

SKYSCRAPER NATIONAL PARK

taught by N. Kernell

This course offers a survey of high-rise architecture from the Tower of Babel to Burj Khalif—and perhaps beyond, since something taller than the pride of Dubai is already on the boards. I will also fold in several bridges, world's fairs and amusement parks, since these are connected to the development of the skyscraper in ways few people would imagine. Ditto lilies and orchids, believe it or not. We'll start with ancient swagger buildings like the Pharos of Alexandria, move on to the London Crystal Palace (not a skyscraper at all) and the development of construction with prefabricated frames, which came into their own with the Chicago Fire and Chicago School—a dignified name for what happened in architecture locally when too many people were losing their chance to make too much money. Next up, the Beaux Arts style, whose classically proportioned hands of marble kept a stranglehold on American architecture in the decades following the runaway success of the Columbian Exposition (1893), staged, of all places, in that crucible of utilitarian design, Sweet Home Chicago. Eventually, classics fatigue set in. How many times can architects ape the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus or the Campanile San Marco on an exponential scale? The Chicago Tribune wanted the most beautiful office building in the world and held a design contest. A medieval knock-off won the prize but the runner-up got all the buzz and the victor's admission that the wrong man won. The zig-zag rhythm of American cities in the nineteen twenties and thirties, now known as Art Deco style, began with that silver medalist's setback plan and a zoning law limiting the height, or rather the mass, of tall buildings. But the Bauhaus crowd was waiting, some would say lurking, in the wings. After the second War Walter Gropius and Mies "Less is More" Van der Rohe moved front and center, where they and their no-talent myrmidons remained for thirty years before there was even a choice. They are still around, as anybody knows who has shuddered at that leggy bore, taller than the empire State Building, that recently topped out in Manhattan. You can see, can't help seeing it from EVERYWHERE. But more and more less is more seemed less and less. How often can you stand a float-glass flower box on end and rhapsodize over "zen-like austerity"? Setbacks and signature crowns—dutch gables, Chinese moon gates, Chippendale-style broken pediments—are back. Let's have some fun out there! Architecture has a history spanning millenia—use it! A skyscraper can look like a pagoda (Jin Mao) or a Malaysian house (Petronas Towers). Architects can consult Feng Shui diviners (I.M. Pei, Bank of China). A building is not an abstraction of teutonic high seriousness. It should schmooze with its neighbors (DG Bank) and honor their design history (AOL Time-Warner Center). Echo Deco rules! I forgot to name this take on high-rise architecture; it is called Postmodernism.

Pictured at right, the so-called mile-high skyscraper designed by Frank Lloyd Wright based on a plant shape from the décor of his Dana House. When Wright dreamed it up. The Mile High was impossible to build with existing technology. It is possible now but unfeasible, since a ride to the top in its external elevators within a realistic time would probably burst your eardrums. But that's not really the point, is it? The Babel-builders would get it.

