

Society of Architectural Historians
Study Day: “Woolworth at 100”

The Skyscraper Museum and the Woolworth Building, New York
March 22, 2013

The Skyscraper Museum’s exhibition, “Woolworth at 100” opens in January 2013. This SAH Study Day will offer participants an opportunity for an in-depth look at the exhibition with the curators Gail Fenske, Susan Tunick, and Carol Willis along with a tour of Cass Gilbert’s buildings in lower Manhattan led by Andrew Dolkart and Gail Fenske. Featured buildings include the United States Custom House, the West Street Building, and the Broadway-Chambers Building, concluding with a visit to the Woolworth Building.

The Study Day will begin at 10:00 in the Skyscraper Museum with gallery talks on the exhibition “Woolworth at 100.” Thoroughly documenting the Woolworth Building and its early 20th-century urban context, the exhibition features original design drawings by Cass Gilbert and his office staff, along with original documents, photographs, and artifacts. It highlights the Woolworth as one of the largest buildings sheathed in terra cotta, showcases its engineering and construction, and examines issues of preservation persisting from the skyscraper’s completion down to the present day. In the gallery talks, the curators will examine the problem of the skyscraper in New York around 1900, the retailer F. W. Woolworth’s vision for the project, Cass Gilbert and the key individuals involved in the project’s design, engineering and construction challenges, the terra-cotta industry and its significance for the skyscraper, the everyday experience of the building’s tenants and tourists, and the Woolworth Building as phenomenon in popular culture.

After viewing “Woolworth at 100,” the group will walk to the Woolworth Building. We will tour Cass Gilbert’s related works and lower Manhattan along the way, stopping for an in-

depth look at Gilbert's United States Custom House (including a light lunch in the Collector's Office) and the West Street Building, Gilbert's first essay in the "skyscraper Gothic."

Proceeding up Broadway, we will pass by the towers of Gilbert's competitors and examine works of architecture from the era that illustrate the full spectrum of the city's social complexity, among them an immigrant neighborhood of tenements on the Lower West Side. We will then visit Gilbert's Broadway Chambers Building, his first skyscraper in New York and one of the earliest uses of colored terra cotta, as well as his later works, the New York County Lawyer's Association Building and the Federal Courthouse at Foley Square, which show that Gilbert played a significant part in the creation of the Lower Manhattan that we know today.

At the Woolworth Building, we will take a close look at Gilbert's highly picturesque, towered and turreted composition, which incorporated modern verticals and medieval details, and his sophisticated use of colored terra cotta for scenographic effect. We will see how the engineer Gunvald Aus's ingenious scheme of windbracing supported the design's characteristic ethereality of construction. On the interior, we will examine the monumental lobby-arcade, which intermingles themes from the Christian masterworks of the Middle Ages with details from Woolworth's favorite consumer settings. We will visit a typical office space and view what remains of the design's European-inspired interiors.

We will conclude the day at 5:30 with a reception in the Woolworth's lobby-arcade and for those who are interested, dinner on one's own in the adjacent Woolworth Tower restaurant.

Andrew Scott Dolkart is author of The Rowhouse Reborn, which won the SAH's 2012 Antoinette Foster Downing Award, Biography of a Tenement House in New York City, and several other books on the architecture of New York. He is James Marston Fitch Associate Professor of Historic Preservation at Columbia University.

Gail Fenske is author of The Skyscraper and the City: The Woolworth Building and the Making of Modern New York, which was named the New York City Book Awards' "2008 Book of the

Year,” and several essays on Cass Gilbert, skyscrapers, and New York. She is Professor of Architecture in the School of Architecture, Art & Historic Preservation at Roger Williams University.

Susan Tunick is President of the Friends of Terra Cotta, author of Terra-Cotta Skyline, and an artist working in New York.

Carol Willis is founder and Director of The Skyscraper Museum, author of Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago, which was named “Best Book on North American Urban History 1995” by the Urban History Association. She is the curator of several exhibitions, has written extensively on the skyscraper, and teaches at Columbia University.