

# Habitations of Modernism: Henry James's New York, 1907

*Tamara L. Follini*

IN DECEMBER 1911, ENGAGED in the work of shaping American identity, the Lincoln Memorial Commission began to review submissions for an appropriately imposing monument to the slain President. In addition to the winning proposal by Henry Bacon for an austere, classically proportioned, temple like structure, were several designs of a more extravagant nature. Daniel H. Burnham favoured a grandiose, circular monument whose columned, open air rotunda housed a standing figure raised to additional height by a substantial plinth. John Russell Pope offered several especially mournful, melodramatic drawings which included a pyramid broken on each side by a classical portico, a ziggurat topped by a full length figure, and a lofty, smoking square-shaped funeral pyre flanked on each corner by a brooding sphinx.<sup>1</sup> Such architectural array testifies to the spectacle that had particularly captured James's imagination when he visited the United States a few years earlier in 1904–5: 'that vivid show of a society trying to build itself. . .into some coherent sense of itself', and which was manifested in the construction of a flow of civic, commercial, and domestic buildings, statues, and

This essay is an expanded version of a paper entitled 'James and the "Exactitudes of Architecture"' presented at the MLA annual conference, December 2002.

<sup>1</sup> Bates Lowry, *Building a National Image: Architectural Drawings for the American Democracy 1789–1912* (Washington, D.C. and New York, 1985), plates 96–106. Although the US Congress incorporated the Lincoln Monument Association in 1867 to build a memorial, the site was not selected until 1901 and work on the winning design was only begun in 1914. It was finally completed and dedicated in 1922, somewhat late for the centenary of Lincoln's birth in 1909.

doi:10.1093/camqtly/bfm028

© The Author, 2007. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The Cambridge Quarterly. All rights reserved. For permissions please email: journals.permissions@oxfordjournals.org

memorials that had begun in the late nineteenth century and was steadily gathering momentum.<sup>2</sup>

The show was especially dazzling in New York. This was not only because James's birthplace was a prime location of new architectural forms; it was also a consequence, he reasoned, of the particular effects of the native air and light. Recalling the 'large clear vistas' revealed to him in the course of a stroll through the upper East Side of New York, and the way the 'golden afternoon' sharply illuminated 'every feature of every edifice', James remarks:

The American air. . . lends a felicity to all the exactitudes of architecture and sculpture, favours sharp effects, disengages differences, preserves lights, defines projected shadows. Sculpture, in it, never either loses a value or conceals a loss, and it is everywhere full of help to discriminated masses. (p. 185)

James's mention of sculpture may indicate that he is also remembering an impression made by a memorial to another Civil War hero, Saint-Gaudens's statue of Sherman placed at the south entrance to Central Park at Fifth Avenue and 59<sup>th</sup> Street, which he had been addressing a few pages earlier in his text. More immediately, however, he is inspired by the distinct 'appeal of high clearness' of a new building, lower down the Avenue at 37<sup>th</sup> Street: the 'great Palladian pile just erected by Messrs. Tiffany' whose white marble façade, when contrasted against the city's aerial brilliance, testified to the possibilities of New York 'nobleness' even while the building's style was not indigenous, came second-hand. Yet as if his own imagination has been infused by the dramatic intensity of Saint-Gaudens's work, the 'golden elegance. . . of an overwhelming military advance', James's description of the effect of the Tiffany building's importation of Venetian styles to the 'strong sea-light of New York' creates a figure of mythic dimension blazoned across the city's sky. 'The medium', he declares, 'has the abundance of some ample childless mother who consoles herself for her sterility by an unbridled course of adoption' (p. 186). James's humorous but disconcerting image registers his engagement with unfamiliar experience in a world requiring especially adventurous kinds of analysis and his superimposition of a variety of reflections on the more immediate suggestions of New York appearances. It is a form of expressive behaviour which resembles that which he

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene*, ed. Leon Edel (1907, Bloomington, Indiana, 1968), p. 159. All further page references are to this edition unless otherwise specified.

