

CHAPTER 6 - Modern Architecture

In Chapter 6 of "The Ways of Men," titled "Modern Architecture," the narrative opens with a foreign tourist's hypothetical first encounter with New York's skyline, described as both chaotic and enchantingly wild at twilight yet dishearteningly graceless by daylight. This dichotomy underscores the broader critique of the city's contemporary architectural ethos, contrasting sharply with the classical beauty and proportionality revered by past critics and architects. The author employs vivid analogies, likening the architectural hodgepodge of downtown buildings to a disorganized, mismatched bookshelf where structures compete rather than cohere, betraying a lack of harmony and aesthetic principle in their design.

The narrative meticulously dissects various architectural elements and trends prevalent in New York, highlighting an obsession with competitive height and superficial adornment over functional beauty and structural integrity. The text critiques the tendency for modern buildings to abandon the artistic restraint and purpose of classical architecture, instead adopting an ad hoc approach to design that prioritizes ostentation. Examples of this include the inconsistent use of classical motifs, arbitrary decoration, and a propensity for adding incongruous elements to rooftops, which, while potentially impressive from a ballooning vantage, contribute to the city's architectural dissonance when viewed from the street level.

Specific buildings are critiqued for their unnecessary and often bizarre embellishments, such as misplaced porticos, gratuitously elaborate cornices, and the whimsical addition of classical figures and structures atop modern edifices, which serve more as a testament to the architects' and owners' vanity than to any coherent aesthetic vision. The chapter ultimately argues for a return to simplicity, functionality, and architectural honesty, where buildings are designed with a mindful consideration of their urban context and the collective visual harmony of the cityscape. It calls for architects to resist the allure of superficial embellishment in favor of designs that respect the principles of classical beauty, proportionality, and the functional demands of modernity, suggesting that such an approach can indeed satisfy contemporary needs without sacrificing architectural integrity.