

# It's Tough Being a Young Skyscraper in New York

Images of the early days — and growth spurts — of Manhattan's most iconic towers.

The MetLife Building was born with an inferiority complex. Even before construction was completed in March 1963, critics called it ugly and unwanted. It was deemed an overgrown, traffic-snarling invader.

Even worse, the tower wasn't nearly the tallest one in New York, and the records it set smacked of desperation: Biggest air conditioning system. Highest helicopter landing pad. The building (originally named after its chief tenant, Pan Am) was the largest skyscraper in Manhattan in terms of square footage.

But even that seemed underwhelming when both the Pentagon and the Merchandise Mart, in Chicago, could sit on it and take its lunch money.

New York is a tough place to be a young skyscraper: Wonders have been built here.

By 1915, Manhattan was already a hothouse of architecture revivals and home to grand, wedding-cake masonry and gilt without guilt: the Park Row Building, the Flatiron, the Singer, the Woolworth and the Equitable, among others.

"The skyscraper represents capitalism's version of the impulse to build great monuments," said Jason M. Barr, an economist at Rutgers University, Newark, and author of "Building the Skyline: The Birth and Growth of

Manhattan's Skyscrapers."

In the late 1920s, in a towering ego-measuring contest made possible by advances in construction technology, three teams vied to construct the tallest building in the world. Walter Chrysler, at least, was self-aware: His tower, the automobile magnate said, would be "a monument to me." The Chrysler Building's 180-foot spire was constructed inside the building and hoisted at the last second to dash the dreams of 40 Wall Street, some 70 blocks to the south.

Within a year, another Art Deco marvel was looking down on the Chrysler. In March 1931, The New York Times reported on the completion of the "dirigible mooring mast" atop the Empire State Building, where (according to the

plan, anyway) passengers would de-blimp in 30 mile-an-hour winds and walk across a ramp to the top of what was then the tallest building on Earth. That did not pan out. Still, the Empire State retained its title until 1970, when the first of the twin towers topped out.

Manhattan has long since bowed out of the race toward space, in favor of going all-in on the luxury condo market, with its \$238,000,000 crash pads. "The economics of building the world's tallest skyscraper in New York — they just don't exist," Mr. Barr said. "The only way to do it is to get the government involved, and the government is not going to do that in 21st century." Instead, governments in Asia and the Middle East have aggressively followed the example New York once set. The Burj Khalifa in Dubai is now the world's tallest structure. The rest of the top 10 is dominated by China.

No one is crying for New York's skyline, because it has an extraordinary number of greatest hits. Asked if he had a favorite building in Manhattan, Mr. Barr laughed at the enormity of the question and named the Flatiron. "But you know another one I love?" he added. "No one talks about it: the American Radiator Building. It's very diminutive but there's a certain charm and elegance to it. In my opinion, Raymond Hood was one of the greatest skyscraper architects ever."

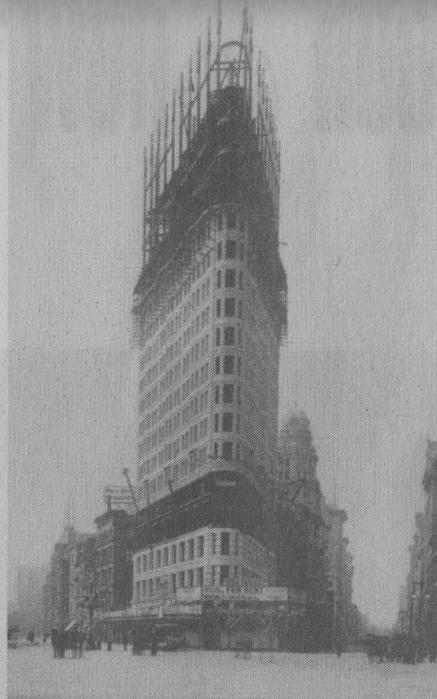
The Radiator building was completed in 1924. Three years later, it was painted by Georgia O'Keeffe, who was living in a Midtown hotel at the time. True, the building is just 338 feet tall. But maybe the only thing that can surprise us about a skyscraper these days is a little modesty. **JEFF GILES**

Above, from the top of 30 Rockefeller Plaza, you can see the Chrysler Building, mid-restoration. Rising to its northwest is the steel frame of the Pan Am Building — now the MetLife Building — in 1962. Below, a construction worker strolling along a frame.