explains, in the Prefaces, as an artist's 'operative irony': the need to project 'the case rich and edifying where the actuality is pretentious and vain'.<sup>3</sup> New York 'actualities' do not strictly answer to such a description. Yet they often provoke reflections or comparisons able to 'break one's heart', and require James to assume 'the patch of optimism', to 'cultivate a working felicity', thereby to entertain more fully and to analyse with more equanimity his impressions, specifically, in this case, the 'great cold calculated story' of 'Palladian piles' (pp 185–6). Optimism and pessimism thus both circulate in his image of the 'unbridled' activity of the sterile mother: while it calls to mind a joyfully crowded, boisterous household, it also suggests absence and lament, egotistically dangerous kinds of acquisition alongside more benign acts of adoption, and a brood whose members might be as much the victims of a fraught foster parent, as the beneficiaries of nurturing maternal instinct. It questions whether a society which takes to itself all manner of architectural styles and habitations, 'to the very great limitation of its dignity', may appear as a sanctuary able to release new forms of identity but could just as easily be creatively impotent, or at least somewhat precipitate in its use and abuse of the past. As such, the image is symptomatic of James's unease when walking the streets of New York: uncertain as to whether early twentieth century American society is sufficiently able to comprehend the life-threatening powers of its own vitality, and wary of the rampant energies that speak so loudly from many of its constructions. Even while removed from the city's commercial and financial districts, in his walk through quiet East Side streets when the 'hour was charming' and 'the air admirable', James is impressed less by forms of private or domestic felicity able to foster varieties of individual character, needs and aspirations, than by the sound of one 'collective sharpness', 'one penetrating voice', and which urgently addresses him 'offering any price, offering everything, wanting only to outbid and prevail, at the great auction of life' (p. 184).

As James puzzles out the 'sources of impressiveness' in multiple aspects of American life – deciding, after 'ransacking [his] brain', that they are 'locked up in that word "modern"' (p. 183) – he repeatedly turns to architectural forms, comparing old and new, as the most potent material evidence of American culture, of the society's practical and utopian energies, and manner of addressing its past history and future potentiality. Such a mode of valuation is in keeping with late nineteenth and early twentieth century theories of urban aesthetics, but it also places James

<sup>3</sup> Henry James, *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel (New York, 1984), p. 1229.

within a recognisable American literary tradition, one that associates democratic society with buildings, the habitations of the mind with bricks and mortar, and deploys building metaphors to measure the degree to which abstract or natural forces on the American continent could be controlled. In his seminal work, *A World Elsewhere: the Place of Style in American Literature*, Richard Poirier initiates his argument by observing ‘an obsession in American literature with plans and efforts to build houses, to appropriate space to one’s desires, perhaps to inaugurate therein a dynasty that shapes time to the dimensions of personal and familial history’. He notes a line of famous literary abodes – Thoreau’s cabin, Silas Lapham’s Boston villa, Sutpen’s Hundred, Gatsby’s mansion – and to these we could add several that have the distinction of titles: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, *The House of Mirth*, Carver’s ‘Cathedral’, James’s ‘The Jolly Corner’. But Poirier’s argument stresses that this addiction usually ‘refers less to structures in the world...than to structures of the mind and...of language’.<sup>4</sup> James’s involvement with architecture is conditioned by a more material interest even while he repeatedly enlists the rich metaphorical suggestiveness of its sensory and visual qualities vibrantly to conceptualise the art and act of narrative construction. While he proclaims that the artist ‘has verily to *build*, is committed to architecture, to construction at any cost’ in affirmation of a commitment to narrative form, the relation between his fictional places and spaces and those of the social world he inhabits is never merely an abstract or oppositional one.<sup>5</sup> James does not suppose that his ‘house of fiction’ can ever offer himself or his readers inviolate mental or imaginative sanctuary, a ‘great good place’, nor would such refuge be desirable for any prolonged stay: his creativity is too dependent on the urban conglomerations which are his natural habitats; their energies are too immense and inviting. While architecture appeals to James as a richly creative analogue for a variety of artistic questions, it is equally a pathway into the historical realities of his time.

This latter awareness is especially palpable in *The American Scene*, where James reflects as a cultural critic on particular buildings with the urgency of one who believes that architectural forms exist in intimate relation to human experience, and posits a direct correlation between what we do or say and the buildings and rooms we create and inhabit. James is something of an architectural determinist. The ‘exactitudes of architecture’ are

<sup>4</sup> Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: the Place of Style in American Literature* (London, 1967), pp 17, vii.

<sup>5</sup> Henry James, *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, p. 1130.

