

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Classic Skyscrapers Define New York. Take a Virtual Tour.

The epitome of the 'Mad Men' era, the sleek midcentury buildings of Park Avenue glimmer. Our critic strolls with the architect Annabelle Selldorf.



By Michael Kimmelman

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8 MIN READ

It's a metaphor for Manhattan, a synonym for "Mad Men," the apex of midcentury modernist New York. It supplanted some of the city's stateliest mansions with corporate palaces in blue glass and bronze. The Park Avenue School of Architecture is the term the critic Ada Louise Huxtable employed to define the "sleek and shiny" postwar skyline, which moved the concept of elegance, as she put it, "from domestic to professional life, from the apartment house to the office building."

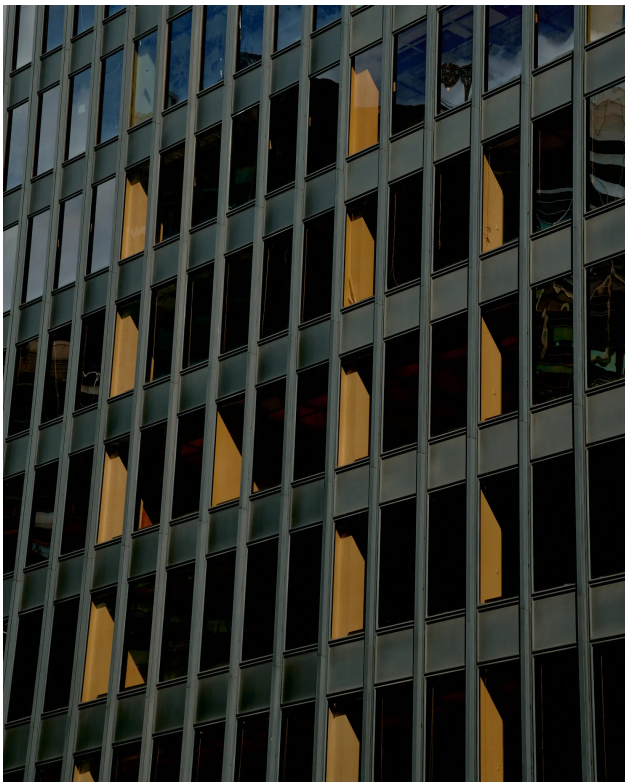
During coronavirus, New York endures and awaits. This latest entry in a series of (condensed and edited) walks around town with architects and others is the first of two exploring, Rashomon-like, some of the city's most famous midtown skyscrapers and commercial landmarks. As with paintings or people, there's no one correct way to look at buildings or the city. The two walks take different perspectives, an architect's then an engineer's.

Annabelle Selldorf moved to New York from Germany after falling in love with the towers of Park Avenue as a teenager. She founded Selldorf Architects in 1988. The firm has transformed the historical Miller House on Fifth Avenue into the Neue Galerie, designed the Sunset Park Material Recovery Facility in Brooklyn and is currently expanding the Frick Collection.

While New Yorkers are self-quarantining, I'm conducting the walks virtually, over the phone. They're also intended to be consumed virtually. Ms. Selldorf suggested a stroll along Park Avenue with a short jog to what used to be called the Citicorp Center a block away. She proposed we "meet" at 52nd Street on the pink granite plaza in front of the Seagram Building, the storied bronzed monolith from 1958 by Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson.



The entrance of the Seagram Building on Park Avenue. The storied bronzed monolith from 1958 was designed by Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



A detail of the bespoke gridded bronze and glass curtain wall of the Seagram Building. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Michael Kimmelman Why Seagram?

