

GRACE AND SERIOUSNESS IN THE FLATIRON BUILDING AND OURSELVES

By Dale Laurin, RA

As an architecture student on my first trip to New York, I was excited to visit many buildings I had only seen in books. But none took my breath away—had me gaze in wonder and smile—more than the Flatiron Building.



Designed by the noted Chicago architect Daniel Burnham and built in 1902, the Flatiron Building is an early example of what was then an entirely new form of architecture—the skyscraper, which was made possible by two recent innovations: the structural steel skeleton—that enabled buildings to be higher and more fire resistant, and the Otis elevator—that made reaching higher floors practical for the people working or living there.

The Flatiron Building was quickly surpassed by others in terms of height and architectural innovation. Why is it then that *this* building, with its unusual shape, so narrow and high that it seems ready to topple, soon became—and a century later remains—one of New York's most beloved and photographed treasures?

Here, for instance, is a famous photograph by Alfred Stieglitz. The explanation of the building's popularity is, I believe, in what Eli Siegel writes about Grace and Seriousness in his great 15 Questions, "Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?":

Is there what is playful, valuably mischievous, unreined and sportive in a work of art?—and is there also what is serious, sincere, thoroughly meaningful, solidly valuable?—and do grace and sportiveness, seriousness and meaningfulness, interplay and meet everywhere in the lines, shapes, figures, relations, and final import of a [work of art]?

"Serious" describes the work of Daniel Burnham, who at the turn of the century was one of America's most influential designers. He was largely responsible for



the popular adaptation of classical and renaissance architectural styles which gave public buildings a feeling of stateliness and

grandeur. He does this with skill and ease at the Flatiron Building, in effect stretching a renaissance palazzo vertically, from a four-story limestone base, to twelve stories of orderly arranged windowed walls of terra-cotta, to a four-story top that has friezes, arcades and that great overhanging cornice.



But what makes this serious classical design simultaneously Burnham's most "playful, valuably mischievous, unreined and sportive" creation is the highly unusual building volume which his facades so forthrightly wrap around: a thin, 20-story triangular-shaped volume resulting from the need to make full use of a seemingly unbuildable site—shaped like an old-fashioned flatiron, where Broadway cuts diagonally across Fifth Avenue at 23rd St., leaving only a sliver of a city block that has a length of 197 feet and a width that tapers from 85 feet to 0. The result is something rare and wonderful in architecture: the classical facades give what could have been an awkward mass of stone and steel a grace, dignity, and elegance; while the flatiron shape transforms the classical elements from stodgy to playful.

The Flatiron Building is a beautiful refutation of the division most people make between the serious and sportive in themselves. Growing up, I prided myself on being a serious student. But I associated seriousness with being grim, and snobbishly felt I was above what I saw as the frivolous interest in softball and other games of my classmates, whom I made fun of in my mind. I learned from Aesthetic Realism that this contemptuous way of seeing people was the reason I felt increasingly heavy, empty, and humorless.

Through the kind, exact criticism I heard first in Aesthetic Realism consultations and then in classes taught by Eli Siegel that were at once scholarly and deeply delightful, I came to see that what I called seriousness was really a false sense of my dignity—a determination not to let the world shake me up in an "unreigned" manner I couldn't manage or control. A truly serious person—and a happy one—wants to know, be stirred and changed by the world in its fullness, in its aesthetic oneness of dignity and wildness.

Studying this was the beginning of large, beautiful changes in my life: a new ease and pleasure being with people; a real sense of humor instead of secret sarcasm; and for the first time, I *wanted* to play softball, and when I did, I had a ball! And my architecture got freer, more expressive.



As I thought about the Flatiron Building, and why it stirred me so much, I came to see more about how the oneness of grace and seriousness in art is a guide to the way of seeing the world that fully represents a person in life. The Flatiron Building is Burnham's most famous work, and I feel he was inspired by that triangular shape, and adapted the classical motifs in a joyful way. The shape, which could have been seen as restrictive, freed him to greater creativity.

There's a gaiety to the decoration—it's not strictly classical. For example, this is a description from G.E. Kidder Smith's *Source Book of American Architecture* (p. 319):

From the top down we find in layers a balustrade, a bold cornice, a band of maidens peeping out of blocks between windows, two-story round headed window framing, and finally a clutch of lion's heads—all in the four floors of the attic.



On the east and west sides Burnham has three rows of bay windows rippling out.



And the stone base of the building and the columns at the top have rustication or a heavy banding that makes for an effect of stripes, which also give the facades a jovial quality.



The building was certainly built for a serious purpose—to house the New York offices of the George A. Fuller Company—a Chicago contracting firm—and for a time it was known as the Fuller Building. But this imposing structure was also the inadvertent source of a most “playful” and “mischievous” phenomenon that inspired a memorable American slang expression. It seems that its considerable height made for sizable wind gusts along the adjacent section of 23rd Street that often lifted the long skirts of passing ladies, thereby attracting crowds of male spectators who were invariably told to “23 skidoo!” or “move along!”—by policemen.

One of the details I love most about the Flatiron Building is how Burnham neatly rounds off the acute angle of his great flatiron shape. Was this a mischievous attempt to visually transform this office tower into the prow of a mighty ship steaming majestically up Fifth Avenue to the "open seas" of Madison Square Park? Or is it a very serious attempt to soften its considerable mass—to make the great vertical edge between its east and west, sunlit and shadowy, sides both stronger and more delicate, graceful? It is BOTH. It's why the Flatiron Building is beautiful and—through Aesthetic Realism—so useful to our lives.



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