*exacting* – his phrase includes a notion of how three-dimensional constructions may be unexpectedly severe or authoritative in the force they exert upon us, in their ability to order social intercourse, shape events and histories, and effect our good or bad fortune. This conviction is nowhere displayed so flamboyantly and amusingly as when he visits that *locus classicus* of the democratic spirit, Philadelphia's Independence Hall, and attributes the revolutionary vision of the Declaration less to the Founding Fathers than to the spatial felicities of the rooms themselves. Surveying the 'delightfully good...large, high, wainscoted chambers', James 'almost catches them in the act of directly suggesting the celebrated *coup*', picturing 'some clever man of the period...taking the hint' to ask: 'What could one here – what *couldn't* one really declare?...I say, why not our Independence?' (pp 291–2). Although he admits this is something of a playful fantasy, James's gesture suggest ways in which American democracy from its inception was shaped by significant forms of the past, and would be defined by and through new spatial constructions in turn. His joke, as he points out, avoids the 'pedantic', but calls attention to America's 'good fortune in having found half the occasion' of its independence 'made to our hand', its lucky escape from 'traps laid for us by some of the inferior places', those which presumably would have tainted America's bid for liberty with less worthy impulses and less honourable motives. Independence Hall becomes thereby 'the sacred thing itself'; it is the architectural equivalent of the spirit in which the Declaration was made, the material sign, whose quality is 'irresistible' and whose 'dignity [is] not to be uttered', of America's self-creation (p. 292).

James's reactions to the power of architecture place him in the company of nineteenth and early twentieth century American practitioners of architectural design and theorists of urban space, figures such as Russell Sturgis, Louis Sullivan, Henry Adams and Herbert Croly, all of whom participated in debates concerning how America should create itself through its material constructions. But his special contribution to these discussions may be the sympathy with which, in *The American Scene*, he values and responds to what he calls, in Philadelphia, the 'persistent actuality' of buildings, the way he apprehends them as repositories of human action and sensibility which have the power to effect our experience as much by the immaterial accumulations of human stories they hold as by their material forms and substance. This may be one reason why these inanimate structures repeatedly become animate, sentient presences in *The American Scene*, rendering James's analysis at times supernatural and unnerving – as buildings are given voice, become transfigured into human or animal figures, or appear to possess malevolent or spiritual

wills, cravings and afflictions, and which impose their spirit on those who venture to approach them. Trinity Church, even from the distance of the observer's ferryboat in the New York harbour, puts 'its tragic case' to James, and laments the 'wretched figure' it has become as a result of the towers which surround it and 'whose very first care is to deprive churches of their visibility' in their showy bid for aerial dominance (p. 78). Expensive houses of recent construction, many built during James's lifetime, are likened, startlingly, in an image of carnage, to 'the very young sent to the scaffold' during the French Revolution, 'youths and maidens, all bewildered and stainless' (p. 158) as they are demolished to make way for commercial enterprise, while the grand houses of Fifth Avenue take on an appearance of haunting desperation 'deep as the look in the eyes of dogs who plead against a change of masters' (p. 160). The association, in James's mind, of the demolition of buildings with periods of historical upheaval and the rupture of discontinuity understands America's embrace of the provisional in tragic, violent dimensions and expresses deep ambivalence about the 'modern' as expressed by New York's prevailing commercial forces. It may also reflect the influence of a writer who profoundly shaped nineteenth century architectural discourse, and James's own youthful appreciations of architecture, John Ruskin. In James's agonised witness of the destruction of buildings associated with the city's history and his own, he is echoing Ruskin's ardent conviction, as affirmed in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, that architecture and poetry are the 'two strong conquerors of the forgetfulness of men' vital to memory and human continuities: '[w]e may live without [architecture]...and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her'.<sup>6</sup>

Strikingly, Ruskin believed architecture to be 'in some sort' inclusive of poetry and 'mightier in its reality': because, he averred, giving characteristic emphasis to the weight of daily experience, 'it is well to have, not only what men have thought and felt, but what their hands have handled, and their strength wrought, and their eyes beheld, all the days of their life'.<sup>7</sup> James's dramatic account of New York's modern domestic constructions registers, albeit in a distinct tone, a similar sense of potency as he penetrates interiors and conveys the terrifying effect certain innovations may visit on inhabitants. While private homes initially appear as 'young, fresh, frolicsome' examples of new social energies, the absence

<sup>6</sup> John Ruskin, *The Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. 39 vols (London, 1903–12), vol. 8, p. 224.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

of divisions in interior spaces obliterates opportunities for ‘the play of the social relation’ and gives to chambers of former domestic privacy and protection the nightmarish proportions of giants’ dens: ‘[t]hus we see systematized the indefinite extension of all spaces and the definite merging of all functions; the enlargement of every opening, the exaggeration of every passage, the substitution of gaping arches and far perspectives and resounding voids for enclosing walls, for practicable doors’ (p. 167). Under the dictates of new design that prescribe each household area to be ‘visible, visitable, penetrable’ from every other part, a spatial dynamics reigns in which space itself, instead of providing visionary order, eclipses human needs and structure preempts rather than encourages more intricate human exchanges and experience. Similar reservations contribute to James’s dislike of the skyscraper, a sign less of antipathy to modern innovations than of a scepticism which regards invitations to panoramic inclusiveness and command as bewitching but deceptive allurements.

