



X Marks the Spot: Occupy's Architecture

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By JAMES GRAHAM



“Wars and panics on the stock exchange,
machinegunfire and arson,
bankruptcies, warloans,
starvation, lice, cholera and typhus:
good growing weather for the House of
Morgan.”

—John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, 1938

Before it was Zuccotti Park, it was Liberty Plaza Park. The old name reflected the realities of Manhattan real estate, binding the park by association to the building that stands just north of it: One Liberty Plaza, a 54-story tower that necessitated the park's very existence. The Park formerly known as Liberty Plaza, surfaced in granite and shaded by honey locusts, was a result of New York's idiosyncratic zoning laws, in particular a provision dating to 1961. Known in bureaucratic parlance as a POPS, a “privately owned public space” — a phrase that blithely overlooks the inherent contradictions masked by its cheerful acronym — Liberty Plaza Park came into being as a tradeoff, a civic amenity provided in exchange for more generous zoning on the remainder of the property. From the start, the three-quarter-acre park's sole reason for existence was to allow One Liberty Plaza's architects to design a taller tower, rising at nearly an acre of columnless interior per floor. That those designers were Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (SOM), the preeminent architects of corporate capitalism in postwar America, is one indication that the longer history of the site — beyond the two months of occupation that gave it an international audience, and beyond whatever happens next,

The city, for its troubles, received \$365,000, a new subway entrance, and two slivers of land for the widening of Cortlandt and Liberty. An existing north-south street, Temple Street, was closed and removed as a part of the zoning allowance.

now that the barricades surrounding the park have been removed — provides a glimpse into why the park proves such potentially compelling territory for a rethinking of the public realm.

Before the tower was One Liberty Plaza, it was U.S. Steel. Again, the restoration of the older name unravels something of its role in the urban economy — this time, signaling the financial origins that brought the building into being. The United States Steel Corporation was the world's first billion-dollar conglomerate, once known on the New York Stock Exchange simply as "The Corporation" in deference to the vastness of J. Pierpont Morgan's interests, virtually co-extensive with industrial capitalism itself. U.S. Steel built its downtown tower between 1969 and 1973, a time of significant construction in Lower Manhattan even as the city's social and physical infrastructures were embarking on a protracted decline. The Corporation trades on the Stock Exchange floor under the slightly ominous ticker symbol "X" — that prototypically anonymous signature, indicating anything and nothing at once.

Do you remember what U.S. Steel looks like? Very possibly not. A matte black monolith, only slightly less austere and cryptic than the one in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, one might be tempted to call it a paragon of the supposed "semantic silence" of the post-Miesian skyscraper, a term most often associated with the Seagram building at 53rd and Park Avenue. But U.S. Steel speaks, if sotto voce. Its oversized structural steel girders form a relentlessly modular exoskeleton that provides clear-span floors inside, and those beams advertise the very material that helped construct Morgan's wealth. While the more famous "House of Morgan" is sited in neoclassical splendor a few blocks south at 23 Wall Street, the giant at Broadway and Liberty offers a more candid, if perhaps less overt or opulent, depiction of magnate capitalism. SOM does not display it on their website.

Before there was U.S. Steel, there was the Singer Building, a different building altogether this time, occupying only the southwestern portion of the block on which U.S. Steel would sit. Designed by Ernest Flag, a devotee of Beaux-Arts ornamentation, the Singer Building was belatedly completed in 1908. Its snub-nosed, needle-like tower was added on top of Flag's already existing fourteen-story base from 1899 — an "architectural afterthought," as Rem Koolhaas has it, that briefly made it the tallest building in the world. Singer sold the building in 1961 to move to Rockefeller Center. The buyer was the developer William Zeckendorf, who in turn sold the site to U.S. Steel in 1964, just a year before the establishment of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Committee. The Singer Building's removal began in 1967, with the LPC powerless to stop it; at some 47 stories and 600 feet high, it was (and remains, even after the Deutsche Bank) the tallest structure ever peaceably demolished. The only two taller buildings to have ever been destroyed were those that rose just across Church Street during the same years that U.S. Steel was under construction.

John Dos Passos reserved a rare disdain for J. Pierpont Morgan; his name stands in as a metonym for an entire ecosystem of industry and finance. In 1919, Dos Passos recounts how Morgan and his cadre helped stave off the Panic of 1907, a run on credit that the government was powerless to alter. That it fell to private capital and not national monetary policy to keep the system liquid was an imbalance in economic might that soon led to the creation of the Federal Reserve. Dos Passos describes Morgan's role in this civilian exercise of financial power with a heroic if bitter metaphor, tempering his critique of the aggregation of capital with a sublime feat of large-scale engineering: "The interwoven cables of the Morgan Stillman Baker combination held credit up like a suspension bridge, thirteen percent of the banking resources of the world." It is a lovely but discomfiting image: The slender delicacy of those tension cables that held the nation's finances in over dark waters (and they were certainly cables of steel) make a marked contrast to the girded skyscraper on the north side of Zuccotti Park. SOM's tower, far from the fluid equilibrium of a bridge built to bend and resettle in response to circumstance, is a self-conscious depiction of structural immutability, an architectural claim that the Corporation is here for the long haul.

Zeckendorf is perhaps best known in New York for assembling the properties in Turtle Bay that would eventually become the United Nations.

