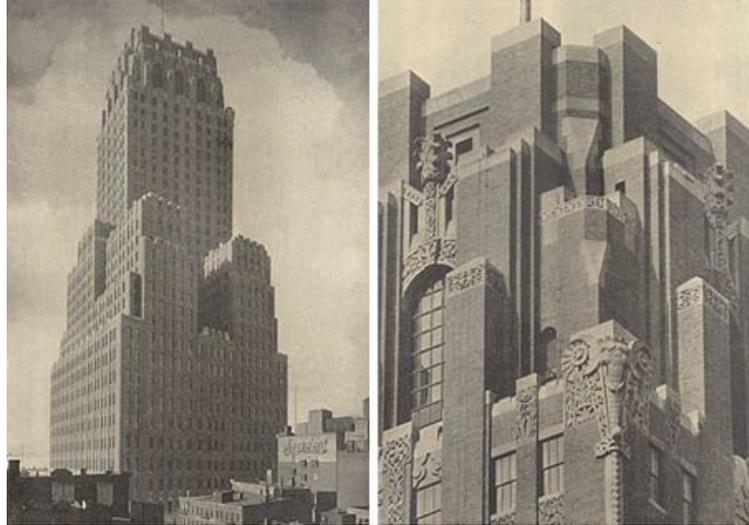


## Who is the Architect of the Century?

Patrick O'Neill April 8, 2012

“Architect of the Century” was the headline reporting the awarding of the American Institute of Architects’ Centennial Medal to Ralph Walker in 1957. Though no such claim could ever be incontestable, Walker’s many contributions to the architectural profession, and skyscraper design in particular, are widely recognized.



An exhibit at 212 West 18th street (formerly belonging to the New York Telephone Company, but in light of recent remodeling and marketing as a multipurpose high rise, now known as the Walker Building) highlights select works from his career. Though few outside the industry are familiar with his name, undoubtedly millions of New Yorkers have seen his buildings at one time or another.

The one-room exhibit covers the period of Walker’s life from 1917 to 1959 and four major works within that period: the Barclay-Vesey Building, the Irving Trust Building, his designs for the 1933 worlds fair in Chicago, and of course, Walker Tower.

If you can look past the shameless self-promotion of an exhibit whose featured architect designed the very building housing the exhibit and whose luxury apartments (coincidentally) go on sale this spring, you’ll enjoy a quaint and highly informative experience that includes period photographs, movies and sound clips, some actual art deco fittings from his buildings, and in the case of Walker Tower, an amazing interactive physical model where touch screen controls operate the lights in specific apartments up for sale this spring. The experience is greatly augmented by one of the better tour guides I’ve had the

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pleasure of listening to, being both highly informative and extremely receptive to visitors' questions.

So who was Ralph Walker and why should you care? Well, he is one of the architects whose body of work is highly representative of a bygone era. He's one of the icons of early skyscraper design, representing a gilded age in which vast sums were spent on the opulence of both the facade and especially the interiors of skyscrapers. (The stock market crash of 1929 curbed such displays of wealth). Early in the emergence of this new building typology skyscrapers were called cathedrals of commerce. A more apt nomenclature based on their entryways might be monuments to mammon.



It's a shame that many of these buildings now have restricted access in the wake of 9/11 since many of their lobbies are truly exquisite works of art that deserve to be admired and not just glanced at in passing between the street and the elevator banks.



Walker's Barclay-Vesey Building was actually damaged by the attacks, but has since been repaired. However, in addition to this distinction it is also considered the first art deco skyscraper ever built, and it is one of the first buildings to really take advantage of the 1916 New York zoning ordinance, which placed limits on a building's height in relation to its distance from the street in an attempt to make the city more habitable by allowing more sunlight to hit pedestrians.

Many of Walker's buildings (not mentioned in the exhibit, but easily spotted in their natural habitat by walking the streets of New York) are notable for their massive bulk and huge footprint, often occupying an entire city block and looking more like a small mountain than a construct of man. Construction on this scale is almost unheard of in New York today,

<http://newyork.thecityatlas.org/lifestyle/ralph-walker-architect-of-the-century/>

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partly because it's rare for any developer to be able to seize an entire city block, but also because Walker did a lot of work for the New York Telephone Company whose buildings had special requirements for the tons of mechanical equipment and legions of switchboard operators that needed to be housed within their bulk.

Skyscrapers are an American innovation and no city in America is more famous for its skyscrapers than New York. From the Flatiron to the Freedom Tower our history is preserved in our buildings. Exhibits like this one remind us not just of how our buildings have evolved, but also of the socioeconomic conditions driving that evolution. They are a window into our past and from habitability issues to economic downturns, they remind us that while the architecture has changed it has all been in service to the same issues that concern us today.

Admission is free, but by appointment only. Call 212-335-1800 to make an appointment or visit [ralphwalkerexhibit.com](http://ralphwalkerexhibit.com).