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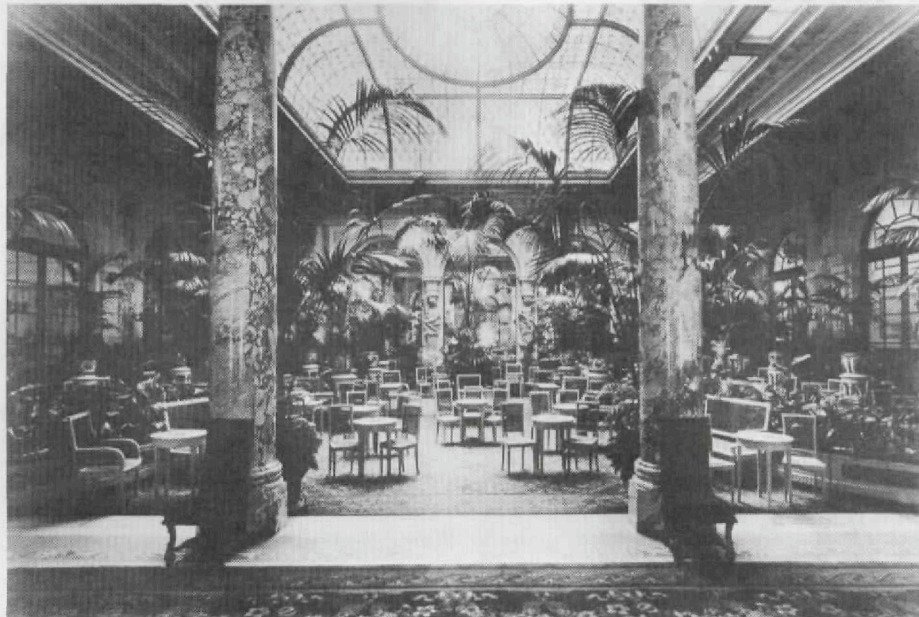


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Citations



Plaza Hotel Tea Room, 1907, Henry Janeway Hardenbergh, architect (Photo from New York 1900, published by Rizzoli, New York)

**The Emerging Metropolis:
 Its Visionaries, Builders,
 and Critics**

New York 1900 — Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism 1890 - 1915 Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin and John Montague Massengale, New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1984, 520 pp., 500 illus., \$60.

Reviewed by Mark A. Hewitt

A great city is nothing more than a portrait of itself, and yet when all is said and done, its arsenals of scenes and images are part of a deeply moving plan. As a book in which to read this plan, New York is unsurpassed. For the whole world has poured its heart into the city by the Palisades, and made it far better than it ever had any right to be. Mark Helprin, *Winter's Tale*

How does one begin to study and write about a subject as vast and complex as the history of New York, or indeed of any world metropolis at the turn of the century? The task must be daunting to even the most erudite historian, yet it has proved to be an irresistible challenge. Rizzoli International has recently published the third volume in a series of books on major world cities in the year 1900 — Robert Stern's long awaited book joins studies on Paris by Franco Borsi and London by Alastair Service. Like those tomes, *New York 1900* is full of large-format, archival photos of great buildings long ago demolished, visionary schemes never realized, familiar monuments in unfamiliar settings, parks, bridges, city plans, and countless other pictures of a great city expanding to form the vast and awe-inspiring construction we know today. But unlike London and Paris, cities which reached maturity before the advent of the 20th century, New York was in 1900 forming itself into the paragon of urbanism in our time, the center of the world's economy, and finally a symbol of the modern age. All of this makes the work of the New York urban historian even more important, and more difficult.

The best recent studies of modern cities have come from historians, less interested in the architecture of the metropolis than in its overall culture, the politics and economics of its planning, or the changes it has wrought upon society. Carl E. Schorske's *Fin de Siècle Vienna* (New York, 1981) brilliantly weaves together literary criticism, art history, social history, and architectural history in a series of related essays which explore the cultural milieu of a city embroiled in the death of a dynasty and the birth of modernism. Norma Evenson's award-winning *Paris: A Century of Change, 1878-1978* (New Haven, 1978) analyzes the mechanisms of planning and growth in transportation, housing, streets, and other manifestations of transformation in the complex fabric of Paris. These books deal with architecture and the overall form of cities in a relatively cursory way. The Rizzoli books are fundamentally pictorial records of the architecture of cities, albeit written by distinguished architectural historians, and the problem of developing a methodology for analyzing complex urban form and a vast array of emerging building types has not been solved definitively by any of the authors in the series.

Stern and his coauthors, Gregory Gilmartin and John Massengale (both young architects who have collaborated with him on past writing projects), present the architecture of New York in a vast narrative, organized roughly according to planning, building types, and neighborhoods. Rather than using a selective and personal approach to the treatment of the subject, or constructing a circumscribed analytical framework, the authors offer an ambitious chronological and interpretive schema in the introductory chapter by briefly outlining three stages in what they call "The Age of Metropolitanism," which extends from the Civil War to about 1940.

