

For the Architect, a Height Never Again to Be Scaled

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Published: May 26, 2005

THE architect of New York's best-loved landmark, William Van Alen, has been all but forgotten in the half-century since his death. Even at the height of his career, Van Alen never approached the fame of Frank Lloyd Wright or Le Corbusier, but he was a major architectural figure and had been a star in the making since his student days. Soon after the Chrysler Building was finished in 1930, though, his professional standing began to slide, and he watched helplessly as his career unraveled, a victim, ultimately, of its greatest achievement.

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"The Chrysler Building" (Princeton Architectural Press, 2002)

The Chrysler Building under construction.

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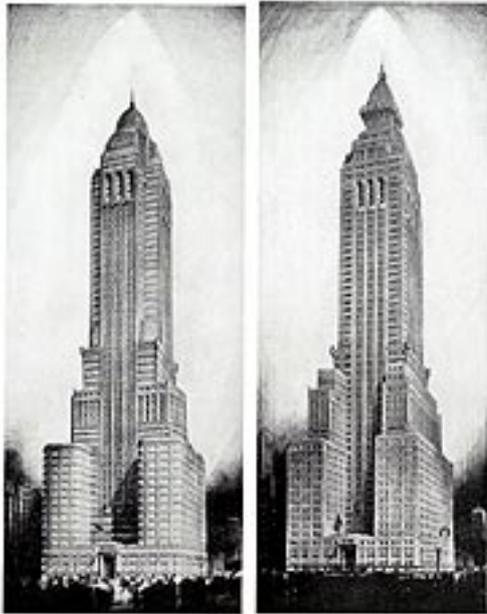
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CHRYSLIS: William Van Alen's design evolved from conventional to streamlined. The spire was kept secret, rising at the last minute to beat the competition.



Bettmann/Corbis

William Van Alen with his wife at the 1931 Beaux Arts Ball.

Van Alen, who was born in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 1882, grew up in a New York of low, flat-topped buildings and trained as a draftsman for a Manhattan row house developer. By 20, he had studied at the Pratt Institute and apprenticed with some of the city's best architects; six years later he won the Paris Prize, a scholarship that allowed him to study architecture - and develop a fresh eye for it - at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. When he returned to New York in 1910, "he tingled with the touch of approaching modernism," Kenneth Murchison, an architect and critic, wrote years later.

Murchison went on to characterize the young Van Alen's thoughts: "No old stuff for me! No bestial copyings of arches and colyums and cornishes! Me, I'm new! *Avanti!*"

He soon went into practice with another young architect, H. Craig Severance, his polar opposite in style and personality. Severance was a handsome charmer who loved nights out at the Metropolitan Club and felt most comfortable in crowds, while Van Alen was tall, gawky and socially awkward. He spoke quietly, smiled sparingly and let his wife, Elizabeth, carry the conversation at parties. He kept his distance from

even his fellow architects. "I am not particularly interested in what my fellow men are doing," he said when asked if he read the popular architectural journals. "I wish to do things original and not be misled by a lot of things that are being done by somebody else."

Van Alen's independent spirit and skills as a designer were well matched with Severance's strength at bringing in commissions, and the firm quickly began to prosper. In 1914 they finished the Standard Arcade, a string of shops on lower Broadway whose facade was notable for windows set flush with the walls, rather than set back, a practice that set a new standard. In 1915, Van Alen earned considerable praise for his novel design of an office building (the Albemarle, at 24th Street and Broadway) without a decorative cornice.

By the early 20's, the partners were winning more commissions for bigger jobs, but in 1924 Van Alen's 10-year partnership with Severance broke apart in a fight over credit for the firm's success. Van Alen now had trouble getting commissions on his own. For four years, even as he continued to attract attention from critics and other architects ("Van Alen's stuff is so darned clever that I don't know whether to admire it or hate it," one architect, Richard Haviland Smythe, told Pencil Points), his most notable projects were limited to a Lucky Strike shop, the Delman shoe shop and a Childs restaurant on Fifth Avenue.

With the real-estate market reaching fever pitch at the end of the 20's, skyscrapers were becoming the obvious route to stardom for architects. In 1927 Van Alen got his shot when William H. Reynolds, a real-estate speculator famous as the impresario behind Dreamland Park at Coney Island, commissioned him to design a 40-story tower at 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue.

Van Alen worked on the design for more than a year, but then Reynolds sold the land to Walter P. Chrysler. Van Alen won the new commission, though he had to abandon the earlier plans: Chrysler wanted the world's tallest skyscraper, one that would spare no extravagance in catching the public's eye.

Through the winter of 1928-29, Van Alen's plan evolved, from a building topped with a pyramid crown to one with a Byzantine dome to one likened by Murchison to Alfred E. Smith's derby hat. He finally hit on a multi-arched dome cut through with triangular windows, which made his tower seem to shoot into the sky. The dome's stainless chromium-nickel facade gave it the appearance of steel suffused with starlight. Only a month after the announcement of the Chrysler Building's design, with a projected height of 809 feet, Van Alen learned that Severance had been hired by George L. Ohrstrom, an investment banker turned developer, to build an even taller building - 840 feet - at 40 Wall Street. The resulting battle forced each skyscraper higher, and Van Alen came up with a trick that guaranteed victory. He designed a needlelike spire to surmount the tower, having it constructed in secret within the building. It won the height race for Chrysler at 1,046 feet and captured the city's imagination. Immediately, though, the critics tore into the design. They were particularly scornful of the spire, which many regarded as an embarrassing gimmick. George S. Chappell, writing under the pen name T-Square in *The New Yorker*, declared the building "distinctly a stunt design, evolved to make the man in the street look up."

"To our mind, however," Chappell added, "it has no significance as serious design."

Douglas N. Haskell said in *The Nation* that it "embodies no compelling, organic idea." Although Van Alen had been among the country's most adventurous architects in his push to move beyond the conventions of masonry construction, he was now being dismissed as a practitioner of flash.

Just as bad, as he saw it, was the problem of his compensation. He had been so carried away - or naïve - on winning the commission that he never signed a contract with Chrysler. After the building's completion, he asked for 6 percent of its \$14 million cost, in accordance with American Institute of Architects standards, but Chrysler refused.

Van Alen sued, and a lien was placed on the property. Although he eventually got his money, he was held up in the

press as an example of how architects should not conduct business with clients. One did not sue Time magazine's 1928 Man of the Year and hope to win many future commissions. The lawsuit and the bad critical reception, along with the Depression, ended Van Alen's career. In the mid-30's, he tried to revive it with plans for prefabricated houses, but only the exhibition models were built.

Frustrated, he spent less and less time designing and more managing his real-estate investments and teaching sculpture at the Beaux Arts Institute of Design in New York. By his death in 1954 his name was absent from architectural circles. The Chrysler Building was his greatest accomplishment, and the one that guaranteed his obscurity.

Neal Bascomb is the author of "Higher" (Doubleday, 2003), which chronicles the 1929 skyscraper race.