James’s considerations of skyscrapers as ‘extravagant pins in a cushion already overplanted’, his likening of the New York skyline to a ‘loose nosegay of architectural flowers’ (pp 76–7), oppose the authoritative dimension of tall buildings by imaginative domestication, and diffuse their aggressive commercialism by associating them with almost feminine frivolities and pastimes. Such metaphoric opposition, which also reflects hostility to the skyscraper’s supposed antithesis to aesthetic concerns, was common to many complaints in the period’s debates about their visual beauty and social acceptability: William Dean Howells disparaged the New York skyline as ‘like nothing so much as a horse’s jaw bone, with the teeth broken or dislodged at intervals.’<sup>8</sup> Yet James’s suspicion is also founded on the forms of abstraction which skyscrapers introduce to human experience and to a human landscape, and he was particularly wary of the visual perspectives such buildings exalted.

One artist who gloried in the ocular perspectives and visual experimentation the tall buildings afforded and whose medium was especially suitable for and responsive to their exhilarating aesthetic possibilities was James’s creative associate, the photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn. He described one of his most famous images, ‘The Octopus’ (1912), which radically re-conceptualises the now extinct Madison Square from the top of the Metropolitan Building, as ‘a composition or exercise in filling a

<sup>8</sup> William Dean Howells, *Letters of an Altrurian Traveller*. Introduction by Clara M. and Rudolf Kirk. (1893–1894; Gainesville, Florida, 1961), p. 70; quoted in Merrill Schleier, *The Skyscraper in American Art, 1890–1931* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1986), pp 9–10.

rectangular space with curves and masses', while another of his black and white photographs, 'The House of a Thousand Windows' (Fig. 1), he thought "almost as fantastic as a Cubist fantasy" (1912).<sup>9</sup> Although a number of Coburn's photographs of skyscrapers, especially those taken from high altitudes, express a romantic sense of them as remote, almost magical palaces or fortresses, uniting their oneiric and functional qualities, 'The House of a Thousand Windows' is a more ominous dwelling, recalling less the utopian energies which partially inspire such buildings than an unsettling bid for aerial and terrestrial supremacy. Seemingly taken from a vantage point almost as high as the building itself, the photographer's position obscures the structure's foundations and causes it to appear to thrust itself menacingly towards the viewer, while its many precise rows of windows are heavily shaded, nondescript squares empty of human presence. The exaggeration of the building's trajectory enforced by its multiple blank panes imparts a forbidding atmosphere to Coburn's image. It suggests the threat to human proportions which similar forms of architectural stylisation conveyed to James, and his anxiety that human values could be vulnerable to distortion if such a process became unduly amplified and space was given over to formalised pattern and perfected design.

James was not immune to the aesthetic appeal of these buildings. He took pleasure in how the 'mercenary monsters', particularly under conditions of fog and moving clouds, 'quite romantically justified [themselves], looming through the weather with an insolent cliff-like sublimity' (p. 83). Yet their frightening implications were inescapable. He eventually concludes that the 'attempt to take the aesthetic view is invariably blighted. . . by their most salient characteristic': the almost sinister multiplication of windows which cannot be 'reconciled with any grace of building' (p. 95). Such profusion evoked the raging commercial forces of the city for James, but it perhaps also suggested, by the duplication of apertures of identical dimensions in a given structure, the dominance of one particular mode of being and the oppression of one unvarying point of view. Casting

<sup>9</sup> Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Alvin Langdon Coburn Photographer: An Autobiography*, ed. Helmut and Alison Gernsheim (1966, New York, 1978), p. 8; in regard to the second phrase, Coburn explains he is quoting his words from the catalogue of a 1913 exhibition at the Goupil Gallery, London. Twenty New York images were also published in Coburn's book *New York* for which H.G. Wells wrote a foreword. Although Wells confessed 'unqualified admiration' for the skyscraper, in opposition to James's position, the terms of his appreciation may owe something to *The American Scene*; he described the Singer building as having 'caught some of the exhilaration in the air' (Alvin Langdon Coburn, *New York*. With a foreword by Herbert George Wells. [London, 1910], p. 9); quoted in Merrill Schleier, *The Skyscraper in American Art*, p. 48.



