Building the Skyline: 
The Birth and Growth of 
Manhattan’s Skyscrapers

By Jason M. Barr. New 
York City: Oxford Uni-
versity Press, 2016; 456 
pages; $49.95

W HETHER FROM a 
highway, a train, or your 
aplane window, that first 
sight of the iconic skyline 
as you approach New York 
City never fails to impress. 
It can be no surprise to 
anyone who has seen it how 
much ink has been spilled 
about the architecture and 
engineering that brought it 
about and how the skyline 
as affected the city’s history. 
Less fully explored have been 
the economic forces that 
drove those modern wonders 
ever skyward.

But Building the Skyline’s 
author, Jason Barr, Ph.D., 
is an associate professor of 
economics at Rutgers Uni-
versity and is considered an 
expert on skyscraper eco-
nomics. Thus, it is not sur-
prising that this is his per-
spective. His book has two 
major themes: the skyline as the product of the “bat-
tle for place” as people and 
organizations try to figure 
out where to live and work 
and the “skyline as system,” 
which Barr explains is a way of 
understanding how deci-
sions about where and how 
to build are interrelated.

Even the book’s selection of 
illustrations is reflective of 
a different focus. Rather than 
a plethora of photographs 
and sketches of these mas-

tive, often beautiful struc-
tures, Barr includes maps of 
population densities, charts 
of land value indexes, and 
tables with statistical regres-
sion results on a variety of 
relevant data.

Barr takes a fresh look at 
many old ideas. Why did 
skyscrapers sprout downtown 
and in midtown but not be-
tween those two clusters? 
The answer has to do with 
neither the presence of Grand 
Central Station nor the depth 
of the bedrock (both com-
mon explanations) but rather 
with post–Civil War eco-
nomic and demographic 
forces. In another example, 
he concludes that, for the past 
125 years, the skyline “is a re-
sponse to the growth in land 
values, while . . . land value 
growth is not directly affect-
ed by the skyline itself.” This 
seeming contradiction reveals 
that, from an economic per-
spective, the skyscraper “is a 
solution to a problem, rather 
than a cause of other ones, 
such as congestion or exces-
sive density.”

Barr takes into account 
theory, data, and historical 
analysis, and as a re-
sult Building the Skyline is 
not a deeply learned, exhaus-
tively researched, and com-
pletely fresh look at the 
development of one of the 
world’s most important 
metropolises.

The Well-Tempered City: 
What Modern Science, 
Ancient Civilizations, 
and Human Nature Teach Us about the Future of Urban Life

By Jonathan F. P. Rose. New 
York City: Harper Wave, 
2016; 320 pages; $29.99

W ITH EACH PASSING year, 
its becomes clearer that as the 
world’s population inexorably rises, an increasing percentage of those people will live in urban centers. In books this manifests itself as a growing wave of thoughtful and scholarly works examining what cities will or should look like and how 
those forms and structures 
can best serve us.

In The Well-Tempered City, 
“urban innovator” Jonathan 
Rose looks backward to an-
cient cities, as well as at the 
evolving cities of today, and 
defines the key challenges 
that cities will increasingly face. 
These will include climate change, 
crumbling infrastructure, and 
souring costs, and the author uses this survey in prescrib-

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