

2000-2009: ONE WILD DECADE

NEW YORK

DECEMBER 14, 2009

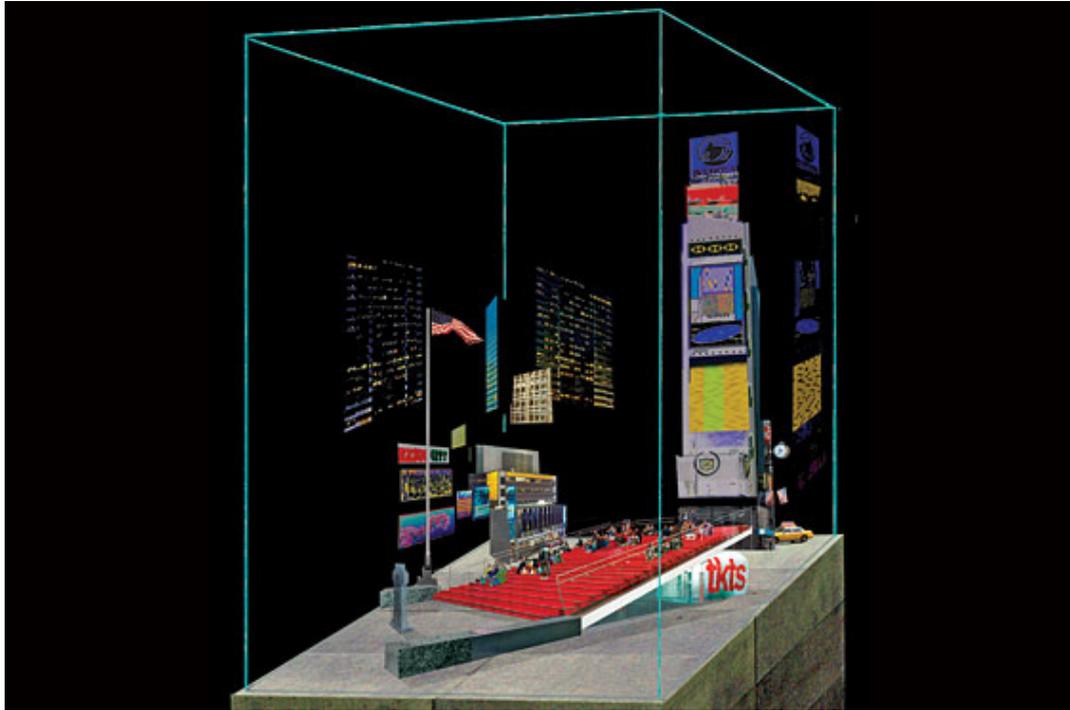
The World Did Not End

But pretty much
everything else did.

When the City Became a Stage

Exposing drama on every corner.

By [Justin Davidson](#) Published Dec 6, 2009



Building of the Decade: The TKTS Booth
(Photo: Paul Rivera/Archphoto.com and courtesy of Perkins Eastman (TKTS pavilion). Illustration by Nick Higgins)

Ladies and gentlemen, take your seats; the show has already begun. Fire up your cell phones and let someone know where you are: on a set of glowing glass bleachers, with a front-and-center view of Times Square. Directly in front, the statue of Father Duffy stands with his back to the audience, facing the proscenium like the stage manager in *Our Town*. Dusk blazes among the twinkling marquees and the palisade of glaring signs. You're part of the razzmatazz, too—members of the ensemble perched on a glossy scarlet staircase to nowhere. The little raked red piazza slung over the shoulders of the new TKTS booth is a work of exuberant uselessness and brilliant urbanism. At once humble and flashy, it distills the theatrical urge that electrified architecture in the last decade.

The solid structure has the feel of a load-bearing hologram. After dark, it looks as though it were fabricated entirely of light. The truth is almost as crazy: Glass walls and glass beams support glass stairs protected by glass rails. The apparently brittle wedge is warmed by natural heat, piped from underground by a geothermal apparatus that hums in the window. The machinery is part of the magic.

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The Critical Decade

TEN YEARS THAT BLEW CULTURE WIDE OPEN.