Fig. 1. A.L. Coburn, 'The House of a Thousand Windows', New York 1912. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved. qx 27/7454 dsc, plate 49. Reproduced by permission.

doubt on readings of James's fiction and criticism which too readily condemn his attraction toward formal literary structures, Victoria Coulson has deftly noted how these interpretations tend to ignore a 'stealthy pathologisation of symmetrical forms' in James's fiction.<sup>10</sup> This tendency may

<sup>10</sup> Victoria Coulson, 'Prisons, Palaces, and the Architecture of the Imagination', in *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*, ed. Peter Rawlings (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2007), p. 179.

be at its most pronounced in James's misgivings about skyscrapers in *The American Scene*. Certainly it is easy to comprehend, by way of Coburn's photograph, how these buildings, with their 'thousand glassy eyes' (p. 77), might have been signs, to him, of a culture developing so as to make acceptable kinds of threatening surveillance crucial to calculating commercial enterprise – he ironically describes the 'glassy eyes' as essential aids to 'help even an expert New Yorker to get the better of another expert one' (p. 96). But these rigid, repetitive window series may have also implied a reduction in alternative perspectives and unorthodox vistas. In his famous image of the 'house of fiction', which may owe something to his American tour, James matched New York's 'acres of window-glass' by similar extravagance while countering such uniformity, 'the eternal impression of things all in a row' (p. 294), by stylistic assortment: the 'number of possible windows' in his house is 'not to be reckoned' but they are defiantly 'of dissimilar shape and size'. Although critics have often noticed that the description of the windows in this creative establishment as 'mere holes in a dead wall' may disturbingly suggest the artist's disengagement from immediacies of experience, James's 'house' is nonetheless an architectural hodge-podge, its inelegantly uneven and proportionately unequal windows betokening marvelously unique literary fabrications, each 'an impression distinct from every other'.<sup>11</sup> 'The House of a Thousand Windows', especially when associated with iconic images of standardisation (such as Fritz Lang's 1927 film 'Metropolis'), is a dwelling constructed by a tyrannical stylist, one obsessively committed to ruthless homogeneity and intent on denying visual irregularity or idiosyncrasy. As such, it curiously recalls Ruskin's prophetic hypothesis about the possibility of inventing architectural styles 'worthy of modern civilization': 'you shall draw out your plates of glass and beat out your bars of iron till you have encompassed us all, – if your style is of the practical kind, – with endless perspective of black skeleton and blinding square'.<sup>12</sup>

A romantic dimension has sometimes been imparted to the urban landscape by modern theorists arguing that panoramic vision enables a new sense of intellection, an ability to experience the world in its structures and cartographic connections rather than through the assaulting sensations of the streets and the fragmentary knowledge or sense of diminution induced by terrestrial chaos. Roland Barthes, for whom New York is

<sup>11</sup> Henry James, *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, p. 1075.

<sup>12</sup> John Ruskin, *Works*, vol. XVI, p. 349; from an 1857 lecture, 'Influence of Imagination in Architecture', delivered to the Members of the Architectural Association.

the supreme evidence that 'abstraction is alive', takes a similar position when he compares an ascent in the Eiffel Tower to a neophyte gaining an initiate's status through the 'adventure of sight and of the intelligence' the structure allows. Barthes's argument is based on qualities specific to the Tower, particularly its open construction and original practical inutility. Yet the characteristic by which he defines its singularity evokes a reason for James's apprehension of and about modern urban realities. Celebrating the Tower's ability to transgress the 'habitual divorce of *seeing* and *being seen*' so as to achieve 'a sovereign circulation between the two functions', Barthes associates the Tower with a mythic quality nourishing human fantasy, and accommodating the 'great itineraries of our dreams'.<sup>13</sup> Such hospitality to infinities of meaning and attractive equilibrium between contending subjects or perceivers are the kinds of human experience and exchange which James fears are threatened by the aerial dimensions of modern constructions – which is perhaps why these buildings are often metaphorically associated with fatality, dismemberment or violent disorder. White-Mason, hero of James's New York story, 'Crapy Cornelia', nostalgically compares the former ease of social intercourse in the city to modern 'arrangements of pretended hourly Time that dash themselves forever to pieces as from the fiftieth floors of sky-scrapers', while, in *The American Scene*, that mechanical monster of a skyscraper's interior, the elevator, is likened to a device of human execution.<sup>14</sup> The 'sempiternal lift', substitutes for measured human communication a mode of living by 'the packed and hoisted basket', 'the herded and driven state', and places one at the peril, upon being 'pushed and pressed in...[of] something that slides or slams or bangs, operating, in your rear, as ruthlessly as the guillotine' (187). A metaphorical journey of ascent, by James's painful comparison, is related not to forms of personal redemption or

<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Buffet Finishes Off New York' (1959); 'The Eiffel Tower' (1964) in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (London, 1982) pp 159, 241, 238, 237.