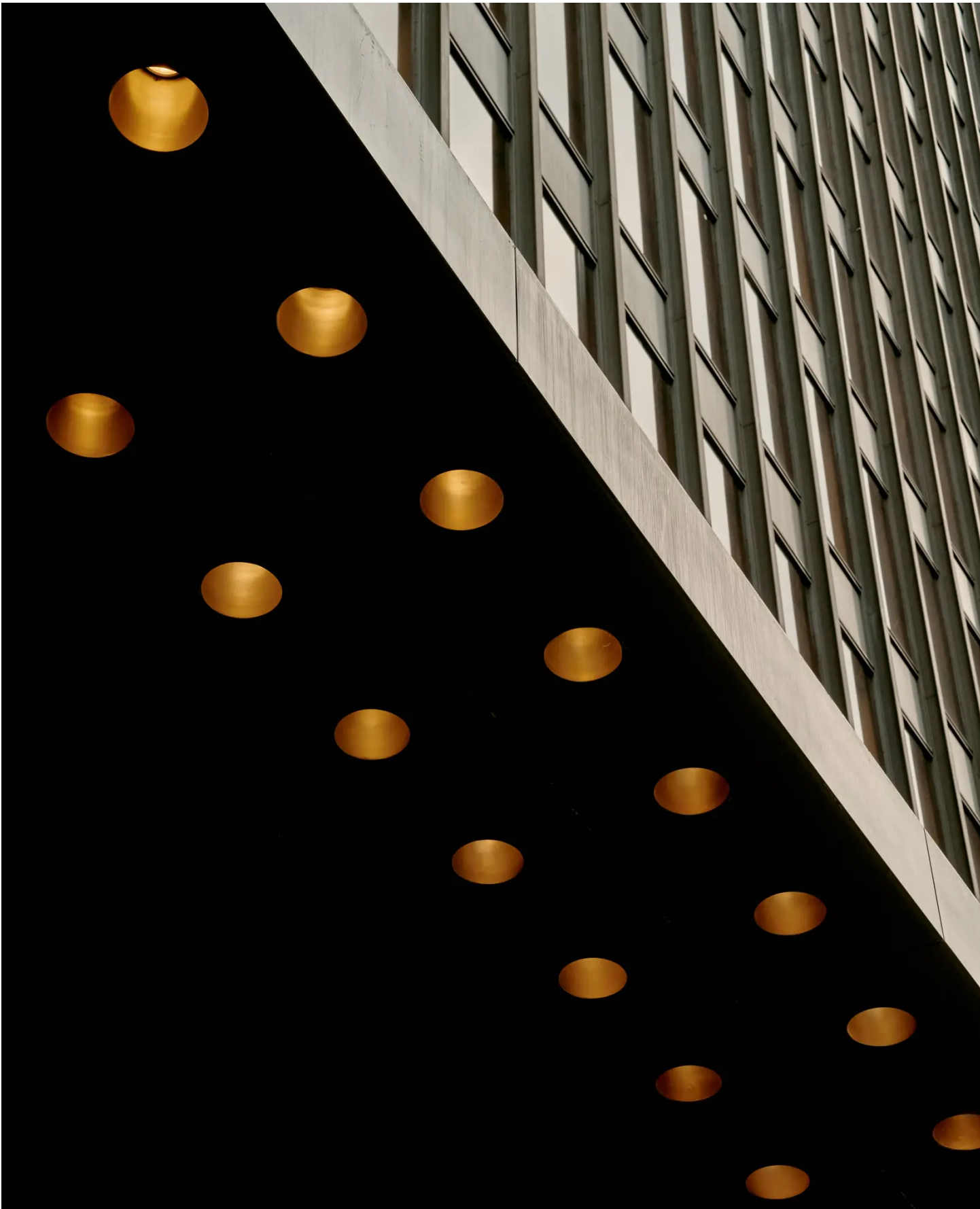
Annabelle Selldorf It made a big difference in my life as an architect. When I first came here from Germany, it epitomized for me New York as a modern city.

When was that?

In 1978 or '79, I can't remember the exact date. I had just finished high school. A friend picked me up at the airport and that same day we visited Park Avenue, which I knew only from pictures. In Germany, when you finish high school, you go straight on to study for the profession that you want to pursue, but I wasn't sure I wanted to be an architect. My father was an architect and he worked so damn hard all the time. The work didn't always seem that much fun, nor did it seem that you could be sure of making a living.

What kind of architect was he?

