Alumni

City in the Sky

A museum celebrates New York’s tallest buildings.

By
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|
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"That’s what I call full-service architecture,” jokes Carol Willis ’79GSAS, an adjunct assistant professor of architecture at Columbia’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, as she greets the unlikely deliverymen—a pair of architects from Skidmore, Owings & Merrill—who are hauling an old desk into the construction site of the new Skyscraper Museum in Battery Park City.

A scholar who has explored the history of tall buildings, Willis is the driving force behind this latest addition to the New York museum scene. She has just arrived, via bicycle, for a construction meeting. Waiting to get started, she dashes about the crowded space, talking to contractors over the buzz of electric drills, watching workmen carefully maneuver the stainless steel cases that will eventually house exhibits.

Located on the ground floor of the Ritz-Carlton hotel, the Skyscraper Museum will have two levels and a mezzanine comprising 5,800 square feet of exhibition and office space, as well as a small bookstore. The museum will feature three or four changing shows each year along with, eventually, a core exhibit called “Skyscraper/City,” which Willis describes as a “definitive history of the skyscraper, with special attention to New York.” One of Willis’s Columbia colleagues, the architectural historian Hilary Ballon—a professor of art history and the chair of the Department of Art History and Archaeology—is assembling an exhibit called “Frank Lloyd Wright’s Towers” (only two of which were actually built), to be installed in the fall and sure to be a big draw. In another coup, the museum has arranged to display for two years Minoru Yamasaki’s original seven-foot-tall models of the World Trade Center towers.

Willis first conceived of the Skyscraper Museum in 1996. As founder, director, and curator, she has assembled a small collection of artifacts—photographs, maps, construction records, and an extraordinary inventory of historic postcards depicting skyscrapers, and the changing skyline, over the decades. For several years, the museum occupied, and mounted a series of exhibitions in, donated space that downtown landlords could not fill.

The move to a permanent home is due in large part to real estate developer Philip Aarons ’73CC ’76LAW, a longtime friend of Willis’s who is also a museum board member and founder of Millennium Partners. Among Millennium’s properties are hotels that operate under the Ritz-Carlton banner. When the Battery Park City Authority was soliciting bids for a project on an unused parcel in the neighborhood, Millennium proposed a hotel that would include the Skyscraper Museum as a public amenity, along with an outdoor plaza that would be home to public art on a rotating basis.

Just as the museum’s design work and construction management were donated (by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and Tishman Construction, respectively), Millennium donated the space for the museum. “We like to give back to the community in which a building is being built,” Aarons explains. A former director of New York City’s Public (now Economic) Development Corporation, he believes that a successful urban project is one that draws a broad segment of the general public. “If you build buildings that contain apartments and sports clubs and theaters and hotels and restaurants and shops all together, you’re really creating a positive urban environment for people who might otherwise choose to live elsewhere,” he says.

In locales ranging from Boston to Washington to San Francisco, Aarons adds, Millennium projects have “brought a lot of people back into downtowns by providing a really dynamic and exciting place to live.” The ground floors of other Millennium projects, including three residential towers in the Lincoln Square development (Broadway and 67th Street), feature popular retailers such as Barnes & Noble, Tower Records, and Loews theaters. But the Battery Park City project “is the very first museum contained in one of our properties,” Aarons says.

“What Carol has done is recognize the skyscraper as a uniquely American art form,” the onetime art history student notes. In terms of cultural significance, he adds, “just as frescoes were to fourteenth-century Italy, the skyscraper is to twentieth-century America. It’s wonderful to have a place where people can understand and

think about this unique American art form. I greatly admire the fact that Carol has been dedicated to this concept for a very long time."

Despite the countless hours she has spent building the museum from nothing, Willis also continues to study and teach what she calls contemporary urbanism—how current events and urban issues affect the expression of architectural ideas and the development of cities. Each fall, she teaches "Architecture, Planning, and Preservation: New York" in Columbia's Shape of Two Cities program, which uses New York and Paris as a backdrop for introducing undergraduates to architecture and urban studies.

Willis's 1995 book, *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago*, analyzes the history of the skyscraper not from a design perspective but in consideration of the financial and regulatory forces that drove skyscraper construction over the years. Here Willis writes about New York's 1916 zoning law, which forced new buildings to conform—for the first time—to something other than "raw capitalism." In subsequent decades, the book explains, economic conditions and public regulation interacted to create the modern city of today.

Once the museum is up and running, it will touch on these phases in a way that is "very content rich and interpretive," Willis says. "I'm happy to serve people from the street and get as many people to visit and come to understand the basic ideas of a city where the density of the streets relates to the quantity of activity in the sky." The main exhibit, designed to engage visitors for about 45 minutes, will serve as a "primer to see schemes of skyscrapers," Willis says. "Then you can walk out and read the city in a more intelligent way."

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