<sup>14</sup> Henry James, *The Finer Grain* (London, 1910), p. 216. The obvious correspondence between James's notion of buildings 'as killing machines' and the ideas of vigilant or monumental architecture put forth by Foucault and Bataille is cited by Coulson, who rightly observes that James's meditations on modern architecture are 'well in advance of those theorists who have more recently figured as the architectural profession's avant-garde' ('Prisons, Palaces', p. 178). In his avoidance of architectural high-life, James is also a number of steps ahead of Michel de Certeau and his frequently cited gesture of descending from a voyeuristic, abstracting position atop the World Trade Center to regain the immediacy and energy of the urban ground (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Stephen Randall. Berkeley, 1984).

illumination but likened to a death sentence leading to a most uncomfortable form of ocular deprivation.

Unsurprisingly, and despite reservations concerning New York's adoption of foreign architectural styles, a prominent reason for James's appreciation of the Tiffany Building – standing still at 401 Fifth Avenue and the object of a recent conservation effort – is its rejection of elevation in favour of the Classical style then in vogue: 'One is so thankful to it', James admits, 'for not having twenty-five stories, which it might easily have had. . .that one gives it a double greeting, rejoicing to excess perhaps at its merely remaining, with the three fine arched and columned stages above its high basement, within the conditions of social symmetry' (p. 185). Designed by Stanford White, and inspired by the Palazzo Grimani in Venice, the building was considered by admirers a masterpiece of elegant retail design whose tremendous windows, maximising the amount of light illuminating showrooms and workrooms, perfectly fitted form to function, although critics disparaged its alleged subservience to the past. One of its distinctive features, a favourite stylistic device of White that became a contentious talking point in contemporary debates, is its overhanging cornice. According to David Garrard Lowe, White's use of the cornice emulated the powerful projections of Renaissance buildings which 'served to control the streetscape' and was part of White's attempt 'to bring a similar harmony to Fifth Avenue', an effort which James appears to appreciate by his notice of the building's observance of 'social' as opposed to abstract 'symmetry'.<sup>15</sup>

James's often riotously inventive and comical contemplation of New York's modernity generously accommodates the city's own buoyant creativity and enthusiasms. Yet his scepticism in regard to many of the features of modernism emerges in his confessed relief in regard to the Tiffany Building, which sounds a note of nervous strain. He 'get[s] into the gate' of Central Park, an 'outside amenity', whenever he can, but it is with Macduff-like sorrow to 'relieve the o'erfraught heart' (pp 174, 175). It is as if the observer so sensitive to spatial configurations is fleeing those nightmarish interiors wherein he finds himself futilely 'looking round for a background or a limit' instead of 'only doorless apertures. . .which decline to tell him where he is', and which hideously multiply into 'other apertures, corridors, staircases, yawning, expanding, ascending, descending, and all as for the purpose of giving his presence "away"' (pp 167–8). James's pun creates 'the visitor' not only as one unable to secure privacy, immersed in 'so merciless a medium' that all he says 'must be said for the

<sup>15</sup> David Garrard Lowe, *Stanford White's New York* (New York, 1992), p. 279.

house', but also as someone discarded, rendered useless or superfluous within new social atmospheres and accommodations. Architectural forms themselves, in this humorous but menacing vision of a home transformed into a hallucinatory fun-house, become the agents of surveillance and disclosure, routing the 'homeless wanderer', now destitute, with unrelenting intensity. The wanderer's identity, unable to find a secure position from which to define its perspective, suffers near dissolution, as if overpowered by ever changing spatial constructions. James here anticipates the condition that the architectural theorist Elizabeth Grosz refers to as 'psychasthenia', in which an individual cannot 'situate its body in a position in space, a position from which it relates to other objects', and which is 'the condition of a coherent identity'; instead subjects 'are captivated and replaced, not by another subject. . .but by space itself'.<sup>16</sup>

