



Nearest Thing to Heaven: The Empire State Building and American Dreams (Icons of America)

By Mark Kingwell

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This elegantly written appreciation of the Empire State Building opens up the building's richness and importance as an icon of America. The book leads us through the facts surrounding the skyscraper's conception and construction, then enters into a provocative theoretical discussion of its function as an icon, its representation in pictures, literature, and film, and the implications of its iconic status as New York's most important architectural monument to ambition and optimism.

The Empire State Building literally cannot be seen in its totality, from any perspective. And paradoxically, this building of unmistakable solidity has been made invisible by familiarity and reproduction through imagery. Mark Kingwell encourages us to look beneath the strong physical presence of the building, to become aware of its evolving layers of meaning, and to see how the building lives within a unique imaginative space in the landscape of the American consciousness. He offers new ways of understanding the Empire State Building in all its complexity and surprising insights into its special role as an American icon.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Kingwell's portrayal of the Empire State Building as an architectural and cultural icon straddles the line between personal essay and historical nonfiction. A philosophy professor and Harper's contributing editor, Kingwell discusses the building's aesthetics and before riffing philosophically about how "the truth of the building lies in its entire universe of use and meaning." Namely, the people who have worked in the Empire State Building and visited it, and the memories that have been made there. Kingwell's tone-nostalgic, reflective, respectful-will appeal to readers with similar reverence for architecture (New York architecture, especially). Rather than reading like a history textbook, its seven stand-alone sections (with titles like "Palace of Dreams" and "Scrape the Sky") move between philosophical questions ("Why do we value what we value?") and more specific, colorful descriptions ("it was the world's first mega-project, employing...the equivalent of a small industrial town"). The author has left out some nuts and bolts, making the book frustrating for those looking for technical details, but the absorbing prose and casual pace will appeal to readers interested in the bigger picture. Photos.

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Review

"This book is surely one of the literary highlights of the year... Go out now, buy and read this book for yourselves. It is a rare treat." Peter J. M. Wayne, *Spectator* "The tone of this scholarly tribute to "the building" is fun-loving cultural studies, with references to Don DeLillo, Barthes, Virilio et al as the author takes a leisurely conceptual stroll around it.' Steve Poole, *The Guardian* 'A thoughtful book... In tracing the Empire State Building's multiple meanings and associations, Kingwell ranges widely.' Andrew Mead, *Architects Journal*"

About the Author

Mark Kingwell is professor of philosophy, University of Toronto, a contributing editor of *Harper's Magazine*, and the author of eight books.

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