

# ARE AMERICAN CITIES GOING MAD ARCHITECTURALLY?

Ernest Flagg, Designer of the Singer Building and Other Skyscrapers, Says Our Taste Is Barbaric and Archaic—Loftier Towers Predicted for the Future.

**ERNEST FLAGG.**  
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**H**AVE the larger cities of the United States gone architecturally mad?  
Is there to be no limit to the craze for tall office buildings?  
At the recent convention of the National Association of Building Owners and Managers, held at Cleveland, Ohio, one member announced that plans have been drawn for a 100-story office building, 1,500 feet high, to be erected in New York City. Still another member boldly asserted that many modern office buildings in large American cities are "monuments to uselessness," and insisted that his assertion was not overdrawn.

Ernest Flagg, one of the best-known architects in this country, who designed the 47-story Singer Building in New York, the Congress Hall in Washington, D. C., and the Naval Academy buildings at Annapolis, Md., as well as many other famous structures, declares that the only limit to the height of buildings in American cities is a financial one.  
Many high buildings, he asserts, are built partly for advertising purposes. A building 2,000 feet high, he says, is entirely practicable, so far as actual construction is concerned. From the point of view of beauty, and also because very high buildings may shut off light from adjoining buildings, he is opposed to the erection of structures of unusual height. In the matter of taste, he declares that the American people are "veritable barbarians," while our architecture he characterizes as "smacking too much of archaeology." As to our artistic sense he proclaims it to be "undeveloped," while "foreigners scoff at the appearance of our cities, and justly, too."

From this it will be perceived that Mr. Flagg has decided opinions on certain subjects and does not hesitate to openly express them when asked to do so.  
"Is there a limit to the height of buildings in American cities?" Mr. Flagg was asked.  
"There is a natural limit—a financial limit," he replied. "It costs more to build a tall building than one of equal bulk spread over the ground. The higher one goes the greater the cost all the way down. Not only does the strength of the lower part have to be increased to support the great weights above, but sufficient lateral resistance has to be supplied to counteract the pressure of the wind. Moreover, the higher the building the more space is required on each floor for elevators, staircases, and supports, so there is a limit where it is not worth the expense to go any higher."  
"However, there are a great many concerns that build partly for advertising purposes. These calculate to make a profit in other ways than from rents. For such there is really no limit except base. If the base is broad enough it would be a rash man who would attempt to fix the limit on height. A building 1,500 feet is entirely practicable, so far as construction is concerned. If ocean steamships which are tossed about by the waves can be built nearly 1,000 feet long, it seems as if it ought to be an easy matter to build structures standing on a solid foundation, which are at least twice as high as these ships are long. I am opposed to high commercial buildings, however. I think it was a great mistake to ever have allowed them to be built."

"Why are you opposed to them?"  
"Because they disfigure the city and shut off the light. It is too bad that such buildings should be built in small places where there is no good reason for them and where they dwarf into insignificance all the other buildings of the town."  
"But are not high buildings necessary on account of the great value of the land in large cities?"  
"I do not think so. It is the high buildings which have given exaggerated values to land in certain small areas at the expense of the surrounding districts. In these areas the value of the land is based on the earning power of tall buildings and it is taxed on this valuation; therefore owners of it are compelled to erect, or else build tall buildings and so help to congest the neighborhood and shut out the light from the streets and adjoining property. I regard the whole thing as an ill-advised experiment, which could only have been carried out in a place where public taste was at low ebb and where dollars outweighed all esthetic considerations."

"Most people think there is more excuse for high buildings in New York than in other American cities on account of the limited area of Manhattan Island, but I believe it would have been possible to obtain quite as much floor space by building over the whole area to a reasonable height as to build high in some places and low in others. The average height of the buildings of New York is not what most people think. It is much less, for instance, than in Paris. We have some very high buildings, but most of the area of the city is covered with comparatively low ones."

