

New York Stories

SINCE ITS HUMBLE BEGINNINGS AS A DUTCH COLONY IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, THE CITY OF NEW YORK HAS SERVED AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FOCAL POINT FOR THE UNITED STATES. NEW YORK'S BUILDINGS, EACH UNIQUE IN THEIR TIME, COMPOSE AN ARCHITECTURAL TAPESTRY THAT EMBODIES THE HISTORY AND ASPIRATIONS OF NOT ONLY THE METROPOLIS, BUT OF AMERICA ITSELF.

by RACHEL COHEN

photographs by ANA CAROLINA BOCLIN



Over the last year and a half, I have found myself arguing with lots of pictures of buildings, the buildings I feel I know from walking the streets of my city. You cannot, I have said to the images of Ana Carolina Boclin, try to tell me that the Woolworth Building sometimes looks yellow against a deeply blue sky—cream possibly, but never yellow. The columns on the New York Stock Exchange do not lean in the slightest, all those buildings downtown are perfectly vertical and, although obviously it is a nice effect, the Empire State Building is not an oblique sketch in a puddle. These are not the buildings of my New York, which are to be seen from the angle of my eye, standing straight amidst crowds of people, their edges blurry from the dust on my glasses. I have felt that each edifice is mortal, and this has made me more possessive and more insistent.

I love the way stone and glass and metal have become repositories of history in New York, the way the city—despite its habit of tearing down a large portion of its buildings every year—has

THE HARD EDGES AND DOMINEERING SPIRIT OF THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING (1929–1931), ONCE AGAIN NEW YORK’S TALLEST SKYSCRAPER, ARE SOFTENED IN A POOL OF FRESHLY FALLEN RAIN, FACING PAGE. THE FLATIRON BUILDING (1901–1903), ABOVE, WAS IN ITS DAY A DARING COMPOSITION IN COMPARISON TO THE DIMINUTIVE DWELLINGS AND CARRIAGE HOUSES THAT ONCE LINED LOWER BROADWAY. THE SOARING LINES OF THE WORLD TRADE CENTER’S TWIN TOWERS (1972–1973), BELOW, WHICH STRETCHED TOWARD THE HEAVENS, SYMBOLIZED SEEMINGLY ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES, NOT THE DEATH AND DESTRUCTION THAT WOULD BECOME THE SITE’S LEGACY.



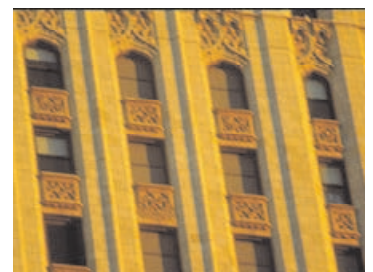
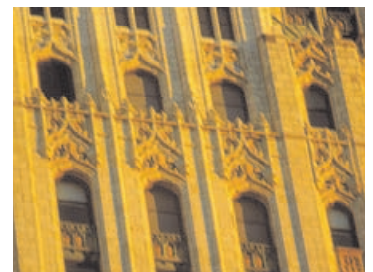
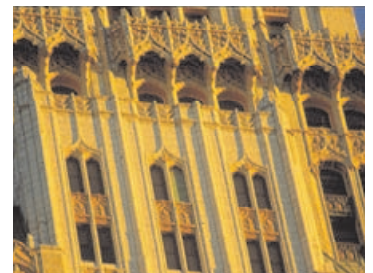
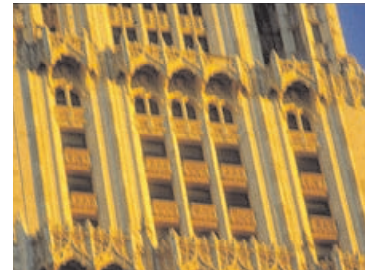
WALL STREET HAS SERVED AS THE FINANCIAL NERVE CENTER OF NEW YORK SINCE 1792, WHEN 24 BROKERS MET UNDER A BUTTONWOOD TREE, AT WHAT IS NOW 68 WALL STREET, AND FORMED THE FIRST ORGANIZED STOCK MARKET IN THE CITY. A GHOSTLY FIGURE OF GEORGE WASHINGTON PRESIDES OVER THE STREET OF DREAMS IN A TRIPLE-EXPOSED IMAGE, BELOW, WHICH INCLUDES THE FACADES OF THE NEW YORK STOCK EXCHANGE (1901–1903) AND FEDERAL HALL (1862–1925). FRENCH GOTHIC SPIRES UNBOUND BY OLD WORLD BUTTRESSES ATOP ST. PATRICK’S CATHEDRAL (1878–1888), FACING PAGE, STAND IN SHARP CONTRAST TO THE SLEEK GLASS MASS OF THE OLYMPIC TOWER (1977). AUDACIOUS IN ITS GRANDEUR, CASS GILBERT’S WOOLWORTH BUILDING (1910–1913), FAR RIGHT, WAS ONCE MALIGNED FOR ITS ECLECTIC GOTHIC DETAIL.

