

Chrysler Building

405 LEXINGTON AVENUE » WILLIAM VAN ALLEN, 1930

THE CHRYSLER BUILDING was built at the fever pitch of the skyscraper's delirious development before the Great Depression, when midtown Manhattan resounded with jackhammers and pile drivers. It shows the extraordinary influence of German Expressionism on skyscraper design and the frenzied push for height that consumed architects of the 1920s. In this discontinuous, postmodern age, one can only gaze in wide wonder at the Chrysler's unified symbolism as a chrysalis between automobile and flying machine.

One of New York's most entertaining buildings, the silver-hooded Chrysler Building had its origins in the amusement parks of Coney Island. A real-estate developer named William H. Reynolds, who conceived of Coney Island's Dreamland, commissioned the architect William Van Alen to design what would have otherwise been known as the Reynolds Building. Reynolds's chief contribution was insisting that the building have a metallic crown, overriding Van Alen's objections.

The 77-story Chrysler was part of a mad-cap, three-way dash to become the tallest building in the world. Its rivals were the now largely neglected Bank of the Manhattan Company at 40 Wall Street, designed by Van Alen's ex-partner and archrival H. Craig Severance, and the Empire State Building. When Severance got wind that the Chrysler was going to top out at 925 feet, he added a 50-foot flagpole that made his building two feet taller, at 927 feet. Then, in August 1930, Van Alen unveiled his secret weapon—the "vertex"—a spire made of chrome nickel steel that was secretly assembled inside the Chrysler's dome and raised from within to bring the building's height to 1,048 feet. Van Alen's vertex had the distinction of being the first man-made structure to top the 1,024.5-foot-tall Eiffel Tower, which had reigned in solitary grandeur since the Paris World's Fair of 1889.

The Empire State and the Chrysler each had their own in-house photographer

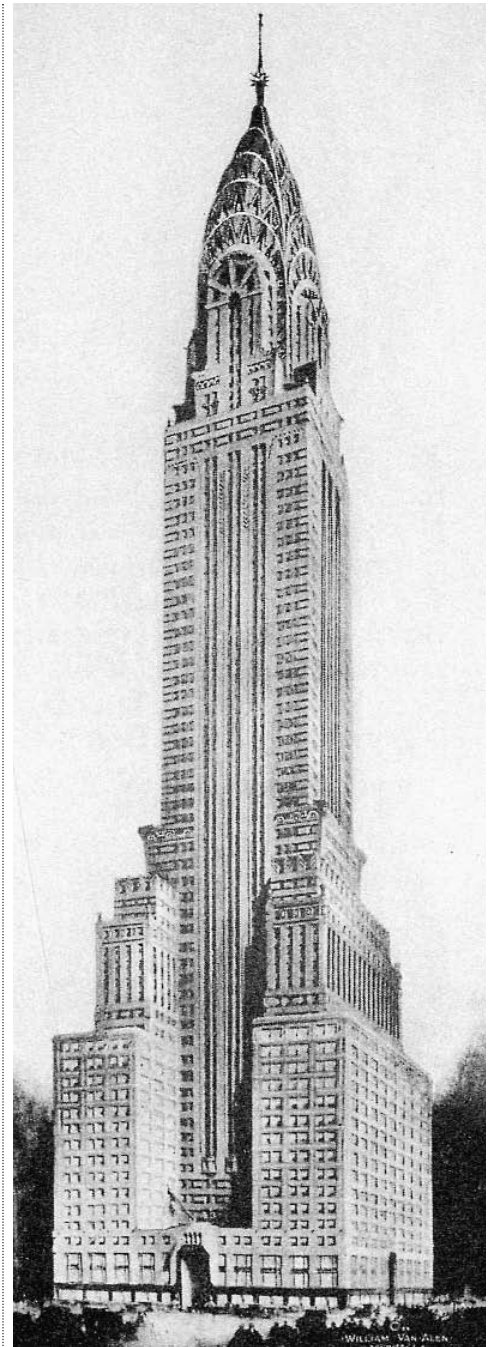
to publicize the race to the top. Lewis Hine took dramatic, social-realist-style pictures of the workmen poised vertiginously in the clouds for the Empire State. Margaret Bourke-White captured the strange, Gothic feel of the Chrysler's silver eagle heads glaring over the city.

The Chrysler's reign as the world's tallest lasted only 11 months, until it was topped by the Empire State Building, which opened in May 1931. Without its mast, the Empire State was only two feet higher than the Chrysler, at 1,050 (a 200-foot-tall mast brought the height to 1,250 feet, and a 204-foot-tall television antenna added in 1950 brought the overall height to 1,452 feet, 8-⁹/₁₆ inches, to the top of the lightning rod).

The world's record was broken again by the 110-story, 1,350-foot World Trade Towers in 1973–74, then later in 1974 by the 110-story, 1,454-foot-tall Sears Tower in Chicago. The title is currently held by Cesar Pelli's 88-story, 1,483-foot-tall Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, soon to be topped by Shanghai's 1,509-foot World Financial Center. The Sears still has the world's highest occupiable floor, 150 feet above the Petronas's, and the world's highest elevator ride. The tallest man-made object in the world remains Toronto's 1,815-foot Canadian National Tower, completed in 1975.

