The Empire State Building: a Beautiful Study in Heaviness and Lightness

Dale Laurin, RA
Architectural Technology

Abstract: This paper is a critical consideration of one of the most famous structures in the world—New York’s Empire State Building, in relation to this landmark principle of Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded by poet and critic Eli Siegel (1902-1978): “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.”

Empire State, designed by the architectural firm of Shreve, Lamb, and Harmon, and built by the Starrett Brothers and Eken contractors, is a 102-story, 1,250-foot high structure which, on its completion in 1930, was the tallest building in the world—a record it held for almost 40 years. While usually recognized for its engineering and construction, through my study of Aesthetic Realism, I’ve come to see this building as a beautiful work of architecture, particularly because of the way it puts together the opposites of heaviness and lightness, as Eli Siegel writes in his 1955 work, Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?: “Is there in all art, and quite clearly in sculpture, the presence of what makes for lightness, release, gaiety?—and is there the presence, too, of what makes for stability, solidity, seriousness?—is the state of mind making for art both heavier and lighter than that which is customary?

Central to the building’s beauty is the way it asserts its tremendous mass in a way that is graceful, not overpowering. It seems to blend with the buildings around it in a friendly way. The mass itself has grace because of the form it is given. The structure rises from a simple five-story base, which is quite neighborly in its scale. But at the 6th floor level, the tower is pulled back generously from the street in a series of well-proportioned setbacks that at the same time seem to visually buttress its soaring mass. Does this tell us that we can assert ourselves in a way that’s graceful and proud when we want to respect what’s around us? The tower becomes slimmer as it rises, giving it lightness, even speed, that draws our eye higher and higher until at the pinnacle, all this matter becomes sheer space.

In this paper, I will also speak about aspects of the construction, particularly the planning, coordination, and skill of its huge work force, which at its peak numbered over 3,000 men—more than any project since the building of the pyramids. From excavation to completion took 13 months—a record time that has never been equaled for a building this size. Speed is on the side of lightness, and it must have been a stirring experience to witness the steady rise of the building’s heavy steel skeleton, which fortunately has been documented in photographs--some of which will be featured in this talk.