"Some time ago I took the trouble to find out what percentage of the area of the city blocks below Chambers Street was covered by buildings of ten stories or more in height, and found it to be about 12 per cent. If the congestion which one sees in some parts of this area exists when only 12 per cent. of the buildings are high what will happen when a much greater percentage of land is occupied by them?"  
"Henceforth the high buildings have been isolated and the light has played ground them; now they are beginning toicken each other and to shut out the light from the streets. The time has come to regulate them; indeed it came long ago, for as soon as the first high buildings made its appearance it should have been foreseen that provision to procure light for the buildings and streets would have to be made if others of the same kind were to be built."

"Should not the fact be taken into consideration that in large American cities the possible area for business buildings is very much less than in cities such as Paris, where the area is far greater?"  
"I don't know; but I do know that the streets of Paris are congested to the very limit of practicability. Perhaps our tall buildings, huddled together as they are, lessen congestion of the streets. If the

offices which now occupy a very small area of land in the high building district were spread out over a greater area it might cause greater congestion in the streets, especially if cabs were used by many in going from place to place as they are in Paris.

"Whether our high buildings are good or bad, we have them, and will continue to have them. Therefore the question which ought to be considered now is 'How can we make the best of them?'"  
"If 100-story buildings are practicable, why not buildings of 150 stories?" was suggested.

The same question of expense remains," said Mr. Flagg. "They would not pay; it costs too much to build them."

"Still, tall buildings in New York are paying investments, are they not?"  
"They do not pay a high percentage on their cost, and as matters now stand many of them are liable at any time to have their light shut out by other high structures, in which case they will pay less. It is perfectly astonishing to see with what utter recklessness millions of dollars are invested in these buildings by people who trust to luck for their light. Windows are placed on the lot line of adjoining property, where they are sure, in time, to be shut up."

This matter of light is becoming serious in New York. Something ought to be done about it at once, for as matters stand great injustice is being done to property owners, who are losing their fair share of light. At present there is nothing to hinder one owner of land from building up to the height of several hundred feet right on the property line of another owner and depriving his light. To be sure, the other man may also build, but if he does where is he to get his light from?"

"The other day I was asked for advice on the improvement of a Broadway plot. A sixteen-story building had been built on the lot line to the south of it. No building erected on the plot could be properly lighted. I believe that piece of property has been damaged to at least 25 per cent. of its value, yet this damage will hardly be considered in assessing it for taxation."

"I have suggested an amendment to the building law which I think would overcome this difficulty. There is no use of expecting any such limitation of height as will be effective in supplying light, so I propose a limit of area which a building can occupy above a certain height. The amendment I suggest is this:

"First—No building shall exceed in height the width of the street on which it stands except as herein provided."

"Second—On each lot there shall be a certain area on which no limitation of height shall be made, except as follows: (a) At corners an area bounded by the two building lines and by two other lines drawn parallel to them and determined as follows: From a point on the building line of one street at a distance from the corner equal to one-half the width of that street or open space on which the building faces draw a line parallel to the building line of the other street. (b) An area on each plot chosen at will and equal to 30 per cent. of the area of the lot, exclusive of any area which may be exempted under the preceding paragraph; but no portion of the building which may be built on said 30 per cent. shall extend beyond a line drawn from the center of the street, but in no case distant from the building line by more than fifty feet, and inclined toward the building at an angle of 10 degrees."

"Such a rule would allow any one all the liberty which is possible without overlapping the liberty of his neighbor. It would provide light for the buildings and streets. It would restore some degree of the appearance of the city which is being established uniform cornice lines. As the high parts of these buildings, being exposed on all sides, would be ornamented, they would give the city a picturesque and interesting appearance."

"The Singer Building may be taken as a sample of what I propose. The upper stories of such buildings would be rentable, owing to the hesitancy of the tenants to locate at such a height from the ground?"

"They have not shown timidity so far. The higher stories rent first because they have a grand view and better light. When the Singer Building was built it was about twice as high as the next highest building in town, and was the highest building in the world. It has forty-seven floors, all told, and the upper ones rented first. The tenants have never expressed any fear, and indeed, they have nothing to be afraid of. The building is stronger than necessary, there is no vibration in it even in a thunderstorm, which is about the severest test it can have."