The Chrysler is surely one of the strangest office buildings designed for an American corporation. Its lobby is just short of a German Expressionist stage set. Folds of black Belgian granite drape the entrances like parting proscenium curtains, and metal zigzag motifs that look as if they could have been taken from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* run above the entrances. The triangle-shaped lobby is a dark, bizarre cavern of crystalline angles and indirect lighting behind onyx stone, more the kind of place to encounter a Valkyrie than make a business appointment. A representation of the Chrysler Building itself appears in a ceiling mural.

The original observation lounge could have been a film set for *The Cabinet of Dr.*



[1] This early rendering of the Chrysler Building shows an alternative crown.

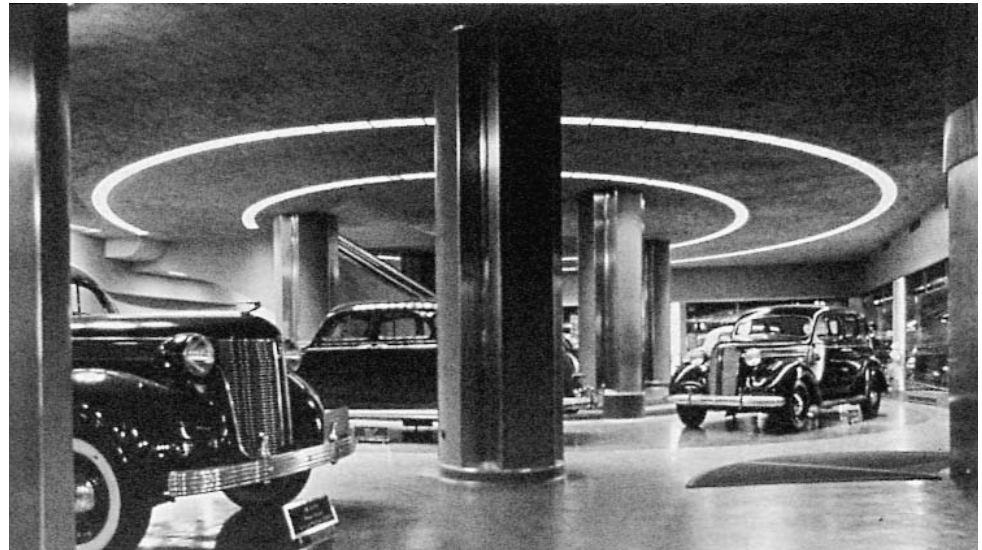


Caligari with its faceted ceiling, walls painted to resemble stars emerging in an evening sky, and Saturn-shaped lighting fixtures. The double-storied Cloud Club featured unobstructed four-sided views of New York, below the Chrysler's distinctive triangular windows. In the cigar room, Prohibition-era millionaires stashed their liquor in special caches below the tobacco-colored upholstery. Walter P. Chrysler slept in baronial splendor in a Tudor-style bedroom complete with a walk-in fireplace.

The building materials are luxe and exotic—red flame-patterned Moroccan marble, whose hectic layers seem to capture the spirit of the Jazz Age, and yellow Siena marble floors. The marquetry elevator doors and cabs are exquisite, a poem to recite: teakwood, Philippine mahogany; Cuban plum-pudding wood; English gray hawwood; African and South American prima vera; aspen, curly maple, and walnut from America; and Australian silky oak. The rich wood inlay is another literal representation of the automobile, because cars of the day often had wooden dashboards and trim.

Many attempts have been made to decode the Chrysler's façade, particularly the spire, which was derided by leading critics of the time as a "stunt design," with "all this inane romanticism, this meaningless voluptuousness, this void symbolism," an "upended swordfish," and as "Little Nemo architecture" referring to the futuristic comic strip. The thirty-first floor of the white-brick tower with gray-brick trim is decorated with a frieze of stylized motor cars surmounted by winged urns that evoke the radiator cap of a 1929 Chrysler automobile. At the next setback, eight giant metal eagle-head gargoyles guard the points of the compass like protective emblems on a medieval castle.

The leitmotif is of a car metamorphosing into a flying machine, or machinery becoming organic flight. Urns sprout wings, eagle heads are made of metal. In this context, the spire can be seen as a feather made of metal, with the triangular windows and patterned metal panels



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representing barbules and rachis. Whatever it represents, Andy Warhol summed up the skyscraper's essence in an insight both profound and superficial: "They look like money."

[1] The entry's zigzag lines resemble a German Expressionist dynamoelectric generator. [2] Car showroom on the ground floor of the Chrysler Building, 1936. [3] Andy Warhol said of New York's silver-trimmed skyscrapers, "They look like money." [4] 1937 model of Chrysler's Airflow sedan on display in the showroom.