"Metropolitanism describes a complex geographic and social ideal in which the city supplied the same services and benefits as the nation as a whole," they write, using a definition inspired by Herbert Croly, who saw New York as "a concentrated and selected expression of the national life." The year 1900 was the apogee of New York's rise to cultural pre-eminence in America — by 1940 one could argue that the city had ceased to be a mirror of the country as a whole, and had instead become something of a cosmopolis or nation in its own right. One misses in the introductory chapters an orientation to the physical form of New York in 1900 — how it differed from the city we know today — and an introduction to the key personalities, critics, planners, and architects in the story about to unfold.

New York 1900 is merely the central volume in a projected three-part study dealing with the entire metropolitan age, and treats only what the authors call the "composite era," from 1890 to 1915, centering on the creation of Greater New York in 1898. Here Stern borrows from another eminent critic of the period, Marianna Griswold Van Rensselaer, who saw New York as "a composite of memories and artifacts" at the turn of the century. Stylistic pluralism was a condition of the time which the book trumpets in its hundreds of style-oriented descriptions — it is a mirror of its subject in more ways than one.

"Our intention is not to sit in judgment, but rather to let the period make a case for itself," the preface states. Though that intention is laudatory, the "composite" methodology which is meant to support it ultimately makes large portions of the book tediously encyclopedic and nearly unreadable. In a dense 500 pages the reader is confronted with hundreds of descriptions of buildings, most illustrated in period photographs, many simply described verbally. The writing is polished, at times incisive and lively and at times dry — one senses three hands at work. But the decision to record nearly every building of any significance within a given typological category lends a fragmentary quality to the book. Moreover, the schema which is presented in the introduction eventually gets lost in the giant survey of buildings. Another facet of the book meant to support the intention to let the period speak for itself, the extensive use of quotations from the writings of leading critics of the

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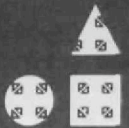
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time and sources such as *The Real Estate Record and Guide*, proves to be problematic. Croly, Van Rensselaer, Montgomery Schuyler, Russell Sturgis, and Barr Ferree were all important critics whose writings give us a deeper understanding of New York's architecture in its historical context, but the sheer volume of quoted material in *New York 1900* becomes disorienting and the fact that little interpretation of the quotes is given by the authors seriously dampens their effectiveness. The authors also present stylistic labels, such as "modern French," as they were used by critics of the period rather than using current terminology. But, finally, the plethora of styles too becomes confusing. All in all the book reads like a large and well-researched catalogue, and perhaps that is how it must be judged.



The Flatiron Building, 1903, Daniel H. Burnham and Company, architect (Photo courtesy New York Historical Society)

As a pioneering study and reference work then, there is much to praise in Stern's book. The photographs are plentiful, large, and well-chosen. Revealing views of lower Manhattan during the first decades of skyscraper building, lavish interiors of hotels and theaters no longer standing, plans and drawings of familiar buildings such as Warren and Wetmore's New York Yacht Club of 1899, and dozens of fine pictures of East Side townhouses and apartments stand out in my mind. Each major chapter, divided according to groups of building types, is introduced by a short historical and interpretive essay - these are the most interesting sections of the book, particularly the essays on hotels, theaters, apartments (following a previous study by Stern), and neighborhoods. The development of both the Upper East Side (Billionaire District) and the West Side is covered in depth, with particularly astute analysis of how fashion, individual whim, and real estate speculation helped to create these distinctive areas between park and river. The outer boroughs of Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island are essentially not covered (except for a short section on suburbs). The text is annotated with hundreds of footnotes - mostly citations from architectural magazines of the era making it an important reference. Subsequent researchers will be a little frustrated by the lack of a bibliography cross-referenced to these notes. Perhaps a later edition will remedy this.

Ultimately, however, *New York 1900* will leave both the general reader and the specialist bewildered by the lack of a unified thematic thread or point of view, by its fragmented structure, and by its failure to evoke the spirit and character of America's greatest city in one of its most exciting eras. The subject is, after all, tantalizing, rich, and diverse - almost mythic - and we expect even a scholarly study to give us a taste of what it was like to be a New Yorker during the "banquet years." John Kouwenhoven's *Columbia Historical Portrait of New York*, to which this book will be compared, lets the photos do all the talking and yet manages to be superbly evocative. There are no people in the photos in the Stern book; we merely see one crisp, static architectural view after another. This, like the dry, descriptive tone of much of the writing leaves one wanting the sense of a personality to the book to match and illuminate the spirit of *fin de siècle* New York. We have indeed poured our hearts into the myth of Gotham during the *Belle Epoque*, and our own post-modern era bears a resemblance to the composite era which Stern discusses. One wishes that this not-so-distant mirror were shown in all its gilded splendor. ■

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