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New York has just experienced its most effervescent period of architectural ferment in decades, fed by a vision of the city as an arena for the performance art of spending money. Vast condo windows packaged the city as a suite of cinematic views and transformed apartments into dioramas of expensive lives. Celebrity architects costumed their buildings in façades so telegenic they might be auditioning for a car commercial. In the thirties, the philosopher-critic Walter Benjamin deplored the way Paris had created a dream world of shops and shoppers, a consumerist city of spectacle. In the last ten years, New York has embraced Benjamin's nightmare, lustily equipping itself with architecture of commercial display. The century began with Trump World Tower, a bronze-glass icon of the entitled life that was born to be a location for *The Apprentice*. As the decade wanes, workers are touching up the makeup on Jean Nouvel's 100 Eleventh Avenue, whose spangled skin swirls toward the sunset in a burst of camera-ready glamour.

If the city provides both audience and stage, it also plays the hero of an open-ended drama, a picaresque tragicomedy of development. In the gnarled tale of the rebuilding at ground zero, a cast of characters worthy of *commedia dell'arte* paraded across the public's consciousness: the grasping developer (played by Larry Silverstein), the vainglorious governor (George Pataki), the inspirational artiste (Daniel Libeskind), and the pragmatic architect (David Childs), plus a chorus of bureaucrats and visionaries. When Libeskind won the competition to draft a World Trade Center master plan, he beguiled the public with a fantastical set of pictures— a set design, really—that bore only tangential similarity to the real world. His glittering Valhalla triggered an appetite for theatrical urban visions. Developers detected that sudden craving and quickly turned expressive architecture from an idealistic dream into a consumer commodity. They wanted their buildings infused with a breath of awe, but they would settle for a quick hit of wow.

Meanwhile, another less grandiose morality play took place all across the city: the drama of gentrification. Masonry buildings were struck, glass ones raised, and in some areas it appeared as if the skyline had been winched up higher overnight. In parts of Brooklyn, crappy but pricey condos went up at the speed of a road show's load-in. A new and youthful cast of residents transformed neighborhoods by dint of galleries and organic-coffee shops—then decided that change had gone far enough. *Après moi*, no more gentrification.

Our straitened period makes it easy to tut-tut this circus of excess and display. Certainly the pursuit of architectural novelty and ruthless disregard for history have done plenty of damage. Everybody has a favorite memory of a low brick block with a bar and a candy store that gave way to a glass behemoth. But the city thrived even as it rewrote itself, because its magnetic pull has always depended on its ability to nurture fantasy, to lend humdrum lives a sense of collective drama.

One man who understood this was the architect and stage designer Joseph Urban, whose six-story International Magazine Building first bedazzled passersby in 1928. ("At first survey, I feel it is perhaps a stunt," hazarded *The New Yorker's* critic.) Imperial columns support nothing but ceremonial urns, as pairs of sculpted extras in medieval garb stand at their feet. Urban built his blond concrete caprice at the behest of William Randolph Hearst, and had the Depression not intervened, he would have topped it with a flamboyant tower.

Another century, another roaring decade, and Hearst's corporate heirs decided it was time to build that

missing high-rise. Norman Foster designed one that, in its geometric rigor and unwavering modernity, matches Urban's feel for the spotlight. Hearst Tower bursts from the Magazine Building like a stripper from a cake, flaunting its corset of diagonal steel beams. But beyond showmanship, the design bespeaks a brutal optimism about the client's business. Magazines may be struggling and print dying, but Hearst Tower represents a declaration of permanence and modernity. Foster scooped out the print-era relic, leaving an evocative shell, and bound the new tower in latticework. The first is an empty façade; the second is naked structure. New media, born from the old.

The media industry enjoys acting out its internal conflicts in public, and its bipolar decade produced a crop of extroverted architecture. Time Warner remapped Columbus Circle with its glowering slabs. Condé Nast and Reuters jazzed up Times Square. Bloomberg erected an understated silver tower with dazzling offices that overlook an open-air oval, evoking an eighteenth-century theater. The *Times* built a tower so enticing to attention-seekers that three of them scaled its exterior ladder of ceramic rods and wound up in court—and on TV.

The media company that thrust itself most energetically into the architectural limelight is IAC, which has no physical presence at all except for its headquarters. Frank Gehry's white-glass bloom is a simultaneously coy and spectacular building, turning the heads of drivers on Eleventh Avenue and hinting at a transparency it never delivers. All that's visible through its strata of milky frits is the fluorescent-lit ceilings. Gehry reveals nothing about what goes on within, and the floral form and creamy skin endow the company with loveliness by association. For branding, that's all we need to know.

