

Art Project B: Analyze an Example of 20th Century Architecture

The Chrysler Building

Kristopher T. Marks, November 25 2002

In 1922 Walter P. Chrysler quit his job as an executive at Buick and started his own automobile company. His innovative designs were an immediate success with the nation's car-hungry consumers and by 1927 the Chrysler Motor Corporation was so large it needed a centralized headquarters building. Mr. Chrysler picked a plot of land in lower Manhattan which had been the location of a small goat farm some fifty years earlier and tore down the unremarkable four story buildings located there. Chrysler then hired architect William Van Alen and requested he design "a bold structure" giving the Chrysler company a higher profile in the business world and "declaring the glories of the modern age" (Damore).

Van Alen fulfilled that request, presenting Chrysler with plans for a 77 story building that would surpass anything previously constructed by human hands. Not only did the design fulfill Chrysler's requests, it eventually helped William Van Alen beat former partner and competing architect H. C. Severence to the goal of having designed the world's tallest structure (Zimmerman). But that height record was almost lost to Severence's neo-gothic Bank of Manhattan Tower (now the Trump Building), which was 8 feet taller than the Chrysler until Van Alen added a 180-foot-high spire to roof of his design (Chrysler, Zimmerman). That addition cinched history for the Chrysler, making it 1046 feet tall and the the world's tallest man-made structure. The previous height record had belonged to the Woolworth's building for 17 years, but the Chrysler only held the title for a few months from its May 1930 completion until the Empire State Building opened in 1931. Even today the Chrysler Building is the 17th tallest man-made structure on earth, the tallest brick building ever made, and (with the demise of the much-taller World Trade Center in 2001) has regained its claim to being the second tallest building in New York City. (Damore)

Unfortunately, William Van Alen was financially ruined by his Chrysler Building design. According to rumor Walter P. Chrysler refused to pay Van Alen for his services because he suspected that the architect had received money from several of the

building's contractors. Van Alen sued Chrysler but the case was eventually dropped and he apparently never received a dime for his work in creating the building. That financial setback combined with the economic depression led to Van Alen never again working on a major building, although he did design several smaller structures and some experimental homes made from steel similar to materials used in the Chrysler Building. (Zimmerman)

The Chrysler Building is more remarkable for its aesthetic design than for its incredible height. Van Alen and Chrysler built a monument to the industrial age and the blooming American auto industry, decorating the building's exterior with "hubcaps," massive wing designs modeled after Chrysler hood ornaments of the day, and abstract automobile designs. (Damore) Major exterior corners of the Chrysler Building feature large stainless-steel-plated eagles. Most people who see them assume that the figures are gargoyles similar to the ones found on gothic style structures, but Walter P. Chrysler specifically requested that his building incorporate eagles to symbolize the company's staying power. The eagles were eventually planned by Charles Bonestell, an architect famous for his contributions to the design of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. He later went on to paint scenes of planets, stars, and space travel for movies which have been credited for inspiring many of the scientists who were involved in exploring space during the 1960's and 1970's. (Durant)

Beyond those small details of the exterior, the Chrysler Building is most notable for its roof design. The stainless-steel curved roof with pointed windows in a sunburst pattern has made the Chrysler Building one of the most recognizable buildings in existence, and certainly the most distinct of New York City's many skyscrapers. The roof was originally intended to be lit at night, but budgetary concerns related to the Great Depression forced the builders to leave that feature out during initial construction. The building was never lit up as Van Alen intended until a set of original blueprints was uncovered during a 1980's renovation and the lighting scheme was finally implemented, 50 years after the fact. (Damore)

The Great Depression had more of an impact on the building's interior than its exterior. Financial troubles forced one of its most unique features, the sky-high "Cloud Club" restaurant, to shut down. The restaurant was soon followed by the Chrysler's

observatory, both of which were eventually torn out and replaced with more office space. The building's interior was allowed to slip into disrepair as it passed from one owner to another (eight total between 1930 and 2002), but in the mid-1990's its famous Egyptian-themed lobby and Edward Trumbull ceiling fresco were restored to their original condition. (Damore) Completing the building's return to greatness, Daimler-Chrysler, the remnant of Walter P. Chrysler's original company, signed a lease agreement earlier this year and will soon reoccupy several stories of the landmark structure. (Chrysler)

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