegance and style' ('Le quartier des immeubles géants', 1912). This was more a confirmation of what the image could do rather than a courageous invitation to finally accept this new urban landscape.

The Woolworth Building, which officially opened in 1913, replaced the Singer Building as the latest, tallest,



Figure 12: Two postcards sent by French tourists. Left: The Park Row Building, New York (1902). Right: Group of skyscrapers next to Trinity Church, New York (1913). Both from the author's collection.

skyscraper to report on. However, here too, the wish to offer the reader an immersive experience rather than an object-oriented one explained why the building did not appear in the image. For the journals, the buildings' primary outstanding quality was not the image of the building itself but that its height allowed a unique view outward. Just as the Eiffel Tower was the only blind spot of the total optical system of which it was the centre, to paraphrase Roland Barthes (2002), each tall building, from the Singer Building to the Woolworth Building (with the Metropolitan Life Tower chronologically in between these two) was at the centre and New York the circumference.¹⁷ This again put the reader in the position of the protagonist.

Ultra-Modern Perspectives on Buildings

The French illustrated journals for general interest from around 1900 saw spectacular news in the New York skyscrapers. Amongst other characteristics, these buildings could astonish, produce shivers, offer exciting views, and even provoke fears for one's life. If the journals did publish quite extensively on this new building type, it was less out of reporting duties than out of the fact that the spectacle

was sold copies. But while the journals tried to benefit commercially from the thrill and awe provoked by skyscrapers, it is also true – and this is the main conclusion of my analysis – that they invented perspectives on architecture that had previously not been in use but would come to represent a major contribution to the modern perception of architecture and the city. Within these perspectives, the early approach by numbers and records quickly widened to incorporate more and more elements that were supposed to enhance the emotional experience of the reader.

As has been shown, this development can best be understood through an analysis over time of the word-image relation in the published articles. The diachronic analysis presented here is the key for understanding that even the most groundbreaking photographs were all part of a dynamic editorial context with the common aim of selling the news, and not part of an isolated personal agenda nor of a local city branding strategy (Blake 2006). The words used in the articles, when not reduced to giving technical details or written entirely on another subject or event, played a specific role: they either painted a mental image of what could not be seen in the graphic image, or explained the image and what had to be viewed.



Figure 13: Lower Manhattan seen from high up the Woolworth Building, from *L'Illustration* ('Le quartier des immeubles géants', 1912: 80–81).

Ultimately, however, the innovative and forceful expressions of the photographic images ended up outdoing the words, inverting the traditional hierarchy of the text as the main document and the image its accompanying illustration.

The developments presented in this article occurred over a period of less than sixteen years. They went from unillustrated, general information on a building type, to information on specific buildings, and finally to the increasing disappearance of the buildings serving as viewing points in favour of the spectacle offered by the cityscape and represented in large spectacular photographs. Chronologically, these different approaches in naming (or not) and showing (or not) buildings did partly overlap. However, they evolved to construct, over time, a dynamic and increasingly complex view of a particular architectural phenomenon: the skyscraper being built in New York and disseminated in France. Surprisingly, all this was achieved without including a single plan or section in the publications, and, except for one case where the architect was of French descent, without citing an architect's name. Only the information mentioned on building records came close to what was typically published by professional architectural journals such as *La construction moderne* or *L'Architecture* in the same period. The way the word-image relation evolved to convey an experience in *L'Illustration* and others marks a major shift in the understanding of the built world, away from the environment and language

of architectural experts and toward sensations obtained through emotional responses.

Except in three cases (all in *L'Illustration*), the photographs were all published without their authors' names. They were taken, published, and considered as pure press products and not as works of a specific author, let alone artist. New York was the news and reporters informed readers about it with increasing fascination and innovative perspectives. And since *L'Illustration* was also distributed in the US, those plunging views in particular may well have influenced the way American photographers themselves, and particularly Alvin Coburn, would photograph the city some years later.

In this article I have shown that it was by offering the public this particular quality of spectacle that *L'Illustration* evolved a genuinely modern perception of building and city: a perception based on unusual viewpoints and strong sensations and emotions, rather than on academic beauty and its conventional tools of representation. The journals — especially *L'Illustration* but also *Le soleil du Dimanche* — can be credited with inventing an ultra-modern perspective on what some of the French observers of that time, in an attempt to distinguish New York from the urban modernity that had developed in Paris, called an ultra-modern city.

To exemplify the split that took place between the language, aesthetics, and understanding of architectural experts on the one hand and the general public on the other, I conclude with *L'Architecture*, one of the

professional journals mentioned at the beginning of this article. The journal printed one major exception to its typical way of publishing buildings. In 1908, in one of its columns entitled 'Courrier des États-Unis', the journal's correspondent Paul Nelson presented the proposition of Ernest Flagg and the principal architectural societies to establish setback rules for the tall buildings of New York (Nelson 1908). Nelson supported this idea since it would help improve the 'safety and the appearance of the city'. He illustrated his column with a plunging view down from the top of the (unnamed) Singer Building. But while we have seen that this kind of image had been used in French general-interest journals to provoke stark emotions in readers, it was used in *L'Architecture* for its ability to reveal from above what was wrong with the accumulation of objects depicted, in this case the city made up of buildings that were too bulky. So even when a new and spectacular photograph did penetrate into the professional realm of the architects, the intent was not to provide the viewer with an emotional experience but only to illustrate the critique expressed in the text.

