
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Decade in Architecture: Strutting Structures Soaring in Triumph

Overcoming a faltering financial recovery, architects have given us triumphant 'supertall' skyscrapers and inviting cultural buildings.

Michael J. Lewis



A decade that lurched in with a listless and faltering financial recovery now struts out, as far as architecture is concerned, in triumph. Not since the 1920s has there been anything like the flurry of competitive skyscraper-building now transforming the skylines of America's cities. This year has seen the construction of the Central Park Tower (1,550 feet) and the Steinway Tower (1,428 feet), both on West 57th Street in New York. Formally opened this October, Foster + Partners' Comcast Technology Center lords over the Philadelphia skyline and sports at its summit a 13-story Four Seasons Hotel (which also claims another few floors near the base). The planned Tribune East Tower, a tapered 1,422-foot fin of a structure that Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill have designed for Chicago, will be shorter but lovelier than all of these.



‘Supertall’ skyscrapers in New York, left to right: 111 W. 57th St. (Steinway Tower), One57 at 157 W. 57th St., Central Park Tower and 220 Central Park South PHOTO: EMILY ASSIRAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Such buildings are “supertalls,” which are arbitrarily defined as skyscrapers higher than 984 feet (300 meters). It is characteristic of the decade that this is the chief architectural term it has introduced into general usage, even as the previous decade popularized “green building.” But it is also characteristic of the decade that of its 10 highest supertalls only one was built in the U.S.—the Freedom Tower that replaced New York’s World Trade Center—and others in Asia or the Middle East.

The prestige of buildings of culture has not diminished. In New York, the new Whitney Museum and the vast expansion of the Museum of Modern Art have drawn considerable public attention, not all of it positive, while some of the most significant museum-building has gone on elsewhere. Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects transplanted the peerless collection of the Barnes Foundation from its intimate suburban setting to downtown Philadelphia, exactly replicating the original installation within an abstractly classical building. Just as ambitious, and successful, Moshe Safdie’s Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art has made remote Bentonville, Ark., an unlikely pilgrimage site.



The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York PHOTO: ED LEDERMAN

Quiet departures do not get the same attention as boisterous arrivals, but they can be more consequential. It was well into the decade before architects began to realize that theory no longer seemed to matter as it once did. There was nothing to compare with the furious squabbles between postmodernists and Deconstructivists of a generation ago, and schools of architecture, once the petri dish of architectural theory, have settled into intellectual quietism. A 2014 symposium at Yale lamented that architects had lost their appetite for imaginative speculation about the future. Those perennial theoretical volcanoes—the proper form of social housing, the place of history in design, the metaphysics of civic space—have gone dormant, and what intellectual energy survives is concentrated almost exclusively on environmentally responsible design.



The Lower Manhattan skyline of with One World Trade Center at center PHOTO: RICHARD B. LEVINE/ZUMA PRESS

Doubtless the digitization of modern life has much to do with this. Architectural theory is a literary pursuit, and the buildings made by an iPhone-dependent architectural culture will differ from those of a book-reading culture. For one thing, the process of design will depend more on technology than ideas. The next trend is already well under way: the domination of design by BIM, the Building Information Modeling system that coordinates all aspects of design, construction and building maintenance. A certain homogeneity is inevitable, for all the superficial bows and gestures on the facade, and this may be the homogeneity we already see in New York's Hudson Yards, the definitive product of this ambitious and uncertain decade.