As James moves about the streets of New York, his reflections, inspired by the city's interior and exterior architecture, often recall a romantic paradigm of a walk as a process of self-discovery and knowledge. But his states of mind also sometimes evoke a journey that leads to dispossession, of the self and its history, of a place in contemporary society. As he puts it when recounting one of his strolls, locating himself within another frame of reference, New York has the virtue and danger of exposing him to the 'hazard of *flânerie*' (p. 189): one's chance of an enlightening discovery is never far removed from the risk of being undone. Such vulnerability, and an account of what James's experience costs him, can be measured by the architectural structures in which he seeks refuge, either imaginatively or in fact, and his appreciative descriptions of interiors distinct to those dictated by the most innovative domestic or commercial styles. An example of the former, in proximity to the Tiffany Building, is the new Public Library on Fifth Avenue at 44th Street, whose foundations had begun at the time of his visit. Designed by the firm Carrère and Hastings, the projected library recommends itself to James less by its obvious connotations as a cerebral oasis than by its Beaux-Arts influenced plan which provided for 'a covering of the earth rather than an invasion of the air', a 'lateral development', the cardinal, 'blest value' of which was that of rendering the dreaded elevator unnecessary (pp 186–7). And the appeal of that condition is the opportunity it might afford for 'the lonely sweetness of a step or two taken by one's self, of deviating into some sense of independent motive power. . .with a dream perhaps of the thrill of fellow-feeling *then* taking, then finding place – something like Robinson Crusoe's famous

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2001), pp 37–8.

thrill before Friday's footprint in the sand' (p. 187). For the buffeted, stranded writer, the horizontal spatiality of the library offers opportunities for 'fellow-feeling' in contrast to the hierarchies manifested and amplified by the verticality of the tall buildings outside, assisting such experience by an allowance for 'deviating': for a form of mental ambulation that encourages the discovery of forms of identity or intimacy impermissible or unacceptable, or perhaps simply unknown and unimagined, by its prevailing culture. James's evocation of 'Friday's footprint' may also suggest that his terrestrial haven is prized as a form more likely to 'take' the imprint of human activity, to record the traces – recalling the commemorative tablets James misses in New York – of other lives.<sup>17</sup>

Yet an imagined encounter and prospective stability within the library's nascent walls is scarcely sufficient refuge amidst the clamorous city's unremitting energies, and James represents himself, at one day's end, drawn to an extant horizontal form, 'an immense red building, off in the clear north-east quarter, which had hung back. . . from the perpendicular. . . and which actually covered ground with its extensions of base, its wide terrestrial wings' (pp 187–88). James is speaking of the Presbyterian Hospital (Fig. 2), occupying a then quiet site on East 70<sup>th</sup> street, which he first approaches at the apparitional hour of twilight and likens to a restorative garden surrounded by 'an enormous bristling hedge of defensive and aggressive vegetation, lacerating, defiant, not to be touched without blood' (pp 188–89). Martha Banta relishes this rebarbative flora as sign of a symbiotic relation between city and asylum, positing that the 'hospital's "halls of pain" draw life from the violent energy of the city, just as the city is humanized by the blood-streaked haven' and arguing that each possesses forms of 'violence' which meet each other 'until a working truce is reached'.<sup>18</sup> But the distinct energies of these outside and inside realms are not necessarily equivalent nor do they match each other as neatly as this reading may suppose. James's metaphoric extravagance in this text has often been interpreted as indication of a willingness and ability to engage with the commanding power of American society on its own terms. Yet to

<sup>17</sup> James's meditation on the value of commemorative wall tablets is occasioned by the destruction of his 'birth-house' on Washington Place, which he holds up as a 'demonstration that tablets, in New York, are unthinkable', given its mania for the skyscraper, and which leads him to envision future New York as 'a huge, continuous fifty-floored conspiracy against the very idea of the ancient graces'. The forces of 'mere economic convenience', by contrast to Friday's lighter imprint, become 'the heavy footprints, in the finer texture of life, of a great commercial democracy' (pp 91–2).

<sup>18</sup> Martha Banta, "'Strange Deserts": Hotels, Hospitals, Country Clubs, Prisons, and the City of Brotherly Love', *Henry James Review* 17 (1996), pp 6–7.