This episode emphasises not just different perspectives but the different realities and preoccupations among professionals and the general public in this period as well. While the preoccupations of the French press and its public produced unusual and spectacular ways of viewing buildings that are still in use today, I would argue that these methods are evidence of a culture of architectural and urban perception developing through the eyes of the general public rather than through the eyes of the architect. The pre-eminence of images over words also marked the beginning of sensationalist reporting on architecture that had ceased to have a genuine relation with the reality of the reader. The urge of the general-interest journals to use architecture to provoke emotional responses eventually prevented the reader from obtaining knowledge about the building and thus distanced the public further from the published architecture.

Competing Interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

Notes

- ¹ *La construction moderne's* first article to include information (and also an image) on American skyscrapers was published on 15 September 1888 (Osborne 1888). A short text on two unnamed but 'exceptionally high' buildings in New York was published two months later ('Maison à quinze étages', 1888). *L'Architecture* began coverage of the same topic six years later, on 20 October 1894, also with an illustration (Bocage 1894). At that time, and for several more years, these 'skyscrapers' were still being referred to in the American press as 'high buildings' (and as '*hautes maisons*' among other terms in France). Nevertheless, since the semantic and symbolic differences between these notions do not affect my argument, and to simplify reading, I will use the term 'skyscraper' throughout my article.
- ² With the exception of the skyscrapers caught in the 1906 fire in San Francisco.

- ³ For the emergence from 1891 onwards in France of news on skyscraper and its repercussions on the urban debate in Paris, see Leitner (2009).
- ⁴ *L'Architecture's* first article on skyscrapers (Bocage 1894) was already illustrated by a photograph, but this combination did not appear in *La construction moderne* until 1908 ('Le plus haut sky-scraper', 1908).
- ⁵ While tunnels, bridges, train stations, superimposed networks of transport, boats, the metropolitan railway – and catastrophes connected to these – as well as strikes, elections, billionaires, snow storms, and heat waves made New York feature heavily in the French illustrated press, I concentrate on skyscrapers, defined for the sake of my article as buildings of 10 floors and more. For an analysis of the articles on other urban objects, see Leitner (2009).
- ⁶ Meir Wigoder (2002) insists that Coburn's *The Octopus* is the 'first urban abstraction from above'. As we will see later, this claim may now have to be revised.
- ⁷ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>.
- ⁸ My method differs strongly from analyses made by Gervais (2007) and Gretton (2007; 2010), who in their diachronic study of illustrated news magazines focus on the relation of text to image in a surface and page design logic, without any mention of content. Moreover, these studies are based on a selection of years only – for example, six months every five years in Gretton (2007) – which render the findings tendencies rather than representative results.
- ⁹ Lord Nordcliffe, director of the London *Times*, stated in 1908 that '*L'Illustration* is beyond question the leading illustrated paper in the world' (quoted in Marchandiau 1987: 188). See also Renou (1987: 7–26) and Guéry (1997: 86–87).
- ¹⁰ For a very general study of this evolution in *L'Illustration* towards spectacular images that ceased to be mere illustrations of words, see Gervais (2007) and Gretton (2007).
- ¹¹ This could explain why, after having published in 1893 a page of drawings showing (falsely) isolated skyscrapers in Chicago, *L'Illustration* suspended the publication of images of skyscrapers, beginning again in 1899.
- ¹² To my knowledge, this article was the first to use the French term *gratte-ciel*.
- ¹³ This was mainly the case for the Singer, the Equitable, and the City Investing Buildings, all situated on Broadway, as well as the Hudson Terminal Building on Church Street.
- ¹⁴ According to Dayot (1905), Hoffbauer's painting was inspired by a page of New York night views that he had seen in the German journal *Die Woche*. Among those views, two were those initially published in *L'Illustration* ('Effet de nuit', 1904).
- ¹⁵ As already noted in the introduction of this article, it was only in 1912 that Alvin Coburn took his famous plunging views of New York, namely *The Octopus*, *The House of a Thousand Windows*, and *Trinity Church*. On Coburn, see for instance Helmut and Alison Gernsheim

(eds.), *Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer* (New York: Dover Publications, 1978).

¹⁶ It is surprising that this fact is not mentioned by Thierry Gervais (2007; 2013) in his otherwise stimulating studies on the overhead or plunging views in photography that were published in illustrated journals and especially in *L'Illustration*.

¹⁷ For a detailed study – without, however, the French sources analysed in this article – of the view from the top of skyscrapers in the early 20th century, see Wigoder (2002).

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