"How far can building construction go in the way of height?"  
"I don't know, admitted Mr. Flagg, "but I do know that the ordinary method of wind bracing will have to be changed in buildings which are much higher than the tallest present structures. Wind bracing is done now in most cases by stripping the columns and using knee braces, which is a most extravagant method. The framework of a building of this kind should be treated as a great truss set on end, and have long away braces. The bracing of the Singer Building was done in that way, but I should carry the system much further in a taller building."

"Is it likely that legislation will be enacted making impossible the erection of buildings of such great height in American cities?"  
"I am certain that legislation will be enacted in time to provide light and air for buildings and streets, for we are drifting into an impossible condition. I suppose, at first, it will take the form of limiting the height, but the limit will be too high and will be found to be ineffective. No limit of height greater than once the width of the narrow streets, or once and a half the width of wide streets will be any use, but we will never be content with that in this country. When it



Ernest Flagg.

is found that a limit of height will not be effective, then I suppose a limit of area above a certain height such as I have suggested may be adopted."

"I do not know that they are. I don't agree with those opinions. I think it a waste of money to build a very tall building in a place where land is cheap, because it would be more economical to spread out and build a lower building of the same bulk. Perhaps this is what was meant by 'monuments to uselessness.' Some buildings are useful in one way and some in another."

"A building may be useful as an advertisement, as I have said. Now I understand that the pyramid on the Bankers' Trust Company Building, at Wall and Nassau Streets, which must contain space for six or seven stories, is to be without windows. The owners are willing to sacrifice that space to an idea. Perhaps in the future, when the novelty of the thing wears off, windows will be added."

"Foreigners scoff at the appearance of our cities, and justly, too. They see our darkened streets and darkened buildings. Having the clearest atmosphere with which

any city is blessed, they see us busily engaged in depriving ourselves of its benefits, and they thank God that the high building craze has not reached the shores of the Old World."

"But all American cities do not regard tall buildings a disfigurement?"  
"That simply shows a lack of taste and art on the part of the American people," retorted Mr. Flagg.

"Our artistic sense is undeveloped. There is no great body of amateurs here, such as is found in more refined communities, who are capable of analyzing our productions and placing them at their true worth. It is only a question of time, however, when public taste will become more cultivated, and when that time does come there will be a great crumbling of reputations which now stand high."

"Our architecture smacks too much of archaeology; it is not modern; we use modern methods of construction and an-

tique methods of design. Why do not people in the United States recognize that every great work of art which has had an unaged reputation was strictly modern when it was made? No copy or adaptation, no matter how cleverly done, can endure the test of time and stand as a work of art."

"We are veritable barbarians in matters of taste," declared this severe critic. "We ransack Europe for old fragments which, though they may be charming in their original situation, become little better than so much rubbish when set up in the midst of inharmonious surroundings. We deck out our houses and grounds with these things in precisely the same way and with as little regard to propriety as savages use when they array themselves with incongruous objects which they obtain from European traders."

"The savages which Henry Hudson, on his second visit, found wearing the hatchet heads he had sold them as neck ornaments present no more comical picture than our art amasses after done in his use of the spoils from European churches and monasteries."

"One sees gardens attached to shingled cottages decked out with marble seats, vases, and fountains taken from Italian villas. Houses in our cities are fitted up with fragments from European palaces which are as much out of harmony with the surroundings as a steam engine would be in a mediæval church. Sometimes whole interiors have been taken from a European building and set up here. Rich men's houses are turned into museums, where there are as many styles as there are rooms, all varring with each other and with the exterior of the building."

"We have been having a very carnival of vulgarity, and an ostentatious display of wealth and of bad taste by people who are regarded as leaders in refinement."  
"Unfortunately architecture in America is not in a normal condition. It is, indeed, in a most abnormal condition. In past ages architectural progress has been an orderly system of evolution. All building within a radius which was sometimes contracted and sometimes extended followed a common line of development. Change was gradual and fashioned varied as a result of the combined efforts of all the minds engaged on it, each builder trying to improve upon what he saw about him and working in a medium which he was perfectly familiar."