"Architecture seems obliged to become a spectre of itself. It is as if it were in this way expiating an original sin, which is nothing other than its own claim to the right of informing — solely with its own disciplinary means — the primary structures of the city." —Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*

Or, rather, more infamous, in that it was the site of a 1920 anarchist bombing that killed dozens, and whose pockmarks are still visible on the stone façade.





photo | View of World Trade Center construction from Isamu Noguchi's *Red Cube*, May 1973, U.S. National Archives (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/usnationalarchive>)

The Singer Building was doomed as soon as Zeckendorf bought it. Having made his fortune gathering and packaging properties, his methods here were unexceptional. This was one of dozens of deals and demolitions that reshaped Lower Manhattan in the 1960s and 1970s, but the specific reason for his interest in the site is notable. Wall Street had grown cramped; in the 1950s, each major financial institution was “living with its hat on, ready to jump uptown,” as Zeckendorf put it in his autobiography. And so he engineered a number of real estate transactions designed to keep the major players downtown — the “Wall Street Maneuver,” it was called — and offered his own startling vision for nothing less than a new stock exchange, filling the block that the Singer tower was part of, and then some. His architect, Henry Cobb, of what was then I.M. Pei and Associates, designed a “beautifully tapered Mayan temple” swooping up from a massive base containing a new exchange floor located in the vast column-free interior three stories above the street. This was enabled by hanging the 40-odd office floors from taut cables that tied the floor plates to the roof, a tower’s worth of bankers suspended over the new stock exchange in an ongoing structural drama invisible to the eye. Zeckendorf used Cobb’s plans, highlighting his novel use of structural steel at a time when concrete was gaining ground in highrise construction, as a selling point when he unloaded the property to U.S. Steel, later complaining that they built “a most conventional structure” when compared with Cobb’s more dramatically shaped silhouette and innovative use of tensile steel.

But U.S. Steel is not so banal as Zeckendorf would have it. The clear-span interior is structurally notable in its own right, and the façade offers an enigmatic interplay between transparency and opacity. From the street, the tower’s envelope appears impenetrable; the ground floor’s

photos | Ernest Flagg's Singer Building / Henry Cobb's Financial Place / SOM's U.S. Steel



It's fitting, this turning point. Had Zeckendorf been successful in luring the NYSE away from Wall Street, then the Occupy encampment would have been located quite precisely at the doorstep of its rhetorical target. But had untapered U.S. Steel never been built, there would have been no legal need for the plaza that became Zuccotti Park, a whim of zoning that the occupation needed to survive for its two months of residency. Capital may be mobile, and markets immaterial, but the urban and architectural embodiment of the "very sensitive and defensive institution" of Wall Street, as Zeckendorf called it, was decidedly neither — and so the block bounded by Broadway, Church, Liberty, and Cedar was cleared and marked with the "X" of U.S. Steel. Even now, as the public image of Zuccotti Park oscillates between retrospection and immediacy, with the tug-of-war over the park's "publicness" still ongoing despite the clearing of the encampment on the morning of November 15, 2011, Occupy's experiment in laying claim to the space of the city has much to say about the relations between architecture and the practice of public speech, between the built environment and the construction of political narratives.

cartoon | Thomas Nast for *Harpers Weekly*, 1881, via Paleofuture



The site of U.S. Steel was a subtle but oddly perfect scene on which to stage a conversation about the architecture of finance and the city. It was also an impossible one, framed by an architecture that resists translation into images from the

glass is recessed deeply in the shadows, compressed below a low, heavy girder. Instead, the tightly glazed, double-height second story draws the eye. But stand next to it and look up, and you can't see the glass at all above the third floor; the upper floors close themselves to view when you approach, and only by moving away from it do the fins allow sightlines in. It is visually accessible only with distance and perspective, opaque up close. The effect has a beauty to it. This reversal in the very nature of the New York skyscraper — moving away from the demonstrative "scrambled alphabets," as Dos Passos put it, of the early metropolitan towers like the Singer Building, toward the laconic abstraction of U.S. Steel — marks a critical shift in how a skyscraper is read as urban scene.

“The absolute stasis of the grid, its lack of hierarchy, of center, of inflection, emphasizes not only its anti-referential character, but — more importantly — its hostility to narrative. This structure, impervious both to time and to incident, will not permit the projection of language into the domain of the visual, and the result is silence.” —Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*

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level of the street. The corporate architecture in question intentionally projects an air of taciturn inevitability, a gridded form that revels in its own silence, like the grids of avant-garde painters who purposefully offered no symbolic content to relate to or oppose. It retires from the civic view even as it insists on its place in the city. Such is the potency of the U.S. Steel building — that we turn our eyes elsewhere, even as the public conception of the property it sits on is transformed through action. As we continue to think about what it means to occupy the city in the broader sense, and as Zuccotti Park continues to be contested in less dramatic ways, we have to be all the more attentive to the histories and even twists of fate that gave us those spaces we have, or those spaces that might have been but weren't. Their subsurface valences have to be made as central as their symbolic content, especially at a moment when the public discourse around architecture's capacity for representing historical and political circumstance remains in the realm of absurd metaphors — the erection of a 1776-foot-tall tower, say, as an adequate nod to Manhattan's most profoundly charged construction site. If the campsite in the shadow of the House of Morgan taught us something about the architecture of the city, it's that we need to look again (or look for the first time) at something like the U.S. Steel Building, from the present and from the street, to see how we found ourselves here.

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