Glass is a morally tricky material: It promises honesty but it can also deceive and misdirect—making it ideal for creating theatrical illusion. Perhaps the most honest building in New York is the cube atop the Apple Store on Fifth Avenue, because it shows off nothing but a logo. Walls, ceiling, and floor are all glass, as are the spiral staircase and the elevator leading to the subterranean depths where actual products are sold. The cube is very nearly invisible architecture, a statement of transparency for its own sake.

Theatrical architecture depends on sleight of hand. In their pristine rectilinear whiteness, Richard Meier's suite of West Village apartment buildings intimates a coolly neoclassical sensibility, but their overt staginess—the suggestion of life lived in public—makes them as baroque in spirit as Gehry's curvy IAC up the road. The two condos on either side of Perry Street went up in 2002, and their influence was immediate and widespread. Meier had pried glass free from its associations with commerce and made it stand for a quintessentially urban lifestyle. Mies van der Rohe had already gestured in that direction in the forties, with his curtain-wall towers on Chicago's Lake Shore Drive. But whereas Mies segmented the exterior with a heavy black grid of steel, Meier frames his façade in a vanishing white matte that makes the curtain wall appear to float. The third building, at 165 Charles Street, seems even more evanescent, the structural elements mere wisps from a draughtsman's pencil.

The effect of all this lightness is to draw the outsider's eye past the surface, into the exposed dwellings. It allows a virtually uninterrupted vista to anyone inside. It hardly matters if there is nothing much to see in either direction; the constellation of podium, proscenium, and scenery deals in illusion and projection. Walter Benjamin might read the Perry Street condos as stacked storefronts, displaying the phantasmagoria of costly lives. You could also interpret it in more contemporary terms, as a tower of vast flat-screen television sets—a display of displays. Buildings like these are merely character actors in a culture of mutual surveillance and exhibitionism. In my pocket, I carry camera, screen, and soundtrack, compressed into a simple gizmo. How can you tell the watchers from the watched?

The ultimate expression of the two-way interchange of views and voyeurism is the new Standard Hotel. Small rooms press up against glass walls, so that guests are drawn to the lip of their little stages as soon as they've dropped their luggage. There, like rock stars late for their own concert, they find a ready audience. The High Line lifts crowds toward the windows, and the bond between bystanders and guests is tightened by anonymity. "Thrill-seekers yesterday flocked to the Meatpacking District's newly christened High Line urban paradise to catch a glimpse of the free skin show playing out in the massive windows at the Standard Hotel, which straddles the park," the *Post* reported breathlessly this summer. Management responded with a straight-faced announcement that it would "make a concerted effort to remind guests of the transparency of the guest windows." As if guests, staff, park visitors, and columnists didn't already know that transparency is precisely the point. Here's looking at you looking at me, kid.

In this newfound enthusiasm for architectural theatrics, staircases have been a surprising player. Until recently, they came mostly in utilitarian models like bare-concrete and fire-escape. Lately, though, a glamour and sociability have attached themselves to staircases like the one that runs through the heart of Thom Mayne's academic building at Cooper Union, the wedge of bleachers facing the new glass lobby of Alice Tully Hall, the wave that wafts shoppers into the underground den of luxe at Rem Koolhaas's Prada store, or the river of orange steel that flows through Thomas Heatherwick's Longchamp store.

The urbanism of spectacle reached its height in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Rome, when piazzas were laid out for pageantry, with side streets for wings and backdrops of billowing stone. Three hundred years later, New York developed a similarly baroque sensibility—only here, spectacle requires no royal pomp or official sanction; it is continuous, commercial, and individual. Rome's street theaters were built of stone. Ours are made of glass. And TKTS is the most open and democratic of these glass stages—admission is free, no auditions required, and the world is watching. Like so many recent buildings, it does triple duty as stage, gallery, and backdrop. It gratifies the narcissistic sense that each of us is starring in a real-time biopic. It is, in other words, totally New York—even though the idea emerged from a design competition won by the Australian firm Choi Ropiha. (Credit for the detailed design work goes to Perkins Eastman.)

Apple's and TKTS's small-scale assemblages of glass carry a heavy urbanistic load. Skyscrapers snap into focus around them, and the plazas look better defined for their presence. It turns out that the pack of new towers that has crowded onto the skyline is really just the chorus line. The real spectacular has unfolded closer to the sidewalk, where audience and performers constantly trade places, and where both sides can see the whites of each other's eyes.