"With the great multiplication of books of travel and illustrations from foreign lands which began in the latter part of the eighteenth century, and which received such an impetus about the middle of the nineteenth century through the introduction of photography, when pictures of buildings in all parts of the world were placed within the reach of every one, the horizon of the builder was broadened, and, strange to say, with the most pernicious consequences. The architect was no longer satisfied to build in the style of his time and country and to try to improve upon what he saw about him; he found it easier to copy than to invent. With the flood of illustrations came the desire to reproduce for modern use the buildings of every age and clime."

"America was not the only place visited by this craze for incongruous types; it was, however, the one where the disease was perhaps the most pronounced, and where the results were the most comical. Even France, whose architecture has always been characterized among the nations of Europe by the greatest sobriety and good taste, and which not entirely escape the contagion, and under its baneful influence during the early years of the nineteenth century architecture in that country sank to the lowest ebb it ever reached before or since."

"In the United States, after the civil war, all the traditions which had given such charm to the productions of Colonial days died out and an era of bad taste and vulgarity set in which is only now beginning to give way under the influence of the French school, an influence which has been applied directly through our young men who have gone there to be trained, and indirectly through the numerous schools of architecture which have sprung up here as a result of its teaching."

"In the midst of this chaos and confusion, with public taste at as low an ebb as it has probably ever reached among people who pretend to be civilized, with architecture for the most part in the hands of men who had had little training in, or knowledge of, even the elementary principles of design, our new method of building was ushered in and we were called upon to deal with a problem the proper solution of which called for more technical and artistic skill than we possessed."

"If such a revolution in the method of building had occurred in a country where architecture was in a normal condition, or where architectural training was general and public taste cultivated, it is probable that the problem it presented would have been dealt with by our builders very much in the same way that the builders of Western Europe dealt with their great problem near the commencement of the thirteenth century. That is to say, they would have allowed themselves to be led by the methods used and, instead of trying to disguise their construction and clothe it in antiquated styles which were intended for buildings of another kind, would have let their work show how it was made and have sought to beautify it by inventing and using new and appropriate forms. In other words, they would have been truthful, and all good art is truthful."

"The time is at hand when the absurdity and bad taste of our past methods will be fully understood and freely admitted. We shall cease to wonder that cultivated foreigners are not favorably impressed by our tall buildings, and will set ourselves to work to make them as perfect and reasonable aesthetically as they are ingenious and daring mechanically and constructively. Sheet metal cornices, with profiles suitable only for stone, will no longer be used at the tops of towering structures, where they serve no other purpose than to shut out some part of the sully needed sunlight from the abyss below. Stagnant air which appears massive, but which is in reality only a thin veneer over the iron columns, will not be thought necessary. Terra cotta will be used in a legitimate way as a filling for panels where no strength is required, or as a covering for metal to protect it from fire, and will no longer masquerade as stone. Huge walls of masonry, which add nothing to the strength of the building and which must be supported at great expense by the

iron framework, will be dispensed with. The propriety of using colonnades and arcades as crowning features perched on the top of facades hundreds of feet high, where they belie the interior arrangement, will be questioned, and a hundred other features which are not reasonable will give place to forms which are suitable both to the material used and to the purpose for which it is used."

"When this happens we will make progress in the direction of good art and the creation of a National style capable of a reasonable explanation. But unless we take the matter in hand promptly we shall find ourselves outdistanced by the French."

"Although we have such a multiplicity of laws that it is a question whether the individual has not less freedom here than elsewhere on earth, yet every man's right to disfigure the city by the erection of eyesores and monstrosities along the street has never been questioned. Many of those who build avail themselves of this license to the fullest extent. We have in the United States high buildings and low buildings in indiscriminate confusion; buildings in every conceivable and inconceivable style of architecture side by side; buildings of every color, and every kind of material jostle each other in the wildest confusion. This is the American background for public buildings."

