It is not accidental that the jacket illustration of Rise of the New York Skyscraper, 1865-1913 by Sarah Bradford Landau and Carl W. Condit (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), is a postcard view of lower Manhattan, with the Woolworth Building’s tower looming beside the elongated typeface of the title and that the authors chose to include the building as the penultimate entry to their definitive book. Engrossed by commerce since the end of the Civil War, the country was receptive to the evocative imagery of Cass Gilbert’s design for the “Cathedral of Commerce,” the moniker assigned the building in its promotional literature. Although he disliked the comparison of his design with ecclesiastical architecture, Gilbert had sketched Gothic buildings—churches as well as civic buildings—in Belgium, and he claimed that the Woolworth Building was based on secular, rather than ecclesiastical, architecture.

In the seven chapters of this exceptionally thorough biography of the building, Gail Fenske examines the roots of Mr. Woolworth’s company, from his first five-and-ten-cent store in Utica, New York, to its development as the quintessential chain store it became; the place of the project within the City Beautiful movement and its location across from City Hall; the architect’s grounding in the Beaux-Arts tradition; the design evolution of the building and its prefiguring of the vertical style of the 1930s; its innovative structural engineering; the advanced technology and artistry of its interior spaces; and its iconic status and civic power among pre-Depression skyscrapers.

Throughout, the writing is clear, direct, and articulate. Handsome in all of its aspects, the book features wide margins (although a more generous gutter width would allow for easier photocopying and digitizing), high-quality coated stock, a suitable serif type, and numerous full-page illustrations. In addition to two appendices that list each of the Woolworth stores in 1910 and 1912, thereby illustrating the phenomenal growth of the company in two years, there are fifty-two pages of notes, an impressive bibliography, and a detailed index. Ample floor plans and sections accompany a generous selection of photographs and sketches, including a signature of twelve color plates that describe the evolution of exterior elevations, as well as a fan-vaulted Gothic lobby very different from the final domed design. For its Gilbert perspective sketch of Ely Cathedral and John Marin’s two interpretations of the Woolworth Building alone, the book is a wise purchase.

Although several monographs on Cass Gilbert exist, Margaret Heilbrun’s Inventing the Skyline: The Architecture of Cass Gilbert (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000) and Sharon Irish’s Cass Gilbert, Architect: Modern Traditionalist (New York, NY: Monacelli Press, 1999) among them, Fenske’s story of the Woolworth Building (which has outlived its eponymous company), for its depth and delight in its subject, belongs on the shelves of all architecture collections.

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