Fig. 2. Anonymous. Presbyterian Hospital. Reproduced by kind permission of the British Library Board. 100410.dd.41.

the extent that his description of the Hospital celebrates the way it manages to ‘invest itself with stillness’, its wards places of delicacy ‘silvery-dim with their whiteness and their shade’ (188), he also affirms a mode of participation and tenure in New York – that of the building as well as himself – that follows a distinct logic, a quiet opposition to the city’s own operative essence. Rejoicing in an interior where the horizontal flourishes and outlines are muted, softened, indistinct – so unlike the sharp clarities of the outer air – James inverts the usual associations between height and vision, and between lowness and obstruction, and claims a different perspective for the self’s freedoms and consolations, quietly resisting the bid for wholeness and possession which he perceives as the implied promise of the tall buildings outside, and embracing instead the visionary tone and refinements that abound in the hospital’s muffled, almost myopic interiors.

As such, the Hospital seems to allow James imaginative asylum, offering a place where the mind can mediate between material and immaterial structures or forms of being, and past and present lives. Recalling the similarly inviting chamber of romance in Hawthorne’s ‘The Custom-House’ essay, ‘spiritualized by the unusual light’ of fire and moonshine, it reaches back to one site of James’s own literary origins, as well as advancing toward that most notorious of his fictionalised interiors, the rooms of the house on the Jolly Corner, spaces which correspondingly appeal to Spencer Brydon in the ‘gathering dusk’ and which are likened to a ‘concave crystal’ that holds a ‘mystical other world’. These

associations reinforce the identification of the Hospital as a site of artistic activity wherein raw experience may be converted and refined into narrative understanding. As a place defined by ‘an adjustment of tone’ and wherein ‘the genius of the terrible city’ is ‘sifted and softened’, the Hospital is the perfect medium for contemplating the subject matter of the city outside, while also being a storehouse of its own rich material: James divines the Hospital ‘to contain treasures of delicacy, many of them still to be developed, but attesting to the possibilities of the soil’ (p. 189). Thus, the Hospital seems to become an avowal of both American society’s artistic future and the saving capaciousness of literature’s immaterial constructions. James’s tribute – operating imaginatively in ways similar to his evocation of Independence Hall, avoiding the ‘pedantic’ once again by fanciful extravagance – prizes the Hospital for providing the conditions by which habitations of the mind can be formed, even within the often brutal, deafening, overwhelmingly ‘direct pressure’ of modern American society.

Yet this building, like those which make ‘for the sense of complexity’ in Philadelphia, contains multiple meanings ‘within, or behind. . . or in the depth’ of its walls. While the Hospital impresses James as a place conducive to literary aspiration, its location, ‘off in the clear north-east corner’ where ‘the clamorous city’ is ‘forever at rest’ may indicate a premonition, on his part, of an increasingly marginal place for artistic activity within the conditions of twentieth century American life – or at least for his own practice of the same. As an unique repository of ‘precious saving presences’ and the place to which James declares he would repair were he ‘alone and disconcerted’ in New York, even choosing to suffer some ‘mis-chance’ leading to the ‘final extinction or dismissal’ in order to do so (p. 189), this site in *The American Scene* may voice doubt about the wider persistence of his own modes of evaluation, and acknowledge the likely disappearance of his own terms of reference, and social and artistic traditions – whilst resonating as well with thoughts of his physical demise. Although the soothing corridors of the Hospital are places of imaginary expansion, they are also constricting ‘halls of pain’, and cannot be separated from a sense of corporeal frailty and temporal limits. Is James’s reference here a compressed quotation of the American poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s lines in her poem ‘Solitude’?: ‘There is room in the halls of pleasure/For a large and lordly train,/But one by one we must all file on/Through the narrow aisles of pain’. If so, the Hospital may be James’s tactfully indirect way of noting not only the imminent end of his own forms of artistry but the construction of his own discreet monument. While the hospital suggests an artistic haven, a writer’s rest-home of a

mildly morbid kind, as a place of horizontal dimensions, apparitional air and sublime stillness, it also prefigures a tomb.

In the tales in which James distilled the after-sense of his New York experience, the architectural shelters of his most sensitive and courageous protagonists are diminutive, provisional, surrounded or permeated by avaricious forces: the habitation of Brydon's watchful Alice has the dimensions of a doll's house; the eponymous heroine of 'Crapy Cornelia' occupies a 'small and quite cynically modern flat' in a block grotesquely named 'The Gainsborough'; the miraculous dwelling on the Jolly Corner is under threat of destruction. In this foreshadowed end, James's fictional abode anticipated the fate of the Presbyterian Hospital which folded its 'terrestrial wings' before the relentless reconstructive energies of New York and was demolished in 1928.