Mostly interiors. Modernist. In Germany, there was an urgent need to break with the past, so nearly every postwar architect was a modernist. But tall steel buildings like Seagram weren't common there yet. Cologne, where we lived, had been reduced to rubble during the Second World War, and the speed with which it was rebuilt made it an ugly, haphazard place. There was much bemoaning about the lack of planning and quality architecture.



The entrance to the building with its contrast of mosaic and marble. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

So Park Avenue looked the opposite to me. It had a kind of intelligence. It was a clean slate.

In the midst of a city that, during the '70s, was exciting but in shambles.

New York was a tough place. But that duality, the contradiction, made me fall even more in love. I was bowled over by how these two conditions existed simultaneously, the potholes and graffiti and boomboxes along with the gleaming, heroic towers of Park Avenue, like Seagram, with its elegance and hierarchy.

What do you mean hierarchy?

A simple example, if we cross the plaza and look at the gray mosaic ceiling of the entry canopy and the lobby, you see how Seagram sets up a kind of hierarchy of materials. Mies could have clad everything in travertine, but the contrast with the mosaic enhanced the building's refinement, it made the marble look more luxurious. The building is all about these refinements. I got to see how Mies orchestrated them from the inside years ago, when I started my firm. The second job I got was renovating Daimler-Benz's offices on the 30th floor of Seagram.

How karmic.

That's what I felt. It turned out there was nothing in the building too minor that Mies hadn't thought it out entirely. It's not an architecture that asks your opinion. Today we talk about whether architecture makes people feel welcome. That's a good question. Somebody could argue that Seagram represents the opposite, a kind of authoritarianism.

I don't know that I can disagree with that. Every tenant at Seagram has to maintain the ceiling treatment he prescribed — a 4-by-4 aluminum grid of Mylar sheets illuminated with one kind of fluorescent fixture. Over the years tenants have tried installing colored fluorescents but the Seagram police always comes around to stop them. You see the logic when you drive by at night and all the different floors are illuminated the same way.

I find the rigor and formality calming. It's a building in which you feel you can breathe because the spaces are so perfectly resolved.

I wanted to point out another very fine International Style building just south, 270 Park — it used to be called the Union Carbide Building. It's being demolished, which is truly sad. But on the way I have to mention the Pan Am Building, now the MetLife Building, because it's unavoidable.

Completed in 1963, partly inspired by the superrefined Pirelli tower in Milan by Gio Ponti and Pier Luigi Nervi. Alas, Pan Am is not as elegant, squatting on top of Grand Central Terminal. It was once voted the building New Yorkers most wanted to demolish.

Designed by Walter Gropius, Pietro Belluschi and Emery Roth & Sons. When I saw the building on that first trip I couldn't believe anybody would have the audacity to stick such a monstrosity in the middle of Park Avenue. It seemed like such a crazy, preposterous, brazen, terrible gesture — but at the same time, astonishing, like New York. I still find there is something unabashed and undeniable about it, which, after all these years, makes me feel almost a little sentimental.

Anyway, a much better building is 270 Park, always attributed to the architect Gordon Bunshaft, the great hero of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, but which, thanks to all the protests around the demolition, we now know involved the work of a woman.

Natalie Griffin de Blois. Who was instrumental in two other S.O.M. landmarks farther up Park, Lever House and the former Pepsi-Cola building.

We'll go to those next. I think Union Carbide opened after Seagram.

During the early 1960s. Then in the '70s, what's now JPMorgan Chase took the building over and eight years ago completed one of the biggest renovation projects in ages, turning the place into an eco-conscious, LEED Platinum headquarters for 3,000 employees.

Only to decide to tear the building down.

Right, and, assuming nothing changes now, replace it with what will be a massive tower designed by Norman Foster, half again as tall, for 15,000 employees — one of the biggest new buildings in the city and the biggest voluntary demolition project ever, which seems like environmental malfeasance. Not to mention a real loss because of de Blois.

I'm ashamed that I hadn't known more about her before the protests over the demolition. It fills me with pride to know that she worked on all these fantastic buildings. She was doing this amazing work when extreme sexism made it very hard for women in architecture.