come to have more old buildings and a longer architectural memory than do many cities in the United States. In my head I have pointed out to Boclin that she is quite wrong to look at the Flatiron Building in sections—the thing about that building is its integrity. I would say to her, you have given the Flatiron newness, and what ought to be cherished in it is its oldness. I wanted the steadiness of my city’s landmarks.

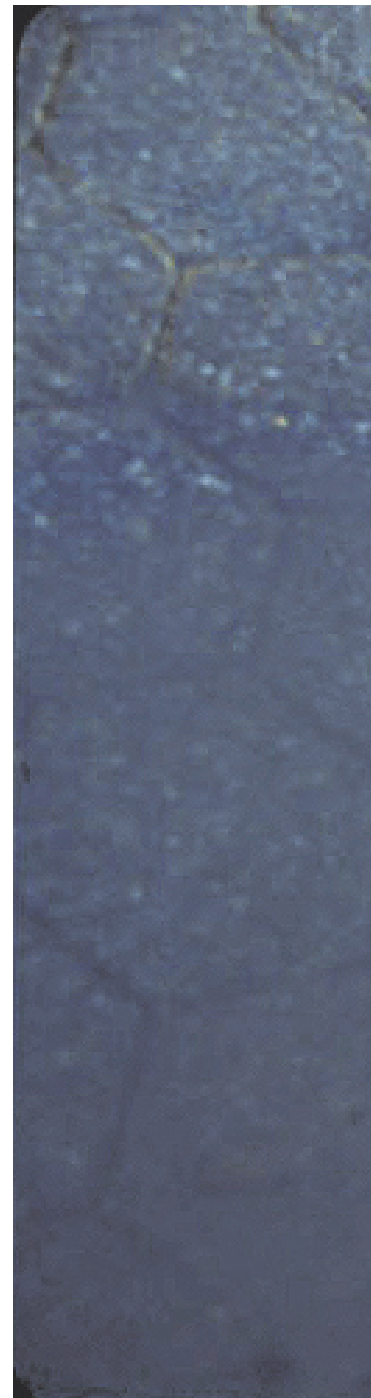
But not long ago, as I was looking at Boclin’s gray photograph of the Empire State Building and the clock pole distorted by the water, I remembered, almost despite myself, that when Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen photographed the Flatiron Building they were interested in its daring. Their photographs, the watery, blue-green images that have come to represent the Flatiron’s romantic oldness, were originally meant to show the triangular, white building’s striking contrast with the horse carriages standing on the street. I never pass the Flatiron Building without the pleasure of those images, and I have been, at other times, happy to marvel that newness and oldness are so easily transformed, one into the other.

After this I began to find, studying Boclin’s pictures, that I was thinking, yes, actually, that is someone’s New York, though I am still not sure it’s mine. I recognize the life of that city, thought it is not the life of my city. But those buildings are gray, and the blue and yellow umbrellas of





THE HULKING MASS OF THE ZIGGURAT-
INSPIRED MERRILL LYNCH BUILDING
(1986) AT 4 WORLD FINANCIAL CENTER,
ONCE OVERSHADOWED BY THE TWIN
TOWERS, APPEARS TO VANISH INTO
THE REGULAR RHYTHM OF
HEXAGONAL PAVING.



the pushcarts do look wonderful against them, and yes, there is a sense that new buildings slant in through the statues that herald their entrances. Now I am able to think, “Oh, isn’t that interesting, your version meets mine in a few places, and yours, too, is vital and specific; yours, too, does honor to the buildings we both know.” And this makes me wonder if I am coming to a later stage of mourning.

Each city is the million cities of the people who walk its streets and see its buildings every day. Each window is an office to someone and a surface to wash to another person and a reflection of light to someone else. Each door is a place to make a delivery or the beginning of a court case or a clean, rectangular line. The city of these pictures, Boclin’s city, has swoop and gaudiness and transience—and those are qualities of my New York, too, ones that I love and have perhaps been forgetting. I think to myself that part of the joy of buildings is their flexibility, the way their edges are sharp in certain lights and soft in others, the way they transform themselves in the face of their own mortality. And, still looking at the pictures, quite suddenly, I feel glad. ■