"Who that has seen the splendor of the palace of the Louvre, Paris, in almost startling contrast with the masterly monotony of the long, simple lines of the opposite facade of the Rue de Rivoli can fail to appreciate the immense importance which background plays in design when properly handled? Everywhere in the superb city of which the Louvre is an ornament one is forcibly reminded of this truth. Public buildings seen in contrast with the facades of uniform height and material, which are as much out of harmony with the surroundings as a steam engine would be in a mediæval church. Sometimes whole interiors have been taken from a European building and set up here. Rich men's houses are turned into museums, where there are as many styles as there are rooms, all varring with each other and with the exterior of the building."

"No such conditions can be found in this country. Wisely or otherwise, we have chosen our height and must continue in it. Our architecture must always be of a more fantastic kind and of a less sober variety."

"Our tall buildings represent no new style, but simply a new method of construction decked out in borrowed clothing. Although we have failed to win the applause of the rest of the world for the buildings, the most of us profess to take a certain pride in them, but it is doubtful if the feeling is very genuine. We have a sneaking inward consciousness that they do not belong to the highest type of art."

"This conviction is clearly enough shown in our treatment of public works. When an important public building is to be built, we instinctively reject the high building type and turn to the ancient models as most appropriate. Our architects are more at home and sure of themselves on this ground. They do not feel the same necessity for deception and disguise in design which they practice with the tall buildings, where almost every detail tends to be something which it is not."

"In buildings of the old kind construction and design go hand in hand; columns are real columns, and support what they appear to support. Walls are real walls, which perform the functions they appear to perform, and so on all the way through, and one rightly concludes that this kind of construction is more dignified than one which, so far as outward appearance is concerned, is a tissue of falsehood."

"But height in itself is certainly no detriment; it is not inconsistent with dignity; the very contrary ought to be true. The trouble is that we have not yet applied to high buildings the same truthful, simple, and artistic treatment which ages of experience have taught us to use in monumental buildings of moderate height. But the time will come when all this will be changed, and when it does come, I predict that public buildings in the United States will be carried to a still more amazing height than the tallest commercial building will be dwarfed by them."

"I have no doubt that heights approximating 2,000 feet will be reached within the next twenty-five years. For I see no reason why such heights should not be practical. The enormous weights involved will be carried by columns of cast steel of almost solid sections bolted together, and not built up of the rolled structural shape which we now use."

"New York City at the present time presents a striking example of the difficulties of the American method. For several years it has been trying to find a suitable site for its proposed new Court House."

"Instead of adopting the simple expedient of going a little to one side and condemning a large area in an inexpensive neighborhood, where enough land might be had not only for the Court House but for other public buildings of the future at a cost hardly greater than would be required for a site for a single building near the present City Hall, we throw away this opportunity to benefit the city by the development of a new centre which would in time become as valuable as the old one, and refuse to consider seriously any but the old locality for the new building. After years of deliberation and after recommending several other sites the commission finally in despair proposed placing it in the City Hall Park. Fortunately this raised such a storm of protest that it is doubtful whether the plan could be carried out. It ought to be accepted as an earnest of the placing of public buildings in small city parks or squares is always a mistake and should never be resorted to."

"The New York and Hartford, Conn., Post Offices are ever-to-be-regretted instances of this sort of folly. In Philadelphia one finds perhaps the most glaring case of all. Notwithstanding its immense cost, I do not think public money could be spent in any other way so advantageously for the improvement of the city as in the removal of the Philadelphia City Hall, for, standing where it does, it is nothing less than a monument to bad taste and a most conspicuous advertisement of the lack of artistic instinct in the people who permitted it to be put there. If the design were as good as it is bad and the building was the finest architectural creation of modern times, it could be nothing but a disfigurement to the city in being put out as it does, the square on which its stands and in destroying the vista of the streets which it obstructs."

"To me it seems the height of folly to expect any improvement in the appearance of our cities through the voluntary co-operation of individual property owners. That can only come with the millennium, when the artistic feelings in every man take precedence of the desire for gain."

"This is a strange country. We go quickly from one extreme to the other, and no one can predict what the future may bring forth."  
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