In an interview she remembered, once, how Bunshaft felt free to tell her to go back home and change her outfit because he didn't like the color of her dress. As a young mother, she said, she was also ordered to join him on a site visit over a weekend, then told to leave the kids in the car.

I recognize the power of real estate in this city. We live in a capitalist society, the Landmarks Preservation Commission can only protect so many buildings, which means some children are left behind, and Union Carbide is one of them. But it's a loss.

We should look at Lever House.

So we're circling back north on Park, to 53rd Street. Completed in 1952, a pioneer of the curtain wall in New York, Lever House is a glass tower levitating over a glass pavilion hovering over a plaza. My mother used to exhibit her sculpture in the plaza.

It's a wonderful place for art. Lifting that pavilion up from the ground gave the plaza a kind of border along the avenue while opening the space up to the street. Everything about Lever House feels open, light, exuberant, with those colorful spandrels of blue-green glass and thin stainless fittings.

At the same time, it's a highly disciplined building, in the same rigorous vein of thinking about steel and glass and the grid as Seagram and Union Carbide. It was especially clever to position the tower, not facing Park, but stretching east to west, which guarantees people inside the offices less obstructed views north and south, over the pavilion. This transparency, the floating, you see it carried to perfection in the Pepsi building.

At 59th Street, 500 Park. A 10-story gem. De Blois worked on it with Bunshaft and Robert Cutler at S.O.M.

I sometimes dream about living there. The detailing, the flatness of the spandrels, the geometry of the vertical mullions in relation to the horizontal paneling. The building looks like it's suspended in midair. You can see the supporting structure through the curtain wall windows, but you don't immediately notice it because your eye is concentrated on this smooth, immaculately proportioned envelope, which looks easy to design but is not. When you build a building, you have to put in floors — and columns to hold up those floors — so at some point or another a building obviously can't be transparent. Part of what gives the illusion of transparency at Pepsi are the wide bays, with those huge windows that create this seamless skin. If the facade had been divided up into even one more bay I think it would have looked crowded.

As an architect, you know that achieving such an effect is not something you just draw one morning and there it is. Arriving at the result is a slow, iterative process. You also need to have the ability to recognize the right result when you get there. All that takes work.

It's a gift.

Certainly, a gift. All the buildings we're looking at depend on the most precise decisions coming together to produce what seems effortless. All these years later, I find this architecture inspiring every time I drive down Park Avenue.

We could end there but you wanted to look at the (formerly named) Citicorp Center, 601 Lexington Avenue, the silvery, striped behemoth on stilts with the sliced top that cantilevers over St. Peter's Church. Some people may remember it as the skyscraper that was occupied when a student discovered a wind could knock it over, so they put thousands of Red Cross volunteers on standby and, without informing the public, spent months reinforcing vulnerable joints during the dead of night. I think of it as where my wife and I took our older son to see the model train show at Christmas.

It seemed very un-New Yorkish when I saw it on that first trip — with that awkward, 45-degree angle on the skyline and that crazy cantilever. I still find the gesture of the angle loud and brash.

William LeMessurier was the engineer, Hugh Stubbins, the architect. The building was completed during the 1970s, so it's a generation later than the ones we've been talking about. There was also a cascading fountain in the atrium by Hideo Sasaki that was sadly demolished a few years ago.

It's not my favorite building aesthetically, probably because it is such a '70s design, but there is something about the boldness of it that I might still come to appreciate at some point.

What I found new and fascinating on that first trip was that the upper floors were corporate offices while the lower few floors around the tall atrium were open to the public with shops, including — this was really exciting to me then — the design shop called Conran. I was struck by the building's attitude, urbanistically: this idea of inviting the general public inside, not just restricting access to the people who worked in the offices.

The building somehow works in a neighborhood of old buildings and stores on Lexington Avenue. It's an example of how adaptable New York is.

You appreciate it for overcoming its adversity.

Now that the city is shut, that seems like an encouraging message, no?