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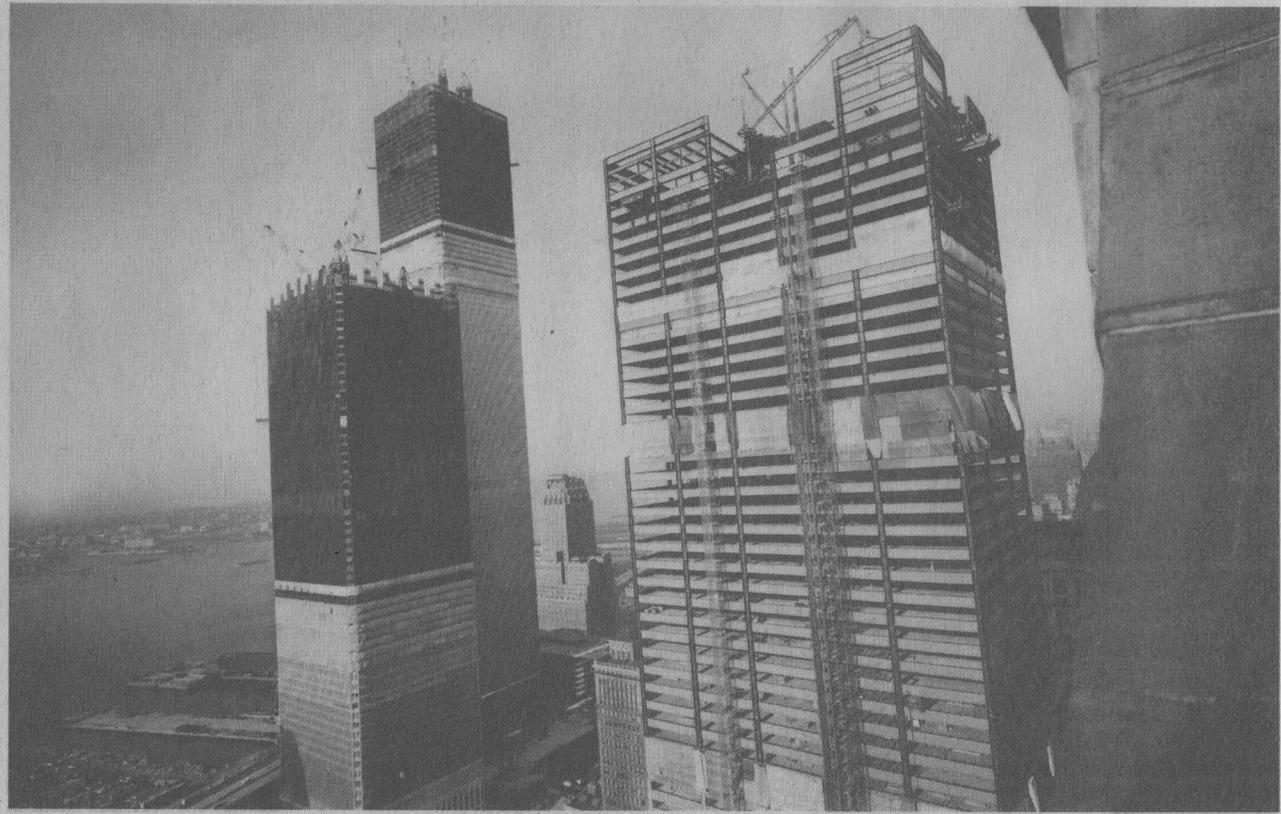


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From left: Construction workers taking a break and taking in the view down Park Avenue from the Pan Am Building in 1962.; the Flatiron Building rising above Fifth Avenue and Broadway in 1902; and the American Radiator Building, now home to the Bryant Park Hotel, in 1934.







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Center above, from left, the Empire State Building under construction in 1930, and the World Trade Center being built in 1970 — the year the north tower surpassed the Empire State Building as the tallest building in the world. Above, the Woolworth Building in 1912.



